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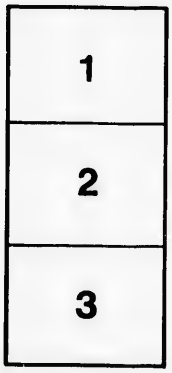

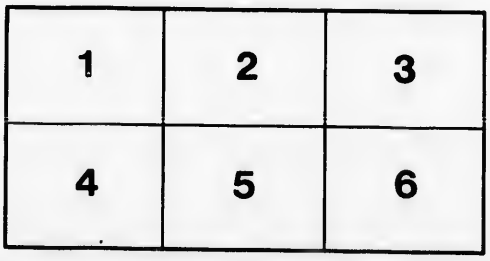

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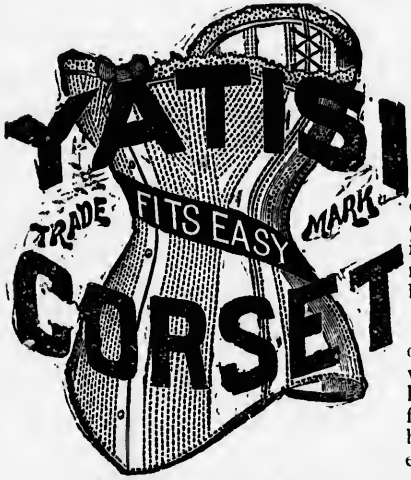

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AUTHOR OF "THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH," "SCHEHERAZADE," "A WITCH OF THE HILLS," ETC., ETC., ETC.

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ST. CUTHBERT'S TOWER.

CHAPTER I.

RISHTON HALL FARM was let at last. Lord Stannington had had it on his hands a long time, and had offered it at a lower and ever lower rent. It was an open secret that John Oldshaw, who had a long lease of Lower Rishton Farm at the other end of the village, had expected the Rishton Hall lease to drop into his hands at last for a very trifling rent indeed. He was a careful man; the property under his hands throve; and he was fond of saying that his lordship would make a better bargain by letting him have the land at £10 an acre than by letting another man have it at £15. However, Lord Stannington had apparently thought otherwise; at any rate, when a stranger appeared upon the scene and offered him a fair rent for the land without any haggling, they came to terms without delay, and John Oldshaw found that his hoped-for bargain had escaped him.

This West Riding farmer was not a nice person to deal with when he was disappointed. He drove over to Sheffield to the agent's office, and stamped into that gentleman's presence, his square, heavy face purple with ill-suppressed rage.

"Na then, Maister Garrett, be pleased to tell mah if yender's true as Ah hear, that Rishton Hall Farm's let to a stranger?" he bellowed, thumping the table with his broad fist, and glaring at the agent with the unreasoning fierceness of an angry bull.

Mr. Garrett was a slight, fair man of uncertain age, whose light eyes were accustomed, by long practice, to read men pretty accurately.

"Quite true, Mr. Oldshaw," he answered, civilly, with imperturbable coolness. "It was let a fortnight ago; and the new tenant comes in—let me see—" referring to his papers—"on the 16th; this day week in fact."

"And dost tha' knaw, Maister Garrett, that Ah're had ma mahnd set on Rishton Hall Farm for this twelvemonth and mair?"

"How could we know it, Mr. Oldshaw, since the farm's been in the market more than twice that time, and we have never had any intimation from you of a wish for it?"

"We Yarkshiremen doan't do things in a hurry. But every mon in t' village knawed Ah'd set ma heeart on t' farm, and noo Ah'm to be t' laughin'-stock o' a' t' feeals i' t' coontry, and Rishton Farm let ower ma yead to a stranger as nawbody's ever heeard on!"

And the farmer gave an apoplectic snort of malignant anger.

"Oh, but that is not the case, Mr. Oldshaw," said the agent as quietly as ever; "Mr. Denison, the gentleman who has taken the farm, is a friend of friends of his lordship, and in every way a tenant of the most desirable kind."

John Oldshaw calmed down suddenly, and into his small, bloodshot blue eyes there came a satisfied twinkle.

"A gentleman, ye say. A gentleman's got the farm!" in a tone of the deepest contempt. "Thank ye, Maister Garrett, Ah'm quite satisfied. It's not for me to grumble at his lordship, then. Ah can pity him. The' never was t' gentleman barn could do any good at farming, and if a gentleman barn's got Rishton Hall Farm, all t' ill I wish his lordship is—may t' gentleman barn stick to's bargain."

And with these words, uttered in a tone of fierce triumph, the farmer, who had not removed his hat on entering the office, turned and stalked out with every appearance of enjoying, as he had intimated, a complete revenge.

The village of Rishton boasted two inns, both of the most unpretending kind. The larger and more important of these was the Chequers, a stone building of the simplest kind of architecture, to which were attached numerous small outbuildings, forming three sides of a quadrangle for Mr. Tew's gig and Mrs. Tew's hens. The Chequers stood just outside the gate of Rishton Hall Farm, and its windows commanded the approach from Matherham, the nearest market-town, which was three miles away. On the 16th of January, the day of the expected arrival of the new tenant of Rishton Hall, John Oldshaw took up his stand at one of the inn windows, watching with malevolent eyes for the approach of his rival. It was a bitterly cold day, grey overhead and black under foot; and the frost, which had held for three days, was growing harder as the afternoon wore on. John Oldshaw, with a sense of keen disappointment, had at last to acquiesce in the general belief that the new tenant would not come to-day.

"If he's coom as far as Matherham he'll stop there t' night, Maister Oldshaw," said Tew, the landlord, a small man, ruled by his wife. "T' ground's too slaippery for e'er a horse to stand on, lettin' alone t' road's all hill and dale 'tween this and Matherham. Besides, t' awd house is as bare as a barn; he'd never coom till he'd sent some stuff to put in it, and a coople o' servants to set it to rights a bit."

"Well, it ain't ma way o' doin' things, to neame wan day for coomin' and then to coom another," said Oldshaw, contemptuously. "But, then, Ah'm naw gentleman, and my lord Stannington 'll mighty soon wish as he could say same o' t' new tenant, Maister Tew."

Mr. Tew could not afford to have an independent opinion in the

presence of the great man of the village, with that miserable Cock and Bottle, not five hundred yards away, gaping for first place as the hostelry of the *elite*.

"It's ta mooch to expect to get another tenant like you, Maister Oldshaw," he said, discreetly.

It was by this time nearly four o'clock, and the grey day was already beginning to darken towards a black evening when Mat Oldshaw, the farmer's oldest son, who had been sent by his father to the top of the hill on the look-out, re-entered the inn at a pace somewhat faster than his usual shambling gait. He was a tall, round-shouldered lad of about twenty, with fair hair and a weather-tanned face, whose heavy dulness was for the moment lightened by a passing gleam of great excitement.

"Weel, Mat, hast seean a ghoost?" asked his father.

"Naw, feyther; but there's a cab coomin' down t' hill——"

"So Maister Gentleman's coom, has he?" shouted the farmer, triumphantly; and he had seized his stout ash stick, and was making with ponderous strides for the door, as if with the intention of inflicting bodily chastisement on the insolent new comer, when his son interposed, blushing a deep brick-red to the roots of his hair.

"Eh, but feyther," he stammered, turning the door handle uneasily, and dividing his glances between the floor, the window, and his father's boorish face, "it's na t' gentleman; it's nobbut twea lasses."

After which admission, he fell to blushing more violently than before.

"Twea lasses?" echoed Oldshaw, incredulously.

"Hey, feyther. An' wan o' them's got a feace lik' a rose."

"Feace lik' a rose?" thundered the farmer. "Doan't thee daze tha dull wits lookin' at wenches' faces, for Ah tell tha Ah'll have na son o' mine hangin' aboot t' Hall noo."

"She bain't na lass for t' likes o' mea, feyther; yon lass is a leady," said the lad, simply.

If the stranger's fair face had not, as his father suggested, dazed his dull wits already, the young man would surely have had the tact to restrain these rash words, which fanned the flame of his father's coarse malevolence.

"A leady! A foine leady! ta foine for any son o' mine? Ah tell thee, feeal, t' day'll coom when tha foine leady'll wish she wur good enoo for t' loikes o' thee; and good enoo she shall never be—tha heears?"

Though the young man's head was bent in a listening attitude, and he assented in the meekest of gruff voices, the father guessed that this deep attention was not all for his discourse, when the sound of hoofs and wheels on the hard ground outside attracted him to the outer door, which he reached in time to see a luggage-laden cab slowly descend the hill and pass the inn-door, giving time for a look at the two young faces inside. Mistress and maid evidently; both bright, eager, and rather anxious. The former met full the surly stare of the farmer, and she drew back her head as if a blast of chilling wind had met her on her approach to her new home. The little maid, who had rosy cheeks and what one may call retrousse features,

was less sensitive, and she looked out to resent this cold unwelcome with a contemptuous toss of the head.

"They're reg'lar savages in these parts, Miss Olivia," she said, in a slightly raised tone. "I only hope we may be uneaten by the time the master comes!"

The cab had passed the front of the inn, and was rounding the sharp turn which led up a slight ascent through the open farmyard gate, when suddenly, without any warning except a few rough jolts over the uneven ground, it turned over on its side, to the accompaniment of shrill screams from one female throat, and a less loud but more plaintive cry from the other. Mat Oldshaw, who was standing on the inn doorstep behind his father, made a spring forward to help them. But the elder man, with a movement quicker than one would have expected from his clumsy form and ponderous gait, grasped his arm with a violence which made the lad reel, and giving him a push back against the wall of the house, said, in a low, thick voice—

"Doan't thoo meddle with what darn't concern thee. Wheer there's so mooch cry, there ain't mooch hurt, tak' ma word for't."

"Feyther!" said Mat, indignantly, entreatingly. Then he was dumb, for even through his not over-bright brains came a suspicion that this accident was perhaps not wholly unexpected by one of its witnesses

As this brief scene passed between father and son, a man in a short frieze coat, knickerbockers, gaiters, and deer-stalker cap, who had quickened his pace down the hill into a run on seeing the accident, looked full into the faces of both men with a keen, shrewd expression as he dashed by.

"It's parson Brander, o' S' Cuthbert's, feyther. He heeard thee," said the young man in a husky, awed whisper.

"An' wha not? Ah'd loike to see sik as him say a word to me!" said the farmer, in a loud voice of boastful contempt.

And the attitudes respectively of father and son, the one of contemptuous disgust, the other of awestruck respect, represented the two views most commonly taken in the country side of the Reverend Vernon Brander, vicar of Saint Cuthbert's.

Before the last disdainful word was out of John Oldshaw's mouth, the new comer had opened the cab door, and extricated the two girls from their unpleasant position. The maid was uppermost, but she was a little creature, and had probably inflicted far less inconvenience on her more massively built mistress than that young lady would have inflicted on her had their positions been reversed. Her rosy cheeks had lost their color, and from her forehead, which had been cut by the broken glass of the carriage window, blood was trickling down.

In answer to the gentleman's inquiries as to whether she was hurt, she said in a trembling voice that she didn't know yet, and begged him to get her mistress out. This he at once proceeded to do, and was rewarded by the thanks of a young lady whom he at once decided to be one of the handsomest girls that this or any other country ever produced.

Olivia Denison was indeed an unchallenged beauty, and had occupied that proud position almost ever since, twenty years ago, she had been pronounced to be "a lovely baby." She was tall—of that cruel height which forces short admirers, on pain of looking ridiculous, to keep their distance; of figure rather massive than slender, with a fair skin, a fresh color, dark hair, blue eyes, and a winning expression of energy and honesty which gave to the whole face its greatest charm. For the moment, however, the rose color had left her cheeks, too, and her lips were drawn tightly together.

"You are hurt, I am afraid," said the stranger, with concern.

"I've only—pinched—my finger," she answered, trying to laugh. But the effort of speaking brought the tears to her eyes, much to her indignation. For she was brave, and she liked to have the credit of it.

"Let me see," said he, with kindly authority.

She presented her right hand, from which he drew the glove very gently, disclosing bruised and slightly discolored finger tips.

"They do hurt a little, but it's nothing very dreadful. I don't know how I did it," she said.

"Lucky it's no worse," said the stranger, kindly. "Now for the lad."

The young driver was looking ruefully at the overturned vehicle. He proved to have escaped with no worse damage than a battered hat. Lucy, the maid, who had ascertained that her head was still on her shoulders, had bound up her cut forehead with her handkerchief, and was scolding the driver for his carelessness as she pointed to the scattered luggage. The traces having broken as the cab fell, the horse had sustained very little hurt, so that, on the whole, the accident had been without tragic consequences. The rescuer took hold of the girl, and shook her by the arm.

"Now, don't you think, considering all things, you might find some better use for your tongue than scolding. You might have been upset a mile away on the road, instead of which you are turned out comfortably at your own door. For, I suppose, you are coming to the Hall?"

"Yes, sir," answered Lucy, abashed, but still rather mutinous, not having the least idea that she was speaking to a clergyman.

"So that the real sufferer by this spill is neither you nor your mistress, but the poor lad who has driven you safely more than three miles over a very dangerously slippery road, and who will perhaps get discharged by his master for having injured the cab. Your mistress does not scold you for half an hour if you break a plate."

"Yes she does, sir," fired up Lucy, so unexpectedly that Mr Brander involuntarily glanced with surprise at the young lady.

"Oh, not Miss Olivia," added the little maid almost indignantly; "it's Mrs. Denison I mean."

"Well, then, if you find the habit so unamiable in Mrs. Denison, as I see you do, you should take the greatest care not to fall into it yourself," said the vicar, suppressing a smile.

Then he turned again to the lady.

"Is everything ready for your coming?" he asked, doubtfully. For he had passed the house that morning, and found it deserted, mildewed, and shuttered-up as usual.

"No, nothing," said the girl. "We've come on in advance to prepare things for papa and mamma and the rest," she added rather tremulously.

The frightful immensity of the undertaking perhaps struck her now for the first time, as she stood, still shaking from the shock of the accident, staring at the smokeless chimneys and shuttered windows of the new home. Mr. Brander looked from one girl to the other, very sorry for both, wondering what kind of idiots the parents could be to send two inexperienced young lasses to grapple with all the difficulties of installation.

"And the furniture? I suppose that has come?" he suggested, dubiously.

"Oh, I hope so," said the girl, anxiously.

"I'll ask at the inn here. If it has come they will have seen it pass. And Mrs. Tew will give you both a cup of tea. You don't mind going into an inn, do you? It's a very respectable place."

"Oh, no; of course we don't," said Miss Denison. "Indeed, it is very, very kind of you to take so much trouble for us."

"Trouble! Nonsense. It's a splendid excitement. As far as I am concerned, I should like a pair of travellers overturned here once a week."

He beckoned to Lucy, and led them the few steps back to the inn door. John Oldshaw was still standing in a defiant attitude on the doorstep, whence he had watched the proceedings with malicious interest. His son was still peeping out, sheepish and ashamed, from behind him.

"Here, Mat, will you run round to Mrs. Wall's—tell her that Miss Denison has come, and ask for the key of the Hall?" said he. "And then you might lend me a hand to take some of the lady's trunks into the house."

Mat's face brightened and flushed.

"All right, sir," he said, and tried to push past his father.

But the elder man blocked the doorway with his arms, and stood like a rock.

"Nay," he said, obstinately; "Mat doesna' stir at tha' bidding. Help the wenches thasel'; thoo's used to 't."

Olivia drew back; she was shocked, frightened, by the dogged ferocity of the farmer's face and by the sudden expression of some strong feelings—whether anger or anguish she could not quite tell—which for a moment convulsed the features of her unknown companion. As for Oldshaw's coarse words, the strong Yorkshire dialect rendered them unintelligible to her. They, however, roused the spirit of the phlegmatic Mat.

"For shame, feyther!" cried he, in a voice which was a new terror for the young lady whose champion he thus declared himself to be. "Maister Brander, Ah'll go loike a reace horse."

And ducking his long body under his father's left arm with an unceremonious roughness which shook that mighty man from his dignity, he touched his cap to Olivia with oafish respect, and ran off down the lane past the Hall barns with the best speed of his long legs.

"We won't go in there, thank you very much," said Olivia, when Mr. Brander had come back to the spot to which she had retreated. "I could not pass that man; I would rather not go near him."

"Will you wait here while I find out about the furniture, then?"

"Please promise not to quarrel with that horrid man about his rudeness to us. I can see he is one of those people who can't help being rude and horrid, just as some other people can't help being unselfish and kind," said the girl, shyly, but with much warmth. "Will you please promise?"

"Yes," said he, simply, looking into her face with a grave, straightforward expression of interest and, as it seemed to her, of gratitude which surprised and touched her.

Then he turned without another word, almost as if afraid to say another word, and going back rapidly to the inn, passed the farmer, who sullenly made way for him, and disappeared into the house. When he came back, his face was full of deep concern of a different kind.

"I bring bad news," he said to the girls, who, mistress and maid, were shrinking together in their desolation. "I am afraid your furniture has not come, and—they say they haven't a room to spare in the inn for to-night. But if Mrs. Tew could see you and speak to you herself——"

"I wouldn't stay in the house," burst out Olivia, indignantly. "If we can only get into the Hall, Lucy and I can manage very well indeed."

"But the place is sure to be hideously damp, and there are no carpets; in fact, there's nothing," said Mr. Brander, in dismay.

"The resources of the feminine mind are infinite," said Olivia, who was again blinking behind her veil. "Here comes the old woman who has the keys, I suppose. I shall get her to take us in for a little while—at least, she'll have a cottage and a fire somewhere or other. And perhaps while we are waiting there the furniture will come."

Mr. Brander looked at her with renewed compassion. He thought this last a forlorn hope.

"Don't be disappointed if it doesn't come yet," he said, encouragingly. "Old Sarah Wall will do her best for you, I'm sure, and all the better if she doesn't see me talking to you. For you won't hear any good of me from her."

And before Olivia could detain him to pour out again the thanks for his kindness with which her heart was overflowing, he had raised his hat with a sudden cold withdrawal into himself, and turning with the rapidity of the most accomplished athlete, disappeared along the road which led through Lower Rishton, leaving her overwhelmed with surprise at the abrupt change in his manner and with desolation at this unexpectedly sudden loss of their only friend.

CHAPTER II.

Old Sarah Wall, the key-bearer, who now came ambling up at a very slow pace, holding her hand to her side, and muttering feebly as she moved, was a poor exchange, Olivia thought, for the masculine friend who had ended his kindly services so abruptly. He had

not even waited, as he had intimated an intention of doing, to see the luggage safely moved into the house. Mrs. Wall looked very cross and not too clean. Scarcely deigning to glance at the strangers, she muttered, "This way!" and then fell to groaning as she led the way through the farmyard up to the house.

Olivia paused to look despairingly at her scattered trunks, and to give a kindly word of comfort to the unlucky cab driver, who was still occupied in estimating the damage done to his vehicle, and his chances of getting it back to Matherham that night. As she did so she heard a footstep on the hard ground beside her, and found the shamefaced and blushing Mat at her side.

"Ah'll get t' luggage in seefe, never fear," said he, in a voice so gruff with excessive bashfulness that poor Olivia thought him surly, and shrank back with a cold refusal of his services rising to her lips.

Mat thought she identified him with his father and so hastened to offer a neat apology for that gentleman's conduct.

"Feyther's a pig," said he. "Boot he wunna harm ye! an' Ah'll do what Ah can to mak' oop for him being so rough."

And he shouldered one trunk and caught up another, and strode along towards the house, whistling to himself with the defiant carelessness of one who feels he has done a bold stroke. The lady and her attendant followed, somewhat soothed by this little show of friendliness.

Even in the midst of her feelings of desolation and disappointment, in spite of the keen cold and of the forlorn, blind look which shuttered and shut-up windows, broken chimney pots, and untrimmed ivy gave to the house, Olivia could not look quite without admiration and a youthful sense of delight in the picturesque at the old Hall. The body of the house was a long, plain, two-storeyed building, with a flagged roof and a curious wide, flat portico, supported by two spindleshank wooden windows, beneath which three stone steps, deeply hollowed out and worn by generations of feet, led to the front door. At the west end a gabled wing, flag-roofed like the rest, ran back from the body of the house; and at right angles to this there jutted out westwards a second small wing of the same shape. In these, the oldest portions of the house, traces of former architectural beauties remained in stately Tudor chimneys and two mullioned windows, round which the ivy clustered in huge bushes, long left neglected and untrimmed. At this end of the building a little garden ran underneath the walls, protected from the incursions of intrusive cows by a wall which began towards the back of the house by being very high and ended towards the front by being very low. From the wall to the house the garden had been shut in by palings and a little gate; but these were now much broken and decayed, and afforded small protection to the yews and holly bushes, the little leafless barberry tree and the shabby straggling evergreens, which grew thickly against the weather-stained walls of the old house, choking the broken panes of the lower windows as the ivy did those of the upper ones. It was this western end that was visible from the road, the view of the front being obscured by a long stone-built barn, very old, and erected on foundations older still, about which hung traditions of monkish days,

If she had seen it at any other time, Olivia would have been crazy with delight at the thought of living in such a place; and even now, cheerless as the immediate prospect was, it gave her a gleam of comfort to reflect that, if she did have to pass the night without any bed amongst the rats, the ancestors of those rats had scampered over the place in the time of Queen Elizabeth.

With some difficulty, Mrs. Wall turned the key in the rusty lock and admitted them. It seemed that she had a grievance in the fact that she had not known on what day they were to arrive. As a matter of fact, she was one of those persons who are never prepared for anything, but Olivia had had no means of learning her peculiarities, and so she met the old woman's complaints in a humble and apologetic spirit which increased Mrs. Wall's arrogance.

The entrance hall was low-roofed and square; the walls were covered with a cheap and commonplace paper, the wainscoting and the banisters of the broad staircase were of painted wood. This was the portion of the house which had suffered most during its decadence. Olivia, examining everything with an eye keen to discover the good points to be made the most of in her new home, found that where the paint had worn off the staircase and wainscot dark oak was revealed underneath, and she rashly uttered an exclamation of horror at the vandalism of the farm's late occupants.

"The idea of spoiling beautiful dark oak with this horrid paint! Why, the people who did it ought to be sent to penal servitude!"

Mrs. Wall was scandalized.

"T' fowk 'as lived here last liked t' place clean," she said, severely. "It'll nivver look t' same again as it did, wi' a clean white antimacassar stitched on to ivery cheer, an' wax flowers under glass sheades in a' t' parlor windows. An' t' parlor a'ways as neat as a new pin, so ye wur afreaid a'most to coom into 't. Ah, ye meen talk o' yer gentlefowk, but they'll nivver mak' it look t' same again!"

Olivia had opened the door to the right, and throwing wide the shutters of one of the three large windows, revealed a long, low-ceilinged room, used as the living room by the late farmer's family, and having at the further end a wide, high, old-fashioned fireplace, the mouldings of which had been carefully covered with whitewash, now smoked-begrimed and worn into dark streaks. The shutters and the wainscoting, which in this room was breast high upon the walls, had been treated in the same way. Olivia uttered a groan, and turned to the door, afraid of uttering more offensive remarks. Then they went upstairs, and opened the doors of a lot of little meanly papered bedrooms which formed the upper storey of this part of the house. Having allowed the new-comers to examine these, while she remained sniffing in the passage, Mrs. Wall shuffled hastily back to the staircase.

"Stop!" cried Olivia, as the old woman placed one downtrodden shoe on the second step; "we haven't seen the other part of the house at all. Where does this lead to?"

And she peered into a crooked passage which led into the first of the two older wings.

Mrs. Wall paused with evident reluctance.

"There's nowt yonder but t' worst o' t' bedrooms; ye've seen t' best," she grumbled.

But Olivia was already exploring, followed by Lucy; and the old woman, with much reluctance, brought up the rear. The passage was quite dark, and very cold. The tallow dip which Mrs. Wall carried gave only just enough light to enable the explorers to find the handles of the doors on the left. One of these Olivia opened, not without difficulty; for the floor was strewn with lumber of all sorts, which the last occupier of the farm had not thought worth carrying away. The walls of this room, which was very small, were panelled right up to the low ceiling; and the panelling had been whitewashed. A second chamber in this passage was in a similar condition, except that the panelling had been torn down from two of the four walls, and its place supplied by a layer of plaster. Holding up her skirts very carefully, Olivia stepped across the dusty piles of broken boxes, damaged fireirons, and odds and ends of torn carpet with which the floor of this room also was covered, and looked through the dusty panes of the little window.

"Now you've seen a'," said Mrs. Wall, rather querulously. "An' t' lad downstairs 'll be wanting to know wheer to put t' things."

She was retreating with her candle, when Olivia stopped her again.

"No," she said, eagerly, "we've not seen all. There's a wing of the house we have not been into at all; and I can see through the little window, on this side of it, some curtains and a flower vase with something still in it. It doesn't look empty and deserted like the rest. I must get in there before I go down."

But Mrs. Wall's old face had wrinkled up with superstitious terror, and it was only by force of muscle that the young girl succeeded in cutting off her retreat.

"Na'," she said, her voice sinking to a croaking whisper. "I canna tak' ye in theer. An'—an' t' doors are locked, ye see," she added, eagerly, as Olivia, still grasping her conductress' arm, in vain tried the door at the end of the passage, and one on the left-hand side, at right angles with it.

"Well, but why are they locked?" asked the young girl, impatiently, her rich-toned, youthful voice ringing sonorously through the long-disused passage. "The whole place is ours now, and I have a right to see into every corner of it."

"Oh, Miss Olivia, perhaps we'd better go back—go downstairs—for to-day," suggested the little maid Lucy, rather timorously behind her.

Mrs. Wall's nervous tremors were beginning to infect the poor girl, who was, moreover, very cold, and was longing for some tea. But her young mistress had at least her fair share of an immovable British obstinacy. Finding that both doors were firmly locked and that there was no key to either forthcoming, she flung the whole weight of her massive and muscular young body against the door on the left, until the old wood cracked and the rusty nails rattled in the disused hinges.

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed Sarah Wall, petrified by the audacity of the young amazon. "Shoo 'll have t' owd place aboot our ears!"

"Take the candle, Lucy," said Olivia, imperiously, perceiving that the dip was flaring and wobbling in an ominous manner in the old woman's trembling fingers.

Lucy obeyed, frightened but curious. Her mistress made two more vigorous onslaughts upon the door; the first produced a great creaking and straining; at the second the door gave way on its upper hinge, so that the girl's strong hands were able to force the lock with ease. She turned to the guide in some triumph.

"Now, Mrs. Wall, we'll unearth your ghost, if there is one. At any rate, we'll get to the bottom of your mystery in five minutes."

But she did not. Pressing on to the end of a very narrow, unlighted passage in which she now found herself, Olivia came to a second door; this opened easily and admitted her into a large chamber, the aspect of which, dimly seen by the fading light which came through a small square window on her left, filled her brave young spirit with a sudden sense of dreariness and desolation.

For it was not empty and lumber-strewn, like the rest of the rooms she had entered. The dark forms of cumbrous, old-fashioned furniture were discernible in the dusk; the heavy hangings of a huge four-post mahogany bedstead shook, as a rat, disturbed by the unwonted intrusion, slid down the curtain and scurried across the floor. As she stepped slowly forward on the carpet, which was damp to the tread, and peered to the right and left in the gloom, Olivia could see strange relics of the room's last occupant; the withered remains of what had been a bunch of flowers on a table in front of the little window; an assortment of Christmas cards and valentines, all of design now out of date, and all thickly covered with brown dust, fastened with pins on to the wall on each side of the high mantlepiece; even a book, a railway novel, with its yellow boards gnawed by the rats, which she picked up rather timorously from the floor, where, by this time, it seemed to have acquired a consecrated right to lie.

Still advancing very slowly, Olivia reached the opposite side of the room, where her quick eyes had perceived the barred shutters of a second and much larger window. With some difficulty she removed the bar, which had grown stiff and rusty, and, drawing back the heavy shutters, revealed the long, stone-mullioned window, with diamond panes, which had been such a picturesque feature of the house from the outside. The thick, untrained ivy obscured one end of it, but enough light glimmered through the dirt-encrusted panes for Olivia to be now quite sure of two things of which she felt nearly sure before—namely, that this was the best bedroom in the house, and that, for some mysterious reason, this chamber, instead of being dismantled like the rest, had been allowed to remain for a period of years almost as its last occupant had left it. Almost, but not quite; for the bedding had been removed, the covers to the dressing table and the gigantic chest of drawers, and the white curtains which had once hung before the shuttered window.

On the other hand, a host of knicknacks remained to testify to the sex, the approximate age, and the measure of refinement of the late owner. More railway novels, all well worn; flower vases of an inexpensive kind; two hand mirrors, one broken; a dream book; a bow of bright ribbon; a handsome cut-glass scent bottle; these things, among others, were as suggestive as a photograph; while the fact that this room alone had been studiously left in its original

state, and even furnished in accordance with it, threw a new and more favorable light on the taste of that mysteriously interesting somebody whose individuality made itself felt across a lapse of years to the wondering new-comer.

Olivia Denison was not by any means a fanciful girl. She had been brought up by a stepmother—a mode of education little likely to produce an unwholesome forcing of the sentimental tendencies. She was besides too athletic and vigorously healthy to be prone to superstitious or morbid imaginings. But as she stood straining her eyes in the fading daylight to take in every detail of the mysterious room, the panelling, which in this apartment alone was left its own dark color, seemed to take strange moving patterns as she looked; the musty, close air seemed to choke her; and faint creakings and moanings, either in the ancient woodwork or the loose-hanging ivy outside, grew in her listening ears to a murmur as of a voice trying to speak, and miserably failing to make itself understood. She was roused by a shrill cry, and found Lucy, whose fear for her mistress had overcome her fear of this desolate room, shaking her by the arm and pulling her towards the door.

"Oh, Miss Olivia, do come out—do come out! You're going to faint; I'm sure you are. It's all this horrid room—this horrid house. Oh, do come and write, and tell master it's not a fit place for Christians to come to, and he'd never prosper if he was to come here, and nor wouldn't none of us, I'm positive. Do come, Miss Olivia, there's a dear. It's fit to choke one in here, what with the rats and the damp, that it is. And if we was to stay here long enough we'd see ghosts, I know."

Olivia laughed. No phantom had terrors for her, however strong an impression half-guessed realities might make upon her youthful imagination.

"Don't be afraid, Lucy," she said, encouragingly. "We'll soon frighten the ghosts away by letting a little fresh air into these musty rooms. Here, help me."

Half reassured by her resonant voice, the maid accompanied her to the larger window, still clinging to her arm, but more for companionship than with the idea of affording support to her mistress, who had recovered her self-command. Together they succeeded in throwing open both windows to their full extent, not, however, accomplishing this without a shriek from Lucy as a great bird flew out of the hanging ivy and almost flapped against their faces in his confusion at this unusual disturbance. They both felt a sense of relief as the keen but fresh outside air blew into the long-closed room, dispersing the mouldy, musty smell of damp hangings and decaying wood. Even the old woman, who had stood all this time in the doorway, apparently engaged in muttering incantations over her tallow dip, but really transfixed by this audacity of young blood, drew a long breath as the rush of fresh air reached her, and gathered courage to ask "what they were after doin' now?"

"Were 'after' ransacking every corner of this old ghost run, turning it upside down and inside out, and chasing away the last shadow of a bogey," answered Olivia, cheerily. "Here's another room to look into."

Crossing the room with a light step, she opened the door of the second of the closed-up apartments. This chamber also had escaped the dismantling of the rest of the house, but it contained very little that would have been worth taking away. It was lighted by three small windows, all much broken, and all hung with limp rags which had once been muslin curtains, gaily tied up with blue ribbons, which were now almost colorless with dust and damp. The floor was covered with matting, which smelt like damp straw, and had evidently afforded many a meal to the rats now scurrying behind the woodwork, which in this room was much decayed and in far from good repair. A plain deal table, from which the cover had been removed; two limp wicker chairs with ragged cushions; an empty birdcage; a fanciful wicker kennel for a lapdog; these were nearly all that were left of the furniture. Olivia inspected everything with eager but silent interest, and then turned suddenly to Sarah Wall, who had again followed them as far as the door, preferring even the eerie passage of the bedroom to solitude outside.

"Who lived in these rooms last?" she asked.

But the candle nearly fell from Mrs. Wall's hand as, for all answer, she withdrew into the desolation of the deserted bedroom rather than face the eager questioner again.

Olivia was not to be put off so easily. She followed precipitately, and, changing the form of her attack, said—

"How long is it since these rooms were shut up, Mrs. Wall?"

The guide's eyes shifted about, refusing to meet those of the young girl.

"Twea year; same as rest o' t' house," she answered, in a grumbling tone.

"Only two years! It wasn't shut up long before the family went away, then?" said Olivia, incredulously.

"Not as Ah knaws on," answer Sarah Wall.

Miss Denison hated an untruth with the impetuous loathing of an honest nature. She would have liked to shake this wretched old woman, who would not be candid on a subject which could not be of the slightest importance to her. Perhaps her companion got an inkling of this inclination, for she turned and beat a hasty retreat along the narrow passage which led from the bedroom to the body of the house. Olivia did not at once follow her. With a curious reluctance, whether reverence for a dead past whose relics she was disturbing, or fear of some shock which its revelations might bring her, she scarcely knew, the girl picked up one of the dust-begrimed novels, and looked at the title page. But there was nothing written on it. She opened three or four more of the novels with the same result. By this time it was growing so dark that she had to hasten her movements for fear that when at last a clue was found she might be unable to distinguish the letters. Having in vain examined every book upon the table, she continued to explore until she found, on a small hanging bookshelf in an obscure corner of the room, a little pile of devotional works—Bible, hymn book, Bogatsky's "Golden Treasury," a tiny "Daily Portion," and a prayer book. This last was on the top of all. As Olivia opened it there fell to the floor tiny dried scraps of flowers and fern. Turning to the flyleaf,

and carrying the book in haste to the window, she found these words, written in a round, school-boy hand—

"Ellen Mitchell, from her affectionate brother Ned." And a date of eighteen years back.

Olivia replaced the prayer book on the shelf, and left the old room without further delay, followed by Lucy, who had remained close at hand, but discreetly silent, during these investigations.

When they reached the outer end of the passage, Olivia glanced with some curiosity at the old door she had so roughly broken down, and as she did so, some letters written in pencil high on the upper panel caught her eye. With difficulty she made out a date in July ten years before.

"I wonder," she thought, "whether that is the date on which the rooms were locked up. If so, it was eight years before the last people left the house, I know. And their name was Mitchell. Who can I ask to tell me the story?"

And, having forgotten cold, fatigue, and hunger in the interest of her discoveries, Olivia Denison made her way slowly down to the ground-floor again, where she caught Mrs. Wall in the act of slipping out of the front door.

CHAPTER III.

The estimable Sarah Wall was, as she herself would have said, "not in the best of tempers" at being intercepted in her proposed flight.

"Ah thowt ye'd got all ye wanted," she grumbled, as Olivia Denison followed her out on to the doorstep and asked her where she was going. "Ah wur goin' whoam to get a coop o' tea, for Ah'm fair clemmed."

"You thought we'd got all we wanted!" said Olivia, ironically. "Why, we've got nothing at all—not even a chair to sit on, I think, if you have tea going at your cottage, you might ask us to come and have some."

"Hey, that ye might, Sally," said a gruff voice, which Olivia had now learnt to recognize as that of a friend.

Turning, she saw Mat Oldshaw, his blushes, if he were still blushing, invisible in the darkness, standing at the foot of the steps, mounting guard over the luggage, which he had piled together.

"Oh," cried the girl, with a sudden change to melting gratitude, "you haven't been waiting out here in the cold all this time for us, have you?"

"Weel, miss," said Mat, laughing uneasily, and shifting from one heavy foot to the other, "t' door was shut, an' Ah couldn't get in."

And, to put an end to conversation, which was an art in which he felt he did not shine, the young fellow seized the two smallest trunks and carried them straight into the big farm living room, whistling a lively tune as he did so. Olivia stood back quite silently while he fetched in the rest of the luggage in the same way, and then stood looking at it dubiously by the light of Mrs. Wall's candle.

"It bean't naw good onfastenin' t' cords," he said at last, "for they won't stay in here. An' Ah dunno reightly what to be doin' for ye if yer goods bean't coom."

He went back again to the front door and looked out. Not that he could see anything of the road, for the huge barn opposite, completely blocked the view from this point. But he was a good deal affected by the predicament in which this beautiful lady and her attendant found themselves, and he was shy of meeting the lady's eyes, being without means of comforting her. Suddenly a figure darted out from the gloom under the barn walls, a strong hand was laid upon the lad's arm, and, willy-nilly, he was dragged down the steps and heartily cuffed before he had recovered from his first surprise.

"Eh, feyther, what art doin' now?" he asked, as soon as he had recovered breath, having speedily recognized the touch of his parent's loving hand.

"Eh, thou feaul, thoo teastrill; Ah've got tha! Ah know'd wheer thoo'd got to. This cooms o' followin' fowk wha can't keep off t' lasses. Coom whoam; coom tha whoam, and if ivver Ah catch tha again a-slitherin' about yon house, Ah'll turn ye oot o' ma house, and oot o' ma farm, as if ye wur nobbut a ploughboy, thet Ah will!"

Mat wriggled and writhed till he got loose from his father's grasp, and slinking back a step or two, he called out, not loudly or defiantly, but with the same rough kindliness which he had shown from the first towards the friendly girls—

"Now mind, Sally, thou maun mash t' best coop o' tea thoo can for t' leddies."

John Oldshaw turned round at these words, and addressed the old woman in a thick and angry voice.

"Sarah Wall, get back to tha whoam an' tha own business. An' if thoo canna keep tha owd fingers oot o' other fowks' affairs, tha needna coom oop oor way o' Soondays for t' broaken meat. So now thoo knaws."

And, with a jerk of the head to his son to intimate that Mat could go on in front and he would follow, the farmer stamped slowly and heavily away down the yard.

His coarse unkindness affected the three women differently. Little Lucy began to whimper and to sob out indignant maledictions upon "the ol-ol-old brute;" Mrs. Wall, after dropping half a dozen frightened courtseys, manifested a great eagerness to go; Olivia drew herself up and became very stern and grave.

"You need not mind what that man says, Mrs. Wall," she said, in a firm quiet voice. "You may be very sure that any kindness you do us will be amply repaid. And as for the broken meat he talks about, if you will really lose that by letting us rest a little while in your cottage and giving us a cup of tea, I can promise you a good dinner every Sunday while my father lives here."

But Mrs. Wall was too far timorous and cautious a person to risk the substantial reality of broken meat on Sundays from the great man of the village for the flimsy vision of a good dinner from a total stranger. She thrust her flickering tallow candle into Lucy's hands, and began to tie her wispy bonnet strings with a resolute air.

"I'll leave t' candle," she said, as if making a great and generous concession; "an' that's a' I can do for ye. For I've nowt in my place I could set afore a leddy; an' as for tea, the bit fire I left will be out by this time."

"But I can light your fire again for you, and boil your kettle in two twos," burst in Lucy. "And we've brought some tea with us."

Her young mistress put a light hand on her arm.

"Never mind, Lucy," she said, quietly. "If Mrs. Wall doesn't care for us to go to her cottage we will not trouble her."

As she spoke her eyes brightened, for at the end of the long barn she descried in the dusk the figure of the gentleman who had come to their aid that afternoon and then left them with such unaccountable suddenness. Lucy saw him too, and being more demonstrative than her mistress, she gave vent to her delight in words.

"No, Mrs. Wall, ma'am; you needn't go for to put yourself out, for there's better folks than you coming along, that are a deal more obliging than ever you'd be, and that have some Christian kindness in them, which is more than can be said for you. Ugh, you grumpy old woman, you!"

"Hush, Lucy," said her mistress in gentle rebuke; "the gentleman will hear you. And I don't suppose he's is coming here at all," she added, reluctantly, as the figure they had both so quickly recognized disappeared again in the gloom.

"What gentleman? What gentleman?" asked the old woman, shrilly.

"How should we know, when we're strangers here?" retorted Lucy, who, now, that her tongue was once loosened, was delighted to have what she afterwards called "a go-in" at their disobliging guide. "But he was a real gentleman; not like your pig-faced friend in the corduroy trousers that you're so mighty civil to; and he wears knickerbockers and gaiters and a cap over his eyes, if that is anything you can tell him by."

Apparently it was, for Sarah gave a step back in horror, and ejaculated "Mercy on us!" two or three times, as if too much shocked for further speech.

"What's the matter?" asked Olivia, rather sharply, remembering the stranger's warning that she would hear no good of him from Sarah Wall, and curious to learn the reason. "If you know who the gentleman is, tell me his name. And what do you know against him?" she added, indiscreetly.

Mrs. Wall, though not brilliantly intelligent, had the splendid gift of reticence where she thought that things might "go round." She only shook her head, therefore, and muttered something about getting herself into trouble and desiring to be allowed to go home.

"Well, just tell me first who he is, then, and you shall go at once," said Olivia, persuasively.

The old woman, writhing nervously under the clasp of Miss Denison's hand, evidently cast about in her mind for a means of getting free while committing herself as little as possible. The reluctant words which at last came out were not very well chosen, however.

"I'll tell ye this, then," she croaked, in a broken whisper, peering round with her sunken eyes as if to be sure the treasonable com-

munication she was making was not overheard by the person concerned. "Yon gentleman, as ye call him, is not fit company for young ladies. And others have found it oot to their cost—so fowk say," she added, hastily. Then, as Olivia released her arm and she tottered away over the hard ground, she looked back to add, in a querulous and anxious tone, "But don't ye tak' it frae me, mind. I nobbut told ye what I've heerd say."

Olivia turned back towards the open door of the dreary house, feeling beyond measure miserable and disconsolate. The dimly seen figure of her friend of the afternoon had disappeared; the disobliging old woman who was at least a fellow-creature, was rapidly hobbling out of sight; while the words which had just, with so much difficulty, been forced out of her, seemed in the hag's mouth to have acquired the chilling significance of a curse. Lucy felt this too, for coming closer to her mistress she half whispered—

"Oh, Miss Olivia, if there was really such things as witches, I should believe that old crone was one."

"Nonsense! Come inside, and let us see what's to be done."

"Oh, you're not going in again—all by ourselves! Oh, miss, just think of that upstairs room!" wailed the poor girl.

"Now, look here, Lucy, you mustn't be ridiculous. We're in a dreadful plight, and we've got to make the best of it. If you give way to silly fancies instead of doing your best to help me, I shall have to take you to that inn at the corner and leave you there while I come back and shift for myself as best I can."

Lucy, who loved her young mistress, grew sober and good immediately.

"You know I'll do what I can, Miss Olivia," she said, suppressing a sob of alarm as a dull sound, apparently from the barn opposite, reached their ears.

Olivia listened. The sound was repeated.

"It sounds like some person chopping wood," she said, after a moment's pause. "I daresay, now the place is uninhabited, the villagers take what liberties they like with it, and use the barns and sheds to store their own wood and hay and things in. Now, come in, and let us undo some of the trunks before the candle goes out.

With most reluctant feet, but without another word of remonstrance, Lucy followed her young mistress. Olivia, with resolute steps and a mouth set with an expression which said to the phantoms of the old house, "Come on if you dare!" re-entered the hall, and kneeling down before a trunk which had been placed there, attacked the cord round it with inexpert but strong fingers. They had got it open, and were congratulating themselves that in this, the first trunk unpacked, were candles, tea, and a little spirit lamp, when, suddenly, there fell upon their ears a noise which even to the brave spirited Olivia was, in a lonely, empty house, undeniably alarming. It came from the long living room where most of their luggage lay, and was as of some heavy body falling with a crash on to the floor.

Olivia sprang to her feet.

"I opened one of the windows," she said, "and forgot to shut it. Some one has got in! No, don't scream!"

She clapped her hand on Lucy's mouth and reduced the threatened

shriek to a moan; then, the noise having by this time ceased, she turned, heedless of the maid's whispered supplications, to the door of the long room. The lock was stiff with rust and the handle difficult to turn; so that, perhaps not much against her will, she left the intruder, if intruder it was, time to escape. But there was no fresh sound, and the young girl's brave heart fluttered a little with the fear that perhaps, on opening the door, she would come face to face with a defiant marauder. At last the door opened. It was dark by this time; through the opened shutters of the four windows came only just enough light to show that the trunks, piled up on the bare floor, had at least not been removed. The air blew in, very keen and cold, through the one open window, which was at the other end of the room, nearest to the fireplace.

"Is anybody there?" asked Olivia, scarcely without a tremor.

Her voice echoed without reply in the desolate department.

She held up the candle and advanced slowly, examining every gloomy corner. No one was there; no trace of any one having been there until, as she reached the other end, her glance fell on some dark object lying close under the open window. At this sight Lucy could not suppress the long-stifled scream, and it was not until her mistress pouncing down upon the mysterious thing, revealed the fact that it was only a couple of logs and a bundle of sticks, neatly tied together with a piece of string, that she found enough relief from terror to burst into tears.

"Who's the benevolent burglar, I wonder," cried Olivia, her spirits rising instantly at the discovery of the little anonymous act of kindness.

She ran to the window and looked out. There was no one to be seen; but on the window-ledge lay a box of cigar lights.

"The mysterious stranger again!" she said to herself. Then turning to the maid, said, "Now, Lucy, make a fire as fast as you can. There are some newspapers with the rugs. Here are sticks and logs and matches. We shall feel different creatures when we are once warm."

She shut down the window and boiled some water with her little spirit lamb; while Lucy, with cunning hands, made in the huge rusty grate a fire which was soon roaring up the chimney, and pouring its bright warm light on floor and wall and ceiling. The spirits both of mistress and maid began to rise a little as they drew up one of the smaller trunks to the fire, and made a frugal meal of biscuits and milkless tea.

"It is a horrid place, though, Miss Olivia," said Lucy, who had been chilled to the heart by Sarah Wall's utterances, and did not feel wholly sure that she herself had not been bewitched by that uncanny person.

"Oh, I suppose it might have been worse. They might have thrown bricks at us," said her mistress; "and remember that two people have already been very kind to us."

"Perhaps the young farmer-man only took to us just out of aggravation because his father didn't," suggested Lucy, who was a well-brought-up girl, and affected to take cynical views of young men. "And as for the gentleman, why, the old woman as good as said decent folk had better have nothing to do with him."

"But you surely wouldn't take that miserable old woman's word for it?"

"No, but I'd take his own face, miss. I watched him when the old farmer was going on so; and, my gracious! I never see such a black look on any one's face before. He seemed to grow all dark and purple-looking, and his eyes were quite red-like. It was just like as if he'd have knocked the other man down, miss, that it was."

"Well, I don't think I should have thought any the worse of him if he had."

"Oh, miss, it's an evil face. And I'm never deceived about faces. I said, first time I saw her, that nursery-maid Mrs. Denison sent away without a character was no good. And then that under-gardener——"

"You mustn't let your prejudices run away with you. Judge people by their actions; not their looks. Now, I saw something quite different in that gentleman's face, and we can't both be right. It seemed to me that he looked like a man who had had a very hard life and a great deal of trouble; as if he had done nothing but struggle, struggle with—I don't know exactly with what; poverty, perhaps, or perhaps with a violent temper, or——"

She stopped, and stared into the fire, having ceased to remember that she was carrying on a conversation. Her wandering thoughts, however, soon took a practical turn again. "The cabman!" she cried, starting up tragically; "I never paid him."

She was instinctively turning towards the door, haunted by an alarming sum in addition of innumerable hours at sixpence every quarter of an hour, when Lucy's voice, in tones of great shrewdness, stopped her.

"Oh, Miss Olivia," she said, shaking her head knowingly; "he's gone away long ago. If this was a place where cabmen would wait for their fares for two hours without so much as knocking at the door, we might think ourselves in heaven, which the other people shows us we're not."

"Well, but who paid his fare, then?"

Lucy began to look not only mysterious, but rather alarmed.

"Oh, Miss Olivia, perhaps it's a plot to get us into his power!"

They had both come to the same conclusion as to the person who paid the fare, but at this point their reflections branched off into widely different channels.

"You're a little goose, Lucy, and you've been filling your head with penny novels, I can see," said she.

But the obligation to a stranger, which she could scarcely doubt she was under, troubled her.

"It is very, very awkward to be thrown out like this in a strange place with nobody to go to for help or advice," she began; when suddenly a light came into her face, and she sprang up and ran to fetch her travelling bag. "I'd forgotten all about it!" she cried, as she drew out a closed letter directed in an old-fashioned, pointed, feminine hand to "Mrs. Brander, the Vicarage, Rishton." "The wife of one of the curates at Streatham knows the wife of the vicar here, and gave me a letter of introduction to her. I will go and call upon her at once. If she is the least nice she will help us, and tell us how to treat with these savages."

Olivia was fastening her mantle, which she had not taken off, and putting on her gloves. Lucy's round face had grown very long.

"And must I stay here, miss, all by myself?" she asked, dolefully.

Olivia looked at her dubiously.

"I would rather you stayed here, certainly, because, you see, the furniture might come while we were away," she said at last. "On the other hand, if you are going to frighten yourself into a fit at the scraping of every mouse——"

Lucy drew herself up. She was not really a coward, and this speech put her upon her mettle.

"I'll stay, Miss Olivia," she said, resolutely; adding, in a milder voice, "You won't be very long, will you?"

"Indeed I won't," answered her mistress, promptly. "I don't suppose it takes more than five minutes to go from one end of the village to the other. We saw the church from the cab windows; it's on the top of the hill. I shall make for that; the Vicarage is sure not to be far off."

Without more delay Olivia left the house, taking the way to the right by which they had approached the house, in the hope of meeting some one belonging to the inn who would direct her. She was fortunate enough to come upon a diminutive villager, who, after lengthy interrogation and apparent ignorance as to where "the Vicarage" was, acknowledged to knowing "where the parson lived."

"Will you take me to the house if I give you twopence?"

"Hey," replied the small boy, promptly.

He did not start, however, until he had taken an exhaustive survey of her, either for identification in case she should try to elude him at the other end of the journey, or to satisfy himself whether she was a person likely to possess twopence.

"Theer's two ways," he said, at last. "Short way over t' brook, an' oop t' steps and through t' churchyard; long way by t' road an' oop t' hill."

"Go the short way, then."

"Mr. Midgley, t' carpenter, fell an' broak his leg goin' oop theer this afternoon. An' t' churchyard; geate's cloased by now."

"Well, then, we'll go the other way, of course."

The boy trudged along up the road, which was a continuation of that by which they had come to the farm, and made no attempt at conversation except in answer to Olivia's questions. She made out, after much persevering pumping, that the vicar, Mr. Brander, was much liked, and that his wife was only a little less popular. After this there was a pause, which was broken by the boy, as they passed between a plain stone building, standing back from the road on the right, and a group of hay and straw stacks, sheds, and farm buildings on the left.

"That's Mester Oldshaw's farm," said the boy.

"Ugh!" ejaculated Olivia below her breath, hurrying on with angrily averted eyes.

The whole place, seen by the weak light of the rising moon, seemed to her to display the repulsive hideousness of its master.

After this the road wound to the left up the hill, and they passed a few scattered cottages, one of which was the primitive village post office.

"That be t' parson's house," said the boy, as they came in sight of an irregularly built stone house standing high, on the left-hand side of the road, in a well-wooded garden.

They had to go round this garden, and turn sharply to the left into a private road at the top of the hill. This brought them face to face with the gates of the little churchyard, while on the left was the front door of the Vicarage, a pretty building in the Tudor style, which, seen even in the faint moonlight, had a pleasant, welcoming air of comfort, peace, and plenty. Olivia gave the boy his twopence, and rang the bell with a hopeful heart. Everything seemed to promise well for the success of her errand. A neat maid soon came to the door, but to Olivia's inquiry whether Mrs. Brander were at home came the dispirting answer that she was away. Miss Denison reflected a moment.

"Is Mr. Brander at home?" she then asked.

"Yes, ma'am, Mr. Vernon Brander is in. Will you see him?"

"Yes, if I can."

She followed the servant across the wife, well-formed hall, to a door at which the maid knocked.

"Come in," said a voice, which seemed familiar to Olivia.

"A lady wishes to see you, sir," said the servant.

"Show her in at once," said the man's voice.

Olivia drew back instead of advancing, as the servant made way for her to enter.

"It is Mr. Brander, the clergyman, I wish to see," said Olivia, hurriedly, in a low voice.

"Oh, yes, ma'am, it's all right. Mr. Brander is a clergyman," answered the maid, reassuringly.

Before another word could pass, Mr. Brander himself, hearing a discussion, came to the door. Olivia looked at him in some confusion. It was her unknown friend of the afternoon!

CHAPTER IV.

OLIVIA'S momentary embarrassment was at once removed by the kindness of Mr. Brander's greeting.

"Yes, Mr. Brander is a clergyman. I hope you have no prejudice against the cloth," he said, holding out his hand with a welcoming smile. "It's not a proper clerical garment, I confess," he went on, as Olivia's glance fell instinctively upon the old shooting coat he now wore; "but I flatter myself the collar saves it."

And he pointed to his orthodox round collar.

"I am not sure of that," said the young girl, smiling in answer. "For instance, if I had known this afternoon that you were a clergyman, I should have felt much more at ease about accepting your very kind services."

"Should you? Well, then, you are at ease about it now. Come in, and tell me if there is anything more I can do for you."

Olivia followed him into the most charmingly luxurious study she had ever seen. Everything in it was comfortable and handsome, in

the best modern taste. The doors, mantelpiece, and panelling were of carved light oak, the furniture of the same, upholstered in dark-green morocco. There were *portieres* and curtains of dark tapestry, harmonizing with the carpet. The books, which filled four large and handsome bookcases, looked to the connoisseur too dainty to be touched by common fingers. Evidences of a woman's presiding eye and hand were there too, Olivia fancied, in a certain graceful draping of the curtains, which seemed to her to betray neither the upholsterer nor the housemaid; in a tall bouquet of dried bulrushes and corn which stood in one corner; and in a small conservatory, full of dark palms and ferns, into which one of the windows opened. Everything was well chosen, everything harmonized with everything else, except the shabbily dressed figure in the centre, with his lean, dark, worn face, and hungry black eyes, and the tattered volume he held in his hand. Mr. Brander read the thought that flashed through his guest's mind, and asked—

"Now, what is your first impression of this room?"

"It is very, very pretty," said Olivia.

"Well, and what else?"

"Some one else had more to do with the arrangement of it than you."

Olivia had never before felt so perfectly at ease with a stranger—so able to speak her passing thoughts out frankly and freely.

"Right; quite right. And now let me hear what sort of a guess you can make as to the person who had the arrangement of it."

"It was a lady. Perhaps a lady who has had some art-school training; but one who can think for herself a little too. Not an every-day sort of lady, and yet not eccentric. One whom you would like to know, but whom you might be a little afraid of."

By the interest and pleasure with which Mr. Brander followed her as she proceeded slowly and cautiously with her conjectures, Olivia felt sure that she was describing his wife, and also that she was getting near the truth. But then a look of pain came into his dark face, which set her wondering whether they had had a severe quarrel, whether there was some serious estrangement between them, or whether the trouble from which he was evidently suffering was caused merely by the absence of the woman of his heart. This singular clergyman, with his unconventional dress and manners, his worn face, and his great kindness, was so different from any of the stiff curates and unctuous vicars she had ever met, that he and his surroundings awoke her in the liveliest interest, even apart from the mysterious warning of Sarah Wall, and the surly insolence shown towards him by Farmer Oldshaw. After a short pause, he said—

"Right in every particular. Now we will see if you can find the lady."

On the mantelpiece was a collection of photographs, most of them of more or less beautiful women, all handsomely framed. Mr. Brander invited Olivia to come up and inspect them. With another slight feeling of surprise, which she would have found it hard to account for, she stepped on to the soft fur hearthrug and made a careful review of the whole gallery. But here she was quite at a loss.

"I must lose my character for divination," she said at last, shaking

her head as she stepped back. "I don't see any face that I could point out with any certainty."

"Try."

She chose one. Mr. Brander shook his head.

"Wrong," he said. "You have disappointed me. What made you choose that one? Give me the nearest approach you can to a reason."

"It looks a good, kind, sensible face."

"It belongs to a good, kind, sensible woman—a Miss Williams—a striking contrast to the rest of her family," he added as a comment to himself. "But she is not the lady who chose the fittings of this room. What do you say to this one?"

It was Olivia's turn to be disappointed, and her face showed her surprise. The photograph was that of a woman who was very handsome, and there your reflections concerning her portrait ended. Mr. Brander laughed.

"Say what you think of it quite frankly. I shan't be offended," he said.

"It is a beautiful face," she answered.

"Well, what else?"

"Nothing else," said Olivia in desperation. "Mrs. Brander may have every great quality that ever adorned a woman; but her face, like nearly all very beautiful ones, I think, is just beautiful and nothing else."

"Don't you see any feeling, imagination, passion?"

"No—o, indeed I can't."

"Well, that's all right, because she hasn't any."

Olivia listened rather awkwardly, for Mr. Brander had unconsciously let a little feeling, a little bitterness sound in the tones of his own voice.

"Do you see great common sense, shrewdness, and a splendid faculty for perceiving where the greatest advantage lies to her and hers?"

His tone was still a little bitter, but it was good humored and playful also.

"Oh no!" said Olivia.

"Well, then, you should see those qualities, for they are all there."

"And may I know who this is?" asked Miss Denison, to turn the conversation from a point where she had no more to say.

She was looking at the companion frame to that which contained the lady's portrait. It held the picture of a strikingly handsome man, not far off middle age, plump, good humored, and prosperous-looking, dressed in correct clerical costume, with a beautiful child seated on his knee.

"That is my brother."

"Your brother!"

All the rules of courtesy could not avail to hide her surprise then. A greater contrast could not be imagined than that between this worn, haggard, ascetic-looking, shabby man, with his unconventional dress and manner, and the neat, smiling, comfortable-looking gentleman, who seemed to beam from his morocco frame on a world where tithe wars were not. Then a light flashed upon Olivia, and she gave Mr. Brander a smile of triumphant shrewdness.

"Now I understand it all," she said, eagerly. "This room is your brother's, and this lady is not your wife, but his."

Mr. Brander laughed rather sadly.

"You think they all 'match' with him better than they would with me."

Olivia grew very red, and in some confusion tried to explain away this too obvious conclusion. But Mr. Brander stopped her.

"You are quite, quite right," he said, kindly. "You would be blind if you couldn't see it. My sister-in-law saw it, twelve years ago, when she was wise enough to reject me and to take my brother."

"There, now you see why Mrs. Meridith Brander is destitute of feeling, imagination, and passion, and resplendent only in the less lovable qualities," he went on mocking at himself good-humoredly. "If she had only chosen me, I should have a very different tale to tell, you may be sure."

Olivia was silent. The strange contrast between the two brothers filled her with pity for the one who had been kind to her, and with a sort of unreasonable antagonism towards the unknown one to whom fortune had been so much more generous.

"It seems very hard on you," she said, glancing at him rather shyly.

But even as she spoke a violent change came over his face which chilled and repelled her, and brought back to her mind with sudden and startling vividness the vague warning of the old woman. A flush of fierce and vindictive anger, a short, sharp struggle with himself, and then Mr. Brander was subdued and kind and courteous as ever. But this peep at the nature underneath had made an impression upon Olivia which she could not readily forget; it destroyed the ease she had felt with him, and woke a distrust which his instant return to his old kindly manner failed to remove.

"It is very good of you to think so," he said, with a courteous smile. "At one time I admit it seemed hard to me too. But I've been forced to confess long ago that I could not have occupied the position he fills either with credit to myself or satisfaction to anybody else. While as for poor Evelyn, if she had had the misfortune to take me with my bad temper and my inevitable hatred of order, instead of being still handsome, amiable, and young, she would be a haggard old woman."

Remembering, as she did, the bitterness which he had previously shown in speaking of his sister-in-law, and the fierce animosity which had blazed out of his black eyes a moment ago in recalling the contrast between his brother and himself, Olivia could not help feeling that there was a little hypocrisy in this ultra-modest speech, and she made some civil answer in a tone which showed constraint in comparison with her previous warm-hearted and simple frankness. Mr. Brander looked scrutinizingly at her face, and reading the change in its expression, hastened to open another and less dangerous subject.

"And here I have been gossiping about my own idle affairs all this time, without once asking you what you came to see me about, and what I can do for you."

"I brought a letter of introduction to Mrs. Brander," said Olivia

producing it. "The wife of one of the curates at Streetham, where I live, or at least where I have been living," she added, correcting herself, "knew Mrs. Brander some years ago. And she thought, as I was coming here all by myself, it would be pleasanter for me to know some one."

"My sister-in-law would have helped you in a hundred ways," said Mr. Brander, regretfully. "She is a very energetic woman, and loves to have some active work to do for anybody, if there is a little occasion to show fight over it. And there is in your case; for that unmannerly old ruffian, John Oldshaw, who made himself so offensive just now at the inn, wanted to have the farm your father has taken, and will annoy you all in every way he can for spite, if I'm not mistaken.

"If he does, I shall get papa to complain to Lord Stannington," said Miss Denison, with a resolute expression about her mouth.

"Well, we must hope there won't be any need to do so. Perhaps your father is a better farmer than John Oldshaw, and will be able to make him sing small."

"Oh, I'm afraid not," said she, shaking her head dolefully; "papa has never been a farmer before. He's been a banker, but he never did much banking, I think; and the other partners bought him out of the bank a little while ago, and he did nothing at all for a little while. But we are not rich enough to live like that, so he thought he should like to try farming, especially as my step-mother had been ordered to live in the country."

Mr. Brander looked grave. He could not help thinking that things looked very black for his pretty visitor. A weak and idle father, an invalid step-mother, such were the fancy portraits he instantly drew of the pair, setting up as amateurs in a business which even experience, industry, and capacity can scarcely nowadays make remunerative! What would become of the bright girl in these circumstances?

"How came they to send you down here all by yourself?" he asked, after a pause.

"My step-mother—you know I told you I had a step-mother," she interpolated, with mischievous meaning—"has delicate health; that is to say, her health is too delicate for her ever to do anything she doesn't wish to do, and she did not wish to come down to an empty house, to have all the worry and trouble of filling it. So I offered to do it. Home has been rather tiresome lately, and I thought it would be fun, and besides that I really wanted to be useful, and to make things as comfortable as I could for poor papa. But I did think she would see that the furniture was sent in time."

"Yes, that's an awkward business, certainly. We must consider what is best to be done. And while I'm thinking it over, you'll have a glass of wine and a biscuit, won't you?" said he, as he touched the bell.

Olivia did not refuse. She thought her best chance of a happy issue out of her difficulties lay in trusting to the clergyman, whose persistent kindness was fast effacing the unpleasant impression of a few minutes before. She even asked him ingenuously whether he thought she ought to stay any longer away from the bare house

where she had left poor little Lucy alone with the mice. Mr. Brander quieted her conscience as, in obedience to his order, the maid servant brought in wine and cake, with which he proceeded to serve the hungry girl.

"I shall let you go in two minutes now," he said. "And we won't let Lucy starve either."

The servant was still waiting.

"What is it, Hester?"

"Young Mr. Williams has called, sir. He wishes to speak to you for a minute. I believe he has a message."

Mr. Brander's face clouded.

"Where is he? I'll go out and speak to him," he said, shortly.

But the words were scarcely out of his mouth when a voice, speaking in coarse and familiar tones, was heard outside the door, heralding the approach of the new comer.

"It's all right; it's only me. Suppose I can come in, eh?"

And, without waiting for permission, a young man elbowed his way past the servant, and entered the room.

The word which applied best to Mr. Frederick Williams, including his face, voice, dress, and manner, was "cub." He was short and sandy; he had an expression of mingled dulness and cunning, in which dulness predominated; his dress, his vocabulary, and a certain roll in his walk smacked of the stable; and the only conspicuous quality he showed to balance these disadvantages was a certain coarse good humor which never failed him. He was even destitute of that very common grace in young men of his type—an unsurmountable shyness in the presence of women of refinement. On catching sight of Olivia, seated by the fire, eating cake with unmistakable enjoyment, his eyes opened wide with astonishment and boorish admiration, which gave place the next moment to an expression of intense shyness as, with a loud cough, he affected to retreat to the door.

"Oh, I beg pardon, Mr. Brander; I didn't mean to interrupt such a pleasant *tete-a-tete*, I'm sure."

But he had no intention of going, and Mr. Brander asked him rather curtly what he came for.

"Oh, my business is of no consequence; it will do any time," answered Mr. Williams, still with his light eyes fixed upon Olivia.

"Very likely. But what is it?" asked Mr. Brander, still more shortly.

"Oh, my father wants to see you about something. It's about the church, I believe; your church, St. Cuthbert's. He wants to do something for it, I fancy; says the condition it's in is a disgrace to the neighborhood."

Again Olivia saw on Mr. Brander's face a glimpse of fierce anger, with which, however, she this time heartily sympathized. Feeling very uncomfortable, she rose and held out her hand to the clergyman. His face cleared as he took it.

"Now, don't worry yourself too much about the wretched furniture," he said, with his old kindliness. "As you go down the hill, mind you stop where the roads cross. There's a wishing-cap hangs on the hedge just there. If you see it, put it on; if you don't, make

the motion of putting it on, and at the same time say these words just under your breath, "I wish that within an hour I may be installed very comfortably!"

"Thank you," said Olivia, laughing and returning the pressure of his hand warmly; "if the wishing-cap could bring that to pass, I should begin to look with respect on a broomstick."

Mr. William's face had assumed during these two last speeches an expression of mingled bewilderment and contempt. As the lady moved towards the door, he followed without having once taken his eyes off her.

"Will you be able to find your way?" asked Mr. Brander, as he opened the study door.

"I'll go with you; I'll escort you. Which way are you going?" asked Mr. Williams, eagerly. "To the Hall, eh? I go past it; don't I, Brander?"

"I believe so," said the clergyman, shortly.

"So you see, you're not putting me to any inconvenience at all," went on the young man.

"Oh, I didn't think of that," said Miss Denison, with a little laugh and a pretty turn of the head. "In my part of the world it is never an inconvenience to see a lady home."

In the meantime they had all crossed the hall and arrived at the front door, where Mr. Brander, with a reluctant frown at his male visitor, again shook hands warmly with Olivia, and told her not to lose heart. He watched the ill-assorted pair as they went down the lane until they turned into the high road. Until they reached this point they proceeded in silence, but as soon as they began to descend the hill, the young man found voice after his snub.

"You're deuced sharp on a fellow," he said then in a conciliatory tone. "It wasn't my fault that I turned up when the parson was making sheeps' eyes at you."

"If I am to put up with your society until I reach the Hall gates, I really must ask you to abstain from making offensive remarks," said Olivia, icily.

"Offensive! Oh, all right. But I warn you that parson chap is a deal more likely to be offensive than I am. By Jove!" he continued, after a freezing pause; "if you weren't such a pretty girl I'm hanged if I'd go a step further with you, after your rudeness."

"In your own choice language, 'I'm hanged if you shall,'" answered Miss Denison, with spirit.

Before the astonished young man could recover his speech, the girl had flown down the hill like an arrow with the wind. He had admired her before; for this display of spirit he felt that he adored her. At this point the road made a circuitous bend which could be cut off by one familiar with the place by crossing the fields. Fred Williams was through a gap in the hedge in a moment, and on regaining the road he was a few yards ahead of the still flying lady. Darting out upon her as she passed, he seized her by the arm; and as the attack was unexpected, she staggered for a second.

"You're a splendid runner, but you can't beat me," said the young gentleman, with what was meant to be an alluring mixture of admiration and manly condescension,

But it had quite a wrong effect upon the lady. Pausing one moment to recover her breath and her balance, she extricated herself from his insolent clutch with a sudden athletic movement which flung him reeling into the hedge, where he lodged amid a great crackling of branches.

"I shall not require your escort further, thank you," said Miss Denison then imperturbably to the spluttering swain.

And she walked on again with a perfect and defiant security. She had not misjudged her effect, for Mr. Williams did not attempt to molest her again. Just as she reached the farm gates, however, he hurried after her, and without coming to close quarters, said, maliciously—

"Very well, madam, Don't be afraid that I shall interfere with you again. But before you take up with Parson Brander, I'd just ask him, if I were you, what has become of Nellie Mitchell."

But Miss Denison walked through the gates without a word.

CHAPTER V.

To be able to inflict a severe physical defeat upon an obtrusive admirer may be a highly convenient accomplishment, but the necessity for its exercise cannot but be a humiliating experience. Olivia Denison felt the hot tears rise to her eyes as she walked up through the farmyard to the Hall. If only one of her own stalwart brothers, Edward or Ernest, were here to give this insolent cad the thrashing he deserved! But Edward was in India with his regiment, and Ernest was tied to a desk in a solicitor's office in London. She must depend upon her own arm and own head for her protection now; fortunately, neither was of the weakest, as she herself felt with some satisfaction. In fact, she scarcely knew yet what measure of strength, both mental and physical, was hers; for she had led hitherto an easy, sheltered life, idle in the sense that all her energy had been spent in amusing herself, happy but for certain uncongenial elements at home.

Now there was to be a difference. Without being expected to know how it came to pass, Olivia knew that papa had grown poorer, that he had become frightfully irritable about bills of late, and that various violent and spasmodic efforts at retrenchment, and papa's reiterated declarations that he must "do something," had culminated in the sale of the beautiful house at Streatham, and in the taking of Rishton Hall Farm. There was something not quite painful in the feeling that she would have to "do something" too, and in the knowledge that she might now be able to turn her quickness of eye and hand to useful account in the service of the father whom she adored. What would his senitive nature do among these Oldshaws, and these Williamses, and these Walls, with the most unpleasant and disturbing rumors afloat about the very clergyman in charge? This was the reflection which troubled Olivia's mind as she approached the Hall for the second time, and going up the worn steps, let herself in without any need to knock at the door.

"Lucy!" she called, as she opened the door of the big room on the right.

There was no answer. The room was deserted, and the fire had burnt low. Olivia shivered as she went in. The run down the hill had put her in a glow; the entrance into this mouldy old chamber chilled her. She put more wood on the fire, and sat down to await the return of Lucy, who, she did not doubt, had found the loneliness of the place too much for her nerves, and had gone out to look for her mistress. In a few minutes Olivia began to long even for the patter of a mouse's feet, for the song of a cricket, for any sign of life in the desolate old house, if it were only the sight of the loathely black beetle. The spirit of the unknown Nellie Mitchell seemed to haunt her. That girl, who had lived in the house, gone about her daily work in this room, whose mementoes still remained undisturbed and undecayed in these deserted old walls, who was she? What had become of her? "Ask Mr. Brander": so the odious Fred Williams has said with intensely malicious significance. Should she dare to do this, and perhaps satisfy once for all those doubts of her new friend which not only the conflicting opinions of the villagers, but certain morose and repellent changes of expression on his own face, had instilled into her? She could not decide. Between her doubts, her loneliness, and her sense of the difficulties of her desolate situation, the poor girl was growing so unhappy that when at last she heard the sound of footsteps upon the ground outside, she sprang up with a cry, and ran to the door, ready to force whoever it might be to share her vigil.

On the doorstep she found Sarah Wall, whom conscience or a glimering notion that it might be as well to be "in wi' t' new fowk," had brought back to make inquiries.

"Hasna' yer goods coom?" she asked, rather apologetically.

"No; they won't come to night now," answered Miss Denison with a sigh.

"There's summat—a cart or a waggon or summat—at t' gate now."

The hope was too much. Olivia gave a little cry. But when, a little later, there absolutely did drive up through the farm-yard, and draw up at the door, a small open cart closely packed with bedroom furniture, she could scarcely keep from bursting into tears. For the first few minutes she was too overjoyed to perceive anything very singular in this arrival. In the front of the cart, beside the driver, sat two neat and buxom country girls, who sprang down to the ground with much suppressed excitement and half-hysterical laughter, and without any explanation of their presence, proceeded, with the help of the driver, to unpack the cart, and to carry the contents indoors and upstairs. Olivia stood back bewildered. One had a lantern and the other a broom; neither would advance a step towards the old house or up the wide staircase without the comfort and support of the other's near presence. But up they did go at last, stifling little screams at every other step, and returning the jibes of the driver with prompt retorts. This young man looked like a stable boy, or perhaps a groom in undress. As he came downstairs again, after having taken up a folding bedstead, Olivia asked him where he came from.

"From t' Vicarage, miss," he answered, with a stableman's salute. "Mr. Vernon sent us down and told us to put t' things in and coom back as quick as we could. T' lasses was to clean oot a room oop-stairs for ye."

Sarah Wall was emitting a series of witchlike grunts in the background.

"Mr. Vernon!" cried Olivia; "Mr. Vernon Brander! Oh, how very kind of him! How very kind!"

"He'll be down hisself just now, miss, I think," continued the lad; "he said he'd coom wi' t' second lot."

Here Mrs. Wall broke in with a preliminary croaking cough—

"Nea, nea! He wunna coom a-nigh this house. He coomed here too often in t' owd time. Nea, nea! He wunna coom inside noo."

"Howd tha tunge, Sal," said the lad, quickly. "Thoo'd get tha-self int' trouble wi' t' vicar if he heerd tha prattlin' so o' 's brither."

Whereupon the old woman fell to incoherent mumbling, and the lad having discharged his load, saluted the young lady again, and drove away. With a pleasant sense upon her that help, ready and efficient, was indeed come at last, Olivia went indoors again, and, directed by the sounds of active sweeping, and at least as active chattering, found her way to the best bedroom in this part of the house, which the exertions of the two maids were quickly rendering habitable. They had brought with them even a large scuttleful of coals, and a supply of candles. In half an hour the room was swept, a fire lighted, carpet laid down, and two little beds and a suite of bedroom furniture disposed to the best advantage.

"Mr. Vernon said we was only to fit up one bedroom, ma'am, as you'd be sure to want your maid to sleep in the same room with you in this big empty house, miss," said the elder and more responsible of the servants.

"Yes, that is quite true," answered Miss Denison promptly.

"And as soon as we had done this room we was to sweep out the big one dowstairs."

"Oh," said Miss Denison, "you need not do that. One room is plenty for us to go on with, and I don't wish you to have the trouble of doing any more."

"Oh, it's no trouble, ma'am. And those were Mr. Vernon's orders. And when the master and missus is away, we have orders to do just as Mr. Vernon says, exactly as if he was master. You see, master thinks such a deal of Mr. Vernon."

Here was another instance of the strange enthusiasm for Mr. Vernon Brander which he seemed to excite equally with the most violent antagonism.

"I wouldn't ha' come here by myself though; not if Mr. Vernon had ordered me ever so; no, and not if master and Mrs. Brander hadn't ordered me too, that I wouldn't!" broke in the younger maid with decision.

Miss Denison caught sight of a severe frown and a bit of expressive pantomime signifying that she was to hold her tongue, from her older and more discreet companion.

"How is that?" asked the young lady. "Do you think this house is haunted?"

"Of course not, ma'm," broke in the elder. "Susan you ought to be ashamed of yourself, telling such silly stuff. Of course, ma'am, when a house lies empty some time there's all sorts of tales gets about, and I daresay if you hadn't come and taken it, in another year there'd ha' been a whole lot of ghost stories and such-like about it."

Miss Denison saw that there was nothing to be learnt here, so she asked no more questions, but waited eagerly for the arrival of Mr. Brander. At last, from the position she had taken up on the steps outside the front door, she heard the clergyman's voice and the sound of wheels and hoofs at the same time; a few seconds later the cart, again piled with furniture, stopped at the door, and Mr. Brander, springing down from his place beside the driver, held out a helping hand to the third person in the cart, who proved to be no other than Lucy. Instead of jumping out with her usual activity, however, the little maid hung back in the most nervous manner, and finally had almost to be lifted out of the vehicle, uttering words of protest in a hoarse whisper.

"Lucy! Why, what's the matter with you?" asked her young mistress, kindly, perceiving by the light of the lantern the clergyman carried that the bright red color had left the girl's round cheeks, and that her eyes were distended with some absorbing horror.

"Nothing, Miss Olivia—nothing," stammered she, faintly. "I—I went out to look for you. I thought you might have lost your way—and—and——"

"As Eben and I were driving down the hill we met her, and, finding that she was looking for you. Miss Denison, I made her get up and come on with the luggage."

He did not look at Lucy, neither did she look at him, and in the course of the work of unloading and furnishing in which they now both proceeded to take an active part, Olivia could not help noticing the ashy paleness that came over the maid's face, and the way in which she shrank into herself if accident brought her in close contact with the gentleman. The installation now went on merrily. To Olivia's great relief Mr. Brander, contrary to Sarah Wall's prediction showed not the least reluctance to enter the old house, but went backwards and forwards between the cart and the big room until there was nothing left to bring in.

"We haven't brought nearly enough furniture to fill this big room, you know," he explained, as he trundled in a roll of carpet. "The cart would only hold just sufficient to make you a little oasis at the fireplace end; but it's better than the bare boards, and to-morrow we'll hope you'll have your own things about you."

"Oh, Mr. Brander, I can't thank you," said Olivia, overwhelmed. "You have built a palace for us in the desert; but what will the vicar say? He will come back and find that you have ransacked his beautiful house on behalf of two utter strangers! I shall never dare to look Mrs. Brander in the face after taking part in such a sacrilege."

"My brother would say nothing if I were to turn all the drawing-room furniture out into the churchyard," answered he, promptly.

"You mustn't judge his temper by my black looks. He and I are as different as heaven and—earth. All the ladies fall in love with him."

"Then I shall not," said Miss Denison, decidedly. "I like my loves all to myself."

Mr. Brander considered her attentively, with a quizzical look.

"I should think you would," he said, smiling. "I am afraid you will be badly off down here—if indeed you could be badly off for admirers anywhere. The nearest approach to an eligible swain in these parts is the gentleman who escorted you home."

Olivia, who was nailing up a curtain while Mr. Brander kept steady the erection of a box and a chair on which she stood, put down her hammer to indulge in a hearty burst of laughter.

"Oh, I'm afraid it's all over with the pretty little romance you have been building up for me," she said, looking down with her bright eyes still twinkling with amusement. "I pushed him into a hedge."

"At the first blush that does not look promising certainly," said Mr. Brander with perfect gravity, "considering the rank of the parties. For if he had been the clod-hopper nature intended him for, and you the dairymaid he would have liked you to be, such a demonstration as that would have been the certain prelude to a wedding."

"It wasn't a very ladylike thing to do, I'm afraid," said Olivia, blushing a very becoming crimson. "But really he was not the sort of person to be dealt with by means of modest little screams and flutterings. And—well, the truth is, I really was so furiously angry that I would have thrown him over the hedge if I'd been strong enough."

"I wish you belonged to my parish," said Mr. Brander, reflectively. "It is a great pity such nerve and muscle should be thrown away. Now, there's an old villain who always nods through the first part of my sermon, and snores as soon as I grow a little eloquent—and—and I daren't throw him into a hedge myself; my motives might be questioned. But if I could only get a fair and amiable parishioner to do it for me, no one could say a word."

"You want to make me ashamed of myself," said Olivia, giving a vicious blow to the nail she was driving in. "But you shan't succeed. My father and my two brothers think that everything I do is right."

"Ah! Then it's high time somebody turned up to prove to you that everything you do is wrong."

"Thank you. My step-mother does that."

"Then what do papa and the brothers say to her?"

"If the world's turning around depended on dear old papa's saying a harsh word to anybody, the world would stand still. As for my brothers, especially Ted, when he is at home breakfast is a skirmish with my step-mother, luncheon is a brisk engagement, and dinner a hard-fought battle. They are always ordering each other out of the room, and it's quite a rare thing for them both to sit out a meal at the same table."

"The fault is not quite all on one side, I suppose."

"Oh, no, of course not. When poor Ted is away life is not very comfortable, but at least it is not volcanic."

"Curious that the common or garden step-mother, wherever found, should always present the same characteristics. She has children of her own, I suppose?"

"Yes, two."

"You don't love them—I perceive by your tone."

"Wait till you see them, and then say whether anybody could."

"I think my professional ministrations are wanted here. Where is your Christian charity?"

Olivia turned round to look down upon him with the most earnest gravity.

"I shall take the liberty of asking you the same question when Regie gets caressed for his vivacity in cutting a slit in your umbrella, and when you see Beatrice consoled with an orange for some impertinence for which she ought to have her ears boxed."

"And it's all the fault of the step-mother?"

"Yes, all."

"Poor lady; I am beginning to feel the deepest interest in her. No doubt she was a perfectly amiable and harmless person before this unhappy metamorphosis."

"Yes; she was our governess—a most excellent woman and very strict with us."

"I must see what can be done for her. I have a sermon that will just suit her, I think; one that hasn't done duty for a long time."

"It will be of no use. When she was our governess she never missed church; now she's our step-mother she never goes."

The curtains were by this time hung; the two maids from the vicarage, after helping Lucy to give the last touches to the arrangement of the furniture, had run upstairs to see that all was in order in the bedroom, and perhaps also to have a little gossip with this new friend. Mr. Brander looked about eagerly in search of more work.

"There's nothing more to do, I am afraid," he said, rather wistfully.

Olivia smiled. "Afraid!" she echoed. "Why I should think you would be very glad to shake off the dust and the damp of this old place, and to get back to that beautiful, cosy room where I found you this evening."

As she spoke, an uncomfortable remembrance of the mystery which hung about the house and its rumored connection with him came into her mind. Mr. Brander looked straight into her face, and said—

"Under some circumstances I might be. For I knew this place very well before it was left to dust and damp. But now I am glad to think that it is going to have life and youth and brightness in it again—very glad; and I don't want to hurry away at all."

He spoke so gravely, and expressed his reluctance to go so naively, that Olivia was silent, not quite knowing in what tone to answer him. Then it suddenly struck him that he might have offended her, and without looking into her face again he hastened to say—

"You must excuse my boorishness if I don't express myself in the orthodox way. I live like a hermit, and have done for the last"—he paused, and then added slowly, as if counting up the time—"ten years. I have forgotten how to make pretty phrases. What I meant

was this: I haven't had half an hour's pleasant talk with a lady, as I have with you this evening, for all that time—ten years! And it will very likely be ten years before I have another. And so I have enjoyed myself, and I am sorry it's over, though I daresay you are rather tired of the rustic parson and his solecisms."

An awkward constraint had fallen upon him; he had grown shy and unhappy. Olivia felt sorry for him, and she answered in tones of sweet feminine gentleness which seemed to pour balm upon some hidden wound.

"I believe part of what you say. For if you had been used to ladies' society you must have known that talking to you has given me at least as much pleasure as talking to me can have given you. And if you are not going to have another talk with me for another ten years, as you threaten, it will be your fault, and not mine."

There was a pretty graciousness in her manner, the result of the homage her beauty had always obtained for her. Mr. Brander gave her a shy glance of adoring gratitude which momentarily lit up his dark face.

"Thank you," he said in a low voice. "I shall remember your pretty words and your kind looks, believe me; but when we next meet, it will not be the same, and it will be no fault of yours."

Olivia was on the point of breaking out into a passionate assurance that no hearsay talk altered her opinion of her friends; but a certain gloom which settled on his face and gave him almost a forbidding aspect checked her, and she remembered, while a deep blush crept into her handsome cheeks, that it is unconventionally premature to call the acquaintance of half a day a friend. So she remained modestly silent while he held out his hand and told her, recovering his usual manner, that he should write a full description of her to his sister-in-law, and that Miss Denison might expect to be chartered as a district visitor before she had time or inclination to say "Jack Robinson."

Mr. Brander then called the two maids and started them on their walk home; brought in a luncheon basket which he had left in the hall, and handed it to Lucy, telling her to open it when her mistress felt inclined for supper; and, before Olivia could thank him for this fresh proof of his kindness, he was already out of the house.

The door had scarcely closed upon him when Lucy, with an exclamation of horror and disgust, flung down the luncheon basket, and, running to the nearest window, threw it wide open.

"What are you doing, Lucy?" asked her mistress in astonishment, crossing quickly to the girl to see whether she was ill.

"Airing the place, miss, after that bad, wicked man," answered the little maid, vehemently.

"You ungrateful girl, after all Mr. Brander has done for us. How can you say such things?"

"I say what I know, miss, and what is known all over the place, miss, to every one but you," answered Lucy, her face crimson with excitement. "He's a murderer, miss; he murdered the poor girl who used to live in those rooms upstairs."

Olivia was standing at the window, with her hand on the latch to

close it. Just as Lucy hissed out those words in a voice shrill and broken with horror, Mr. Brander passed. The light from the room fell full upon his face. He had heard the girl's words. A look, not of indignation, but of shame, of agony, convulsed his pale features, but he did not turn his head. Olivia shivered. She wanted to call out to him, to ask him to deny this infamous slander; but her mouth was dry and the words would not come. For he must have heard, she knew, and yet there was no denial in his face.

With a trembling hand she closed the window.

"There, it's quite upset you; I knew it would, Miss Olivia," said Lucy, rather triumphantly. "Aren't you shocked?"

But the tears were gathering in Olivia's eyes.

"I'm shocked, yes, of course," said she, sadly. "And I'm dreadfully—dreadfully sorry."

Lucy was scandalized. This was not the way in which she had been taught to look upon a criminal.

CHAPTER VI.

In spite of all her philosophy, of all her fortitude, Olivia Denison could not deny, even to herself, that the one terrible word "murderer," applied to the man who had proved himself such a kind friend, gave a shock such as no newly formed friendship could stand unshaken. If he had only denied the charge by so much as a look! But, on the contrary, his downcast head and hurrying step when Lucy's indiscreet remark fell on his ears seemed like a tacit admission of the justice of it. The little maid's characteristic comments on the matter jarred upon her greatly.

"You might have knocked me down with a feather, Miss Olivia, when they first told me it was him as made away with the young woman whose rooms we were rummaging in to-day! 'Lor,' I says, 'never! A nice-spoken gentleman like that!' Indeed, Miss——"

"Who was it told you, Lucy?" interrupted her mistress, quietly.

"It was when I was going up the road, ma'am, looking for you. For I got that frightened at last, sitting here all myself, and nobody to speak to, and such cracklings and noises as you never heard along the walls! So I went out a little way, thinking perhaps you had missed the road and lost yourself. And I came across two women and a man standing at the gate of a farmyard. And I spoke to them and they guessed where I came from; for it seems it was the farm belonging to that rude man, though I didn't know it at the time. And they asked me in, saying as they wouldn't keep me not a minute. And I was so glad not to be alone that I went just inside the kitchen door with them—just for a minute. But then they told me such things that I felt I couldn't come back to this house all by myself after hearing of them. They said how that clergyman, for all his nice-seeming ways, used to be a wild sort of young man, and how he once courted her that's now the vicar's lady, but she wouldn't have nothing to say to him. And so when she married his brother he got wilder and wilder, and he took to courting the farmer's daugh-

ter that lived here on the sly like, and not fair and open. She was a masterful sort of girl, and her brother and his wife, that she lived with, let her have her own way too much, and have ideas above her station. And people think she believed he'd marry her, for her own people and every one was beginning to talk ; and then one night—it was the 7th of July, Miss, ten years and a half ago—she went out to meet him, down by his own church, as people knew she'd done before, and she never came back. And nobody's never seen nothing of her from that day to this ; only there were screams heard that night down by St. Cuthbert's—that's his church, ma'am."

Lucy ended in a mysterious whisper, and both she and her mistress remained silent for a little while. Then Miss Denison spoke in a warm and decided tone—

"There must have been investigations made. If there had been anything like just ground for supposing that Mr. Brander had made away with the girl, he would at least have been hunted out of the parish, even if there had not been proof enough to have him arrested."

"He was arrested, Miss Olivia. But his mother was Lord Stannington's sister, so he had friends at court ; and as for his brother, he moved heaven and earth to have him got off. And so those as knew most didn't dare to come forward, and nothing wasn't found ; and as everybody knew the poor girl hadn't had the best of characters, and had always been a bit gay, like, they said there wasn't evidence enough, and Mr. Brander was never brought up."

"But he remained in his parish ! That would have been too much of a scandal if the suspicion had been strong. I think you have only been listening to a lot of tattle, Lucy ;" said Miss Denison, trying to disguise the deep interest she could not help feeling in this gossip.

"Well, Miss Olivia, I only tell you what was told me," said the girl, rather offended at the slur cast upon her information.

And she crossed over to the fireplace and began to break the lumps of coal into a blaze, to intimate that, in deference to her mistress's wish, she had done with idle gossip. But, as she slyly guessed, the subject was far too interesting to be shelved like that.

Miss Denison took it up again abruptly, no longer attempting to hide the warmth of her feeling in the matter.

"How was it he stayed, then?" she asked.

"It was his brother's doing, that, ma'am, I believe," said Lucy, delighted to have her tongue loosed again. "He backed him up, and advised him to face it out, so everybody says. And his being so strong for his brother, and him thought so highly of himself, made people afraid to interfere, like. And so Mr. Vernon stayed. He had only a poor parish, full of colliers and such like ; and the poor folks liked him, because, for all his wild ways, he was good humored and pleasant. So nobody objected much, and he quieted down all of a sudden, and grew quite changed, and worked very hard, so that now they think the world of him in his own parish, and wouldn't change even to have Mr. Meredith himself for their clergyman. Only the story sticks to him, especially close round here, where the girl lived ; and, no matter what he does, some of them can't forget he's a murderer."

Olivia shuddered. It was quite true: such an incident in a man's life was not one that you could forget. She let the subject drop without further comment, but it haunted her for the rest of the evening as she sat brooding over the fire. Lucy, who was of an industrious frame of mind, got out her darning and mended away busily. But she had a healthy appetite, and she had had nothing more satisfying than biscuits and a sandwich throughout the day. Gradually her longing glances fell more and more frequently on the despised supper basket which Mr. Brander had given her. At last she could hold out no longer.

"Are you hungry, Miss Olivia?" she asked, with plaintive meaning.

"Not very," answered Miss Denison, waking with a start out of a troubled reverie. "But I daresay you are, Lucy. I forgot that I had wine and cake at—Mr. Brander's."

Lucy made two hesitating steps in the direction of the basket, and stopped.

"Do you think—we'd better not—touch it, Miss Olivia?" she asked, doubtfully.

Miss Denison got up, with a grave and troubled face.

"Don't you think it's a little too late to try to avoid an obligation, Lucy, when every one of the comforts round us—fire, chairs, table, the very beds we are going to sleep on, we owe to Mr. Brander?"

Lucy snatched at this view of the matter readily, and trotted off with eager steps to inspect the contents of the basket. These proved most satisfactory.

"Bread, Miss Olivia; butter, cake, oh! And a cold fowl! And a silver tea-pot!" she announced gleefully as she made one discovery after another, and skipped with her prizes to the table.

Olivia, healthy girl as she was, could not eat much that evening. Her responsibilities in the new home were beginning to look very heavy; and the strange story she had just learnt oppressed her. Lucy, on the other hand, found that a good supper led her to take a more cheerful view of current affairs.

"Oh, Miss Olivia!" she exclaimed, when the meal was ended and they were preparing to retire for the night, "how much nicer this is, with ghosts and murderers and all, than it'll be when Mrs. Denison comes and the children! Like this, with just you, it's jolly, and I could work for you all day. And I suppose when you've committed a murder it makes you feel that you must be nicer, like, to make up for it, for certainly Mr. Brander is a nice-spoken gentleman and a kind one, and no two ways about it."

"Now, Lucy," said her mistress, gravely, "you must put that story right out of your head, as I am going to do. We'll hope there's no truth in it all; but even if every word were true, we have no right to bring it up against a man whose life sets an example to the whole parish, and who has shown us kindness that we ought never to forget. I hope you will have the good sense and good feeling not to tattle about it to cook and to Esther when they come."

"No, ma'am," said Lucy, demurely.

Miss Denison felt, however, that she was trying to put on human nature burdens too great for it to bear, and she wasted no more

words in pressing the point. Tired as she was when she lay down that night on the little bed so strangely provided, for some hours she could not sleep; excited fancies concerning the girl who had disappeared and the man to whom her disappearance was attributed filled her head with a waking nightmare. Gratitude remained uppermost, however.

"He shall see that whatever I have heard makes not the least difference," was her last clear thought before sleeping.

But Olivia's kind intentions were more difficult to carry out than she imagined. Next day she saw nothing of Mr. Brander, although she received another proof of his thoughtfulness. A vanful of the much-expected furniture arrived in the course of the morning; and scarcely was it emptied before the two maids from the Vicarage appeared again npon the scene; "by Mr. Vernon's order," to give what assistance they could towards getting the house ready for occupation. Then began for Olivia three of the happiest days she had ever passed. There was work—real, useful, genuine work—for head and hand and muscular arm in the arrangment of every room to the best advantage. The maids from the Vicarage and her own trusty Lucy seconded her with a right goodwill, being all ready to worship this handsome, bright-voiced, sparkling-eyed girl, to whom the lifting of the heaviest weights seemed to be child's play, and who worked harder than any of them. On the second day the very last consignment of the household goods duly arrived, and Olivia was able to send back the Vicarage furniture with a grateful little note of thanks. In the evening, when she was resting in an armchair, tired out with her labors, and enjoying a glow of satisfaction in their success, there was a rap of knuckles on the knockerless outer door, and Olivia started up, with her heart beating violently. The presistent self-effacement on the part of Mr. Brander made the girl nervously anxious to show him that her gratitude was proof against any evil rumors; and the hope that it was he brought a deep flush to her face as Lucy, now installed in her own kitchen, and busy still with polishing of pots and pans, went to open the door. But she only brought in a note, which Olivia took with some disappointment. It was an answer from Mr. Brander to her own, but was so very formal that Olivia felt her cheeks tingle with shame at the impulsive warmth of her letter.

The clergyman's note was as follows:—

"DEAR MADAM"—(And she had put "Dear Mr. Brander." Olivia could have torn her pretty hair.)—"I beg to assure you there is nothing in what I have done to put you under any sense of obligation. In doing what little I could to make you as comfortable as the unfortunate circumstances of your arrival would permit, I only acted in my capacity of representative to my brother, who is hospitality itself to all strangers.

"I am, dear madam, yours faithfully,

"VERNON BRANDER."

Olivia read the note twice, while Lucy stood still at the door.

"The young farmer's son brought it, ma'am, and he's waiting," said she.

Olivia went to the door, and held out her hand to Mat Oldshaw, who took it very sheepishly in his own great paw, and, having given it a convulsive squeeze, dropped it hastily, as if overwhelmed with horror at his presumption in touching it at all.

"Come in," said she, smiling, and leading the way into the big farm living room; she had decided that this was to be the dining room of the establishment, and had furnished it accordingly.

Mat followed her shyly, and remained near the door until, by easy stages, she had coaxed him into a chair at the further end. He was beautifully washed and combed, and clad in his best clothes, and beautifully awkward and bashful withal.

"It's very kind of you to bring me this," she said; "and I'm very glad to have an opportunity of thanking you for the help you gave us the other day. You ran away so fast that I had no chance of speaking to you."

"'Twere nowt, that," said Mat, in a voice husky from bashfulness. "Ah'd ha' coom and given ye better help than that yesterday when Ah saw t' goods coom, but Ah didn't like."

"Would you? Well, we should have found plenty for you to do. But your father wouldn't have liked it, of course."

"Feyther! Ah bean't afreeaid o' feyther!" cried Mat, in a burst of energetic defiance. "Neea, it wasna' for him that Ah didn't coom. But Ah thowt maybe ye'd ha' been so angry with him for's rudeness that ye wouldn't care to ha' seen me ageean."

"Oh, I knew you had nothing to do with that."

"That's true enoof; and Ah coom to-neeght to say"—and Mat looked down on the floor and grew scarlet to the tips of his ears—"that ye mustn't be surprised if things doan't work straight here at first. Feyther's a nasty coostomer when he's crossed, and there's no denying he's wild at a stranger takkin' this pleeace. An' if he can do ye and yer feyther an ill turn he's not t' man to stick at it. An' if yer feyther don't knaw mooch aboot farmin', ye may tell him not to tak' any advice from moine. But if ye should be in a difficulty aboot matters o' t' farm, ye can just send for me on t' quiet, and Ah'll help ye all Ah can. Ah beean't ower bright maybe, as ye can see for yerself, Miss, but Ah understand t' farm, and what Ah can do for ye Ah will."

Mat had strung himself up to this speech by a great effort, and he reeled it off without any sort of pause, as if it had been an article of faith that he had got by rote. Then he got up and gave a hopeless look towards the door, as if that was his goal, and he was utterly without an idea how to reach it.

Olivia rose too, and turned towards the fire. Her impulsive nature was so deeply moved by this rough but genuine friendliness that she had no words ready to express her feelings.

There was a pause, during which she heard the shuffling of Mat's feet upon floor as he prepared himself, with many throes, for another rhetorical effort. As she at last turned towards him and again held out her hand, he found his courage, and began—

"An' wan moor thing Ah'd loike to say, Miss: doan't you be afreeaid o' parson Brander, for all they may say. Of coorse, ye've heard t' story; t' ill aboot a mon always cooms oot first. Maybe t'

story's true; Ah knaw nowt about that. But Ah do knaw that there's ne'er a heart loike his in t' coontry side. An' he's done all t' harm he'll ever do to anybody. An'—an' he give me this note for ye, Miss, and Ah've given it, and noo Ah'm going. Good-night, Miss."

With which abrupt farewell he made a countryman's obeisance to her, and sheered off with great promptitude.

"Good-night. I shan't forget what you've said," Olivia called after him, smiling.

She sat down again to muse by the fire, holding the open letter still in her hand; and after a few minutes, being utterly tired out with the day's work, she fell asleep. When she woke up she could not resist an exclamation of horror, for she saw confronting her, in the dim firelight, an ugly, grinning face, the owner of which broke into a peal of hoarse laughter in enjoyment of the shock his presence caused her. Starting to her feet, Olivia woke up to the full consciousness that the ill-favored intruder was no other than her persecutor of two nights before. While she was gathering up her forces for a withering speech, Mr. Williams gave her a smile and a nod of friendly greeting.

"You didn't expect to see me, did you?" he began, in a perfectly amicable tone.

"I certainly did not. Nor can I say that I wished for that—honor," answered Olivia, with what ought to have been withering sarcasm.

But Mr. Williams grinned on, entirely unmoved.

"No; you thought you'd shut me up—choked me off for good, didn't you? Why, I've got brambles and splinters in every finger still. But I liked you for it. Oh, I do like a girl of spirit! Why, there isn't a girl about the place I haven't tried to annoy, and not one of them has had the pluck to round on me as you did. But, then, look at your muscle, you know," he added, admiringly.

"I'm exceeding garteful for your admiration, and I will try to deserve it," answered Olivia, briefly.

She walked rapidly to the door, which she threw wide open with a gesture of invitation to him to go out. Mr. Williams instantly got behind an armchair.

"No, no, I know you can throw me out if you want to, but just let me stay and explain. Look what a shrimp I am compared with you. You can't mind me," pleaded he.

The sight of the little sandy man clinging to the back of the armchair, and "dodging" any movement of hers which he imagined to be threatening, caused Olivia's just indignation to merge into a strong inclination to laugh. She remained standing by the door, drawn up to her full height, and said, very drily—

"I suppose it is of no use to talk to you about the feelings of a gentleman. But perhaps you can understand this: I consider you an odious person, and I wish you to go."

"That's just the impression I wish to stay and remove," said Mr. Williams, blandly.

"You won't remove it by staying," said Miss Denison.

"As for the feelings of a gentleman," pursued he, ignoring her

interpolation, "of course you are quite right. I haven't got them; I don't know what they're like, and I don't want to. I'm a hopeless little cad, if you like, though nobody but you and the parson would dare to call me so, because I'm coming in to a hundred and eighty thousand pounds. Doesn't it make your mouth water—£180,000? It does make a difference, don't it, say what you like, in the way you look at a fellow?"

"It does," said Miss Denison. "It makes one shudder to think of so much money being in the hands of a person who is not competent to make a right use of half a crown."

"Why, I never thought of it in that light," said the gentleman, leaning over the back of the armchair, and caressing his chin musingly. "But, look here, I may marry, and she will think she knows how to make a right use of it, I'll warrant."

This speech he accompanied by a look which was meant to be full of arch meaning. Miss Denison took no notice either of speech or look.

"Now, are you going—of your own accord?" she asked firmly, and rather menacingly.

"I don't know how you ever expect to get married if you cut a fellow so short when he's getting near the brink of a proposal."

"Now, are you going?"

"Yes, yes," said he, hastily, as she made one step towards him; "I'm going. Though I don't see why I should be the only man turned out, when I'll bet I'm the only one with matrimonial intentions."

"You don't consider that you are the only one with the audacity to spy upon me and to enter this house like a burglar."

"Now how did you guess that? Why, you must have been only shamming sleep then, when I hung on to the window sill outside, and saw you looking so invitingly like Cinderella that I was obliged to come in to get a nearer view."

Miss Denison was breathless with indignation. He continued—

"As for spying, I'm not the only one. I've caught the parson prowling about here these two evenings. And, look here, of course I saw from the first you liked him better than me, and now you have heard the story about him, no doubt you think him more interesting than ever. But I don't intend to be snubbed for a murderer. And so I tell you this, Miss Denison: if you are any more civil to him than you are to me, I'll just spread abroad something I know and that nobody else knows, and that is: how he disposed of the body of the first poor girl who was unlucky enough to have anything to do with him. And perhaps that will stop you from being the second."

With these words Mr. Williams came out from his place of refuge behind the armchair, and keeping at a respectful distance from the fair but stalwart arm which he had already learnt to fear, sidled out of the room with a swaggering bow. He looked back, however, when he was safely outside the door.

"Don't lose heart," he said. "I shall make you another offer some day; perhaps half a dozen. They'll come to be your one amusement in this hole."

With this delightful promise, Mr. Frederick Williams opened the front door and let himself out, leaving his involuntary hostess unable to distinguish which feeling was strongest in her breast—amusement or disgust at an impudence which she might well consider unparalleled.

And that vague, insolent threat of his, what did it mean? Could he really know anything about the mystery concerning the girl Ellen Mitchell?

CHAPTER VII.

THERE was no denying that the arrival of these two spirited young women had caused a great flutter among the bachelors of Rishton and its neighborhood. For it is to be noted that if, on the one hand, the remarkable beauty of the mistress attracted the attentions of the *elite* of the male population, the rosy cheeks and saucy independence of the maid began very soon to make havoc in humbler masculine hearts, so that by the time Sunday came round, and with it the great weekly gathering time, the whole village was in a mild ferment of excitement over the prospect of a close inspection of the strangers—and in their best clothes.

The little church stood on the very summit of the hill on the slope of which one side of the village lay. Its foundations and part of its walls were very ancient; but after having been allowed to fall into neglect and decay, it had been carefully restored, under its present vicar, into a faultlessly trim and yet picturesque little building, the fanciful gray stone tower of which could be seen from the Matherham high road, rising like a coronet above the trees which grew thickly on the crest of the hill. The churchyard was kept like a garden. One of its gates led to the Vicarage, one end of which overlooked it; a second led through fields by a long and circuitous route down to the village; the third and principal entrance opened on to a little green, well shaded by trees, on which, close under the churchyard wall, the old village stocks, green with damp and a trifle infirm from age and neglect, stolidly survived its time of active service. A long two-storeyed cottage, green with untrimmed ivy and yew trees, which were suffered to overshadow the small willows, stood at right angles with the Vicarage, facing the green. Leaning over the wall of the front garden was a weather-beaten board, bearing the information that the cottage was "To let."

When Olivia, attended by the faithful Lucy, arrived at the church on Sunday morning, she was at once accosted by the clerk, a small and sanctimonious-looking old man, who smelt of spirits, and inducted into a seat, close under the pulpit, which was, he informed her in a low whisper, "the 'all pew." It was too far forward for Olivia to be able to see many of her fellow-worshippers, but one party, occupying the opposite pew to her, could not fail to catch her eye. It consisted of two very showily dressed young women, who entered with much [illegible] and whispering, and were a long time settling themselves; of a much younger brother and sister, whom they

hustled into a very small corner of the pew; and of Mat Oldshaw, who occupied the outside seat, and who appeared to be bashfully conscious the whole time of Miss Denison's presence, though he never once dared to look in her direction.

Olivia was one of the first of the congregation to arrive, and in the interval before the service commenced, she could not help regarding with some interest such of her new neighbors as came within her range of vision. The Oldshaw family, with the exception of Mat, she knew she should not like, but in a large pew in front of them sat a lady whose appearance attracted her greatly. She was not very young or very pretty; she was dressed with great simplicity in a dark costume and a long seal-skin jacket; and the word by which a stranger would have described her was "lady-like." It was impossible to help contrasting her with the two fidgety women behind; and Olivia was growing more and more sure that she should like to know her when, to her surprise, she suddenly heard a loud, hoarse whisper, "Here, gee up, Soosan," and looking round, she saw the quiet-looking lady move up the pew at the behest of the odious Frederick Williams.

As Olivia turned her head, she met this young man's admiring eyes turned upon her with their usual vacant stare. He was attired this morning like the "swell" of the comic scenes of a pantomime, the salient points of his costume being an overcoat lined with otter, a pink-striped shirt, light gaiters, and brick-colored gloves. Olivia fancied also that he had had his hair curled. He bestowed upon Miss Denison a nod, a smile, and a wink, and appeared quite unabashed by the fact that she vouchsafed him no sign of recognition in return. He ensconced himself in the outer corner of the pew, and watched her persistently until a heavy and measured tread up the aisle, followed by short, pattering steps, announced two new comers, and he had to make way for an elderly couple whom Olivia rightly guessed to be his parents.

Not that they bore any but the faintest family likeness to Olivia's dashing admirer. The gentleman was an erect and handsome man of sixty or more, pompous and dignified; his wife was short, stout, good-humored-looking, and well dressed. Just as she noticed these facts the church bells ceased ringing, and a small choir of surpliced boys came out of the vestry, followed by Mr. Vernon Brander.

"Isn't he a dear?" Miss Denison heard one of the fidgety ladies whisper to the other, enthusiastically.

Mr. Brander conducted the service with no assistance but that of the choir and the clerk, who was evidently a privileged person; for he put everybody out who was within a dozen feet of his nasal voice. Olivia was impressed by the sermon, but she was hardly sure whether the impression was altogether favorable. For the preacher did not speak "as one having authority," but rather as the servant than the teacher of his hearers; as one who was bound to keep them in mind of truths which they knew already, rather than as one who held up their duty before them with all the weight of a respected and honored pastor.

When the service was over, Olivia lingered a little in the churchyard, looking at the gravestones, not unwilling to give the much-

discussed Mr. Brander an opportunity of proving that no rumors could affect her behavior to one who had been kind to her; but he would not avail himself of it. On coming out of the church, which he did with extraordinary little delay, Mr. Brander seemed purposely to avoid glancing towards the spot where she was standing, but at once, with quick steps, made for the gate at which the lady, whose appearance had attracted Olivia, was waiting. Her party, including the ill-mannered Frederick, had gone, as they had come, without her.

Olivia, who, like all young girls, could see a great deal without looking, knew that the clergyman and the lady were talking about her, and she would not pass out at the gate while they stood there. So she continued her inspection of the tombstones, with a heart beating rather faster than usual, for the very few minutes that the *tete-a-tete* lasted. Now, surely, she might have a chance of speaking to him; in common civilty he would come, if only, as his note expressed it "as his brother's representative," to ask how she was getting on with her furnishing, and whether her friends were coming soon to relieve her of her responsibilities. He passed quite near to her on his way to the Vicarage gate. She raised her head with a smile and a heightened color, ready to give him her prettiest greeting; but he looked away with a persistency which she could no longer doubt was intentional, and it was with a blush of the deepest mortification that Olivia, whose burning eyes no longer saw inscriptions, or tombstones, or anything but a particularly tactless and unobservant clergyman, whose conduct in not allowing her to lessen her obligation to him by an expression of her gratitude was, Olivia felt, highly reprehensible. She was so hurt, so indignant, that when the pleasant-looking lady, who stood by the gate and watched her approach, made a movement forward as if to address the young stranger, Olivia turned her head stiffly away. She would give no opening to the friend of the man who had so deeply offended her.

But anger in Olivia's breast was a feeling which could not last. Before she was halfway down the hill she was sorry for her hasty action and ashamed of her disappointment. With the exaggerated feeling of an impulsive young girl, she blamed herself as ungracious and ungrateful, and decided that the avoidance of a man as kindly and chivalrous as Mr. Brander had proved himself to be could only proceed from the most honorable motives.

The observant Lucy, perhaps, detected a lightening of the cloud on her young mistress' face, for, at this point of the latter's reflections, she broke the silence she had discreetly kept since leaving the churchyard.

"It's a lot to do to take the service here in the morning, and at St. Cuthbert's in the afternoon, and a young men's class four miles away at night, isn't it, ma'am?" she asked, glibly.

Lucy had already collected as much local information as if she had been settled in Rishton three months, and could have enlightened Miss Denison on a good many points of local gossip if she had been encouraged to do so.

"Why, who does all that, Lucy?"

"Mr. Brander, ma'am. He holds a meeting of colliers belonging

to some pit at night, and he says 'he goes to them because they wouldn't all come to him.'"

Olivia looked at her in astonishment. Here was the little maid quoting with perfect confidence the clergyman's own words.

"But how did you pick up all this information?"

"Oh, one hears things, ma'am," said Lucy, who was an inveterate gossip, but who did not care to own that butcher, grocer, old woman at the village shop, nay, even the small boy who brought the afternoon ha'porth of milk from Mrs. Briggs', who kept a cow at the other end of the village, all were laid under contribution to keep her well informed. "And they do say, Miss Olivia, that the difference between St. Cuthbert's Church and this is something which must be seen to be believed," she added.

Miss Denison said nothing to this. She herself was longing to see St. Cuthbert's, and would have found out the place and gone to service there that very afternoon if a feeling of shyness had not restrained her. Church once a day had always been enough for her at Streatham; therefore it could only be curiosity which was urging her to break through her custom now, she said to herself. So she stayed at home that afternoon and wrote reluctantly enough to her father to tell him that everything was ready for the arrival of the rest of the family. If only Mrs. Denison would take it into her head that the air of Yorkshire was too keen for her sensitive frame, and would allow papa to come without her, what a happy life they two might lead together, thought Olivia. She loved her easy-going father passionately, and as passionately resented the subjection in which he was kept by his second wife; but her utopian dream was not to be fulfilled. On the Wednesday following she received a long letter from her step-mother, announcing that they would all arrive next day, and giving rambling but minute directions as to the preparation for their coming.

Olivia put down the letter with a sigh, called Lucy, and in a doleful voice informed her that the reign of peace and freedom was nearly over. The little maid's face fell.

"Lor, Miss Olivia, how she will fuss and worrit, to make up for not having been able to get at us for a week!" was her first comment.

"Well, we must try to give her no cause," said Olivia, trying to keep grave.

"She'd find cause to grumble, Miss, if she was in heaven, and we was all angels a-flying" about of her errands. I'll warrant before she's been in the house ten minutes she'll take a fancy to the scullery for her bedroom, and say that we ought to have made this room the coal cellar," said Lucy with ill-humor that was not all affected.

There was enough truth in the girl's comic sketch for Olivia to give a sigh at the prospect, though she stifled it instantly, and started briskly on a tour of the house to see whether she had left any loophole for complaints on the part of her step-mother. She could find none. She had prepared the largest and best room for her father and Mrs. Denison; the next best for the two children; the third in order of merit she had fitted up as a spare room, leaving only two little rooms scarcely larger than cupboards, the one for herself, and the

other for her brother Ernest, on his rare visits. The two rooms in the wing she left unappropriated and untouched, not from any superstitious scruples, for she would have liked the larger one for herself; but she knew if she were to take possession of it, her step-mother would certainly never cease "nagging" at her for helping herself to so spacious a room.

Thursday morning came, and Olivia rose with a doleful sense that the fun and the freedom of the week were nearly over. Her energies had found delightful vent in the unaccustomed work and responsibility; she began to feel that even if she had been still in the old home at Streatham, a contented return to lawn tennis and crewel work would have been impossible. Would Mrs. Denison, who was lazy as well as fretful, and who would now have to do without a housekeeper, be inclined to trust her with the reins of management? As Olivia had always until now been known to have the utmost horror of any household duties, she was not without a hope that, if she kept secret the change in her own feelings, Mrs. Denison might herself make some such proposal, being amiably anxious to make those around her feel as acutely as she did herself the alteration in the family fortunes.

They were to arrive about six o'clock. Olivia, who was only anxious to see her father, would not go to meet them. She would get old papa all to himself in the evening, and have a long talk, and tell him all her adventures. He was not himself while within range of the querulous voice and cold eyes of his second wife. Olivia thought she would have a very early dinner and a long walk to brace herself for her fall from autocracy. So at two o'clock she was on the Sheffield Road, walking fast against a keen wind, under a leaden sky that promised snow within a few hours. She did not care for that. Protected by a hooded waterproof and a thick pair of boots, the healthy girl was quite ready to do battle with rain, snow, or wind; and the object of her walk was quite interesting enough for her to think little of the cold.

Olivia was going to St. Cuthbert's. She knew where the church was. She had seen its dilapidated, patched-up tower, a very marvel of make-shift architecture, far away on the plain below her as she walked to Matherham by the longest and prettiest road. After walking for about a mile and a-half along this road, which was on high ground and afforded a wide view of hill and plain, she had only to turn to the left and descend the hill by a steep and narrow lane, and walk on until she came to it. A feeling of shyness brought the bright blood to the girl's cheeks as she turned into the lane. She hoped she should not meet Mr. Brander. The whisper of one of the Misses Oldshaw in church on Sunday had made known that it was the fashion among a section of the village ladies to worship him; and Miss Denison, having always held "curate adorers" in stern and lofty contempt, was most anxious not to be confounded with that class. It was just the time, however, when she thought an active clergyman would be going his rounds in the parish.

She had indeed met no one the whole way except a lame tramp, who was approaching her along the Sheffield Road as she turned into the lane. The whole country-side seemed to be asleep except for the

occasional distant shriek of a railway engine as it disappeared between the hills a mile away.

At last Olivia drew near to the church and the Vicarage, standing together, with no other buildings near, on a slightly rising ground in the centre of the plain. The Vicarage came first. It was a large, plain, hideous house, like a great stone box, sheltered by no ivy and no trees, with an uncared-for square of garden in front of it, and a plain stone wall all round. Only three of the windows in the front part of the house were curtained; the rest were blank and bare, as if the place had been uninhabited. Close to the garden wall came the churchyard, a mildewed wilderness in which broken and displaced headstones had been suffered to take what positions they pleased, and lay flat, or stood sideways, or leaned against each other without hindrance. The church itself was the most extraordinary pile Olivia had ever seen. It was built of stone, and very, very old and ruinous. But no care, no taste, no skill had been for years employed in its restoration. As harm came to it from wear or weather, it had simply been repaired in the cheapest and speediest way with whatever substance came first to hand. Thus, the glass of one window, having been irretrievably damaged, had been replaced by bricks, which filled up the blank spaces between the scarcely injured tracery. In the early years of the century, a storm had brought down the central tower, which in its fall, had crushed through the roof of the south aisle, breaking through the outer wall and making one-third of the whole church an almost shapeless ruin. As that storm had left it, so through sixty years it had remained, with only this difference, that the shattered tower had been brought up to the height of a few feet above the roof with irregular layers of wood and brick and stone, and surmounted by a pointed roof of slate; while the spaces between the arches on the southern side of the nave had been bricked up to form an outer wall to the church, leaving the ruined aisle outside, exposed to every chance of wind and weather. At the south-east corner, a portion of the roof, no longer either very solid or very safe, still kept in its place. At the south-west angle a rough hole in the ground and a dozen rude and broken steps had formerly led into a small crypt with a vaulted roof, which extended about half-way under the southern aisle; but the opening having, not without reason, been declared dangerous, had been filled up, ten years ago, with bricks and stones and earth, over which the grass and weeds had now grown.

The gate of the churchyard was locked; but Olivia was not going to be deterred by such an obstacle from the closer inspection her curiosity craved. Choosing a place where the high stone wall had irregularities on its rough surface large enough to afford a footing, she climbed to the top, and let herself down with a jump among the gravestones on the other side. The three doors of the church were also locked; this she had expected. She made the tour of the building very slowly, trying to decipher the dates on the weather-beaten headstones. Before she had gone half way round, the snow, which had been threatening all day, began to fall in large flakes, so that, by the time she again reached the ruined aisle, Olivia was glad to take shelter under the remaining bit of the old roof. This formed a

very complete place of refuge; for a sort of inner buttress had been formed with some of the loose stones, which supported the remaining portions of wall and roof, and made the enclosed corner safe from wind or rain. She was debating whether it would not be wiser to make the best of her way home at once, in spite of the snow, before the short day began to draw in, when she heard the key turn in the lock of the gate, and, peeping between the stones, saw the Reverend Vernon Brander enter, and, leaving the gate open behind him, disappear round the west end of the church. From his grave, stern, absorbed expression, Olivia guessed that he was unaware of the presence of another human being. In a few minutes she heard the rattle of the key in the lock of the north-west door of the church, and then Mr. Brander's tread, on the stone floor inside.

Olivia did not wish to see him. She decided to wait a few minutes, in case he should only have gone in to fetch something; she could hear him walking about, opening the ventilators of some of the windows, and closing those of others; then for a few minutes she heard no further sound. She would escape now, while he was engaged inside. Just as she was drawing the hood over her hat, preparing for a smart walk back through the snow, she caught sight of another figure at the gate, whom she recognized as the lame tramp she had seen near the entrance of the lane. He was a man whose age it was impossible to determine, with coarse features, and an expression not devoid of intelligence. He had a wooden leg and walked moreover with the aid of a stick.

Olivia was so much struck by the expression of vivid interest and curiosity with which he scanned every object round him, from the shambling tower above to the gravestones at his feet, that, instead of coming out from her shelter, she remained watching him, convinced that the place had some special interest for him. That interest her mind connected, with a lightning flash of vivid perception, with the story of Nellie Mitchell's disappearance. The man came towards the ruined aisle, treading more slowly and cautiously with every step, and gradually turning his attention entirely to the ground on which he trod. He did not come so far as the roofed corner, but suddenly turned his steps back in the direction of the blocked-up entrance to the crypt. Against the roughly piled stones he struck his stick sharply, with an abrupt exclamation in a loud and grating voice.

Just at the moment he uttered this, Mr. Brander appeared round the western corner. His pale face turned to a livid color and his lips twitched convulsively at sight of the man, whom he appeared instantly to recognize. The tramp, on his side, took matters much more lightly. Saluting the clergymen with a touch of his cap, he said, in a voice which became hoarse in his endeavor to make it mysterious—

"Eh, Maister Brander, but it's a long time since we've met. Eleven year come next seventh of July."

Olivia held her breath; the seventh of July was the date of Nellie Mitchell's disappearance. She would have given the world to run away, to escape hearing what she knew must be a confession; but there was no way out except by passing the two men. Brave as

she was Olivia dared not face them. She shrank back in her corner and vainly tried not to hear.

CHAPTER VIII.

THERE was a long pause after the tramp had addressed Mr. Brander. In spite of herself, Olivia found herself at last holding her breath with impatience to hear the clergyman's answer. She would not look at him, although through the gaps in the rough stonework she might easily have done so; but her hands, with which she had at first tried to stop her ears, fell down at her sides. When at last he spoke, Mr. Brander's voice was low and husky, affected by some strong feeling.

"Yes, Abel, it's a long time—a very long time."

The blood rushed to Olivia's face, and her cold hands stole together; there was something in the vicar's voice which told so clearly of years of keen suffering that a great throb of pity wrung the girl's heart; and she hoped, as eagerly as if the matter had affected her personally, that this tramp would keep his secret.

"Ay," said Abel, in whose tones, to do him justice, there was no malignity. "Ah've kept ma word, parson. Ah promised ye that neeght as Ah'd go on straight wi'out resting hereabouts. An' on Ah went, and Ah nivver said nowt, and Ah've nivver been nigh t' pleace from that day to this. Now that's straight dealin', parson, arn't it?"

"Yes, Abel; I always knew you for a straight man."

Mr. Brander spoke gravely and appreciatively, but there was no undue humility in his tone, as of a man demanding mercy. Abel resumed.

"Ay, parson, so I be. Ah'm not mooch of a Christian, as tha knaws, an' if so be a mon treats ma ill, Ah loike to be even wi' him. But if so be a mon treats ma fair, Ah treat him fair beck. An' tha's treated ma more nor fair, parson, mony's the time. An' so, when tha says, 'Shut tha mooth an' mak' nae guesses,' Ah shuts ma mooth, an' Ah doan't guess nowt."

"What brings you here now, then?" asked Mr. Brander, abruptly, with perceptible anxiety in his tone.

"Weel, parson, tha knaws Ah wur born and bred hereaboots. An' though Ah been fond o' trampin' it i' ma time, Ah'm not so spry-like as Ah wur, an' Ah'd like to settle in t' pleace where Ah wur bred."

"You've saved some money, then?" asked Mr. Brander as sharply as before.

"Not so mooch, not so mooch, mester, but Ah doan't count to end ma days in an eight-roomed villa, like t' gentlefowk."

There was a pause, and then the vicar spoke in a constrained tone, in which the effort to repress some strong feeling was more manifest than ever.

"And if I ask you not to settle here, Abel, but to pitch your tent for the remainder of your days somewhere else, what would you do?

Come, I don't want to throw in your face what I've done for you, but what would you do?"

Olivia heard the man clearing his throat undecidedly, and kicking with his wooden leg against the gravestones.

"You doan't trust ma, parson, an' it's a bit hard, after howdin' ma tongue nigh eleven year. Eh, but if Ah'd wanted to ha' spoke, wadn't Ah ha' spoke afore now?"

"If you had wanted to speak about the business, I should never have wasted my breath asking you not to," said Mr. Brander with decision. "I trust you, Abel, as much as one man may trust another. But judging you as I should judge myself, I say it would be impossible for you to live in this neighborhood, where that night's occurrences are still continually being raked up and discussed, without its leaking out that you were here on that night, and that you met me. That, as you know, I wish to keep secret."

"But, parson," began the man slowly, in a troubled tone——

Mr. Brander interrupted him.

"Now we've nothing further to discuss, Abel. I want the whole story forgotten."

"But it's not a whole story, Mester Brander, an' that's why it nivver will be forgotten. It's a mystery to all but—to ivverybody; an' until t' fowk knaw what become o' Nellie Mitchell, a mystery it'll be, an' they'll talk aboot it. Why, parson, dost knaw t' tales as goes round?"

"What do tales matter as long as they are only idle ones?" said Mr. Brander, hastily. "Now, Abel Squires, which is it to be? Is the parson to have his way, or has he been wasting his breath?"

"He maun ha' his way, Ah reckon: but Ah tell thee, parson, it's all no use. It'll be none o' ma doin', but—murder will oot, tha knaws."

He dropped his voice to a low, portentous whisper for the last words.

"Murder!" echoed Mr. Blander, also in a low voice. "What are you talking abont? Didn't I tell you it was not murder?"

"Ay, that tha did," said Abel, rather drily.

"And did you see anything?"

"Weel, not that neeght, but next day——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Brander, sharply. "Then you didn't keep your word; you didn't go straight on!"

The man's answer came deliberately.

"Ah went straight on that neeght, mester, as Ah towd tha Ah would. But Ah coom back next mornin'. It wur only human natur'; an' Ah took a look round. Ay! parson, Ah hid summat as would ha towd a tale."

"What was that?" asked Mr. Brander, slowly, and, as it seemed, with difficulty.

"There wur marks on those steps down to t' crypt as is now blocked oop. An' down at t' bottom. An' Ah tramped 'em oot. An' there war marks in other pleace as Ah made away. An' it wur all for ye, parson, for Ah thowt of what ye'd done for ma when Ah wur ill and nobody to care for ma, an' Ah did what Ah could."

"You're a good fellow, Abel," said Mr. Brander, huskily, after a few moments' pause. "And you've been a good friend to me."

"Ah, Mester Brander, but Ah'd ha' liked to ha' served ye a better way," said the man, who seemed affected in his turn.

The vicar silenced him with a peremptory "Sh-sh." Then he said—

"You won't be able to get far to-night on foot. It will be snowing heavily in an hour from now. You must get home by train to-night."

Olivia guessed that he must have put money into the man's hand, for Abel Squires answered reluctantly—

"Ah doan't tak' it for howding ma tongue, parson. But if ye want ma to go further, it's but fair ye should pay for it. Here's good-day to you, sir, and may you nivver"——

The voices were growing fainter. Olivia peeped between the stones for the first time, and saw that the oddly assorted couple were making their way among the ruined gravestones to the gate, where the vicar shook hands with the tramp, who went back up the lane towards the Sheffield road as fast as his wooden leg would let him. Mr. Brander stood at the gate until long after Abel had disappeared from sight at a bend of the lane. His back was towards Olivia, and all that she could see was that he remained extraordinarily still. The snow, which from a few feathery flakes had gradually thickened into a blinding storm, grew at last so dense that no mental abstraction could shut it out. The vicar suddenly threw back his head, and apparently taking in the fact that he was getting wet through, gave himself a violent shake to get rid of the white covering which already enveloped him, turned and walked rapidly back to the church.

As soon as Olivia heard the rattle of the lock, she sprang out of her shelter, struggling with her umbrella as she went, hurried over the uneven ground within the ruined aisle, where a few minutes before Mr. Brander and the tramp had been standing, and steering rapidly and neatly between the broken and scattered tombstones, reached the gate in very few seconds. As she flitted quickly through, however, a gust of wind blew the skirt of her waterproof against the bars of the gate, which swung to behind her with a loud creaking noise. She ran on, and in a minute was out of sight to any one at the church door, hidden by the churchyard wall. But Mr. Brander, hearing the noise, and being naturally rather startled by the idea that some one had been about during his very private conversation with Squires, was too quick for her. He was out of the church and on the track of the intruder before she had got many steps up the lane. She was just past the bend when he suddenly came up with her. One umbrellaed and waterproofed woman in a snowstorm is so like another that he had not the slightest idea who his quarry was until he had passed her and turned to look back. As he did so he caught sight of her face, and instantly stopped.

Olivia stopped too, and holding back her umbrella, met his glance with a frank, straight gaze. He raised his hat, seemed about to speak to her, but hesitated. She smiled and held out her hand. He saw at once that this was not the ordinary greeting of an acquaintance she was tendering him. The muscles about her mouth were quivering, and her eyes, as they met his for a moment before dropping modestly, were luminous with generous feeling, maidenly

shame struggling with womanly sympathy. Mr. Brander took her hand with some constraint. As he touched it, however, something in the firm clasp of the girl's fingers gave him confidence.

"Miss Denison," he said, gravely, while his keen black eyes seemed to read the thoughts in her brain before they were uttered, "you have been in the churchyard. Where were you?"

The blood, which was already crimson in Olivia's cheeks, mounted to her forehead, until her whole face was aglow. Her eyes fell, and it was in a low, almost faltering, voice that she answered.

"I was in the ruined part of the church—where the roof is left."

Mr. Brander was startled by this confession. He did not at once speak, being evidently occupied in trying to recall the very words of the conversation she must have overheard. But he soon gave up that attempt, and asked, impatiently—

"Then you heard—what?"

Olivia's breath come almost in sobs, as she answered at once, with bent head, and almost in a whisper—

"I heard nearly all you said—you and the man. I am very, very sorry and ashamed, and I ask your pardon. But I did not dare to come out while you were there. I hoped to get away without your seeing me."

"But what did I say? What did he say? What did you understand by it all?" asked he, so eagerly that he almost seemed to be bullying her.

"Oh, I don't know. Pray don't ask me. I don't want to remember. I would rather forget it all. I never meant that a word about it should pass my lips, and it will not after this," said she, hurriedly without looking up.

Mr. Brander said nothing to this at first, and Olivia, raising her head to steal a look at his face, judged by his expression that he was in the throes of some terrible mental struggle, the outcome of which would be some passionate outburst. But he recovered command of himself, and when he at last spoke to her, it was in a very quiet voice.

"I am keeping you standing in the snow, Miss Denison; I must not do that. But we must come to a word of understanding now; it will put us on a right footing for the future."

"You need not say another word to me, Mr. Brander," interrupted Olivia, vehemently. "The understanding between us is clear enough; you are a most warmhearted gentleman, and have shown me more delicate kindness than I ever received in my life; I am, and shall be as long as you let me, your grateful friend. What understanding do you want more than that?"

Her clear young voice rang out with enthusiastic warmth, which threw the clergyman off his balance. He began to tremble like a leaf, and again his thin, mobile face showed signs of the emotion within him. But he still kept it under restraint, and spoke in a perfectly steady voice.

"Thank you; I expected generosity from you. But—do you quite understand the position I am in, I wonder? Did you understand that man—that tramp—is keeping a secret for me?"

"Yes," answered Olivia, steadily.

"And you are aware of its nature?"

The girl drew a deep breath, but she answered bravely, though in a low voice, "Yes."

"And after that, and after hearing everything that you have heard, that you must have heard, about this miserable story, you still are ready to call yourself —my friend?"

He kept his voice at the same quiet pitch, but on the last two words it broke a little. There was a pause of only a few seconds.

Then Olivia answered in a veritable whisper, but with the same sweet and dignified seriousness, "Yes, Mr. Brander."

She might reasonably have expected some acknowledgement of the gracious, womanly daring of this speech; but instead of giving any sign of gratitude, Mr. Brander, to her astonishment, turned upon her quite sharply.

"Well, that's quixotic, illogical, pretty perhaps from a boarding-school young lady's point of view, but not worthy of a woman of sense."

Olivia was surprised, but she was true woman enough to have her answer.

"I think I can justify it," she said, holding her head back rather obstinately.

"Very well. Justify yourself for being ready to make friends with a man believed to have committed a very atrocious and cowardly murder."

Olivia looked at him full and earnestly.

"I don't believe——" she began, doubtfully.

"You don't believe what?"

"That you—ever—did it."

"Because I have the assurance to take the bull by the horns, waylay you, and insist upon coming to an explanation?"

"No—o, not because of that."

"Why then?"

Olivia continued to gaze at him as solemnly as if she had been a judge passing sentence.

"It is very difficult to say quite why," she began, deliberately. "They say women hardly ever can say why they believe a thing."

"Is that all your answer?"

"No," she replied rather sharply, beginning to be a little annoyed at the irony in his tone. "They have never proved it, for one thing although they tried. And—how can a man have changed so in ten years?"

"The first is a reason; the other is not. But you have just seen with your own eyes the only witness to my actions on that night, and heard with your own ears that he has not been in the neighborhood since."

Olivia assented.

"Then you say, 'How can a man have changed so much in ten years?' But I tell you I have changed so much in that time that, except for externals, I might pass for a different man. Now what becomes of your reasons for thinking me innocent?"

"I will believe you did it if you tell me so, of course," said Olivia quietly.

"And what then?"

"What then? I shall be sorry again, and puzzled."

"And you will withdraw all those pretty professions of friendship?"

Olivia debated with herself for a few moments only. Then she answered, vehemently, in a strong voice—

"No. You were my friend—a very good friend too—before I heard anything against you. You were good to us, as I hear you are good to everybody. When you met that man in the churchyard just now, you spoke like a brave man, and not like a coward. I hear from every one about the noble, self-denying life you lead. If you didn't do it you are almost a martyr; if—if you did, you are expiating what you did in a manner which justifies our respect. Now if you call these women's reasons, I don't care; they are good enough for me, Mr. Brander."

"And for me, too, Miss Denison. 'I——"

He tried to keep his voice under proper command. But educated to self-control by long years as he was, he gave way under the unexpected rush of warm and generous feeling. A choking in his throat checked his utterance; his keen eyes grew moist and dim. He saw, as in a mist, a hand held out to him, and seizing it, he wrung it in a pressure which made Olivia wince.

"Look here," he said at last, in a voice still husky, while he continued to hold her fingers in a strong nervous clasp; "I have nothing to say to you; no confession, no explanation, nothing. But you are a grand girl—a grand girl."

He released her hand suddenly, as if with an effort, and then at once struggled into his usual manner.

"You're half frozen with standing in the cold (a very just penalty for eavesdropping, by the way), and you'll be half buried before you get back. I must see you home."

"Oh, no, indeed, I'm not going to drag you all that way on a day like this."

"But I choose to be dragged. You rash young woman, accustomed to the peaceful security of Streatham; you must learn that it is not safe for a young lady to tramp about this part of the world alone so late in the day."

"But it's not late."

"It will be dark before you get home. Go on up the hill, and I will fetch my mackintosh and overtake you."

He went into his bare-looking house while Olivia tramped on obediently. She had not noticed, until then, how thickly the snowflakes were falling, nor how the gloom of the leaden sky was deepening. Now, too, she became aware, for the first time, that her jaws were stiff, and her hands and feet bitterly cold; for the interview with Mr. Brander had been too exciting to allow her to notice these things. He overtook her in a very few minutes, and walked by her side, conversing on different topics, until that scene by the churchyard scarcely seemed a reality. They passed only one person, a rough-looking collier of unsteady gait, whom Mr. Brander made use of to point a moral.

"Now, is that the sort of person you would care to meet if you were alone?" he asked.

"I shouldn't have been afraid of him," answered Olivia.

"No; if he had been sober he would have been vastly afraid of you, and of most girls I should say. So he is when he's drunk. But your courage doesn't want stimulating; it wants repressing. For I tell you my collier boys are good lads in the main, but there are black sheep among them as among other folk, and you mustn't risk falling in with one towards nightfall on a lonely road. Do you hear?"

He spoke with playful peremptoriness, but Olivia understood that he was giving a serious warning, which she promised to heed. He went on talking about the colliers, who formed the bulk of the inhabitants of his scattered parish, with affectionate interest which awakened a sympathetic curiosity in her, until they reached the inn at the entrance of Rishton village. Mr. Brander had grown so warm over what Olivia afterwards discovered to be his favorite subject that, quite unconsciously, his steps, and consequently hers, had grown slower and slower, while his voice grew more and more eager until a passer-by would have taken them for a pair of lovers reluctant to separate. They had come to a complete standstill in the farmyard by the corner of the house, when they heard the opening of the front door, a man's footstep, and then a woman's strong shrill voice——"

"It's no use looking for her, Charles. She won't be in yet. Olivia never did care a straw for your comfort or for mine."

Olivia turned to Mr. Brander, and held out her hand with a doleful shake of the head.

"There" she said, "isn't that more eloquent than the longest description? There'll be an end to everything now she's come!"

Fortunately it had grown by this time so dark that under her umbrella the hot blushes which mounted to Olivia's cheeks as soon as this speech had escaped her lips could not be seen. Giving Mr. Brander her hand very hastily, and not leaving him time for something, he half hesitated, but wanted to say, she turned, and with a hasty "Good-bye; thank you very much for coming," ran round towards the front of the house.

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Olivia had come as near as she could to the porch without being seen from thence, she stopped, in the hope that Mrs. Denison, who was still grumbling at her step-daughter's non-appearance, would go indoors, and give her a chance of enveloping her father in a warm hug, and of snatching a stolen interview with him unknown to the ruling powers.

In a few moments, to the girl's great delight, Mrs. Denison said, impatiently, "Well, I can't stand here in the snow, just because your daughter chooses to insult me by absenting herself when I am expected."

"My dear, my dear," expostulated papa's mild tones, "Olivia is the best creature in the world. She wouldn't think of insulting you or anybody. But how could she guess that we should come by an earlier train than the one we said?"

"Well, I'm not going to catch cold even for the best creature in the world, and I should advise you not to either. Are you coming in?"

"Not directly, I think, my dear. I want a little air after that stuffy railway carriage. And really, you know, those children do quarrel so——"

"If you want to go hunting for Olivia, say so; but don't put it down to the poor children," said Mrs. Denison.

And she went indoors, shutting the door with a nearer approach to a "slam" than etiquette prescribes for a lady.

No sooner was she safely inside than Olivia crept along under the lea of the house wall, and springing up the worn steps at a bound, flung down her umbrella, and threw her arms round her father's neck like a hungry young bear.

"Good gracious, my dear, you're quite wet and as cold as ice. You must come inside and warm yourself."

"Oh, no, dear old papa—poor old papa; it's warmer here outside. With Beatrix and Regie fighting, and mamma at freezing point, the place must be——"

"Now you've been listening; that isn't right."

"Yes, I have—all the afternoon—taking in all the private conversations I could get near enough to overhear. I find it grows upon one. But I can always tell what temper Mrs. Denison is in without any listening."

"Now, Olivia, I won't hear that. Your step-mother is the best of women——"

"Yes, papa, I know," said Olivia, nodding gravely.

Indeed she had heard that sentiment many scores of times, and she supposed that by constant repetition her good-natured father hoped to persuade himself that it was true.

"And Regie and Beatrix are the best of children, aren't they, old papa?" she asked, gravely.

He was quite distressed at not being able to reply truthfully in the affirmative.

"Well," he said, "I'm sure they would be. Only somehow, I don't know how it is, they seem to get a little too much indulged, I think."

"Perhaps they do. I think they want a little more of your iron rule, papa," said Olivia, who was hanging on to his arm, lovingly patting his cheek and turning up his coat collar and lavishing upon him all the caressing little attentions he loved from his adored daughter's hands.

He began to laugh; her liveliness and demonstrative affection were dispelling the gloomy forebodings which had hung upon him all day on the entrance to this new and untried life.

"You don't treat me with proper respect, Olivia. If you are going to be impudent. I shall take you indoors and get Mrs. Denison to talk to you."

"What mortal man may dare, you dare; but you don't dare that," said his daughter, saucily. "Don't you want to know how I've got on here all by myself?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid you'll catch cold?"

"No, I shan't. The excitement of this stolen meeting with the king of my heart will keep me warm. Besides, we'll go in directly. Only when we do, you know what it will be. Nag, nag—oh, no, I forgot; that word is tabooed. I should say orate, orate, until all the ills that flesh is heir to have been exhausted."

"What were you doing out on a day like this? You hadn't gone to meet us, had you?"

"No-o, I hadn't. I'd been to look at a church."

"That means that you've fallen in love with a parson."

"Papa, papa, how can you say such things——of me, too?"

"Why, my dear child, I only spoke in fun. You don't really suppose I thought so meanly of you as that?"

Olivia laughed with some constraint. If her father, who already had a prejudice against the clergy, should hear the rumors about poor Mr. Brander, nothing, short of entreaties which she would be ashamed to use, would induce him to allow her to exchange another word with the vicar of St. Cuthbert's. And, in a neighborhood where the social attractions were so few as at Rishton, the loss of an acquaintance capable of intelligent conversation was a serious one. She grew silent, and beginning to feel conscious of the cold, shivered. Her father instantly opened the door and led her into the house. He could hear his wife's powerful voice as she chatted with one of the servants in the dining-room. Mrs. Denison was one of those women who confide much in their servants, without extracting any confidence worth having in return. She dropped into a stony silence as her husband and his daughter entered; for there was a feud, generally covert but none the less real, between the two ladies.

Mrs. Denison was a woman of about thirty-five, of the middle height, somewhat thick set, with a cold face, which was not ill looking, though she had never been strictly handsome. She drew herself up, with a displeased expression, in the arm chair she occupied by the fire; and Olivia knew that her efforts to make the house comfortable had not met with the approval of its mistress. The girl walked the whole length of the long room with a rather rebellious feeling in her heart, which she tried to subdue, and held out her hand with the best grace she could.

"How do you do, mamma? I hope you had a pleasant journey," she said, cordially.

Mrs. Denison gave her finger tips, and looked at her with cold eyes.

"Quite as well as I could expect, thank you, knowing what I had to look forward to."

"I hope you don't dislike the new home already."

"Oh, when it begins to look at all like 'home,' I daresay it will be bearable enough; but there is at least a fortnight's hard work for me before that can happen."

Olivia's face changed, and began to look proud and mutinous. Mr. Denison rushed into the breach.

"Come, come, Susan, I don't think you are quite fair to poor Olivia. Remember, it's hard work for a girl, arranging a big house like this. I think she has done very well indeed."

"You must allow me, Edward, to know what I am talking about,"

said his wife; while Reggie and Beatrix, who had been quarrelling silently but viciously in a corner, scenting something in a possible discussion among their elders, came to an abrupt truce and listened eagerly. "I think I ought to understand the arrangement of a house by this time."

"It is a pity, Mrs. Denison, that you could not have spared Lucy and me a week of discomfort and hard work by coming here first yourself," said Olivia, whose quick temper was seldom proof against her step-mother's attacks. "I never doubted that we should fail to please you, but you might give us the credit of having tried."

"Why, what's the matter, Susan? What have you to find fault with?" asked Mr. Denison. His easy-going nature made him averse from interfering in any discussion; but he had suffered so much self-reproach for allowing his daughter to come to Rishton by herself that he felt impelled to dare a word in her behalf. "Hasn't she made the place very comfortable?"

"She has at least taken care that she herself shall be very comfortable," said Mrs. Denison, in her most disagreeable tone.

"Will you please tell me how I have done that?" asked Olivia, in a very low voice.

She was afraid lest her self-control should leave her, and the discussion assume the vulgar aspect of a quarrel between two angry women. For, blame herself for it as she might, she was angry as well as hurt.

"By consulting nobody's convenience but your own in your choice of a room for yourself," said Mrs. Denison, sharply.

"My bedroom!" cried the girl with unfeigned surprise. "Why, what other could I have chosen? It is the smallest in this side of the house, except papa's dressing-room!"

"It is the only one that I could possibly make into a boudoir for myself. I don't know whether you expect me to give up all the little comforts and refinements of a lady."

This speech grated on the ears of both Olivia and her father. Mr. Denison, after ten years of his second marriage, was by no means so absorbed by marital devotion as to ignore the descent he had made in taking for his second wife a woman scarcely refined enough to have been maid to his first. Being a man of affectionate temperament, fond of home, and sensitively grateful for kindness real or supposed, it was natural that in his keen sorrow at his first wife's death, he should fall a prey to the first woman, near at hand, who should find it worth her while to capture him. This, in the natural course of things, proved to be his daughter's governess.

The clever, superficially educated daughter of a small provincial shopkeeper, the second Mrs. Denison, on her elevation to a rank above her birth, was determined to avail herself to the full of every privilege to which her new station entitled her. One of these privileges she conceived to be the possession of a "boudoir," though what the precise significance of it was to her it was not easy to see, as she entered it very rarely, while the whole house was not large enough for her to "sulk" in. But in overlooking this necessity of her station, Mrs. Denison chose to consider that Olivia had wished to put upon her a slight of the kind she could least brook, and no pains the

girl had taken in other directions could induce her to overlook the indignity.

Again Mr. Denison, with unusual rashness, stepped in.

"My dear Susan," he expostulated, "Olivia must have a room to sleep in. And there must be a spare room kept for Earnest. Where else could she stow herself?"

"There are two good rooms in the wing——" began Mrs. Denison.

"But, my dear, they are damp and full of mouldy old things that——"

He was interrupted in his turn by his daughter.

"I haven't the least objection to sleeping in the wing, papa. I left those rooms untouched for Mrs. Denison to decide what she would have done with them. I will take the large room with pleasure, mouldy old things and all."

In truth, Olivia was pleased with this arrangement, and she took possession of the room which had once been Ellen Mitchell's with alacrity which she did her best to hide from her step-mother. Nobody had told Mrs. Denison the story about those two rooms; but their decayed and desolate appearance had inspired her with a strong prejudice against them, so that Olivia was allowed to keep not only the bedroom but the outer room as well for her own use. Mr. Denison was strongly opposed to the idea of his beautiful daughter sleeping away from the rest of the household in what he called "a wretched old rat run." But as the two feminine wills were both against his, he could do nothing but stipulate emphatically that fires were to be kept up in both rooms throughout the winter. His wife demurred at the expense, but on this point he was firm, and had his own way.

In the jarring family life which the Denison household led under the presidency of the second wife, Olivia found a great relief in being able to shut herself up in her wing, away from all discordant elements, even though the atmosphere of these two rooms remained to the end heavy with the tragedy of their last occupant. That tragedy the young girl grew more and more anxious fully to know about; so she turned over the leaves of the old books, and read again the inscription in faded ink in the old prayer book: "Ellen Mitchell, from her affectionate brother Ned." What had become of "Ned?" Did the "affectionate brother" know that his sister had been spirited away, leaving no trace? These were conjectures which often passed through Olivia's mind as she sat down for a lazy half hour by her fire at bedtime.

This half hour was now the only idle time in Olivia's day. Like many other idle English girls, she had only wanted something to do to develop the most dashing energy; and as Mrs. Denison was too much enervated by long years of laziness to care for the trouble of housekeeping, Olivia flung herself with ardor into these new duties, and found in them that necessary outlet for her energies which she had previously sought in lawn tennis.

The whole family had been settled at Rishton Hall a week, and Mrs. Denison had begun bitterly to complain that nobody had called upon her, when one afternoon, while Olivia was busy in the dining-

room with the children's clothes, and her step-mother was shut up in her boudoir with a novel, a carriage drove up to the door, and a footman, descending from the box, gave such a thundering knock as made the old door creak on its hinges. Olivia could just see from where she sat that the carriage was very large, that the footman was very tall, and that the horses were showy animals, their heads held well back with the bearing rein. That was enough for her. She loved horses, and the bearing rein was an abomination in her eyes.

"Those parvenus!" she said to herself, haughtily.

And when Lucy came to announce that Mrs. and Miss and Mr. Frederick Williams were in the drawing-room, she said, briefly, "Tell Mrs. Denison, Lucy," without looking up, or pausing in her work.

She knew this was wrong. She knew that she ought to go and entertain the visitors during the ten minutes which Mrs. Denison would certainly devote to self-adornment before going down to the drawing-room. But, besides that she felt, in her new burst of house-managing fervor, the giving and receiving of visits to be a frivolity, Olivia was resolved not to cultivate any intimacy with the family of the odious Frederick. So she worked on, feeling guilty but defiant, until she heard Mrs. Denison's heavy and pompous tread upon the stairs. A few minutes later, the drawing-room door opened again, and Olivia heard the whole party come out to be shown over the house.

"You shall see what I have made of the upstairs rooms first," said Mrs. Denison's voice, "and make the acquaintance of my cherubs."

And to Olivia's delight, they streamed upstairs towards the room where the cherubs could be distinctly heard screaming with all their might. She gave a sigh of relief at this respite, and was turning over a small stocking on her hand to see what mending it needed, when there came a little, timid, hesitating knock at the door.

"Come in," said she, feeling instantly sure the knock was that of a complete stranger.

The door was opened by the pleasant-looking lady whom Olivia had noticed in church. She had a diffident blush on her face, and a deprecating smile, which made her look pleasanter than ever. Olivia rose, and the lady hurried forward.

"No, don't get up. Don't make me feel I've disturbed you," she entreated. "I know I've taken a dreadful liberty, but I caught sight of you in here as we came in, and I'm so devouringly anxious to know you that when Mrs. Denison offered to take us all upstairs, I slipped behind to try to get a peep at you."

Olivia was disarmed. Miss Williams took a chair beside her, and looked with interest at the work in her hand.

"I could show you such a much better way of mending that heel if you'd let me," she said, almost with eagerness.

"Oh, if you're what they call 'clever with your needle' I musn't work before you," said the girl, smiling, "I'm only a beginner at anything useful, and I bungle frightfully over everything at present."

"But you want to learn?" asked the lady, quite earnestly.

"Indeed I do. We haven't enough servants now to do everything; and unless I learn to give real help in the house—not mere amateur-

ish dabbling, you know—half the things that ought to be done will be left undone."

Miss Williams' gloves were off, and she was already busy with the small stocking. Olivia was astonished to notice that the quick, clever fingers bore distinct traces, both in shape and texture, of former hard work. The elder lady glanced up, caught the girl's eyes, and blushed.

"Yes," she said, smiling, and as if telling a secret, "you would be astonished if I were to tell you of all the work these hands have done in their time. Now that my father has got on, and married a lady, all that has to be forgotten. But, oh! if the servants knew, when I tell them the hall has not been properly scrubbed, how I long to be down on my knees doing it myself!"

She was in earnest, but there was such a twinkle of fun in her eyes that Olivia, who liked her more and more every minute, joined her in a burst of laughter. Then Olivia remembered that there was a bond of union betwon them, and she said, in a confidential tone—

"You have a step-mother too, then?"

"Yes, and no. Mrs. Williams is my father's second wife, and I am the child of his first. My own mother was"—she looked round her with mock mystery—"a factory lass. And—and so was I till I was fourteen. Then my father made a discovery, and began to grow rich and ambitious. And my mother died—perhaps luckily for her, poor thing—and he buried her and the old life together. But he could not bury me, you know; and if the lady he then married had not had the sweetest disposition in the world, it might have fared ill with me. But she is a kind creature, and she made my civilization as little irksome to me as possible. And that is why step-mother doesn't seem the right name for her; and there is all my autobiography."

All the time her busy fingers were making the needle fly through the stocking with a deftness absolutely bewildering to Olivia.

"You are luckier than I have been," said the young girl, in a low voice.

Miss Williams looked up again, her eyes beaming with sympathetic intelligence.

"Yes, I could see that. My father married up for the second time, while yours——"

"Married down. Yes, down in every way; that's the worst of it; temper, manners, everything. If she had been different, I should not have minded growing poorer in the least, but it is tiresome to be thrown so much on her society."

"Yes, there are absolutely no suitable friends about here for you."

"Well," said Olivia, laughing, blushing, and hesitating. "I thought so till ten minutes ago."

Miss Williams in her turn flushed with pleasure. But then she shook her head.

"You might put up with me perhaps, though I am much too old for you. But my half brother! You have met him, and snubbed him, I think, because he is always raving about your beauty and spirit. But if so, you certainly do not want to meet him again."

"Indeed I don't," answered the girl, laughing.

"We might perhaps find a common meeting ground at the Vicarage after next week, when the vicar comes back. But I don't know how you will like Mrs. Brander," she added, very dubiously.

"Isn't she nice?" asked Olivia, with great interest.

"Oh, yes, she's very nice, and very handsome, and—and straightforward, and—and looked up to. She quite leads the fashions here, you know, and starts everything. She is not at all like the ordinary humdrum vicar's wife. But——"

"Well?"

"I don't want to talk scandal, but you must hear all the standing gossip, and you may as well hear it without venom. People talk about her and her husband's brother——"

"Mr. Vernon Brander?"

"Yes."

"He told me himself he had been in love with her before she married," said Olivia, warmly.

Miss Williams gave a quick glance at her face, making the girl blush.

"Yes, but, well, people have seen her going in and out of his house since, and late, very late in the evening. I should not have told you these things, only they must make a difference in the way one looks upon people."

"From your manner towards Mr. Vernon Brander, I shouldn't have thought they made any difference," said Olivia, who was much excited.

"Ah, that is the privilege of being an old maid," answered Miss Williams, very quietly. "I can do without fear what a young girl cannot do—make friends with a black sheep."

Olivia started. "Do you think he is guilty, then?" she asked in a startled whisper.

Miss Williams, who had risen, looked very grave.

"Of the other charge? I don't know. I would give my right hand to know that it was not so. For I am so much interested in him—I may even say, so fond of him. I know, from what he has told me, that his inner life is one long storm, one long struggle. But, why doesn't he clear himself if he can? To an old friend like me three words would be enough."

"Then you believe——"

"Why does he accept the position? Why does he come to me, and ask me to do what I can to help you in your loneliness?"

Olivia looked up.

"That is what he did last Sunday," continued Miss Williams. "And he alluded to 'his unfortunate position' as putting a barrier between you and any wish he might have to assist you. Why should he speak like that if he knew himself to be innocent of either charge?"

Olivia was silent. She did not care to let the other lady see how deeply this matter affected her. She was, indeed, surprised at the keenness of her own feeling. It was a great relief to her that at that moment voices were heard at the top of the staircase, and Miss Williams jumped up, saying that she would have to excuse herself

for playing truant. Olivia shook hands with her almost mechanically, and promised to go to see her without knowing what she said. As soon as she was left alone, the young girl abandoned her work, and sat staring before her in most unusual idleness. One sentence was ringing in her ears:

"Why didn't he clear himself if he could?"

And to this question it was impossible to suggest an answer.

CHAPTER X.

ANY one who could have seen into the workings of Olivia Denison's heart and mind when she was left to herself would probably have pronounced her to be "in love" with the Reverend Vernon Brander. This was not quite true. She did indeed feel a very strong interest in the hermit vicar and his mysterious history; and such interest in a young girl's mind cannot exist quite apart from sentiment. But, then, the sentiments awakened by the overheard interview in the churchyard and by Miss Williams' suggestions were so largely mingled with doubt, disgust, and horror, that on the whole she felt she would infinitely prefer, in spite of his kindness, never to meet him again. She felt very thankful, however, as the days went by, that no story and no rumors about the vicar of St. Cuthbert's reached Mrs. Denison's ears. That lady was too much wrapt up in herself to trouble herself much about her neighbors; and beyond expressing great indignation that he had not called upon her, she expressed no great interest in the vicar's deputy.

Olivia was taking to the country life with much zest. Besides her household duties, she found time to occupy herself greatly with the live stock on the farm, and to take the poultry under her especial care. Mat Oldshaw used to slip round, on one pretence or another, in the early morning when she was busy with her poultry, and, leaning over the fence, used to give her advice about the management of them, trying to check her extravagance.

"Ye doan't need to give 'em all that coorn, Miss Denison, now they aren't laying," he said to her one day reproachfully as she distributed grain with a wildly lavish hand. "What profit will ye be likely to get if ye feed 'em oop like that? Every egg ye'll get this year 'ull cost ye twopence, and ye'll lose on every chicken ye sell."

"Well, I can't starve them just because they're not bringing in a profit just now," said the girl. "If they've any sense of gratitude, they'll grow beautifully plump and fat, and sell at fancy prices."

"That there's regular lady's farming," said Mat, shaking his head dubiously. "And it's of a piece wi' t' way t' master's goin' to work himself. It's very pretty, but it ain't like practical work, and it doan't pay."

Olivia's bright face clouded.

"But papa's got a farm bailiff," said she.

"Oh ay, and gotten a rat to eat oop his coorn," assented Mat darkly.

"Do you mean to insinuate," began Olivia with a tragic face, "that Tom Herrick——"

"All Ah mean, Miss, is that Ah'd like to see ye mak' a profit on your hens; for that's what Ah call success, and Ah'd loike ye to be successful, that Ah should."

"Thank you, Mat; it's very kind of you. And you're quite right; of course it's only by making every department pay that one can make the farm pay."

"Ay," said Mat. "And if ye'll but follow out what I say, ye'll be able to keep twice them lot o' hens on what ye're givin' 'em. Ye've got ground for fifty more, and if Ah was you Ah'd go over to Long Sedge Bend and buy some of old Widder Lund's; she's got 'em to sell. And doan't ye go giving her no fancy price, but beat her down; that's business, and she's none so poor but she can afford to let ye have 'em cheap. The bean't so much to look at, her hens; but they're good 'uns to lay, and worth a fieldful o' them fancy soarts."

Olivia began to play thoughtfully with the grain left in her basket. She was very anxious for the honor of her poultry yard, and she began already to be fired with the ambition to make it a successful commercial enterprise. She had a little pocket money put by; she could lay that out as she pleased, without consulting anybody.

"How far off is this Long Sedge Bend?"

"A matter o' twea mile and a half. It's down by Sedge Bend coal-pit."

"And where's that?"

"Ye go along t' Sheffield road till ye coom to t' mill. Turn to yer left, as if ye were goin' to Sheffield, till ye coom to t' Blue Boar. Bear to yer left across t' fields, and that's Sedge Bend."

"Isn't there a shorter way across the fields? That must be such a long way round."

"Ay, but ye maunna go t' short way. They're a roough lot down at Long Sedge, and ye maun keep to t' road."

"Well, I shall go this very day and interview Mrs. Lund. I'm afraid, though, I shall be short of accommodation if I buy many more chickens."

"Nea, Ah'll rig ye oop some nests and a perch in t' auld toolhouse yonder. Ah can do 't in an hour."

"It's awfully good of you, but you needn't hurry with it, for I shan't start till after luncheon."

"But start as early as ye can. It doan't do to be late, by oneself, in those parts."

"Well, I'll be sure to start in good time, and I'll take a big basket, to bring some of the chickens back in."

"Best let mea fetch 'em for ye to-morrow; Ah can't get away to-day. It's not for t' loikes o' you to carry baskets o' live stock along t' roads."

"But I can't wait—I can't wait; I must see them to-day," said this headstrong young madam, who liked to carry out her plans with the impetuosity of a whirlwind. "And as for the basket, why, there isn't another farmer's daughter in Yorkshire with stronger arms than mine."

Mat looked at her mistrustfully, but he said nothing more on the subject.

"Ah'll tak' t' measure of t' toolhouse if Ah may coom in," was all he said.

Olivia was running to open the gate for him; but, with a nod of thanks, he vaulted over the high fence, and set about his work without another word. The country lad had been fairly bewitched by the beauty and brightness of this young lady, who seemed to him a creature of a different mould from any of the womenkind he had hitherto met—even from handsome Mrs. Meredith Brander. Nothing gave him so much delight as to be able to render her a small service; and even while he was taking the measurements of the toolhouse, he was pondering a way to spare her what he considered the dangers of the walk she proposed to take that afternoon. The girl herself, knowing nothing of this plan, and thinking lightly enough of the enterprise, watched his proceedings with great interest, and finally overwhelmed him with thanks which sent him home happy.

Olivia started on her walk that afternoon without a word to anybody concerning the object of her expedition. She had a purse with some of her savings in her pocket, and a large poultry basket on her arm. "I shall leave this basket somewhere when I come in sight of the cottage, and pretend I've only come to look at the chickens," she said to herself, resolved to be very astute. But the widow Lund was more astute still, and managed to drive a very good bargain with her fair young customer. Indeed, Olivia showed such a helpless inability to distinguish between a young chicken and the hoariest-headed rooster of the lot, that it would have needed superhuman virtue not to take advantage of her. It was with a glow of unspeakable delight and pride that, having paid for a dozen hens, she said she would take half of them home with her, and, running out of the cottage, picked up the basket which she had hidden behind the hedge, and brought it to pack her live stock in.

Poor Olivia! An unknown visitor was such a rare sight at Long Sedge that the advent of "a grand lady wi' a big basket" had been reported all over the village as she drew near the outskirts; and the widow Lund herself, with two cronies, having watched her approach, basket and all, from the door of Mrs. Perkin's washhouse, was able to appreciate at its full value the poor little ruse.

When her load was ready, Olivia quickly discovered that a basket containing six live chickens is neither a light nor a convenient burden, and perceived that to carry them back by the way she had come would be a more arduous and fatiguing task than she had imagined. When, therefore, she found there was a path across the fields which would lead up to the high road, and shorten the way by at least half a mile, the temptation was too strong for her, and, disregarding Mat's warnings, as that young man had expected her to do, she ventured fearlessly on the short cut. Half a dozen unkempt children laughed and yelled at her as she passed; a few rough-looking women whispered to each other at the doors of their dirty cottages; while a man, who was leaning against a wall smoking a short black pipe, slunk out of her way, as if conscious that she belonged to a higher type of civilization. Mat was right; Long Wedge Bank was a rough place. The inhabitants looked wild and out of touch with the rest of humanity; the long rows of small brick cottages, many of which were windowless and deserted, looked squalid and miserable, while over everything was that black and grimy look which the neighborhood of a coal pit produces.

It was Saturday afternoon, and the pits were idle. A great black wheel, towering over a mound on the right, showed where lay the entrance to the nearest shaft. Round the door of a beerhouse, smaller and much more disreputable-looking than the Collier's Arms, was a group of men and boys, spending their half holiday in dull and noisy fashion. They were a rough-looking lot, and Olivia passed them quickly. Her way lay along a cinder path over the fields, and for some time she got on very well, meeting no one, and enjoying the frosty afternoon. Just as she ran through a turnstile and followed the sudden turn of the path to the left, however, a man started up from the ground, called out "Hallo, missis!" and attempted to seize one of her feet. She was startled into uttering a low exclamation, and, rightly judging that the man was drunk, she ran on as fast as she could, hoping to get beyond his pursuit before he could get upon his legs. But a drunken man may be able to run when he cannot walk; and Olivia's assailant, who was a stalwart young collier with a blear-eyed and most unprepossessing face, gave chase in good earnest, and came up with her just as she came to a barrier between two fields in the shape of a very high and very primitive stile. Seeing she had no time to get over it in safety, the girl put down her basket close by the hedge, turned suddenly, and faced her pursuer.

For the first time in her life she felt thoroughly frightened, for the young man looked brutal and reckless; but she had plenty of courage, and the terror she felt showed neither in her face, her attitude, nor in her resonant voice.

"What do you want?"

He reeled, not having expected her sudden movement.

"Ah want look at tha pretty feace, meh dear," said he, only just distinctly enough for her to understand him.

And he gave her a tipsy leer of admiration.

"And now will you be kind enough to pass on?" said she, in a firm tone. "Or to let me pass on without further hindrance?"

"Ah'm not a-hinderin' of tha," said the young man, who was trying to stand steadily in proximity much too close to be pleasant. "Tha can goa wheer tha lakkest."

Olivia looked at him doubtfully, but as he made for the moment no attempt to molest her, she began to feel reassured.

"Go back, then," said she, "and let me go on."

"Nea," said he, shaking his head with an ugly grin; "Ah'm goin' to help tha over t' stile. Ah'll carry tha whisket for tha if thr'rt civil."

"Thank you," said Olivia, taking the fellow's offers as if they were courtesies, "but I want no help, either for myself or my basket. If you wish to do me a service, you will go back and let me go on."

"Ah maun see tha over t' stile first," said he. "Coom, missis, don't be shy."

He swooped down upon her basket, which she snatched up so quickly that he lost his balance and fell against the wooden fence. With a rapid step she got round him, basket and all, and was in the act of mounting the first step of the stile when the young ruffian, perceiving her purpose and enraged at a blow he had received in

stumbling, lurched round with unexpected agility, and laid a rough hand on her arm. She tried to wrench herself free, but the muscular strength she was so proud of was as a child's feebleness against the brute force of this man. It had never before happened to her to feel powerless like this. With teeth clinched hard, and eyes watching intently for a moment's advantage, she wrestled in utter silence with the man, who tried to force her to mount the stile.

"Tha'd better not give ma so mooch trouble, ma bonny madam," said he, roughly. "Tha'll only have to pay for t' other side. An' Ah'll tak' a buss now to goa on wi'."

He put his arm round her waist and tried to kiss her; Olivia fought fiercely, still without uttering a word. In the midst of her desperate struggles her assailant saw the girl's face change—light up with hope, with expectancy. Then, with all the force of her lungs, she suddenly shouted, "Help!" For a moment the collier was surprised into desisting from his attack, but before she could take advantage of this he recovered himself, and putting one rough and dirty hand over her mouth, growled out, sullenly—

"Nea, theer bean't no help for tha till Ah done with tha."

Closing his strong fingers on her face, he pulled her head around with brutal violence, and had his own repulsive face close to hers, when he suddenly felt one strong hand laid on his shoulder and another under his chin, and his head being forced back with a jerk, he found that he was in the vigorous clutches of the vicar of St. Cuthbert's."

"Dang tha! It's t' feightin' parson!" cried the rough, in a surly tone.

"Yes, and I'm going to exercise my fists on your ugly face as soon as ever you're sober, you hulking vagabond!" said Mr. Brander, with a conspicuous lack of pastoral meekness.

The man had fallen back, and, half drunk as he was, looked ashamed of himself.

"Tha maun look out for thaself if tha tries that on," he said, sullenly. Then with more assurance he went on, "Dunna think Ah care for tha bein' t' parson. It ain't mooch of a parson tha'lt be when all's known. Ay," he continued, seeing that these vague words were not without effect, "theer's a mon aboot as wants tha, an' as woan't rest till e's gotten tha, and may be before tha taks oop wi' another lass e'll mak' tha give an account o' t' one tha spirited away. Now coom on if tha loikes."

And he put himself in a fighting position.

Mr. Brander pushed him on one side so that he staggered, and picking up Olivia's basket, signed to her to get over the stile, while he turned to give a few short and sharp words of farewell to the discomfited collier. A few seconds later Olivia, who had walked quickly on in shame, relief, and confusion, heard the vicar's voice close behind her.

"And now, Miss Denison, I've a sermon ready for you."

Coming up with her, he saw that the girl, who made no answer, had tears in her eyes.

"No, I'm not going to have any mercy on you because you choose to cry," said he, pitilessly. "It's no fairer of a girl to use her tears

against a man than it is of a man to use his fists against a woman. If you don't instantly leave off, I shall feel at liberty to hit you. You know you deserve it."

"How?" asked she, tremulously.

"How! Why, by disregarding the emphatic warnings, not of one friend, but of two, and by dragging out a poor parson on Saturday,' his sermon day, to protect you from the consequences of your folly.'

"Dragging you out!"

"Yes. This morning comes Mat Oldshaw post-haste to me just before luncheon to say that you were going off on a wild-goose—no, on a tame-hen—chase to Long Sedge Bend, and that he was certain you would come back over the very fields which he had just assured you were unsafe for a lady."

"But, Mr. Brander," put in Olivia, in real distress, "I've always been used to take care of myself; I have never been annoyed before. It's an infamous thing that a girl shouldn't be able to do what her powers enable her to do just as well as a man!"

"Infamous, perhaps, but indisputable. It is of no use to kick against custom."

"But what is going to be the use of me, if I, a great strong creature who can do lots of work, and shall soon understand farming better than papa, can't cross the road without a footman at my heels to keep off typsy coal miners? Oh, dear, I wish I weren't a wretched girl!"

"You couldn't be anything else, with that illogical mind, and that extravagant way of looking at things."

"Illogical!" cried she, now really offended. "Why, papa says I have the most reasonable head he ever knew!"

"For a woman."

Olivia was at first too much offended to answer.

"I'm papa's right hand," she said, at last, coldly. "I'm just like a son to him."

"I think not, Miss Denison," said the vicar, shaking his head.

"My father would tell you so himself, Mr. Brander."

"And I should not believe him, Miss Denison."

Olivia began to see that the vicar was enjoying her indignation, so she bit her lips and remained silent.

"Just think now, what happens when you find him a little depressed and irritable. Does he dismiss you with a snub as he would one of your brothers? Does he not rather submit to a little gentle coaxing, allow himself to be 'brought round' and receive a kiss as a reward?"

"Yes, that is true, certainly," said she, smiling. "But that has nothing to do with the real value of the help I give him."

"Oh, but it has. It has, on the contrary, everything to do with it. Instead of complaining that you are a 'wretched girl' you must learn to understand that. What the intrinsic value of your services may be I don't know; but if you had the abilities of a Senior Wrangler they would count for nothing compared with your sympathy and love for him, and your pretty feminine way of showing it. And so, you see, as your tender womanhood is of more consequence to us—I mean to him—than all the fine masculine qualities

of your intellect, you must consent to accept the protection we decree that your womanhood needs."

"Papa doesn't decree it. He says girls ought to learn to take care of themselves."

"Will he say so after to-day's adventure, do you think?"

"I shan't tell him anything about it."

"Then I shall, unless you give me your word, like a sensible girl, never to cross these fields alone again."

"Need you ask that, Mr. Brander?" said the girl, reddening.

"Well, forgive me. I don't know you well enough to be sure how deep the headstrong vein runs."

"I am miserably sorry and ashamed to have brought you so far this afternoon."

"Are you? Oh, I have done more irksome things than that in my time, I assure you," said he drily. "Besides, I've only come from St. Cuthbert's. I'm back again in my own parsonage to-day, you know, for my brother and sister-in-law are expected this afternoon."

"Are they?" said she. "I am so anxious to see them, especially Mrs. Brander."

"Make haste on to the high road then, and we may meet them. The pony cart has gone to meet them, and they generally come this way round from Matherham."

They were within a short distance of the road when Mr. Brander descried a little way off his sister-in-law's light wood cart and plump cob pony. Quickening their pace, Olivia excited and curious, her companion decidedly nervous, they climbed the last steps of the hill, and reached the high road a few moments before the cart came up. They stopped to recover their breath, exchanging a merry word or two as they waited. As they drove up, Olivia, who had splendid eyesight, could see what a handsome pair the vicar of Rishton and his wife were. He was fair, serene, portly, good-humored; she, dark, erect, and blooming. They were conversing amicably as they came along, and did not notice the two people waiting by the roadside until they were close upon them, and Vernon Brander accosted them. Olivia wondered at the nervous tremor in his voice as he did so.

But she was still more surprised at the effect of the meeting upon the lady and gentleman in the cart. The serenity of the portly vicar clouded at sight of his brother; an indescribable change came over his face, a look which was not exactly disapproval, or doubt, or suspicion, or mistrust, though it partook of all those qualities, as he glanced from Mr. Vernon Brander to the beautiful girl at his side. The expression of the lady spoke more plainly still. Her eyes moved quickly from the man to the woman and back again, while her lips tightened and her forehead puckered with evident consternation. Both lady and gentleman, whatever the cause of their annoyance might be, were self-possessed enough to give Miss Denison a kind and courteous greeting, when Mr. Vernon Brander, with evident nervousness, introduced her. Learning that Olivia had been buying poultry, Mrs. Brander inspected the purchase with great interest, but pronounced two of the birds to be very old roosters indeed. She then told her brother-in-law that they were going straight

home to an early dinner, and told him to make haste to the Vicarage, as they should expect him to join them.

Then they drove off, leaving Olivia with the uncomfortable impression that they disapproved of her acquaintance with Mr. Vernon Brander in the strongest possible manner.

CHAPTER XI.

NOT for some minutes after the little carriage containing the Reverend Meredith Brander and his wife had driven on did either of the young people they had left break silence. Olivia watched the disappearing vehicle with much interest, and Vernon Brander, though with less openness, watched Olivia.

At last she turned sharply, and met his eyes fixed upon her with a half-fierce, half-mournful intentness, which struck her with painful surprise. He at once turned away his head, and asked abruptly—

"Well, what do you think of them? Mind, it is of no use for you to say you 'haven't had time to judge,' or anything of that sort, for I have already caught the reflection of very decided opinion in your face."

"I don't deny that I have formed decided opinions, though I don't pledge myself they are correct."

"Well?"

"I think I shall like your brother, but I know I shan't like his wife."

"Very stratghtforwardly put. An instinct merely, or something more?"

"Something more, I think. You know, I have seen their portraits; well, I have thought about them a great deal, and now I have compared my impressions of the photographs with my impressions of the originals, and the result is a decided opinion."

"You know I told you that you would like my brother—that all ladies do," said Vernon, with a perceptible shade of jealousy.

"Well, you were right; I admit it. He seems the incarnation of good humor—to shed a sort of sunshine of cheeriness around him."

"Yes, yes, he does," admitted Vernon, rather bitterly, Olivia thought.

She continued: "It was plain that, for some reason or other, neither he nor Mrs. Brander was glad to see me. It almost seemed as if they took an instinctive dislike to me. But even that could not sour your brother; it scarcely made him less genial. On the other hand, it made all the difference in the world to Mrs. Brander's manner. She looked at me just as if I were an enemy, who had done her, or was going to do her, some severe injury."

Glancing at her companion, Olivia saw that something she had said affected him very strongly. She was silent therefore, afraid that she had already said too much.

"It may be," said Mr. Brander, after a pause, "that she feels a

kind of most innocent jealousy of you. She has, all through her married life, been used to look upon me as one of those unattached tame cats who are only too glad to catch mice for any responsible matron who is kind to them. My sister-in-law annexed me in that capacity long ago; sends me to market, sets me to mind the children, to nail up the fallen picture, or even to lecture the gardener. I don't suppose she has seen me speak to another lady—a young lady—for ten years."

"I should have thought, by her look, she would be equal to lecturing the gardener herself," said Olivia, drily.

Mr. Brander laughed. "Well, she is not quite resourceless when it comes to an affair of the tongue," he admitted. "But you must not think she is a shrew, for all that. Then, she has been our beauty, too, and has been used to set the fashions for the ladies. While now——" He stopped and smiled as he looked at the blooming, prettily dressed girl beside him.

Olivia, however, found this no smiling matter, but replied, with deep scorn—

"Surely, Mrs. Brander can't be so small-minded as that. I can assure her I have no wish to entrench upon her privileges; and, with only eighteen pounds a year for dress and pocket money, I am not likely to set fashions that there will be a rush to follow."

"You might set a fashion in faces," suggested he.

"Oh," said she, laughing, "if Mrs. Brander envies me the admiration of Mr. Frederick Williams—or, indeed, of any of the *jeunesse doree* of this neighbourhood—I can assure her that she will only have to wait a very little while before my unqualified disdain will bring them all again to her matron's feet."

"Myself among the number."

"Oh, Mr. Brander, I didn't count you."

"But in mercy you must. I am rather grey behind the ears, and rather lean about the jaws; but let me still think myself as eligible a bachelor as the place boasts."

He spoke playfully, but something, either in his tone or in the knowledge she had of his life, touched her, and made her voice very kind, as she answered—

"I did not mean that I thought you too old. I meant that I could not think of classing you with a creature like Frederick Williams."

"He would take that as a compliment."

"I don't think he would if he saw me look at him and then at you while I said so."

Mr. Brander pulled up his clerical collar, and affected to give his hat a jaunty cock.

"It's so long since I've been 'buttered up,' and it's so nice," said he.

"Why, you have a great following among the ladies of the village."

"I am afraid I look upon them—though without so much reason—much as you do upon their counterparts of the opposite sex."

"And Mrs. Brander, doesn't she, in return for your services at marketing and nailing pictures, 'butter you up' too?"

The gaiety, which had sat so pleasantly on the usually grave man, suddenly evaporated. He answered, very quietly—

"She calls me a good fellow, and—yes, I think she means it."

They had slackened their steps a little as they drew near the bottom of the hill where The Chequers hid the entrance to Rishton Hall Farm. They had stopped altogether at the bottom to exchange these last few sentences before saying farewell. As his last words were succeeded by a moment's pause, Mr. Brander glanced up the hill he had to climb to the Vicarage, and became aware of his brother's portly figure descending the slope with measured steps toward them. His cheeks grew pale; the last gleam of vivacity died out of his face.

The change caused Olivia to look in the same direction, and to note that there was something judicial in the handsome vicar's gait—something mildly apprehensive in the expression of his face. She felt an impulse of indignation against both husband and wife for their inexplicably rigorous attitude towards Vernon Brander and herself. At sight of his brother, Vernon, who seemed at once to grow cold and formal, raised his hat, and would have left her with a few words of farewell. But she held out her hand, and, as he took it with a flushing face, she retained his with a warm clasp, while she said—

"I am going to get papa to waylay you, Mr. Brander, as you come back from the Vicarage. You have never been inside the house since the day you played fairy godmother to me and poor Lucy. I want you to see the old house now we have made it again a home."

"I shall be delighted, Miss Denison," faltered poor Vernon, with one ear for her kindly words and the other for his brother's deliberately approaching footsteps. "You are very kind to me," he added, in a hasty undertone. Then in his usual voice, "Good-night," said he, as she released his hand, and, with a bow to the vicar, turned to the farm-yard gate.

With a few steps on either side—dignified in the one, hurried and nervous in the other—the brothers met. The elder passed his arm affectionately within that of the younger, and turned to walk up the hill with him.

"Evelyn began to be afraid you had forgotten us and our dinner in pleasanter society than ours," said Meredith, in his genial voice.

If Vernon, as his nervous manner suggested, was afraid of his brother, the fault lay in his own conscience, and not in any coldness or harshness on the part of the Vicar of Rishton.

"No," said Vernon, hastily; "I had not forgotten. Of course not. Miss Denison was annoyed by a rough as she was crossing the fields; I came up just in time—by the merest accident—and I could do no less than see her home."

"Of course not. Not a very great penance either. What an extremely pleasant-looking girl!"

It was characteristic of the vicar's warm, expansive nature that he found enjoyment in all goodly things; and he never attempted to hide the pleasure the sight of a beautiful woman gave him, although, as in the present instance, he remembered his cloth in the expression of it.

"She is very handsome," said Vernon, whose candor went a step further than his brother's.

"And amiable?"

"By that one means sympathetic to oneself, I suppose. Yes, I

find her amiable," said the younger man, with a sort of dogged defiance in his tone.

"Then you are pretty intimate already?"

The vicar spoke without the least harshness, but the answer came in an almost sullen tone, as if Vernon's own conscience were reproaching him.

"Not very. This is the fourth time I have met her."

"But, dear me, with these sweet-faced girls, one gets over the ground so fast!" suggested the elder more genially than ever.

"That depends. There's not much about me to fascinate a beautiful woman."

"Oh, I didn't mean that: I certainly did not mean that. But we had looked upon you—you had taught us to look upon you—as a confirmed bachelor; almost a misogynist."

"No, not that," interrupted the younger, abruptly. "I have always admired women; in my way, at least, as much as you have in yours—unluckily for me," he added in a bitter, mocking tone.

"And now your admiration is to take shape in a definite preference for one?" said the vicar, rather diffidently.

Vernon was restless and uneasy; he snapped twigs off the hedge as he walked along, and seemed unable to look his brother in the face.

"What does my preference matter?" he asked, at last, almost fiercely. "What did it matter before, except to bring upon me the shame and shadow of my whole life?"

His brother looked shocked and alarmed at this outburst. He put his arm, which Vernon had thrown off, again most persuasively through that of the younger man.

"Come, come," he said, very earnestly, very affectionately; "you must not talk like that. You lead a life—voluntarily, mind, else there would be no grandeur, no dignity, in it—so full of austerity and self-saerifice that you are winning yourself almost the reputation of a saint. You have shown an example of courage and endurance such as few men would have the steadfastness to follow—not I, for one, I admit. You are loved by your parishioners. And it is scarcely too much to say that by your own family—Evelyn, myself, and the little ones—you are adored."

The Vicar of Rishton watched his brother's face closely as he pronounced these words in full tones of deep feeling. They took effect at once. The thin, sensitive face relaxed, and a faint smile hovered on Vernon's lips as he answered—

"You are all very good to me, and I love you for it; but you don't need to be told that now. As for all that about my being a saint and a martyr, it is nonsense, and only a kind way of putting the fact that ten years ago——"

"Now why trouble yourself about what happened ten years ago?" interrupted the vicar in grave but most gentle tones. "The evil wrought then has been bitterly repented of, and atoned for in a manner so noble that I can scarcely speak of it without tears."

"Noble? Nonsense! There was nothing in what I have done but the outcome of a most commonplace human feeling. I don't wish to deceive you about that, or get more credit than is due to me."

"Well, I will say no more on the point. It is not for me to contradict you. For, whatever may have been our relative positions ten years ago, your life since then has made you a better man than I, and I bow to you as to my superior."

It was very gracefully said, with a warmth and sincerity of tone which made it no empty compliment from the handsome, much-revered vicar to the hermit-parson of ruinous St. Cuthbert's. The latter received it with a restive, deprecatory, impatient wave of the hand; but yet a keen observer, who had looked from the one face to the other at that moment, would almost have been inclined to say that the elder, whether or not he quite meant what he said, had spoken the truth, and that the worn features and keen grey eyes of the younger man revealed higher capacities for good than the bland, benevolent, and good-humored countenance of his brother. Ten years ago, before the tragic event which had been the turning point of Vernon's life, the reverse of this would have been true. Passionate, reckless, and hot tempered, he would have looked, beside his open-faced brother, like the evil angel beside the good. But a decade of unruffled prosperity on the one hand, and the same period of austere self-sacrifice on the other, had told their tale; and the man over whom there hung the shadow of a fearful crime now threatened, by long humility and devotion, to oust from the first place in the esteem of the rough mining population the irreproachable and kindly Vicar of Rishton himself.

Meredith had spoken the last words in a decisive tone, as if he considered the discussion at an end. But from the expression of his brother's face, it was clear that he had yet something to say—something of more import than anything that had yet passed between them.

"You have tried me long enough to trust my discretion a little, Meredith; but I don't know how you will take what I am going to tell you." He hurried on in an agitated voice, without looking his brother in the face. "I have never been a misogynist; perhaps I shall not always be a bachelor. Mind, I only say perhaps."

There was a long pause. They tramped up the hill side by side without exchanging so much as a look, until the pretty gables of the Vicarage were in sight, peeping out behind the massive evergreens and the yet bare lilac branches of the vicar's garden. Then Meredith spoke, in the most subdued and gentlest of voices—

"You are the best, indeed, the only possible judge of your own conduct, Vernon; but I fear that, to a nature like yours, the thought of having caused suffering to a woman you love will some day be very bitter."

His voice seemed to fade away on the last words, as it did at the pathetic points of his sermons. His eloquence again took effect on the sensitive Vernon.

"My wife—if, indeed, I ever had a wife—should never know the truth," said he, in a low and husky voice.

"Oh, but she will!" said Meredith, with energy. "Do not deceive yourself on that point; you cannot deceive me. No one can prevent your marrying; I, for one, shall never utter another word against such a step; but, if you do take it, your ten years'

silence, as far as the feelings of others are concerned, will have been in vain."

There was another pause—a short one, this time. Then Vernon spoke, in a harsh and broken voice—

"Be satisfied. No woman shall ever suffer through me—again. I will bear it to the end—alone."

"Spoken bravely—spoken like yourself," began the vicar of Rlshton, in his usual firm and cheerful tones. He was about to say more, when his speech was checked by the sight of a man's face peering over the wall of a small, neglected garden, which adjoined the vicar's own premises on a lower level of the hill.

The face was that of a stranger, but of a stranger who apparently took a deep interest in his surroundings. Meredith Brander examined his features with frank and rather puzzled interest, while Vernon scanned the face with an intentness which almost savored of dread. The stranger, on his side, gave them a nod of free-and-easy greeting, which they returned by a more conventional salute, as they proceeded up the hill.

"Who is that man?" asked Meredith, as if trying to recall some memory connected with the features he had just seen.

"I don't know," answered the brother, in a troubled voice. His brother looked inquiringly.

"Have you seen him before? I can't quite make up my mind whether he is a stranger to me or not."

"He is a stranger," said Vernon; "probably the man who has taken the cottage. I heard this morning that it was let at last."

"You don't know his name then?"

"Mat Oldshaw, who told me, did not mention his name."

No more was said on the subject of the stranger by either of the brothers, both of whom remained apparently in deep thought for the few remaining steps of their walk.

The gravity of both faces lightened when, on reaching the Vicarage, the sounds of childish voices broke upon their ears. Mrs. Meredith Brander prided herself on nothing so much as on being a "sensible woman;" and, as there is no sign of want of sense in a woman so marked as the spoiling of children, the event went a little way in the opposite direction, and kept her little daughter of ten and small son of six in somewhat rigorous subjection. Not only did she honor the old-fashioned saying that "children should be seen and not heard," but she even went so far as to think that the less seen of them the better. Her husband, who was an affectionate and even demonstrative father, would have had them much more about the house; but he yielded in all domestic matters implicitly to his wife's ruling, and, as she had decreed that the proper place for children was the nursery, in the nursery they for the most part remained. Therefore, the children had come back in a cab with the luggage, instead of with papa and mamma, in the pony carriage, and they were on their way up the stairs towards their own domain when their father and uncle came in and caught them.

Vernon Brander's haggard face lighted up with an expressic of deep tenderness as the little girl turned on hearing the gentlemen's

footsteps, and, with a shrill cry of childish delight, ran down a few steps, and flung her little arms tempestuously round his neck.

"Uncle Vernie! Uncle Vernie!" she cooed breathlessly into his ear. "Oh, I have such a lot tell you, and I've such a heap of shells for you, and some seaweed for you to dry; and, oh! I have so wanted to see you, and have you with us there by the sea. It would have been lovely if only you'd been there!"

"Come, come, you carneying, blarneying, little sixpenn'orth of halfpence," said Uncle Vernon, seating himself on the stairs and putting his arm affectionately around her little waist, "don't pretend it wasn't lovely without me, or that you're glad the holiday's over so that you can see your old uncle again."

"But I am though, whether you believe it or not," said the child, gravely, looking into the wrinkles of the clergyman's face with affectionate solicitude. "The sea was beautiful, and it was nice to have no lessons, and to see the pretty people, and to have new walks instead of the old ones we're so tired of. But there was no one to tell what one thought, no one to look at me like you look, Uncle Vernie —no one to hug like this."

And, suiting the action to the word, she crushed up his head and face in a stifling embrace.

At that moment the drawing-room door opened, and Mrs. Brander, handsome, erect, and neat as a statue, came upon the scene.

"Kate, you are forgetting yourself, my dear," she said, in a tone of gentle but decided reproof. "Your uncle does not mind a kiss, but a bear's hug is neither lady-like nor welcome."

The child withdrew her arms at once, and relapsed into the unnatural demeanor of a sensitive child snubbed. Vernon grew red, and passed his hand over the little girl's fair head with more than paternal tenderness.

"Don't be hard upon the child, Evelyn," he said in a low voice. "You who have children of your own don't know what pleasure that 'bear's hug' can give to a childless man."

Meredith Brander, who had been playing with his little boy, looked uneasily towards his brother at this speech.

"What a fuss you make about that child!" said Mrs. Brander, lightly, as if anxious to turn the conversation.

And, coming to the staircase, she picked up the little girl's hat, which had fallen off in the course of her excited greetings, and telling her to run upstairs and get her face washed, Mrs. Brander invited her brother-in-law, with a welcoming gesture, to come with her into the drawing-room.

Vernon followed her with scarcely disguised reluctance, which the lady did not fail to perceive.

"What is the matter with you, Vernon?" she asked, as she seated herself by an open work-basket, and immediately began operations upon an embroidered pinafore. "There is a change in you since we went away; you have either grown less sociable, or else you have found some society more congenial than ours. Sit down; that pacing to and fro fidgets me."

Vernon stopped in front of her, but did not seat himself.

"Do you know," he began, abruptly, "that I have gone through a lengthy catechism of this sort at the hands of your husband? I have given the fullest answers to all his questions, and he can pass on to you any information you may require."

In spite of the peremptoriness of his words, his tone was almost pleading; and in his face, as he looked down upon her, there was an expression of chivalrous kindliness which took all harshness out of his speech.

Mrs. Brander, glancing up at him, drew a breath of relief.

"I was almost beginning to fear, Vernon, that you had formed, or were on the point of forming, new ties which would make you forget the old ones."

Mrs. Brander's voice was not capable of expressing much deep emotion; but she lowered it, as she said these words, to the softest pitch it could reach.

"Forget!" he echoed. "That is a process my mind is incapable of. I think you know that, Evelyn."

She gave him a straightforwardly, affectionate look out of her handsome eyes.

"Perhaps I do, Vernon," she said, gently. "Perhaps I think your mind incapable of any process by which you could bring suffering upon another person."

Vernon looked down into her beautiful face critically. There was genuine anxiety in her expression, but it did not touch him as much as a similar expression on those comely features had been wont to do. For the last few weeks he had been haunted by another woman's face, one which betrayed most ingenuously every thought of the owner's mind, every impulse of a warm young heart. Mrs. Brander was intelligent enough to have an indea of the truth; and when she saw that her soft speech left him comparatively cold, she did not waste another on him, but rose from her seat with a sigh, and bent over her table in such a way that he could not see her face. The sensitive Vernon instantly began to imagine tears in her eyes, drawn forth by his own hardness. He was seeking words to comfort her when the door opened, and Meredith came in. His genial presence seemed on the instant to relieve the embarrassment of the other two.

"It seems to me, my dear," he began to his wife, "that Kitty is not looking any the better for her stay at Bournemouth. I went upstairs with the children just now, and I was quite struck with the paleness of the child's cheeks."

As the vicar uttered these words, a change came rapidly over his brother's face. He glanced from father to mother with an expression of the deepest anxiety, which Mrs. Brander, while answering her husband in calm and measured tones, did not fail to note.

"I think you worry yourself unnecessarily about the child. She's tired now after her journey; she will probably look all right again to-morrow."

The vicar allowed himself to be pacified by his wife's assurances, and, leading his brother away to the fireplace, they occupied themselves, until the announcement of dinner, in discussing the trifling events which had happened in the parish during the vicar's absence. Mrs. Brander listened with an especially attentive ear while her

brother-in-law gave a somewhat detailed account of the arrival of the new occupants of Rishton Hall Farm, including, as it necessarily did, the story of his own assistance at their installation.

Mrs. Brander did not attempt to deceive herself as to the strong measure of interest which the beautiful young farmer's daughter had excited in Vernon. Neither did she disguise from herself the anxiety and annoyance which this discovery caused her. Instead, however, of indulging in any feelings of feminine jealousy, she set herself to try to devise a way of ousting this rival. A ray of light broke suddenly over her handsome face.

"When I spoke of my own suffering, he was certainly not so much touched as he used to be," she reflected. "On the other hand, anything connected with Kitty seems to move him more than ever. I must play Kitty against this Miss Denison."

And, without any of the pangs of a jealous woman, Mrs. Brander, with a glance at her innocent brother-in-law, made a calm resolution as to the part she should play in what she perceived to be an incipient love affair.

CHAPTER XII.

VERNON BRANDER left his brother's house that evening in a frenzy of doubt and uncertainty, such as his passionate, self-torturing nature was liable to. He had so long been bound in a dutiful and chivalrous vassalage to his sister-in-law, seeing her faults without being repelled by them, and in all things doing her reverent homage as to his early ideal, that it came upon him with a shock to discover suddenly, as he had done this evening, that she had fallen from that high place in her imagination. He tried in vain to hide from himself the fact that this change in his feelings was due to the appearance on the scene of a rival who was carrying away all before her. Mrs. Brander had, on previous occasions, scoffed at his adoration of children; she had often shown clearly how little she cared for his feelings; but never before to-night had she seemed to him cold, and hard, and selfish; never before had it occurred to him to think how lacking she was in feminine softness and charm.

Following on this discovery came the inevitable consciousness who it was that had brought about this knowledge. If he had not looked lately into a softer pair of eyes, if he had not felt the touch of a warmer hand, if, in short, he had never met Olivia Denison, he would have gone on comfortably in his platonic worship of the only woman of his acquaintance who had any of those elements of beauty and grace which were necessary to his somewhat fastidious standard. But the advent of the beautiful, warm-hearted, impulsive young girl had changed all that; and Vernon, as he remembered the promises he had made to his brother and his brother's wife, and recognized clearly enough that by the circumstances of his life he was bound to remain in bachelor loneliness, felt that the burden of a bygone sin was heavier upon him than he could bear.

He was going gloomily down the hill, and had nearly reached the

foot of it, when a rather rough voice, with an inflection which was un-English and strange, addressed him quite close to his ear.

"Could you oblige me with a light?"

Vernon, who had his pipe between his lips, stopped, and offered the stranger his matchbox. The night was dark, but he was able to recognize in this abrupt-mannered person the man he and Meredith had seen that evening leaning on the garden wall of the cottage adjoining the Vicarage. There had been something suspicious about the stranger's manner then; there was something more now. He took the proffered matchbox, struck a light, and, instead of applying it to the cigar he had ready in his mouth, held it close enough to Vernon's face to get a good view of every feature.

The clergyman, returning his gaze, grew deadly pale. He did not flinch, however, but settling his face with the hard determination of a man accustomed to bear pain, submitted to the scrutiny in dogged silence.

"Thank you," said the stranger slowly, as he threw away the match, which had burnt down, and struck another, with which he proceeded to light his cigar. "You are the first person about here who has shown what in other parts we should call common civility. A rough lot, these Yorkshiremen!"

"And they don't always improve much in manners by going abroad," said Vernon, quietly.

The other remained silent for a moment, peering at him in the darkness. Then he spoke again, more courteously than before.

"You take me for a Yorkshireman, then?"

"Yes; I can hear the Yorkshire burr through some accent you have picked up since."

"Well, you're a smart chap for a parson," said the other, approvingly. "You'll excuse my frankness; but I'm a plain man, and I dare say my manners are none the more polished for fifteen years spent among cattle-drovers. They're not the sort of company to make one fit for Buckingham Palace."

"I suppose not," said Vernon. "And you have said good-bye to them, and come back to settle down in your native county?"

"For a little while—a year, or maybe two," answered the stranger with great deliberateness. "I haven't come over here to sit still and twiddle my thumbs for the rest of my life."

"Why, there's plenty of work to be done here in the old country."

"Yes, it's work brings me over here, and hard work too, by what I hear," said the other, looking penetratingly at the clergyman through shrewd, half-shut eyes.

He gave the impression of being able to see in the dark as well as any owl, and Vernon felt that he himself was still being subjected to the same keen inspection which had been begun by the light of the match. He, on his side, could see enough of the stranger's appearance to feel curiously interested in him. This abrupt and somewhat uncouth person was a man whose age was difficult to guess. That he was still in the vigor and prime of life was evident, but it was not so certain whether the rugged furrows in his face, and a certain deliberateness of speech and action, were signs of approaching middle age, or the result of heavy responsibilities and hard work begun

early in life. The lower part of his face was covered and much concealed by a short beard of a fashion long grown obsolete in England; he was dressed with that sort of solid respectability which disregards expense and also the fashion of the moment, while a huge gold watch chain, to which was attached a bunch of heavy and handsome seals, gave the final touch to a get-up which was nothing if not confidence-inspiring. The man looked both shrewd and honest, particularly the former; Vernon felt every moment more and more eagerly interested as to the reason of his presence in the village.

"You know that we parsons are privileged impertinents?" began Vernon, after a short pause.

"Yes," answered the stranger promptly.

"Perhaps you know too that I have been until to-day 'deputy shepherd' here at Rishton?"

"I know that too," admitted the other.

"Then perhaps you will let me ask if you are the new tenant of Church Cottage?"

"Well, there's nothing gained or lost by admitting that I am; and further, I don't mind telling you that I'd as soon the cottage were a little further off the church. One can't expect to live in the odor of sanctity for nothing, and with a parson living next door, and religious consolation therefore always turned on, I shall feel, so to speak, always under the tap."

"You needn't be afraid of that with my brother," said Vernon, smiling. "I suppose there never was a man with less professional cant about him. He'll talk to a neighbor about his fruit trees, his pigs, his poultry, and everything that is his, but never a word of religion, unless the subject is introduced by somebody else."

"I see; won't give professional advice for nothing? Well, I respect him for it; there's no good in making your wares too cheap. Guess your brother and me'll get along."

What could the work be which brought this keen-eyed, prosperous-looking colonist—for a colonist it was not difficult to guess that he must be—to a sleepy little hole like Rishton, where the commerce was restricted to the weekly buying and selling in Matherham market, and to the still humbler traffic in the small wares of half a dozen puny village shops? Vernon was shy of asking him point-blank the nature of his work; indeed, something in the stranger's manner intimated pretty plainly that he would not have given the required information. And no hints sufficed to draw him out. The vicar of St. Cuthbert's made one such attempt, which failed most signally.

"You will find also," said he "that my brother is a practical man, and any help that he can give you in the work you speak of he will offer most willingly, I know."

But to this speech the first reply of the colonist was a sardonic laugh.

"I daresay he will," said he, drily, when his hard merriment had suddenly ceased. "For the matter of that, a man with a serious object before him, who has his head screwed on the right way, can get help of some sort from everybody he comes nigh to. And so, Mr. Brander, I make no doubt I shall get assistance in my work, not only from your brother, but from yourself."

And with these words, uttered in a tone of some significance, he turned on his heel with an abrupt nod, and made his way with characteristically heavy and deliberate steps towards the gate of the cottage.

Vernon Brander watched the solidly-built figure disappearing in the dusk, and then proceeded on his way down the hill in some agitation of spirit. The shadow of the old crime was creeping up again; the tragedy which ten years had not lived down was reappearing with a new and ghastly vividness in the presence of that matter-of-fact stranger. Who he might be Vernon could scarcely guess; what the nature of his work was in a quiet village flashed upon him with an intuition which left no room for doubt. The feelings produced by this thought were not all gloomy; a certain hungry look, which betokened perhaps that even open shame would be welcome after ten years of silent ignominy, burned in the clergyman's dark eyes as he lifted his head and gazed into the blue-black night sky above him with a piercing intentness which seemed to be trying to fathom the mysteries of the future.

On reaching the bottom of the hill, he was startled out of his reverie by a bright girl's voice and a gentle touch on his arm. He stopped short and lowered his head dreamily, almost inclined to think, in the high state of excitement to which he had been worked, that the sweet voice, the kindly touch, were a prophecy of happiness rather than the commonplace incident of an every-day greeting. The next moment, however, he came fully to himself, and found that he was in the presence, not only of Olivia Denison, but of her father.

"Mr. Brander, come down from the clouds if you please, and leave your next Sunday's sermon to take care of itself for a little while. I want to introduce you to my father."

Mr. Denison, a tall, strikingly handsome man of about fifty years of age, with a gentle, kindly face entirely destitute of any trace of his daughter's energy and impulsive frankness, held out his hand with a very willing smile.

"I am very happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Brander, and to be able to thank you for your great kindness to my little daughter here."

He patted Olivia's shoulder affectionately, but it seemed to the clergyman, as he looked from the one face to the other, that the action was scarcely typical of the mutual relations between gentle, vacillating father and quick-witted, active daughter.

"Miss Denison is so much more valiant and self-helpful than most young ladies that she spurs one up to do more for her than one would for others," said Vernon.

"Yet this afternoon you would not allow that I could help papa," put in Olivia, reproachfully.

"Didn't I rather suggest that the help you really gave was of a different kind from what you imagined?"

"She gives me help of all kinds," said her father affectionately. "She's my clerk and my comforter; and I think if the farm-hands struck work, she'd take to the plough as naturally as she's taken to the poultry."

"Well, I'd certainly try my hand at it," said the girl laughing. "I suppose the chief qualifications are a steady hand and a correct eye, and both those I've acquired at billiards."

"My dear Olivia, you musn't own to playing billiards before a clergyman!"

"And why not, Mr. Denison?" asked Vernon. "I love a good game of billiards myself; and the strongest reasons that keep me out of old Williams's billiard-room up at the Manor Hall are old Williams' inability to play a decent game, and his son's inability to make a decent remark."

Olivia gave an exclamation of disgust at this passing allusion to her importunate admirer: Mr. Denison seemed relieved by the clergyman's admission.

"I've not come much in contact with gentlemen of your calling," said he; "and I have rather a feeling that I must be on my best behavior before them."

"A very proper feeling, and one that I wish you could communicate to some of the gentlemen engaged in mining occupations among my parishioners. It's a much healthier symptom than throwing bricks."

"Do they throw bricks at you?" asked Olivia, indignantly.

"Not so many as they used to do," said Vernon, with a twinkle in his eye, which was, however, not discernible in the increasing darkness. "I found a way to cure them of that."

"What was that?"

"I threw them back."

Mr. Denison did not attempt to disguise the fact that his respect for and appreciation of the Church were rising rapidly. It was with a cordiality very different from the formal gratitude he had shown at the outset that he presently begged the clergyman to do himself and his wife the pleasure of lunching with them on the following or an early day.

"I am very anxious to introduce you to my wife," said he. "She used to try hard to get me to receive what I irreverently called her 'pet parsons;' but I had heard them preach, and that was enough for me. Now you see I can bring forward a candidate of my own."

"That's unfortunate, because I can't come to-morrow; and next day is Sunday. And perhaps, if you hear me preach, you may want to retract your invitation."

"Well, we must chance that," said Mr. Denison, smiling. "But I can trust a par—no, I mean a clergyman, who knows something about the tables of slate as well as the tables of stone. Remember, we are only poor farmer folk now; the glory of Streatham has departed. But we shall make you heartily welcome; and you must forgive the absence of champagne. Now, what day will you come?"

"May I say this day week?" said Vernon, after considering a moment. "For the next few days I have work to do a long way off which will make any sort of meal an impossibility. I shall live upon bread and coaldust; and you must not be surprised if I turn up with a complexion of Othello, and with a little of his savagery, after a week's intercourse with the blackest and roughest race in Yorkshire."

The following Friday was, therefore, fixed upon as the day on which the Rev. Vernon Brander was to make formal acquaintance with Rishton Hall Farm and its new masters. And, with a mutual liking which opened a pleasant prospect of future acquaintance, the two gentlemen bade each other good-night, and separated.

But, if they had only known it, there was a very strong woman's will working against any such happy consummation. Mrs. Meredith Brander, for reasons of her own, had conceived the intention of doing what she could to form an impassable bridge between her brother-in-law and the household at Rishton Hall Farm. She shrewdly guessed that her best chance lay through the step-mother; but for a day or two she took no active steps, contenting herself with gleaning all the information she could concerning the character and habits of each member of the Denison family. Mr. Denison, she decided, was not of much account; Mrs. Denison, a vain, half-educated woman, exalted above her natural station, ought, with judicious treatment, to be easy to deal with. It was with the handsome, high-spirited Olivia herself that the difficulty lay, and Mrs. Brander felt that she must proceed with caution.

In the meantime, the new inmate of the cottage was exciting much general interest, and some suspicion. He lived entirely by himself, but for such companionship as was afforded him by Mrs. Wall, during the two or three hours a day when she jogged slowly through his apartments with a broom and a pail, and generally "did for" him. He drove such a hard bargain with this lady, and lived so simply, that the belief soon spread among the villagers that he was very poor, that his big watch-chain was brass, and that his solid manner and imperative speech were mere empty "swagger."

The Reverend Meredith Brander was shrewd enough to think differently. There was a weight and solidity about the speech and manner of the new-comer which it is not given to the mere waifs and strays of the earth to acquire. When he passed an opinion, which was seldom, for he was apparently of reticent disposition, it was with the evident belief, not only that it was worth listening to, but that it would be listened to. The vicar tried hard, in every decent and graceful way, to win from him some information as to who he was and what he did there; but his geniality and his personal charm had no perceptible effect on the stranger, who kept even his name a secret, and steadily declined Mr. Brander's invitations to him to dine at the Vicarage, or to play a game of chess with him in the evenings.

"I'm sure you must find it dull alone in the cottage at night," the vicar would say to him cheerily; "for one can see with half an eye that you've been used to an active life, with lots of movement and all sorts of society. Why don't you let yourself be persuaded into sitting by a warm hearth instead of a cold one, with a woman and children about you? All globe-trotters love the atmosphere of women and children."

"I can bear with 'em, but I'm not excited about either species," the stranger answered one day to his neighbor's persuasions. "I've had a wife and children myself; but I'm bound to say I get on quite as comfortably without them."

If this unorthodox speech was meant to shock the vicar, it failed of its effect; for Meredith Brander had no Puritannical horror of human frailties and eccentricities, but a cheery belief that they gave a healthy outlet to the dangerous humors of the world.

He discussed the new-comer with his wife, who, however, took scarcely enough interest in the subject to set her feminine wits to work towards solving the mystery which hung about him.

"I don't know why you make so much fuss about him," she said rather contemptuously one day, when her husband had been recounting his fruitless efforts to induce the stranger to dine with them. "And I am sure I am thankful that he had the sense not to come. To judge by his manners he has been a navvy, who went gold-digging and picked up a nugget; and to judge by his coming here and the way he lives, the nugget was somebody else's, and he has to live *perdu* until the little affair has blown over."

The vicar made no reply to this; but there was evidently nothing convincing to him in his wife's contempt for the stranger. When he spoke again, it was upon a fresh subject.

"Vernon's getting very thick with the new people at the Hall Farm. I met him to-day arm-in-arm with papa, and I hear that he's going to dine with them next Friday. Now, papa is a very amiable man, though he may not be over-endowed with brains; but I suppose it is not far-fetched to imagine that there may be another attraction."

Mr. Brander spoke in his usual light and genial tones, without even the touch of seriousness he had shown when treating of this same subject with his brother. But the effect of his words on his wife was instant and strong. The lines of her handsome mouth grew straight and hard, her low, handsome forehead puckered with an anxious frown as she said sharply—

"He must be stopped."

The vicar, raising his eyebrows blandly, stroked his chin, and looked out of the window.

"Yes, my dear, I admit that it would be very much for the best if he could be stopped; but the question is, how is it to be done? All we can do is to persuade, exhort, advise. And haven't we done it—perhaps even overdone it? If Vernon takes it seriously into his head that he will marry, why, marry he will; and I don't see how all the king's horses, and all the king's men, can prevent him."

"Perhaps not," said his wife, icily. "But I can."

Her mouth, which was Mrs. Brander's most eloquent feature, closed with almost a snap, and strongly suggested the idea that her interest in her brother-in-law's matrimonial inclinations was not purely benevolent.

"Well, my dear, there is no denying that it would be for the best if you could prevent this rather foolish flirtation with a particularly headstrong girl from coming to anything. One can scarcely think that this type of girl, for all her beauty and high spirit I think we must allow her, would make him happy as a wife."

"I hadn't thought of the matter from that point of view," said his wife drily.

The vicar glanced rather uneasily at his wife, whose habit of looking at things from a purely matter-of-fact and practical point of view sometimes jarred upon his more easy-going nature.

He rose from his seat, and prepared to leave the room.

"But you should, my dear; you should," he said in a gently reproachful tone, as he came to the back of her chair and, gently stroking her dark hair with his plump white hand, printed an affectionate kiss on the smooth white forehead, from which the frown had scarcely yet departed.

As soon as her husband had left the room, Mrs. Brander gave herself up to resolute consideration of a difficult and delicate plan of action. After some time she came to a decision, and her face cleared.

"To-day is Wednesday," she said to herself, glancing at an almanac on her writing-table. "This dinner, or luncheon, or whatever it is, is not till Friday. Then I have to-morrow to work in."

And she rose with a sigh of relief, and went about her household duties with a lighter heart, feeling that she had provided for the fulfilment of a very disagreeable task in a rather able manner.

On the following afternoon Mrs. Brander, after a short drive in the neighborhood, drove her little ponies up to the door of Rishton Hall Farm to make her first call upon Mrs. Denison. The latter lady had already expressed some indignation that the vicar's wife had not called upon her before, and had even announced her intention of being "not at home" to Mrs. Brander, to show her sense of the folly of such airs in a woman who ought, by virtue of her husband's office, to be the humblest in the parish. However, what happened when the smart-looking little pony-carriage drew up at the door was this: the farmer's wife, after peeping through the dining-room curtains, in a flutter of excitement, rushed across the hall to the drawing-room, with a hoarse whisper of directions to the approaching housemaid, and greeted the visitor, on her entrance, with a mixture of dignity and effusiveness, which the vicar's wife met with her usual, straightforward, matter-of-fact simplicity of manner. Mrs. Brander had brought her ten-year-old daughter with her, less for companionship than for the reason, which she would at once frankly have owned, that the child's fragile fairness formed an admirable compliment to her own brunette beauty. The child also served to make the introduction of the two ladies less formal, as her presence resulted in Mrs. Denison sending for her own two spoilt children, whom Mrs. Brander greeted courteously, but without effusiveness. Indeed, she afterwards described them as the two most intolerable little offences against humanity she had ever met, and she was much too frank to do more than veil this feeling even in the presence of their mother, whose caresses of the little Kate and compliments on her beauty evidently excited in the more sensible of the two mothers no approval whatever.

The vicar's wife had something in her mind that she considered of far more importance than any matter connected with mere children. Before very long she brought the conversation round to Olivia Denison, of whom she took care to speak with such exceedingly moderate approbation as she thought likely to suit a step-mother's taste. Mrs.

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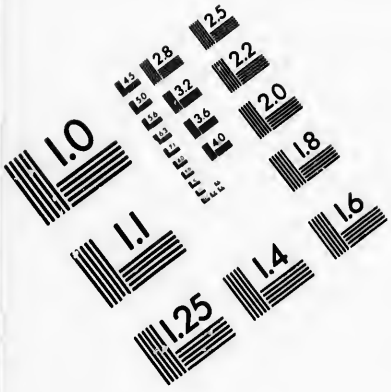

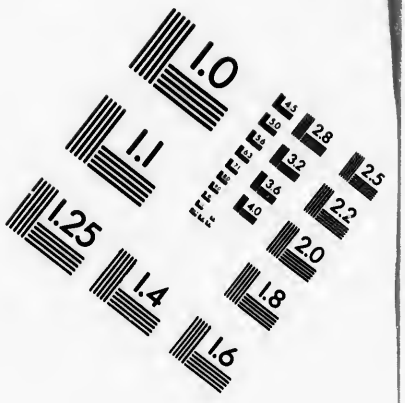

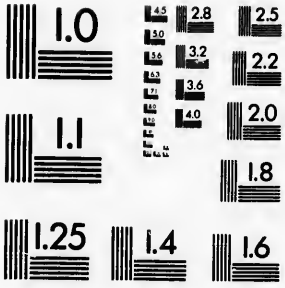

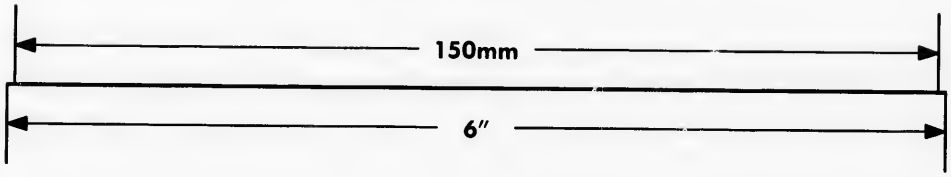

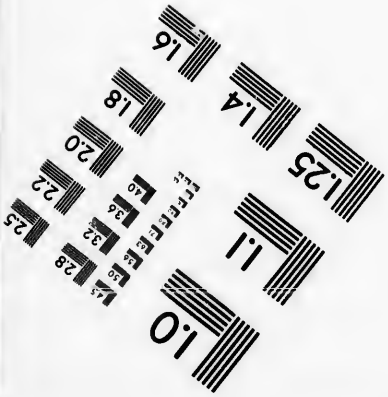

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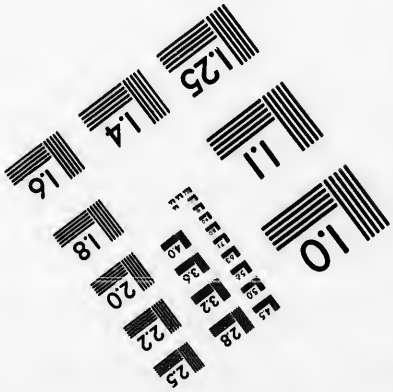

Denison was delighted to meet some one who did not go into the usual raptures about the young girl's beauty and amiability.

"Olivia is not a bad sort of girl," she admitted, in a patronizing tone. "But she has been terribly spoilt by her father. Her temper is almost unbearable, and I regret to say that she does not scruple to indulge it on my poor children."

"I should think you would be glad to get her married and settled, both for her sake and your own, then," said Mrs. Brander. "She is a showy sort of girl, who ought to marry even here."

Mrs. Denison looked for a moment rather embarrassed.

"Well, certainly," she admitted grudgingly. "A gentleman has already made his appearance who seems to be attracted by her—at least, so her father thinks. I myself shall not see him till to-morrow, when he comes to luncheon here."

"Indeed!" cried Mrs. Brander, raising her eyebrows with great apparent interest. "I wonder if it is any one I know?" Mrs. Denison gave a little cough of uncertainty.

"Well," she said at last, with some hesitation, "I hope I'm not letting out a secret, but it is your own brother-in-law, Mr. Vernon Brander."

Mrs. Brander almost started from her chair in well simulated horror and surprise.

"Vernon!" she exclaimed, in a low voice. "Impossible!" Mrs. Denison turned pale.

"Why not?" she faltered. "Surely there is nothing against the vicar's brother!"

Mrs. Brander hesitated, in much apparent confusion and distress.

"I would not for the world have been the first to break it to you, and even now I scarcely like to tell you. In fact, I will not unless you will promise that it shall make no difference in your treatment of the unhappy young fellow," she said at last.

Mrs. Denison, shaking with curiosity and alarm, gave the required promise in an unconvincing tone.

"Years ago," began the vicar's wife in a tone lowered to escape the children's ears, "Vernon unhappily became involved in an intrigue with the sister of the man who occupied this house, and at last, after a quarrel, she mysteriously disappeared, and has not since been heard of."

"Murdered!" shrieked Mrs. Denison, startling the children, who all turned round, and caused her to put sudden constraint upon herself.

"Hush!" said Mrs. Brander, rather alarmed by the strength of her effect. "We don't like to think that; we *mustn't* think that. But there is just enough unpleasantness about the affair. *You* understand," she murmured confidentially.

"I should think so!" cried Mrs. Denison, heartily. "I'll take care that he shall never——"

The vicar's wife interrupted her, laying a persuasive, but not feeble, hand on the arm of the excited lady.

"You will take care never to hint a word of this to him, or to any one," she said, in a low, but exceedingly authoritative, tone. "You remember your promise. Without any measure so strong as that,

we women always know how to give an acquaintance who is in any way undesirable not too much cold shoulder, but just cold shoulder enough."

She rose to go, feeling that she had done enough to accomplish her purpose.

"I think that ought to do it," she said to herself, with subdued and still somewhat anxious satisfaction, as she whipped up her ponies, and drove away from the farm.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE second Mrs. Denison was, unfortunately for her husband's household, one of those ladies who unite in themselves most of woman's typical frailties. One of the most marked of these was a great jealousy of any member of her own sex who was younger, better looking, or in any way considered more generally attractive than herself. This jealousy rose to such a pitch in the case of her handsome stepdaughter that she was more pleased at the discovery of the ineligibility of Olivia's new admirer than disappointed at the failure of a prospect of getting rid of her.

In spite of her promises to Mrs. Brander, Mrs. Denison of course told her husband that night, with some triumph, what a desperate character he proposed to introduce into the bosom of his household on the following day. But her sensational tirade produced little effect. Mr. Denison had indeed heard the old story since he gave the vicar of Saint Cuthbert's his invitation; and, to tell the truth, it had rather tended to increase than diminish the liking he had taken to the parson. An injudicious liking for the girls was a humanising foible which he could understand and excuse. As for the disappearance, it was an old story, and might contain an old slander. At any rate, even a murderer was better than a milksop. So he made light of his wife's deep-voiced harangue, and pronounced his opinion that Mrs. Meredith Brander might find something better to do than to spread these foolish stories concerning her brother-in-law.

"Then you mean to take no steps, in the face of what I have told you, to prevent your own hearth from being polluted by the presence of a murderous libertine?" inquired Mrs. Denison, who had the liking of a narrow and half-educated mind, in moments of excitement, for language equal to the occasion.

"Well, I'm not going, after inviting a man to luncheon, to rush out and tell him we have heard a cock-and-bull story about his doings a quarter of a century ago, and so we can't let him come in."

"And so Beatrice and Reginald are to get their ideas of the church from this man? I might have known what sort of a clergyman you would pick up, who would never receive Mr. Lovekin or Mr. Butterworth! I am told this Mr. Vernon Brander doesn't even dress like a clergyman."

"He wears a round collar," said Mr. Denison; "perhaps that will save the morals of Beatrice and Reginald. Anyhow, he doesn't

talk up in his head like old Buttermilk, and he doesn't look so like a trussed chicken as that lean-necked Lovekin used to do."

"At least there was no scandal about either of those gentlemen," said his wife with dignity. "A girl could trust herself with either of them."

"She'd have an odd taste if she couldn't."

"Perhaps you have no objection to this man as a suitor for your daughter?"

"He hasn't proposed yet."

"Or to the chance of her being found dead in a mysterious manner."

"Perhaps he doesn't make away with more than seventy-five per cent. of the girls he comes across. Olivia might take her chance," said Mr. Denison, who was getting sleepy, and had had enough of the conversation.

This flippancy silenced her for a time; but it had for its permanent effect on Mrs. Denison the strengthening of her resolution to show this black sheep of the church what a high-principled British matron thought of him.

When, next day, the Reverend Vernon Brander arrived at the farm for luncheon, his evil star brought him before Olivia had returned from her morning walk. He was shown into the drawing-room, where, by Olivia's orders, in honor of his coming, a fire blazed in the usually cheerless grate; for Mrs. Denison, although an indolent and extravagant housekeeper, practiced from habit a dozen uncomfortable and futile little economies, which she had learnt in her childhood's days in her father's small shop. On learning of the guest's arrival, she made no haste to receive him; and Vernon was left for some time to an uninterrupted study of the room.

He decided at once, his thoughts while in this house all taki[illegible] he same direction, that Olivia seldom or never sat in the room, [illegible]nat she did not like it, but that, nevertheless she had had something to do with the arrangement of it, and that much of the decorative work, both of needle and paint brush, with which it was adorned, was done by her active fingers. The position of each article of furniture was too coldly correct to please her, Vernon, used to the society of a woman of taste, felt sure. There was no pretty disorder of open book or music, untidy workbasket, with its picturesque overflow of feminine trifles; no disarranged cushion; no displaced chair. The piano was shut—looked even as if it might be locked; the furniture, of the pretty, modern, spindle-shanked, uncomfortable type, was evidently scarcely ever used. Vernon had time to wander about at his leisure until he found something which roused in him more than a passing interest. This was a large photographed head of Olivia, which stood by itself in a dark corner on a side table in a handsome oak frame. It had evidently been taken quite recently, and was an excellent likeness. Vernon could not resist the temptation to take it up and carry it to a window to examine it, as he could not do in the obscurity to which it had been condemned. Then, as he was still left undisturbed, he put the portrait on a centre table in the full light, and opening an album which lay not far off, began hunting for more photographs of

the same girl. He found a page containg four, taken at different stages of childhood and gawky young girlhood. Going down on his knees beside the large portrait, he held open the album immediately underneath it, and began tracing out the development of the woman from the child with the deepest interest.

Absorbed, as his habit was, in the occupation of the moment, he did not hear, or did not heed, the approach of footsteps across the hall. The door had not been properly closed, and, before he could change his position, it had been thrust open with peremptory touch, and he was in the presence of his hostess.

Glancing from him to the portrait on the table, and thence to the book in his hand, Mrs. Denison saw or guessed how he was employed, and feminine jealousy and dislike increased the horror and indignation she was nursing against this homicidal clergyman whom her husband had chosen to exalt at the expense of her own chosen divines. She stood with a stony and most unwelcoming face while Vernon, rising hastily with a bright laugh, shut the album, and came forward to meet her.

But she put forward no cordial hand, and vouchsafed him only the coldest little nod of the head. Vernon mistook the reason of this reception, confounding the step-mother with the mother, and supposing that his hostess was in arms at the liberty he had taken in thus openly worshipping at the young girl's shrine.

"I must apologize for my attitude of apparent devotion," he said; "but I was so much interested in tracing the development of the child as shown here," and he held out the album, "into the woman as represented here," and he touched the portrait on the table, "that I did not notice how unnecessarily devout my position had become."

"Very unnecessarily," assented Mrs. Denison, in a hard and frigid tone.

Poor Vernon looked much disconcerted by this rebuff.

"I hope you will believe," he began, almost stammering in his confusion, "that I had no intention of taking a liberty in admiring your daughter's portrait so openly——"

"My *step*-daughter's!" interrupted Mrs. Denison, with a snap.

"Oh, ah, yes—I mean your step-daughter's,"—floundered Vernon, more perplexed than ever. If she did not care about the girl, why this anger? "You must all be so much accustomed to the admiration Miss Denison excites that even an eccentric tribute may, I hope, be excused."

With masculine want of tact he was getting deeper and deeper into the mire. Mrs. Denison's cold, pale, plump face grew every moment more forbidding.

"The place is not so overrun with admirers of Olivia Denison as you seem to imagine," said she, acidly. "There is nothing the matter with the girl's face; on the other hand, we are not accustomed to consider it anything to rave about. We Londoners like beauty of a more delicate type."

"If by delicate you mean puny and pale," said Vernon, with rash honesty, "you certainly won't get us up here to agree with you. But if you mean refined, I can't imagine a face more ideally satisfying in that respect than Miss Denison's."

This was the last straw. The one consolation Mrs. Denison always had ready for herself on the irritating subject of Oliva's beauty was that her own flaccid paleness made the girl's bright coloring look "vulgar." She had made her entrance in an aggressive mood; every word the unfortunate man had uttered had increased her prejudice against him, and had seemed specially designed for her annoyance. Inflamed by sullen anger, and rushing to the favorite conclusion of the ill-bred that she had been "insulted," Mrs. Denison let loose upon her guest the vials of her wrath. She had just enough sense of decency not to get loud in her anger; but her thin, compressed lips and coldly venomous grey eyes struck a sort of terror into the unsuspecting clergyman, before her slow words came like the crash of a thunderbolt upon his ears. Mrs. Denison prefaced her speech by a hard, short laugh that scarcely moved the muscles of her flabby face.

"I suppose your taste still runs in the same direction that it did ten years ago then, and that you admire red-cheeked farmers' daughters as much as ever?"

"I don't understand you, madam," said Vernon, growing paler than ever, if that were possible, but losing his nervousness in the face of this preposterous attack.

His recovered self-possession irritated Mrs. Denison, who had expected him to cower under her onslaught. Although she was already growing alarmed at what she had done, she was too sullenly obstinate to draw back, and she strengthened herself, even while her breath came faster and a slight flush came over her face, with the conviction that she was unmasking villainy, and putting to rout a man who was a disgrace to his sacred calling.

"Indeed, I should have thought that in this house, of all others, your memory would have been better."

As Mrs. Denison had remained standing, Vernon had perforce done the same. He now took a step to the left, so that the light might fall on his face as well as on hers as he answered her.

"If you have any accusation to make against me, will you be kind enough to make it in so many words, and not in roundabout hints?"

He had managed to make the woman feel the full awkwardness of the position into which she had brought herself. She hesitated and stammered, even though her grey eyes did not flinch from their vindictive stare.

"I—I had heard—everybody has—stories which—a clergyman, too!—I should never have thought——"

"No. People never do think, when they bring a vague charge, that they ought to be ready to substantiate it. Will you tell me what you heard?"

"I am not to be brought to book in this way," said Mrs. Denison, recovering herself, and speaking in a louder voice. "You cannot be ignorant of the stories about you, and you cannot be surprised that I don't think you a fit person to—to be a friend to—to young girls."

There was a pause, which Mrs. Denison found very awkward. She stood with one hand upon a small octagonal table, feeling very anxious that this most obnoxious visitor would either go or give her an opportunity of going. Vernon, on his side, stood perfectly still

before her, staring at the floor, not with the shamefaced look of remorse and guilt, but with an expression of painful and earnest thought. At last he raised his head, and his black eyes, full of passion and fire, met her own cold grey ones steadily.

"You have heard that I caused the disappearance of a girl ten years ago?" said he, not abruptly, but with grave deliberateness.

"Er—yes—something—yes—of the sort," answered Mrs. Denison, taken aback.

"And on sufficiently good authority to warrant your considering it true?"

"On the very best authority. I never act on any other," said the lady, hastily.

Vernon looked perplexed, and his tone grew a little more diffident as he continued—

"Then why not have spared me the humiliation of this reception? Just two lines sent by the stable boy would have been enough, and you may be sure I should never have troubled you with what, I hope, has been a painful interview to you."

Vernon said "hope," and even put a slight emphasis on the word, as he had a suspicion that his hostess was ill-natured enough to have found some enjoyment in his discomfiture. With a ceremonious and dignified bow he was passing her on his way to the door, when a genial voice startled them both, and Mr. Denison entered.

Not being a man of specially quick perceptions, the new comer did not at once see that anything was wrong. He seized Vernon by both hands, welcomed him in warm words, and with apologies for having been absent on his arrival.

"And where's my Olivia?" he went on, turning to his wife, now observing for the first time the unpromising frown on that lady's face, and believing that his daughter's neglect was the cause. "She should have been here to help you entertain Mr. Brander."

Mrs. Denison began to say something inarticulately, but Vernon, in a clear and deliberate voice, took the words out of her mouth.

"You do Mrs. Denison injustice. Judging from the manner in which she has entertained me, I should think she is not only able, but that she prefers, to do without any assistance."

Mrs. Denison looked both confused and alarmed, as she stammered something about Mr. Brander's having misunderstood her. For her husband, like many other easy-going men, was subject to occasional fits of passionate violence, which, for a woman of Mrs. Denison's cold and somewhat stodgy temperament, had peculiar terrors.

"Misunderstood!" cried he, in an ominous tone of surprise and perplexity.

"Misunderstood what?"

"I think the misunderstanding was on the lady's side," said Vernon, very calmly, moving a step nearer the door. "For if Mrs. Denison really thought that I could comfortably partake of her hospitality after being accused by her of unspecified crimes, she made a mistake which I must now beg to leave her leisure to recognize."

Without giving Mr. Denison, who had grown during this speech absolutely livid with anger, time to answer him, Vernon Brander hurried out of the room and out of the house.

But Mr. Denison's outbursts of passion, if violent, were short lived. After having inveighed for a few minutes furiously against woman's talkativeness and woman's indiscretion, he allowed himself to be talked round by his wife, into believing that what little she had said to the Reverend Vernon touching his former delinquencies, he had brought upon himself by a very impertinent expression of his admiration for Olivia. Being at heart a man of peace, and unable to retain displeasure with any one for long, Mr. Denison had subsided into an uneasy and conscience-pricked silence on the subject, when Olivia's footsteps, bounding through the hall with the agility of youth and high spirits, startled both husband and wife.

The girl sprang into the room like a flash of sunshine, but being far more acute than her father, the first glance from his face to that of his wife showed her that something was wrong.

"Where's Mr. Brander?" she asked abruptly, already with a dash of suspicion in her tone. "Lucy told me he'd been here nearly half an hour."

Mr. Denison walked away to the nearest window without speaking; Mrs. Denison leaned back in the easy chair which she was occupying with an assumption of easy dignity meant to conceal the uneasiness which she felt. For to displease Olivia seriously, much as the elder woman might affect to ignore the girl's feelings, was a very different thing from displeasing her good-tempered father.

"Mr. Brander has been and has gone," said Mrs. Denison, with an air of offended dignity. "He has proved himself unworthy the honor of being admitted as a friend into my family, and I never wish to hear his name mentioned again."

"You don't think I'm to be satisfied like that," said Olivia, very quietly. Then she stood, with hands clasped and passionate, earnest eyes, gazing at her step-mother's doughy face with a steadfastness which caused that lady to "fidget" uneasily, and thus to destroy the effect of her efforts at dignified composure.

"You're forgetting yourself strangely, Olivia, to speak to me in that manner. I am mistress here, and I am not going to be dictated to by a chit of a girl."

"You have said something, done something, to send him away; I am sure of it," said the girl with breathless earnestness, not heeding her step-mother's fretful protest. "I will know what it is; I have a right to know. Papa," she went on, turning towards her father entreatingly, and speaking in a voice that grew softer the moment she addressed him, "you know Mr. Brander has been kind to me, most unselfishly, disinterestedly kind—and just when I wanted help and kindness. You would not let him be rudely treated, would you? You would never allow your guest to be insulted, I am sure. Tell me what has happened; I must know. Do tell me; do satisfy me. I am not curious; I am miserable until I know."

She had crossed the room to him, put affectionate hands on his shoulders, and was looking into his face with tender pleading, far more irresistible even than his wife's peremptory reasoning had been. He could not look her in the face, but frowned, and made feeble and futile attempts to get rid of the clinging fingers. Mrs. Denison's hard voice then struck upon their ears.

"Really, Edward, you're not going to allow yourself to be talked over in that way, I hope. Surely you and I are the best judges as to who are, and who are not fit acquaintances for our children. And when the wife of the vicar of the parish herself warns me that such and such a man is a criminal of a sort not fit to be admitted into a decent house, I don't think anyone can dispute that we have authority for what we do."

"The wife of the vicar! Mrs. Brander!" exclaimed Olivia in bewilderment. "She told you that about her brother-in-law?"

Mrs. Denison did not answer. She was ready to bite her tongue out for her indiscretion in mentioning her informant's name. For she knew Olivia's impulsive nature, and was very much afraid that the girl would get her into trouble with the vicar's wife, with whom she was anxious to stand well. For Mrs. Brander's well-bred simplicity of manner, and a certain air of being queen of the district which years of homage had given her, had made a strong impression on the ex-governess. Olivia read the truth in her step-mother's confusion, and a new spring of anger bubbled up in her heart.

"The wicked, treacherous woman!" she panted, scarcely aloud, but with great vehemence. "He shall know who are the friends who spread these stories about him."

She was turning impulsively towards the door, drawing on as she did so, one of the gloves she had taken off, when Mrs. Denison, with unaccustomed agility, sprang up from her chair and laid a heavy hand on the girl's arm.

"Where are you going?" she asked, peremptorily, with much anxiety.

Olivia looked down at her face with a resolute expression, which made her step-mother's hands tingle to box her ears.

"I am going to find Mr. Vernon Brander, to tell him of the slanders that are being spread about him and who spreads them, and I am going to apologize most humbly for the treatment he has received in this house this morning."

If Olivia had trusted herself for another minute in Mrs. Denison's clutches, the last ray of that good lady's self-restraint would have been torn away, and she would have recalled her old methods of school room rule by bringing her plump hand in sharp contact with the girl's cheeks. But Olivia was too quick for her. With an agile twist of her imprisoned arm she freed herself, and shaking her head at her father, who was crossing the room to follow her, she left the room even more rapidly than Vernon Brander had done.

Olivia flew along the road towards St. Cuthbert's as if pursued. The thought that the man who had done so much both to help and protect her should have been exposed to the vulgar insults of the tyrant of her father's household threw her into a frenzy of anger and humiliation for which she found no balm. With her indignation against Mrs. Meredith Brander, on the other hand, there mingled an unacknowledged consolation. She did not like that lady; she was also unconsciously jealous of her strong hold upon her brother-in-law. Therefore the discovery of Mrs. Brander's perfidy, which could not fail to weaken that hold, had an element which was not unwelcome. But

to do the girl justice, this selfish feeling was in very small proportion to the passionate wish to make some amends to him for the indignity he had just suffered.

It has been a dull morning and now the rain was beginning to fall, and to envelope the hills far away on the left with a haze which by its density threatened something worse than a light shower. In her impulsive eagerness to start on her errand of consolation, she had not thought of the mundane precaution of taking an umbrella, and although she was now not too much absorbed to regret the omission, she was far too impatient to go back. As the rain fell faster she began to run, and when she came in sight of the ruinous church, standing still far away in the valley below her, partly hidden by the gaunt and cheerless Vicarage, she had to pause for breath, although by that time her clothes were wet through. Through the veil of rain she caught sight of a man who was making his way towards St. Cuthbert's by a shorter path, over the meadows and through the straggling trees which at this point skirted the hill on the south side of the valley. It must be Vernon Brander, she felt sure, returning passionately angry or deeply humiliated, from his unlucky visit to the farm.

Olivia wanted to overtake him before he could reach his house; so with her usual impetuous rashness, she broke through the hedge on her left, ran, tumbled, and slipped down the hill, which was slippery with wet grass, scrambled through the damp, dead underwood which grew between the trees at the bottom, and, running for the rest of the way, got into the lane leading to the church, and, turning the last sharp corner in a brilliant spurt, ran into the man she was pursuing as he leaned against the churchyard gate.

And it was not Vernon Brander after all!

The man had turned, hearing the rapid footsteps behind him, and the change in the girl's face, as she learnt her mistake, was far too pronounced for him not to see easily that she was disappointed.

"I'm the wrong man, missee, I'm afraid," said he good humoredly, and in a manner perfectly free from offence.

Olivia knew that this was the new tenant of Rishton Church Cottage; she had seen him on the previous Sunday, not indeed inside the church, of which he had confessed to the vicar a frank abhorrence, but leaning over the low wall of his garden to watch the worshippers, as they left the building, with half-shut, critical eyes.

"No," said she, apologetically; "I thought it was the vicar."

A curious look, partly of interest and partly, as it seemed to her, of pity came over his face.

"The vicar of this rat run?" he asked, with a nod of his head in the direction of the church.

"The Vicar of St. Cuthbert's," answered the girl with some dignity.

Her ideas on the subject of conversation with strangers were strictly conventional, but besides the universal interest and curiosity which the mystery surrounding the new comer excited, she felt a sudden conviction that the attraction which brought him to this remote neighborhood was not unconnected with Vernon Brander.

The stranger gave a sort of grunt, and nodded significantly.

"I thought so," said he.

Olivia turned away, with a deep flush in her cheeks, much vexed with herself for having given the man an opening for a remark which seemed highly impertinent. She was making boldly for the Vicarage when she heard the stranger's voice again. He had followed and was walking beside her.

"Look here, Miss Denison," he began, in a serious and respectful tone, "although I am a stranger to you, you are not one to me, for I've studied you since I've been in this neighborhood, as I've studied all the rest of my neighbors. And if I thought of them all as I do of you, it would be better for some of them."

Olivia turned suddenly towards him, and stopped, impressed by his tone, and filled with dread of what was coming.

"Don't be frightened," he continued, in a voice which, for the rough man, was almost gentle. "You're a fine, high-spirited, generous girl, and I want to be able to say to you that I will never harm you nor yours."

"You want to be able to say it!" she exclaimed in bewilderment.

"Yes. As long as you remain Miss Denison I can say it, but if you were to shut your ears to everybody's warnings and marry the Vicar of St. Moulder-in-the Hole here, I couldn't."

"Why, who are you?" cried the girl, in a tremulous voice.

"Ned Mitchell, brother to Nellie Mitchell, who was done away with here ten years ago. And I'm here to make the man who murdered her swing for it!"

CHAPTER XIV.

Olivia Denison was by no means a nervous or weak-minded girl. On learning that the man who stood before her was the brother of Nellie Mitchell, she did not scream or stagger back, or give any outward sign of the shock she felt, except to bite her lips, which had begun to tremble and twitch, as she bowed her head in acknowledgment of the information. But, none the less, she was instantly possessed by a much greater terror than if this unexpected avenger had been a fierce-looking personage with flashing eyes and a melodramatic roll in his voice. She felt that there would be no softening this hard-headed colonist, who took the punishment of his sister's betrayer as "all in the day's work," and announced his intention of getting him hanged with the same dispassionate decision with which he would have resolved on the sale of a flock of sheep. And at the same time she felt for the first time fully conscious that even the absolute knowledge of Vernon Brander's guilt would not suffice to stifle her interest in him.

Quietly as she took his sensational announcement, Ned Mitchell was shrewd enough to know that the young lady was greatly shocked by it, and her bearing filled him with genuine admiration. But his first attempt to soften the blow was scarcely well worded.

"Come, Miss Denison, there are as good fish in the sea as ever

came out of it, and a young lady of your spirit is too good to waste half a sigh on any man, let alone a parson. There's nobody fit to mate with you in this played-out old country; what you want is a lad who can sit a buckjumper, or ride five hundred miles without a wink of sleep except what he gets in the saddle. That's your sort."

"Is it?" said Olivia tranquilly. "perhaps so. But I assure you, Mr. Mitchell, I can exist a few more years without a mate at all, and that it is no frantic desire to get married which makes me anxious to see one of my friends cleared of a charge of which I believe him to be innocent."

"Well said. That's what a friend should believe. But if your friend has quite a free conscience about St. Cuthbert's churchyard and anything that may ever have taken place in it, can you suggest a reason for the gate's being always locked?"

"I suppose it is to prevent the sheep getting in," said Olivia, regretting the feeble suggestion the next moment.

"Certainly the sheep can't pick a lock, but, then, neither could they lift an ordinary latch."

"Do you suppose that no churchyard is ever kept locked unless a murder has ever been committed in it?"

"No. But I think it strange that since I have been here, prowling about, let us say, not only has the gate been mended where it had grown weak in one of the hinges, but two breaches in the wall, by which one could have got into the churchyard without the help of the gate, have been repaired."

Olivia glanced towards the place where she had got in over the broken wall on a former occasion. The gap had been stopped up, and some of the earth underneath on the outside had been carted away to make a forced entrance more difficult.

"Well," said she, her cheeks flushing, "and is there anything singular in the fact of a vicar's having his churchyard wall repaired?"

"When the churchyard is so orderly and so beautifully kept as this one?" added Mr. Mitchell, with a derisive laugh. "Yes, I think there is something singular in it. And what makes it to my mind more singular still is that when I congratulated the Reverend Vernon Brander on these repairs he denied all knowledge of them."

"Then he certainly knew nothing about them," said Olivia, promptly.

Mr. Mitchell, for the first time, gave her a glance such as he was accustomed to bestow on the ordinary run of women—a glance full of resigned and lenient contempt.

"Well, you are thorough-going, at least," he said, at last, patronizingly. "But it is a curiously lucky thing for the vicar, whose house is the only place that commands a view of the churchyard, mind you, that I can be seen wandering about the place one day, and find I can't get in the next."

"Very likely his housekeeper saw you, as you say, prowling about, and, considering your manner suspicious, had the repairs made without thinking it worth while to consult her master."

"Not likely," said Mr. Mitchell, with a shake of the head. "How-

ever, I'll not keep you here in the rain trying to persuade an old hand like me that black's white. Do you know that your clothes are wet through?"

This was quite true. Recalled to consciousness of physical discomfort, Olivia shivered.

"Yes, I must make haste home," she said. Then, with a hopeless glance at his face, as if she despaired of her words having any effect, she added, "You are too suspicious. You are so shrewd that you think you can't make a mistake. But for all your cleverness, my belief in the friend I know and trust is just as likely to be right as your belief to the contrary."

"Well, well, I hope it may be. Don't think I have any ill-feeling towards this Vernon Brander as a man; it is the betrayer of my sister that I'm after, and if Vernon Brander isn't the guilty party, why, he'll have nothing to fear from me. Good-afternoon, Miss Denison."

Mr. Mitchell raised his hat, with a shrewd and not unkindly smile into the girl's beautiful, agitated face, turned on his heel, and began to make his way, with his usual stolid and leisurely manner, up the hill towards the high road.

Left to herself, Olivia, who was by this time too thoroughly drenched to trouble herself about a few minutes more or less in the rain, debated what she should do. The heat of the impulse which made her dash out of doors on learning the insult to Vernon had now departed, and some of Mr. Mitchell's words had hurt her maidenly modesty to the extent of making her shy of visiting the clergyman at his house. On the other hand, she had now, in the menaces of the colonist, another reason for putting him on his guard. When Mr. Mitchell had disappeared from her sight at the first bend in the lane, she began to follow in the same direction slowly, her mind not yet made up. An unexpected incident decided her.

Glancing furtively at the cheerless windows of the gaunt stone house, Olivia saw, at one of them, the figure of an old woman in a black dress and widow's cap, who watched the girl with evident interest, and at last opened the front door and began making signs to her. Olivia stopped. The signs were plainly an invitation to come in. She advanced as far as the gate, and then the old woman addressed her.

"Won't you step inside a minute, out of the rain? Come in, come in; there's nobody about but me."

This decided Olivia, who recognized the speaker as Vernon's housekeeper, whom she had seen at Rishton Church on Sundays, So she walked up the stone-paved path, and thanking the old woman for the proffered shelter, followed her into a hall, the desolate and bare appearance of which corresponded perfectly with that of the exterior of the house.

"I think you'd better come into my room, Miss, though it's really only the back kitchen," said the housekeeper. "But Mr. Brander, being out to-day, lunching up at the Hall Farm, as you know, Miss, there's no fire in his room."

Olivia assenting gratefully, the old woman led her past the open door of a comfortless and dingy room on the left, which might have

been either dining-room or study, past a second door on the same side, which was closed, to a small apartment at the back, where a bright fire, a cat on the hearthrug, a bird in its cage, and a cushioned rocking chair, gave a look of comfort which was a welcome relief to the cheerless aspect of the rest of the house. An open door led into the kitchen, and gave a pleasant glimpse of fire-light shining on well-polished pots and pans.

The housekeeper broke into ejaculations of alarm as she touched the girl's wet garments.

"Bless me! you're soaked to the skin!" she cried, beginning instantly to divest Olivia of her outer garments with a vigorous hand. "Come upstairs with me. Yes, you must; it would be manslaughter on my part to let you stay five minutes in those clothes. I believe you've caught a fever already."

Fatigue, excitement, cold, and wet had done their work on Olivia, who began to look and to feel ill. She resisted for a few moments the housekeeper's well-meant endeavors to drag her to the door, but yielded at last, and suffered herself to be taken upstairs, and arrayed from head to foot in garments belonging to her hostess which, if neither well fitting nor fashionable, were at least dry. Mrs. Warmington, for that, she informed Olivia, was her name, assured the girl that she would have plenty of time to have her outer garments dried, and to get away home before Mr. Brander returned, as it was his day for visiting an outlying part of his straggling parish.

"And," she said, "he will no doubt go straight on from the Hall Farm after luncheon, and won't be back here until teatime."

"Without having had anything to eat," thought poor Olivia.

She let herself be led downstairs again, noting, as she did so, that no visible corner of the house, except such parts of it as came within the housekeeper's special province, was one whit more comfortable or homelike than the bare hall. A pang of acute pity for the lonely man pierced her heart as she decided that, whatever sin he might earlier in life have been guilty of, no expiation could be more complete than his dreary life in this desolate house, with only an old woman for companion. And Mrs. Warmington did not strike her as the most devoted servant or the most sympathetic personality in the world. She had "seen better days," evidently; but although she did not flaunt the fact unduly, it perhaps gave her a little additional aggressiveness of manner, so that, in spite of her kindness, Olivia felt that one must be hard up for companionship to seek Mrs. Warmington's society. The girl was indeed struck by the difference between the warm kindliness the old woman showed to herself and the rather off-hand manner in which she alluded to her employer. She began to puzzle her head as to the reason of this, and grew very anxious to find out in what esteem the clergyman was held by his solitary dependent. After a little conversation by the fireside, during which the warmth came gradually back to her shivering limbs, she put out a feeler in this direction.

"It's a very lonely life that you and Mr. Brander lead up here," she said, looking into the fire, and hoping that she did not betray in which of the two lives she took the greater interest.

"You may well say lonely. It's a godsend to see a human crea-

ture about. I could have blessed the rain to-day for bringing you here."

"I suppose it's even worse for you than for Mr. Brander, because he has his parish duties?"

"Well, I'm of a more contented turn of mind than he," said Mrs. Warmington, with the same coolness that she had previously shown on the subject of her master. "But, then, to be sure, perhaps I've a better conscience."

There was silence for some minutes. Mrs. Warmington gave the impression of being ready to be questioned, but Olivia was shy of taking advantage of the fact. The housekeeper glanced at her from time to time, as if hoping for some comment on her words. At last, as none came, she looked her visitor full in the face, and said—

"I see you know the story. Every one does, more or less; though there are not many who know the rights of it as well as I do."

Olivia's heart seemed to stand still.

"But you don't think him guilty?" burst from her lips, in a tone which expressed more anxiety than she guessed. "You know him, perhaps, better than anybody; you know that he isn't capable of anything so cruel, so base."

Mrs. Warmington pursed up her withered lips in a judicial manner, poked the fire, and put on a fresh supply of coal, all with an air of being the chosen keeper of some great mystery. Olivia watched her, but without asking any more questions; she felt heartsick, miserable. Other people might guess; this old woman probably knew. At last the housekeeper solemnly broke silence.

"It's hardly a tale for a young lady's ears; perhaps it almost seems like a breach of confidence on my part to touch upon my employer's secrets at all. But he has never made a confidante of me, and if there's any one in the world who might use the knowledge I possess to Mr. Brander's disadvantage, I know it is not you."

The young girl felt a shame-faced flush rising in her cheeks. This woman spoke in a significant tone, implying that the depth of the interest Olivia took in her master was not unknown to her. The girl turned her head a little away, and stared at the fire with statuesque stillness while her companion continued—

"To begin with, I may tell you that the Branders are distant relations of mine. It does not make me love them the more, but it will prove to you that I have no interest in making them out to be worse than they are."

Olivia assented with a slight bend of the head.

"I don't deny that I have noticed the interest you take in my master, and as you are an inexperienced young girl, with some warm-hearted, and perhaps rather quixotic, notions, I think it right to put you in possession of the facts of this business, as I know them."

Olivia glanced at the woman, and saw that, in spite of the dry hardness of her manner, there was a kindly look in her eyes. Indeed, Mrs. Warmington, whose heart was a little parched towards the world in general, had taken a fancy to the bright-cheeked, handsome girl.

"I suppose you know," she went on, "that the Branders pride

themselves upon being what is called a 'good' family. You will also know that in all 'good' families there is generally more than one 'bad lot.' Although I am a connection of theirs, I must confess that there has been quite an exceptional number among the Branders. And, awkwardly enough, it happens that the family interest lies chiefly in the Church. The Branders have been clergymen for generations, generally with little credit to themselves. Here and there has been an exception, but never more than one in a generation; the exception in our time is Meredith. His two brothers, Vernon and one who is now in China, showed from the very first how unfit they were for their calling. I don't blame them much; I don't praise Meredith much; their temperaments are different, and it can scarcely be called their fault that only one of the three is a round peg in a round hole. Well, you know that both my master and his brother, Meredith, fixed their choice on the same lady, and that Meredith married her. After that, Vernon, who was no particular credit to his cloth before, grew wilder than ever. It was not long before his constant visits to the Hall Farm became the talk of the village; for Nellie Mitchell hadn't the best name in the world. Before long it was rumored about that the girl had been seen, late in the evening, in the neighborhood of St. Cuthbert's."

"Did you live here then?" abruptly asked Olivia, who had been sitting in an attitude of straining attention, with close-shut lips and heaving breast.

"I had been here six weeks when—when the end came. Tongues had been going faster than ever for the last week or two, and, of course, some of the talk had reached my ears. I knew, from little things I had seen—a portrait, a glove, slight changes in his manner when speaking of her—that my master had not yet got over his fancy for Mrs. Brander, married though she was. Then I heard whispers of Nellie Mitchell's jealousy; how she flaunted past the vicar's wife in the churchyard on Sunday with a swing in her walk and a toss of her head which were almost insults; of letters which were left in a wood close by, some of which fell into strange hands. I was shocked by these reports, but I looked upon them as partly gossip, and considered that, in any case, they were no business of mine. One evening in August I was standing at the window of the front room watching the sunset, when I saw Nellie Mitchell coming down the lane past the house. Something in the girl's appearance and manner struck me as it had never done before. It was not the first time that I had seen her come this way; but on all previous occasions it had been after dark that I had seen a figure which I believed to be hers slinking past hurriedly, as if anxious to escape notice. Now the girl walked boldly—one would have said defiantly—with a flushed face and an expression of reckless resolution. She carried in her hand a small white packet, and, as she came opposite the house, she stopped, and, turning so as to face the gate, deliberately untied the string or ribbon which held her little parcel together, and counted the letters of which it consisted. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. I could see her red lips move as she counted them out to herself, and then slowly tied them up again with one angry and determined look up at the windows of this house from her bold black eyes.

She did not see me; but it was evident that if a hundred people had been staring at her out of these empty, shutterless windows, it would have been all the same to her. I was shocked, horror-stricken. For the first time the full meaning of all the ugly rumors I had heard became plain to me: my master had been this woman's lover!"

Olivia shivered at the woman's words, which seemed doubly shocking from the matter-of-fact, somewhat hard tone in which they were spoken.

"As the evening went on, I grew more and more restless and uneasy. Certain noises I had heard from time to time in the night, which I had put down to the rats, came back to my mind. It now seemed to me that they might have been due to another cause. They had come from one of the front unused rooms. If thoughts of evil now came into my mind, how could I be blamed? My master was away, doing his rounds in the parish; he had told me he should not be back till late. All the rest of the evening I watched from the window, but I did not see the girl return. The thought came into my mind to go out and try and find out where she had gone; whether she was really, as the villagers' hints suggested, waiting for some one in the churchyard. But I was afraid; I had no mind to interfere in other people's affairs; it has always been my custom not to do so. For a young girl like you I am ready to break my rule but not for such as Nellie Mitchell."

And Mrs. Warmington's lips closed pharisaically.

"Nine o'clock came, ten o'clock, half-past ten; it was quite dark. Then, as I was walking up and down, with an attack of what I call the 'fidgets,' there came through the open windows a scream so shrill, so horrible, that I staggered into the nearest chair as if a blow from a strong man's arm had sent me there. 'Nellie Mitchell! Nellie Mitchell!' I felt myself saying, hoarsely. Then I think I fainted, for what I remember next was to find myself hanging over the chair with my head on Mr. Vernon's writing table. I got up, at first scarcely knowing what it was that had startled me. I was in utter darkness; in my first spasm of horror I had thrown down the lamp. As I groped about to find a match, my fingers trembling so much that they were clumsy and almost powerless, I heard a footstep outside the door. It was my master, Vernon Brander!

"I stopped in my search, and drew back instinctively, as I heard him fumbling at the handle of the room door. It seemed such a long time before he came in that the whole of this ugly story—the villagers' gossip, the sight I had seen, and the sound I had heard that evening—all seemed to pass quite slowly through my mind as I stood there waiting for him to come in. At last the door opened slowly, and my master stood in the room with me. I heard his breath coming in guttural gasps; I heard the table creak and the objects on it rattle as he came forward and leaned upon it. I almost shrieked, middle-aged, matter-of-fact woman that I was, when he suddenly whispered, in a hoarse voice—

"'Who's that?'

"I summoned self-command enough to answer, pretty steadily—

"'It's I, sir.'

"He got up from the table, and turned towards the door; but an impulse seized me to learn what I could then. I remembered with a sort of inspiration, where the matches were, found them, and struck a light. I was just in time to see my master's hands as he opened the door: they were stained with blood!

"'What have you done? You have killed her!' I hissed out close to him.

"'Before Heaven I have not!' he answered, huskily; but his teeth were chattering, and his eyes were glassy and fixed.

"Then, covering his face with his hands with a groan, he turned and staggered out of the room. As he did so he dropped something, which I picked up and examined without scruple. I admit that this was high-handed, but when you are almost a witness to a foul action, you make new laws for yourself on the spur of the moment. By this time I had quite recovered myself. I lit a candle, and read every word of the letters which Nellie Mitchell had flourished before my face that evening. There were no names used. The gentleman had insisted upon caution, as the girl over and over again complained. For these letters were hers, and as each successive one was full of more and more bitter reproaches against her lover, I guessed that it was the return of her letters which had at last goaded the girl to desperation. Her jealousy of Mrs. Brander was expressed on every page, and the last contained a threat of exposure. It was evident that, whatever the girl's character might have been, she was bitterly in earnest over this passion. In spite of myself, the burning words, guilty though they were, filled me with a kind of pity, increased by the awful suspicion which now possessed me. I felt the hot tears fall upon the papers in my hands, and I was so absorbed in my reading that I did not hear my master come into the room again; for the door had been left open. When at last I heard his tread close behind me I started, but did not attempt to hide how I was engaged. He did not seem startled to see the letters in my hand, but, taking them from me, he read them right through, one by one, and then placed them in his desk. His face was as white as that of a dead man, and the hands he had just washed were livid round the nails. He looked the wreck of the man who had gone out to his work that afternoon in the August sunshine. When he had shut his desk he turned very calmly to me and said—

"'You will leave me to-morrow, of course; but you had better not go very far, as there will be an inquiry—an inquest; all sorts of things—and your evidence will be important—against me.'

"Those last two words decided me. My life was my own. This man was my own kin. I answered, as calmly as he had spoken to me—

"'You are my master, sir, and of my own blood. I shall stay with you as long as you please to keep me. If your conscience is bad, I shall be an everlasting prick to it; if it is clear, as I pray Heaven, you will have at least one friend when you most want one.'"

Olivia started up all on fire.

"That was good of you!—that was noble of you!" she cried, in a trembling voice.

"Not at all. It is just the sort of thing a woman likes to do. A

little cheap quixotism—that is all; and I secured myself a home for life, you see. I was no young girl that I should be afraid of him."

It was impossible to tell whether it was the cynicism or the kindliness which predominated in Mrs. Warmington's motives, or whether they were there in equal proportions. As Olivia stared wonderingly into the withered and somewhat inexpressive face, the housekeeper rose somewhat abruptly from her seat.

"That is Mr. Brander's step!" she exclaimed as she turned to the door. "If you stay here, you will be able to slip out presently without his seeing you."

With these words, leaving Olivia no time to protest, or even answer her, the housekeeper left the room, closing the door behind her.

CHAPTER XV.

OLIVIA'S first thought, as the door closed on Mrs. Warmington, was to follow her out and make a dash for freedom. But as she started up with this impulse, a sliding movement on the part of the garments she wore reminded her that she was not in walking trim; and a glance at the gilt-framed but mildewy glass which adorned the housekeeper's mantelpiece showed her such a comical figure that the instincts of maidenly coquetry would never have allowed her to risk a meeting with Vernon Brander in that odd disguise.

Mrs. Warmington's figure was of the straight-up-and-down sort—long in the body and short in the limbs. Being a lady of frugal bent and careful habits, she wore her dresses for so long a time that they acquired enough of the shape and character of the owner to impart the same characteristics to any subsequent wearer. Therefore, Olivia's glance in the mirror showed her a woman in dark-brown stuff of slipshod fit, with a substantial square waist, and baggy sleeves too short in the wrist. After one despairing look out of the window at the rain, which went on falling in torrents, she sat down again disconsolately to listen and wait for her hostess' return.

Mrs. Warmington had not met her master on her way upstairs, for Olivia had heard him go into the front room before the housekeeper left her; that she might be equally lucky on her way down was the girl's inward prayer. For there were ominous sounds in the house suggesting that Mr. Brander was not minded to sit down quietly to the writing of a sermon or the reading of a good book, as one had a clear right to expect of a clergyman. Poor Olivia, sitting upright as a ramrod, with a scared expression of face, heard him come out of the dining-room into the hall. By the noise he made at the hat and coat stand, she guessed that he was changing his wet coat for a dry one. That business over, he ought plainly to have returned to his room; so it seemed to Olivia. But instead of that, he remained fumbling at the stand until the listening girl remembered, with a spasm of terror, that she had left there to dry, by the housekeeper's directions, her little hand bag. Perhaps Mr. Brander would pass it over, taking it for granted that the flimsy little feminine thing

belonged to Mrs. Warmington. No woman would have thought so; but, of course, men are not observant. Her worst fear was that he would remain there, not making enough noise to put the housekeeper on her guard, until that lady should come sailing down the stairs laden with a hat and cloak which evidently did not belong to her. The girl scarcely dared to draw breath in her intense anxiety. To be caught sneaking into a gentleman's house in his absence, warming yourself at his fire, and even—as she discovered to her dismay on examining her feet—making free with his slippers, is an awkward situation at any time. But when you have just been told the secret of his life, and when your whole soul is warring about him, mercy struggling with horror, and conviction with doubt, the dilemma becomes well-nigh tragic.

Presently Olivia heard him drop some object, and the little crash it made caused her to shiver and almost to cry out. Then he began to cross the uncarpeted hall with very slow steps. Olivia strained her ears and held her breath. He was coming towards the room she was in. Had he guessed the presence of an intruder, or was he only coming with the prosaic intention of ordering something to eat? The girl remembered with remorse how he had been cheated out of his luncheon. But what should she do? Already she heard him calling, in a low and, as she fancied, tired voice, "Mrs. Warmington!" There was no time to escape by way of the kitchen—no corner of the room where she could hide herself. As she stood up to give one last hopeless look round, she again caught sight of her disguised figure in the glass. Seized by a happy thought, she snatched up from the top of one of the side cupboards, that filled the space between the fireplace and the walls, a small woollen shawl of rusty black, which Mrs. Warmington used to wrap round her head when she indulged in an afternoon doze. Olivia now blessed her fervently for this information. She had just time to wrap it round her head, to throw herself back in the rocking chair with her head turned away from the door, to cross her legs as Mrs. Warmington did, to fold her arms, and hide her hands in the folds of the baggy sleeves, when the door opened softly, and Mr. Brander put his head inside.

"Mrs. Warmington!" he called, very gently.

No answer, of course.

"Are you asleep?" more gently still.

His housekeeper's afternoon doze was a very common occurrence apparently, for he uttered a little petulant sound, and disappeared into the kitchen. In the dusk of a wet afternoon the girl's ruse had succeeded perfectly. But the obscurity which had favored her was not equally kind to him, for Olivia heard much chinking of china and clattering of plate before he re-entered the room. Instead of going through to his own domain, however, he stood still between the fireplace and the door, and Olivia, not daring to look, guessed that he was eating. Trembling as she was with the fear of discovery, it seemed to her a long time before she heard him take up the poker and proceed very noiselessly to break the red-hot coals. She seized the opportunity to turn her head a little, and to steal a frightened glance at him through her eyelashes. He had on the shabbiest of threadbare and ragged house coats, and was hungrily eating bread

and cheese and a piece of dry and crumbling cake. When he had built up the fire to please him, he dragged an old church hassock from under the table, and seating himself on it, drew as near to the grate as possible, and went on with his improvised meal.

He was so close to Olivia that she could detect the coaly smell which constant contact with his mining parishioners had imparted to his old clothes; so close that she felt that he was cold as well as hungry; so close that his hair brushed Mrs. Warmington's brown stuff gown as he bent forward, with his elbows on his knees, and looked into the fire.

And as they sat thus, in the darkening twilight, side by side, he unconscious of her presence, she grew less afraid that he should discover it, altogether less anxious for the safety of her disguise. Her thoughts turned instead to consideration of his loneliness. What a cheerless existence was implied in this creeping up to the side of a rather cold and cross-grained old woman for warmth and companionship! The close contact seemed to help Olivia to feel her way into the mind of the solitary man. She pictured him innocent, laboring under a charge which for some unaccountable reason he was unable to refute; she pictured him guilty, torn with remorse, and working out a weary expiation. In the latter case, she began to feel, even more strongly than before her interview with Mrs. Warmington, that the horror of the deed was swallowed up in compassion for the doer. When he had finished his very frugal dinner, he sat so still that she was able to open her eyes and so gain all the information concerning the state of his mind which a careful study of the back of his head could impart. He was dejected, weary, unhappy; probably smarting still, so she told herself, from the pain her step-mother's treatment had caused him. Presently he rested his head on his left hand, and so came nearer still to her. She could feel that she was trembling from the force of an aching pity, and that her hands seemed to tingle with the wish to lie with consoling touch on his bent head. She had forgotten Mrs. Warmington and the dry clothes—forgotten to wonder how she was going to get out of the house and home again without discovering herself to Mr. Brander. She soon discovered, however, that her feelings were more acute than those of the object of her pity; for his head tilted slowly further and further in her direction until at last it rested on her knee. Mr. Brander, who, after a fierce battle with certain very unclerical feelings, had tried to subdue the mind to the flesh by a long stretch over the hills, had succeeded in tiring himself out.

He was fast asleep.

And if he had but known it, he might have had sweeter dreams than he was used to. For the resting-place he had found was the creature who cared most about him of any in the world.

Olivia had an inkling of this, and it made the touch of her hand almost motherly as she bent down and held it very, very gently just near enough to feel his hair against her fingers. Only thirty-four or thereabouts, and his hair so grey! She could dare now, as he slept, to bend right down, and to see by the firelight how thickly the white threads grew among the dark behind his ears and near the temples. So curly his hair was, she noticed; quite soft, too, and

silky, like a child's; quite out of keeping with the worn, lined face, that looked so sad and so old as the dancing flames threw deep shadows upon it. And her fingers moved involuntarily through the wavy mass, as she thought, as women will, that there had been a time, long ago, when he lay, a helpless child, depending on the kindness of a woman. And she tried to fancy what that poor mother would have felt if she had known what evil rumors would some day darken the name of her curly-haired boy. Olivia was by nature more impulsive and passionate than sentimental; therefore these unaccustomed feelings and fancies instead of finding vent in a gentle sigh, made her breast heave and her eyes fill, until a broken whisper slipped through her trembling lips—

"Poor mother—poor son!"

She was ashamed of her foolishness the next moment, and raised her head quickly with a start and a hot, tingling blush, anxious to jump up and run away, though still not daring to move. She took out her pocket handkerchief very carefully, dabbed it against her wet eyes with much fierceness, and then gave another glance, not at all sentimental this time, at the face against her knee. Horror and confusion! Was he asleep at all? The expression of his face had quite changed, and there was a wretched tear—her tear!—on his forehead. What should she do? Remove that tear, certainly. For she felt that it would leave a huge stain, unmistakable as ink. Very nervously she attempted to dry it with her handkerchief; but the moment the cambric touched his face, Mr. Brander raised his head and prevented her.

"Don't!" he said, huskily. "Why should you? What is there to be ashamed of in your kindness to me? Do I get too much from anybody?"

Olivia did not answer. She felt as if a new acquaintance had suddenly been sprung upon her. This mood was so different from any she had seen Mr. Brander in before. The half-cynical self-reliance, the bright, somewhat bitter humor had disappeared, and given place to a humility so touching, so gentle, that she felt constrained to remain where she was rather than risk hurting his feelings by rising abruptly. But she could not answer his questions, and so she sat silently, with her head bent down and turned a little away, while he resumed the position he had first taken, with his arms on his knees, looking into the fire. After a few moments, during which the girl had time to wonder that she felt, under these rather awkward circumstances, so much at her ease, she broke the silence, in a low, hesitating voice.

"Mr. Brander," she began, "I should like to say something to you about—about this morning—about Mrs. Denison."

Her painfully apologetic tone made him turn his head at once, with a smile.

"You may say something to me—in fact anything—upon any other subject than those two," he answered, in his usual kindly tone. "Say something to me about this afternoon and about yourself. Let this morning—and Mrs. Denison—be buried. Mind, I say, this is no unchristian spirit."

"You are very good," said Olivia, glancing at him timidly and gratefully.

"Do you mean that?" he asked, inquisitively. "You have heard a good deal to the contrary, you know."

"Well, but is all that true?" she burst out boldly. "Now, you have brought that question upon yourself before, and now you deliberately bring it upon yourself again. Why don't you satisfy me by a straightforward answer? I do deserve it; for I always take your part, to other people and to myself too."

"Do you?" he asked, so eagerly, with such a flash of pleasure over his face that Olivia felt abashed again. Then he paused, and the light had gone quite out of his face before he went on: "You won't be satisfied then with the consciousness that you are a poor beggar's solitary champion?"

"I won't be satisfied with that if I can get you to tell me any more," she answered, simply. "I don't pretend that I'm not anxious to know more; but it is not out of curiosity to learn other people's affairs, but because there really must be something peculiarly interesting about a secret which causes your own relations to speak ill of you."

Olivia had suddenly made up her mind for a bold stroke. It cannot be denied that there was a little malice in her heart; but it was a small matter compared with her real anxiety to put him on his guard against one whom she considered a treacherous friend.

"My relations!" he echoed, with a look of such bewilderment and incredulity that she began to think he would not believe her.

"Isn't a sister-in-law a kind of relation?" asked Olivia, rather unsteadily, after a pause.

Mr. Brander's expression changed to one of pain and fear; so that Olivia watched him in terror, not daring to go on. He looked at her without answering, and then, as she remained silent and fearful, he got up and walked to the other side of the little room, where, as her face was turned towards the fireplace, she could not see him; but she knew without the aid of her eyes, that he was much agitated; and when he came back and, standing by her chair, put his hand gently on her shoulder and spoke to her with calmness which might have passed for unconcern, she was not deceived by it.

"And what ill does my sister-in-law say of me?" he asked.

"She told my step-mother an old story, and said you were not a proper acquaintance for—young girls."

"Oh, she said that, did she?" returned Mr. Brander, in a measured voice. Then he said, abruptly, after a silence, "You are sure of this?"

"Quite sure."

Then it appeared to the girl that he stood beside her without a word for a very long time. For the fire seemed to die down, and the murky light outside to fade perceptibly, before he even changed his attitude. At last she found courage to look up timidly into his face, and saw that his eyes were staring towards the window with the blind look of a seer whose vision is only keen for the fancies and phantoms in his own mind. And Mr. B[illegible]ler's fancies must have been of the gloomiest kind, for his face startled the girl into uttering a little exclamation, which roused him from his abstraction, and woke him to the fact that his hand had been laying all this time on the young girl's shoulder.

"I beg your pardon," he muttered, as he withdrew it as hastily as if it had been red-hot iron.

The blood rushed to Olivia's face. The touch of Mr. Brander's hand had not offended her; the knowledge that it had been unconscious did. And a most acute pang shot through her heart, as she realized that it was because his mind was full of another woman's treatment that he was oblivious of her. She was jealous. In such an impulsive, energetic girl as she was, vivid feeling found vent in hasty action. Rising from her chair, and quite forgetting that her odd costume made dignity impossible, she said, very coldly, that she must go home now; her father would be anxious about her, and the rain was less violent. Even as she spoke the wind dashed a clattering shower against the window in disproof of her words. She did not notice it herself; neither, apparently, did her host. For he opened the door for her at once without any semblance of a wish to detain her, and without seeming to remark her singular apparel.

Olivia darted out of the room and up the stairs in a tempest of excited feelings which fouhd vent in an outburst of indignation against Mrs. Warmington for leaving her so long alone with Mr. Brander. The housekeeper met her at the top of the stairs, looking herself pale and frightened.

"Why didn't you come down?" asked Olivia, impatiently.

The old woman glanced nervously down into the hall, and answered in a soothing tone of apology,

"I did not dare, Miss Denison. I did not want my employer to find me talking to you. He would have guessed what we were talking about. We get so sharp, we people who live much alone, and he would never have forgiven me. Ever since I heard him go into the room were you were I have been walking up and down the landing in a fever. You did not tell him what we had been talking about, did you?"

"No," answered Olivia. "He didn't ask me."

"Thank goodness!" said the housekeeper with such a depth of relief that the girl's curiosity was roused.

"Why should you mind so much?" she asked. "He seems quite used to having his affairs discussed, and takes it for granted that people should think the worst of him."

This thought moved her as she spoke, and caused her voice to tremble sympathetically. The housekeeper examined her face narrowly as she answered, with great discretion—

"He wouldn't have minded about any one else, Miss Denison: but it's different with you."

"Different—with me!" echoed the girl, very softly.

Without more words, Mrs. Warmington, after once more listening and glancing down into the hall to assure herself that they were not likely to be disturbed, crossed the landing on tiptoe, and beckoned Olivia to follow her. Then throwing open the door of one of the front bedrooms without noise, she said—

"That is Mr. Brander's room. Do you see by his bedside a set of hanging shelves on the wall?"

"Yes."

"And a box in the middle of the bottom shelf?"

As she spoke, the housekeeper was crossing the room. Taking down the box, she returned to the door with it, and, raising the lid, showed Olivia the tray of an old-fashioned workbox with well-worn fittings.

"It was his mother's, I believe," she whispered. Then, as the girl drew back, shocked at having been inveigled into prying among Mr. Brander's treasures, she went on: "Have you ever seen this?" And lifting out the tray of the workbox, she thrust under Olivia's reluctant but astonished eyes an indiarubber golosh, which Miss Denison instantly recognized as one she had lost on her way back from the Vicarage on the evening of her arrival at Rishton.

With a little cry of astonishment and annoyance, Olivia put out a hasty hand to recover her lost property. But Mrs. Warmington prevented her, shutting the box hastily, and restoring it to its place.

"I can't take, or allow you to take, anything out of my employer's boxes in his absence," she said, drily.

"But it's mine; it's of no use to him, and I want it!"

"You will have to do without it, unless you care to go and fetch it yourself. But I think, on second thoughts, you will be satisfied that enough honor has been paid to your old shoe."

Olivia blushed, and moved her shoulders with vexation.

"It was such a huge thing!" she exclaimed, impatiently. "They were always sizes and sizes too big for me."

Mrs. Warmington's thin lips relaxed into a smile.

"Oh!" she said; "perhaps you only wish to put a smaller one in its place."

Olivia felt that she had, as her brothers would have termed it, "given herself away," and she was glad to let the subject drop. Following her conductress into her bedroom, she put on her own, now dry, clothes, in silence and much meekness, thanked her in a subdued voice for her hospitality, and begged, as a final grace, the loan of an umbrella.

"It won't be necessary. Mr. Brander will see you home."

"Oh, no, indeed," broke out Olivia, hastily. "I want to slip out of the house quietly without his seeing me again."

"Do you really want that?" asked the old woman, with a searching look which set the younger blushing. "Because, if so, I can take you down this way by the back staircase. It is never used, but—"

"Then, perhaps, the stairs will creak," interrupted Olivia, and without more delay she made, softly indeed but deliberately, for the front staircase.

"I can't thank you enough for your kindness," she whispered, when they both stood in the hall.

Mrs. Warmington shook her head with a drily amused smile.

"I had a motive," she said. "I am too fond of my own comfort to put myself out of the way without one."

"A motive!" echoed Olivia.

"Yes. I wanted to know you better, and I wanted you to know Mr. Brander better. Now nobody can deceive you about him, and nobody can deceive me about you."

"Why, who would try?" asked Olivia.

"Nobody, perhaps. Good-bye."

With one glance towards the open door of the front room, from which they both heard the sounds of a man's tread, the housekeeper shook her guest's hand, and, abruptly leaving her, disappeared into her own domain at the back of the house.

Olivia, who was highly offended at this discovery that she had been "managed" and made the victim of a little trick, walked to the front door with her head held high, and a firm intention of not even glancing in the direction of the study. But a sound inside the room, as she passed the door, broke her resolution, and she gave a swift glance that way. The look revealed Mr. Brander standing beside the black, empty fireplace. That was all. He saw her, and saw the proud turn of her head as she instantly averted her eyes. Then he heard the latch of the front door as her hands fumbled with it; he heard the door open, and shut again immediately, very softly. The next moment there was a hesitating step back across the hall, and the young girl's face was looking into the dingy room.

"Please will you open the door for me, Mr. Brander? I—I don't quite understand the lock."

He came at once, and did the little service without a word. She looked out; it was still raining persistently, the heavy downpour having been succeeded by a fine drizzle.

"It hasn't left off yet," she said, timidly.

"No."

They both stood still, looking out into the gathering darkness.

"Shall I lend you an umbrella?"

"Oh, if you would, I should be so glad. I will be sure to bring—send it back."

He brought an umbrella from the stand, and opened it thoughtfully.

"If I lend you this one—it is the best, the lightest; the one I use when there's a bishop about—I shall want it again early to-morrow morning——"

"I'll be sure to——"

"Very early," he continued, without heeding her.

"Then let me have the old one."

"It's full of holes. Besides, one of the ribs is broken."

"Oh, never mind. I can quite well get back without one at all."

"It might be managed," suggested Vernon, guiltily, when he had produced and examined carefully the second-best umbrella, which proved to be only a little better than its reputation. "If I were to walk part of the way back with you, it might clear up, and you might be able to get [illegible] without one; and I could bring it back, you see."

"But I don't like to trouble. I'm always imposing," murmured Olivia.

However, the half permission had been enough for Mr. Brander, who was by this time slipping into his rough overcoat with the alacrity of the British workman at the sound of the first stroke of six.

Worse conditions for a pleasant walk through the fields and lanes can scarcely be imagined than a March evening after a pouring wet day, a fine rain falling, the ground ankle-deep in mud, and the

darkness already so thick that an occasional slip into a puddle was unavoidable. They had to walk in most uneven, jolting fashion to find a path at all through the steepest part of the lane. Sometimes Olivia had to take Mr. Brander's arm to keep her footing at all, and once he had to help her to jump over a miniature torrent. They scarcely talked at all, but a warm sense of human sympathy and mutual help grew so strong between them that when they came to a particularly ugly quagmire their eyes would meet with a smile and a nod, and they would go on again very happily. At last, when they got to the top of the hill, and both instinctively stopped for breath at the same moment, Olivia looked up and said, shyly and simply—

"Did you know it was I—all the time?"

"I knew it was you when I felt—something on my face. I was asleep, and it woke me."

"I'm so sorry," murmured she.

"Don't apologize. You may cry over me just as much as you like."

She laughed a little, and then they went on again, but without exchanging any more looks, until they came suddenly, without having realized that they were so near to the bottom of the Vicarage hill. He glanced up it, and Olivia caught the expression of his eyes.

"You are not going there—to the Vicarage?" she burst out, impulsively.

"Yes, I am," he answered, with a dogged look of anger and scorn on his face.

The girl, drawing a long, sobbing breath, retreated a step without speaking.

Vernon stopped and looked into her face almost with the boldness of a lover.

"Why not?" he asked, in a voice little above a whisper.

"Why not, indeed, Mr. Brander!" she said, coldly, but without succeeding in hiding a break in her voice; "if the friends you can't trust are of more value than those you can."

"It is not a question of that, Miss Denison."

"Isn't it?" she broke in, quickly. "I think it is. You will go in all cold indignation, and come out all hot remorse and repentance. And you will never see that lessons in patient self-sacrifice are all the good you will ever get out of the Vicarage!"

Vernon started violently, and fell to shivering.

Shocked at the strong effect of her bold words, Olivia remained silently and humbly waiting for the reproaches she expected.

CHAPTER XVI.

OLIVIA DENISON'S outburst against the Vicarage folk and their treatment of Vernon Brander seemed to overwhelm the latter with consternation. He stood before the impulsive girl as if benumbed by her vehemence; and it was not until her restless movements and bending head showed that she felt uncomfortable and ashamed of

herself that he tried to speak and to reassure her. For it was evident that she thought her boldness had deeply offended him.

"You do them injustice, Miss Denison. Though I know it's only through your kind feeling for me. There is nothing my brother would not do for me; he always takes my part most valiantly."

"Ah, your brother, perhaps. But Mrs. Brander! She doesn't. And a woman can do you more harm by raising her eyebrows at the mention of your name than a man could by preaching a course of sermons against you."

"But why should she? Miss Denison, I can't believe it."

"Do you believe what I tell you, that Mrs. Brander warned my step-mother against admitting you into her house?"

"I must believe it, since you say it is true. But I am sure there must be some explanation—"

"Of course there will be an explanation; and one that will satisfy you perfectly, I have no doubt," interrupted Olivia, impatiently. "Mrs. Brander will be able to explain everything, and make you see how entirely right and natural it is that you should have no friends but those at the Vicarage."

She saw by the change in his face that she had succeeded in sowing the seed of what she considered a wholesome suspicion in his mind; and rather afraid of trusting herself to further speeck on a matter which lay nearer her heart than she cared to show, she held out her hand abruptly, saying with a break in her voice—

"Good-night, Mr. Brander."

She knew he was grateful for her interest in him; she knew he had that day been happy in her society. But she was quite unprepared for the flash of passionate feeling which suddenly shone out of his dark, thin face at the touch of her hand. It was like the wild gratitude of a starving man for food, which he seizes ravenously, and for which he can utter no articulate thanks. Olivia was almost frightened by it, and her hand trembled as he clutched it in his.

"Good-night," he said; "good-night. I had forgotten what such a thing was—as a friend—until, until you came. They are very good—my sister-in-law, and even my old housekeeper. But they are cold; at least, they are not like you. There is something in the very touch of your hand, in the kindness of your eyes, that warms one and makes one feel—human again. God bless you, Miss Denison!"

He had hurried out his words so fast, in such a low, hoarse voice, that Olivia scarcely heard more than half. But what she did hear touched, melted her, made her heart open with a yearning tenderness she had never felt before, even for her beloved father in his troubles. She let Mr. Brander hold her hands in the grip of a moment's passionate happiness, and only sighed out a faint protest against his fervent words. It was he who first woke from the entrancing pleasure of that moment's mutual sympathy. Letting the girl's hand drop, he stepped back as abruptly as if they had been interrupted, leaving her confused and ashamed at her involuntary show of feeling.

Through long years of self-control on his side, through pride on hers, they both recovered their outward composure so quickly that

a very keen observer, who happened to pass a moment later, could detect no sign of unusual emotion in either of them. This passer-by was Ned Mitchell, who touched his hat to Miss Denison with a significant air of being determined to remark nothing, and nodded to the clergyman with a side glance of no great favor. As she caught sight of him, Olivia drew a deep breath and shivered, as if some forgotten horror had become suddenly vivid. Instead of allowing Mr. Brander to take a formal farewell of her, as he was about to do, she detained him by a gesture until the colonist was out of hearing, and then made an impulsive step nearer to him, with a face full of deep anxiety and excitement.

"I had forgotten—quite forgotten," she panted out. "That man—do you know who he is?"

"No."

"Do you know why he is here?"

"No—o. But I have sometimes made ugly guesses."

"They were right; they were true. He is the brother of Nellie Mitchell."

She communicated this intelligence in the lowest of whispers, and he received it without a perceptible movement. She did not know what to do next—whether she should attempt to comfort and reassure him, or whether she should quietly slip away while he was apparently absorbed in his own thoughts and unconscious of her presence. She decided on a middle course.

"Good-bye, Mr. Brander," she said, in a gentle and timid voice. He started, and as he turned towards her, she noted narrowly the expression of his face. Whether the waning daylight had now grown too faint for her to see properly, she could be sure; but it seemed to her that there was more relief than alarm in his eyes, which were glowing with keen excitement.

"When did you find this out?" he asked, very quietly.

"This afternoon, on my way to St. Cuthbert's," she answered, promptly.

"On your way to St. Cuthbert's," he echoed, very softly. Olivia blushed and bit her lip, but she answered readily enough, holding up her head with some dignity—

"You had been insulted by my people. I came to apologize for them. That was only natural, as you were my friend."

Mr. Brander smiled. He seemed already to have quite recovered from any shock her alarming information might have been supposed to cause him.

"That was generous of you—and like you," he said. "But it was very unwise. Do you want to set all the old women's tongues wagging?"

"I don't care," murmured Olivia defiantly, though she cast down her eyes; "besides, I didn't stop to think."

"But you ought to stop to think. You haven't always some one at your elbow to do it for you, as I verily believe a woman ought to have."

He had fallen into the tone of playful reproach which was natural to him when he was moved to tenderness.

"But I was in the right," said Olivia.

"I don't know about that. However, we will leave that unsettled. How came this man to speak to you?"

"He saw that I wanted to get into the churchyard, and so did he."

"And he told you he was Nellie Mitchell's brother?"

"Yes," answered Olivia, who felt the hot blood burning in her face as he mentioned the dead girl's name.

Both were silent for some moments, during which Mr. Brander regarded the girl intently, trying to fathom the thoughts in her mind.

"And you thought it would interest me to know this?" he asked, very gently.

"I—I was afraid so," she burst out, and impulsively hid her face for a moment in her hands.

She heard his breath come fast; she seemed to feel that his hands were near her, hovering over her, almost touching her; and she remained motionless. But when she looked up he was some paces away, busily employed digging holes in the ground with the point of his umbrella. As she looked up, their eyes met.

"Yes. You were right. It does interest me," he said, gravely.

Olivia's face fell. At sight of this change in her expression, Mr. Brander's composure suddenly gave way again—broke up altogether. He showed himself suddenly in an entirely new light, swayed by excitement so tempestuous that the girl realized for the first time the depths of passion which still remained in this man under the burnt-out crust. In a moment she recognized the fact that he was capable of impulses and of acts which she could neither measure nor understand. For good or for evil, his was a nature deeper and stronger than hers. This knowledge, so suddenly borne in upon her, gave her a new interest in, and respect for, him, even while it made her reluctantly admit that the possibility of his having committed a great crime was far clearer to her than before. All this flashed into her mind in a second of time, as his agitated face turned towards her just before the feelings which surged within him broke on his lips in hoarse, incoherent speech.

"I must tell you—Oh, God! Why should I not tell *you*? Who in the whole word deserves to hear the truth as you do? Listen!"

No need to tell the girl that. Her heart was in her eyes. She held her very breath in the intensity of a rush of feelings, which made her wet and cold from head to foot as she stood, unable to utter a word, waiting for the fatal explanation. He had come a step nearer to her, the first words of his confession were on his lips, when a bright, high, woman's voice broke upon their ears. The sound acted on Vernon Brander like a stroke of paralysis. His right hand, raised in eager gesture, fell to his side; into his excited face came suddenly the vacant stare of idiotcy. As for Olivia, the tension on her weaker feminine nerves had been too great.

She drew a long sigh, and burst into tears. Then, before he could recover himself sufficiently to offer one word of comfort or apology, she muttered a hasty "good-night," and hurried through the farmyard gate towards her home.

Vernon could only watch her retreating figure a little way, as an angle of the big barn that stood opposite the farmhouse soon hid her

from sight. Then he went on with slow, dogged footsteps to meet his sister-in-law; for it was her voice which had disturbed his *tete-a-tete* with Miss Denison. The suspicions of the latter had already bore some fruit in his mind; for he asked himself whether Mrs. Brander had not come out on purpose to interrupt them. What other motive could bring that comfort-loving lady out into the damp and cold of a wet April evening? He dismissed the idea from his mind almost as soon as it entered; nevertheless, it was a just one.

Mrs. Brander had called on Mrs. Denison that afternoon, and had learnt, through the indiscretion of the latter's husband, enough of the morning's proceedings to fill her with anxiety and annoyance. The vicar managed to restrain her first impulse, which was to go straight to St. Cuthbert's and see Vernon.

"You will be putting yourself in the wrong if you do that, my dear," said Meredith, quietly. "If he thinks he has any cause of complaint against you, he is not the man to nurse it up silently. He is sure to come straight here on the first opportunity to 'have it out' with you. And then I have no doubt of your powers of making the rough places smooth again."

Evelyn Brander submitted to her husband's judgment, with a doubt which he made light of. A few months ago she could have made her brother-in-law take her own view of any matter; now there was an unpleasant possibility that he might take somebody else's.

As the afternoon wore on, therefore, and Vernon did not appear, she went the length of watching for him at one of the drawing-room windows which commanded the best view of the road; and when the tenant of the adjoining cottage returned home, she threw up the sash, and asked him if, in the course of the rambles round the parish which he was known to be in the habit of taking, he had that day met the vicar of St. Cuthbert's. The colonist, being an observant man, noted the lady's anxiety, and the unusual courtesy towards himself to which it gave rise.

"Your brother-in-law, madam," said he, bluntly, "is standing at the bottom of the hill. He has been standing there some time, I believe." Then the idea of a little experiment crossing his mind, Ned Mitchell made a pause to give the more effect to his next words. "He is with Miss Denison, of the farm down yonder."

Mrs. Brander's handsome eyes flashed; with what feeling, whether jealousy, or anger or disquietude, he could not be sure. She bestowed upon him a little polite smile of thanks for his information, and said it was an unpleasant evening. But it was evident that her interest in him was gone; and as he had nothing more at present to obtain from or to impart to her, the colonist gave the off-hand touch to his hat which was the most respectful form of salutation he ever bestowed, and retreated into his cottage. Mrs. Brander shut down the window with one vigorous pull, and in two minutes was sallying down the hill through the mud and the drizzle, her handsome dinner dress held at a height more convenient than graceful, her kid shoes encased in stout goloshes, an old macintosh of her husband's buttoned round her with the sleeves left swinging and a huge carriage umbrella held over her head. She was a practical woman, and if one liked to

wear handsome clothes, there was no reason why one should spoil them for the sake of a more picturesque appearance for ten minutes on a wet evening. As she passed the end of her neighbor's garden, that gentleman, who was on the watch underneath his porch, addressed to her an admiring word.

"Well done, ma'am!" cried he. "As long as you parsons' ladies do your husband's district visiting in such weather as this, you'll stave off disestablishment, I reckon."

"Oh, yes," she called out in answer, being in one of those anxious moods in which the proudest woman is afraid of giving offence to a fellow mortal; "you don't know yet what weak woman is capable of."

These were the words she was uttering when the faint sound of her voice startled Vernon and Olivia as they stood together at the foot of the hill.

When Miss Denison left him, Vernon had only a few steps to take before he met his sister-in-law, who greeted him with the kindly affectionate manner of a relation with whom one is on perfectly good terms. She gave her umbrella to him to hold, and passed the disengaged hand lightly through his arm. Instead of proceeding up the hill with her, however, he stood still, remaining as stiff as a wooden soldier.

"Aren't you coming up to the house?" she asked, with innocent peremptoriness, shaking his arm persuasively.

"No, thank you," said he coolly, but with a coolness utterly different from hers, as it arose from the chilling of a warm nature, not from the innate frigidity of a cold one.

"Oh, but you must! I was peeping out of the drawing-room window when the bear next door came back to his den and told me you were out here, talking to Miss Denison. So I rushed out hoping to catch you both, and drag you in to dinner; the pretty farmer's daughter to amuse Meredith, and you to entertain me."

With the audacious coquetry of a cold woman, she pressed his arm with her hand, and bending forward looked into his face with her great gazelle-like eyes, which, by a turn of her head, she could make divinely alluring while ordering the details of a custard pudding. But Vernon was not now to be allured. He withdrew his arm boldly under the pretence that it required two hands to hold the heavy umbrella at the proper angle.

"Miss Denison has gone home," said he. "And I'm going home: thank you."

"What, without an umbrella? Come as far as the house, and I'll give you one. It's sure to rain before you can get back."

"Miss Denison has got mine. I can go to the farm to fetch it."

"Well, perhaps you won't mind seeing me as far as the door first. I can't hold that great thing and keep my dress up too. I won't insist on your coming in; that will do some other time. I had something to say—to ask you about my Katie; but never mind now. I see you are thinking of something else."

"Katie!" exclaimed Vernon. "What about Katie?"

"Oh, she doesn't seem very well to-day, and I thought perhaps—"

"You thought what? Is there anything I can do?"

"There might have been. But I can't ask favors of you in such a mood as you are in to-night. We are losing you day by day. You will soon have no place in your heart even for Katie."

"I think you misjudge me, Evelyn. A child may forget her friends when they are absent. But at least she does not speak ill of them."

Mrs. Brander stopped short in the mud, and looked at him with proud indignation.

"Of course I see you are insinuating that I have done so. Your new friends have been turning you against the old!"

"No. It seems, though I can scarcely believe it, that my old friends have been turning my new ones against me. Now, Evelyn, you are honest, aren't you? Did you, or did you not, warn Mrs. Denison against me, as not being a proper friend for a young girl?"

Now, Vernon Brander only did his sister-in-law justice when he called her honest. Her blunt frankness, which made little account of other people's feelings, had often been counted against her as a fault. Moreover, it was one result of her husband's profession that, though not by nature over-scrupulous, lying should now seem a great sin to her. But the issues at stake seemed to her so great that it cost her only a moment's hesitation to reply—

"I did not. I told her I understood you did not think of marrying. Was I wrong?"

"No," answered Vernon, in a very low voice.

Evelyn's great eyes were meeting his with the simple, direct stare habitual to her, which seemed to preclude the idea that she could lie. A weaker, a more sensitive, or a more modest nature would have shrunk from the gaze of his burning, pleading eyes. But her character was not built on complex lines; she felt that she was doing the best possible thing under the circumstances for herself and for everybody else, and so, her conscience being, as usual, free, there was no need for any airs of disquietude or remorse. And so the guileless man was caught at the first throw of the line, and was carried off to the house safe and subdued, while she informed him that Katie was not well, and that if he and his old housekeeper were willing to take charge of the little girl at St. Cuthbert's for a fortnight, she thought the change would do her good.

The vicar's wife had not overrated the effect of this proposal. To have his darling niece in his own care for two whole weeks was a bribe which would have tempted him to condone any wrong. By the light which came into his face as he quietly said he should be glad to have the child, Mrs. Brander knew that her trump card had been very well played, and that she had an influence ready to her hand which might be reckoned upon to counteract the dangerous one of Olivia Denison's youth and beauty.

The tenant of the cottage watched the pair curiously as they passed his garden on the way up to the Vicarage. Nothing in the demeanor of either escaped his penetrating eyes. Absorbed as he was in one object, every smallest incident which occurred in his neighborhood was regarded by him as having a possible bearing upon it.

"I wonder," he said to himself, as they turned the corner into the

private road at the top of the hill, "what is the reason of the interest that parson's wife takes in her husband's brother? Pretty strong it must be to bring my lady out into the puddles in those finicking togs of hers! Love, passion, anything of that sort? She ain't built that way; and if she had liked him best, she would either have married him or she'd have given 'em something to talk about by this time. I should like to think there was a woman in the secret—my secret; it would make my work seventy-five per cent. easier."

In the meantime, Mrs. Brander and Vernon had reached the house, and had been met at the door by the vicar, who seemed placidly amused by the triumph and satisfaction he saw on his wife's face, and by the subdued and even hangdog expression on that of his brother.

Dinner was waiting; and the vicar, who was as much disturbed by such an occurrence as he ever was about anything, hastened to lead the way to the dining-room, gently murmuring disapproval of his wife's conduct in leaving the house at such a critical moment. The meal passed uncomfortably; for the unexplained uneasiness under which Vernon was evidently laboring could not fail to effect, in some degree, even his rather stolid brother. When they all adjourned to the drawing-room, the constraint of his manner became so apparent that Meredith, used to an atmosphere of calm respect for himself and content with things in general, laid his hand on his brother's shoulder and asked him, with benevolent peremptoriness, if there was anything the matter.

Vernon who was standing by a table, turning over the leaves of a magazine with unmistakable lack of interest, started violently, and caused his sister-in-law to look up from the needle work with which her handsome, industrious fingers were nearly always employed. Her quick eyes discovered, at a glance, that there was some more serious reason for his melancholy than she had supposed. She rose and with a thrill of vague anxiety laid aside her work and crossed the room towards the two brothers. Vernon's eyes met hers, and the expression she saw in them caused her to stop abruptly.

"Well, what is it? Do speak out, Vernon. We are not fools. We are ready to hear anything," she said, in impatient, almost querulous tones.

Her brother-in-law cleared his throat, looking from the one to the other with a strange yearning in his eyes.

"I will speak; I will tell you," he said huskily. "I have learnt to-day something which may cause you some alarm—for me," he added, hastily, as husband and wife looked anxiously each at the other. "I don't know whether you have ever troubled yourselves about the man who has come to live next door, or made any inquiries about him."

"Well, who is he? What is his name?" asked Evelyn, while her husband remained silently watching his brother.

"He is Ned Mitchell, the brother of—"

He stopped. There was dead silence in the room. Not one of the three seemed to dare to meet the eyes of another. Evelyn was the first to speak. Her voice was low and husky, quite unlike her usual bright, imperious tones.

"You are sure?" she said.

"Quite sure."

Another silence.

Then the vicar spoke. His voice was not affected by the alarming announcement, except that it was, perhaps, unusually gentle and kind. He laid a sympathetic hand on the shoulder of his brother, who still remained, with head bowed down, unable to meet their eyes.

"And, of course, you think he is here about that unfortunate business of ten years ago?"

Evelyn shuddered, and glanced first at her husband and then at the broken-down man on the other side of her. Her lips moved, imploring Meredith to be kind, to be careful. Vernon raised his head, looking still at the carpet.

"I suppose so," he answered, in a husky voice. "Not that we need trouble ourselves. What can he really do? Nothing. I—I am as safe as ever."

The vicar withdrew his hand. Calm as he had remained, he seemed to breathe more freely at this assurance.

"I hope so, indeed," he said, solemnly; "for all our sakes."

Vernon rose, and his eyes met those of his brother for the first time. He tried to speak, but only a dry, choking sound came from his parched mouth. He seized the hand his brother held out to him, and wrung it till the clasp of his thin, nervous fingers left livid marks on the soft pink flesh.

"God bless you," murmured the vicar, in his warmest tones of encouragement and sympathy.

Again Vernon tried to speak; again he failed. With a hasty side glance at his sister-in-law, full of a plaintive, dumb sort of gratitude and entreaty, he crossed the room rapidly, with almost a staggering gait, opened the door with clammy fingers, and hurried out.

Husband and wife, thus left face to face, said not a word, but each gave a strange look of searching inquiry into the face of the other.

"Poor fellow!" said the vicar, gently.

Mrs. Brand did not answer. With a woman's keener sympathy, she was listening to her brother-in-law's footsteps in the hall outside. All there was of warmth in her somewhat cool nature was brought to the surface to-night. As she heard the hall door open, she uttered a little cry, and, leaving the room quickly, came up with Vernon before he had got out of the house, and put a warm, loving hand upon his arm.

"Oh, Vernon, Vernon! I wanted to say God bless you too!" she whispered, with tenderness most unwonted in the self-contained woman.

Vernon looked in her face with astonishment. There were tears in her great brown eyes; tears which, if he had seen them a few months ago, would have set his blood and his brain on fire. Now the sight of them filled him with astonishment and gratitude, but left him calm.

"You are too kind, dear," he said, pressing her hand affectionately in his. "You must not trouble your head so much about me. Indeed there is no need. Good-night, good-night."

He stooped and kissed her hand very gently, very reverently, and left her, hurrying down the lane without a look behind.

Evelyn Brander stared out into the darkness for some minutes after he had disappeared from her sight. For the first time, perhaps, in all her life she felt a vague sense that there might be something in existence more serious, more interesting than what we should eat, and what we should drink, and wherewithal we should be clothed.

"If I had only known," she murmured to herself; "if I had only been able to know!"

Then she looked curiously at the hand Vernon had kissed, seeming surprised to find no change in its appearance. The next moment, raising her head to its usual proud angle, with a little laugh at her own folly, she shut herself into the house.

CHAPTER XVII.

When once the secret concerning the identity of the stranger at the cottage had been let out, it spread mysteriously throughout the length of the straggling village with astonishing rapidity. Ned Mitchell had come back; and, remembering the character for pig-headed obstinacy he had borne at home when he was a boy, it was safe to prophecy that there would shortly be a "shindy" somewhere. Two or three old people now declared that they had recognized him from the first, though they had been too discreet to make known the fact; and towards the close of the day following that on which he had revealed his name to Miss Denison, it became plain to him, from the whispers of young girls and the curtsies of old women, that he was the hero of the hour.

In the evening he had the honor of a call from the chief of the village busybodies, a superannuated postman, who clung to his old trade of news carrier to the community. As Ned Mitchell lived by himself, and locked up his house when he was out, the visitor had to sit on a broken horse trough which stood on the green under the trees opposite to the cottage until the colonist returned from one of his long daily rambles.

"Good-evening, squire," said the old postman, rising with fussy respect, and hobbling quickly to the gate lest his unwilling host should shut him out before he could reach it.

Mitchell glanced towards him, and jerked at him an indifferent nod. The old man was not to be rebuffed. He had that quality of dogged and patient energy which we can most of us show in other people's business.

"Pardon, squire," he said, with a beggar's humility. "Don't be affronted with me for wishing to be one o' t' first to pay my respects to ye."

"Respects!" echoed Mitchell, shortly, thrusting his hands into his pockets with an instinctive perception that these contained his most respect-worthy attribute.

"Ay, squire. I'm proud to be one o' t' first to welcome ye back to yer owd home."

"Old home! What, do you call this wretched little heap of mouldy bricks and worm-eaten boards a home for me?" asked the colonist, contemptuously.

"Noa, squire; leastways it didn't ought to be. But as them as have no right to 't have got t' Hall Farm instead o' them that was born and bred there, it's summat to welcome ye back to t' village that's proud to have you belonging to it."

"Proud! Why proud?" asked Mitchell, bluntly. "If the village has got to be proud of me, I ought to be ashamed of it, I should think. And who can have a greater right to the farm than the man who's paying the rent of it."

The old postman was not abashed. Each snub administered to him did but increase, in his eyes, the importance of the administrator. He felt, too, that the opportunity he gave the colonist of sharpening his wit upon him was inclining that gentleman to look upon him with favor.

"Very true, squire. You that travel get a different way o' looking at things from what us stay-at-home folk do. All t' same, squire, I hope as I may be allowed to give you a bit of a hint that may, or it may not"—and the old man nodded with mystery and importance—"be of use to you on your business here."

"My business here! And what's that?" asked Mitchell, abruptly.

"Well they do say as how it were on account of summat as happened ten years ago that were never cleared up."

"Oh?"

"And if so be as that's true, which I don't say—neither do I say otherwise, as it aren't true, why then what I say is," went on the old man, whose style grew more involved the nearer he came to the point, "that Martha Lowndes, as were her foster-sister, and them two always as thick as thieves, which that is a party as knows more'n she tells."

Ned Mitchell, who had been taking nuts from his pocket, opening them with a penknife, and devouring them ravenously, shut up his knife and laid his hand on his garden gate without the smallest sign of interest in the information he had received.

"Is that all?" he asked, feeling his pockets to make sure that not one nut still lurked in the corners.

"Well—" began the gossip, rather disconcerted, but ready to make the best of a bad business.

"Ah, it is all, I see," interrupted Mitchell.

And with a nod of stolid indifference, he turned and strolled up the cottage path.

But Ned Mitchell, though he had no notion of being grateful for the old man's information, was not long in making use of it. No sooner had the April evening closed in than he, having already found out Martha Lowndes' dwelling, knocked at the door of a small, tumble-down cottage, where he was admitted at once by a woman who looked about fifty, and whose face was careworn and deeply furrowed.

"Martha Lowndes?" said Ned.

"Yes," answered the woman, looking at him curiously.

"I thought you were younger."

"I'm thirty-five," said the woman, shortly. "You're Ned Mitchell, I suppose. I'd forgotten you; but they told me you were about; so I suppose it's you."

"Right you are."

"Come in, then."

He at once accepted the not very gracious invitation, and sat down on one of the wooden chairs, which she dusted for him.

"And so you're come at last. You didn't hurry yourself."

"No, I didn't hurry myself, but I meant to come."

"Well, I thought it was odd if you didn't, and her your favorite as she always was."

"Yes, that's true. But that was in the old days, when I was sentimental. If it had happened when I first went away, with nothing but the shirt on my back and my mother's Bible, I should have worked my passage home by the next boat, and run amuck among these fine gentlemen till I got the right one by the throat. But when it did happen, I'd got sheep farms of my own, and a wife and family, and was making my pile. So I let justice wait till my liver wanted a change. But it'll be justice none the less for that."

The woman stood with her arms akimbo, regarding him solemnly Indeed all capacity for gaiety or even cheerfulness seemed to be dead in her.

"Well," she said, presently, "and what do you want with me?"

"You can tell me something, or else I've been made a fool of."

"Yes, that's right enough. I can tell you something. It's been on my mind this ten year, and it's what has made an old woman of me before my time. You remember me, 'flirting Mattie' they called me then, and I don't say but what I was as good as my name. There were a pair of us, they said; and we were together a good deal. 'Birds of a feather,' you know. But Nell was always closer than me; if I fancied anybody, all the world might know. But she, she'd carry on with half a dozen, and you might never know which was the one she'd a liking for, or if it was in her to care for anybody. It wasn't for a long time I myself guessed there was something up—not till she grew mopish and fidgety like, and set me wondering. For awhile she'd own to nothing, and it wasn't till one day I took her unawares like that I found out how serious it was with her."

"Serious?"

"Yes. As serious as it could be. I taxed her with it quite sudden one day as she was sitting there on that same chair like as it might be you. And she turned quite white and confessed, and said as how it wasn't that as troubled her most, but that he'd got tired of her, and wanted to get shut of her, and was crazy at the thought of the exposure and disgrace. 'Why, it's you that's got the worst of that to bear; not him!' cried I. And all on a sudden she gets quite quiet, and as it might be bites her lips together, so as no words she didn't want to use mightn't force themselves through. 'Why don't you speak to your brother?' said I; 'he'd get the fellow to do the right thing by you.' But she only shook her head, and got up, and began to walk about, and just said in a low voice that I didn't understand. And I began to guess it was a gentleman."

"You taxed her with that?"

"Yes. She took it all in the same sullen way, and would name no names. But she said he loved another woman, and she'd have forgiven him anything but that."

"But you should have got her to say who he was, woman!"

"Do you think, if wild horses could have dragged it from her, I shouldn't have known? I tell you I never knew before what was in the girl; how obstinate she could be, nor what strong feelings she had. It was something quite different to what I'd ever felt, and I wasn't the same with her as I'd been before. When she passed through this door that evening, it seemed as if a fierce, revengeful woman had gone out where just a giddy girl like myself had come in."

Ned Mitchell was not moved by this recital to any show of deep emotion, but the woman could see that he was touched, and she went on in a voice less studiously cold—

"I didn't see her again for some days—not for near a fortnight, I think. But when I did, it didn't need her words to point out the change in her. I didn't dare ask her many questions that time, but I'd got some inkling by then as to who those might be that was bringing her to this pass. I thought I'd try to get at the truth in a roundabout way if I could; so I began, 'I didn't see you at church on Sunday evening, Nell.' Her face grew sullen at once. You see, sir, I'd heard of a certain clergyman that was often at the Hall Farm of an evening."

"You mean Vernon Brander, I suppose?"

"Yes. And how Nell had been seen late o' nights down by St. Cuthbert's."

"Well, now, I think his coming openly to the farm is more in his favor than not."

"Unless it was a blind."

"Well?"

"Well, I dursn't say more then, but presently, as she sat at tea with me, I caught her eating some green gages that was on the table in an oddly ravenous way, stones and all. 'What ever are you doing, Nell?' says I. 'You'll be ill for sure if you swallow those stones like that.' And she looks at me with an odd smile. 'I'm practising,' says she. 'I may have to swallow worse than that some day.' I stared at her, thinking perhaps her trouble had touched her head, poor thing! And then I got quite cold, fancying perhaps she had it in her mind to make away with herself. And I says, 'Nell, if ever you feel tempted to do a mischief to yourself, think of them that cares for you truly—of poor Ned, away across the seas!'—yes, I said that, Ned—'and of me, that's always cared for you like as if you'd been one of my own!' Then up she started from her chair, and began to roam about the room again, restless like, just as she'd done the last time. 'Don't be afraid, lass," says she to me, in a voice she meant to be rough. 'I'm not going to do anything foolish—not more foolish than I've done already, that is. While there's life there's hope, they say, though perhaps there's not much of either left for me!' 'What do you mean, Nell?" says I, frightened. She didn't answer me for a minute; then suddenly

she turned, with her great black eyes flashing, and said, 'If I'm found dead, Mattie, you'll know I didn't put an end to myself. And I tell you I'll let others know it too, if my body lies buried fifty years first.' Oh, Ned, I shall never forget her face. It was white like death, and the lips all drawn back from her teeth. 'Twas as if all life and the wish to live were burning out of her. 'Why, Nell, this man, whoever he is, he surely never threatened to kill you!' 'Not in words, no,' says she, with her eyes fixed in front of her. 'But there was murder in his eyes the last time I saw him. If he's past caring for me, he may kill me; I don't care. But he shan't live happy with the love of that other woman; I swear it. I've been true to him. I've done for him what there's hardly a girl in England would have done; I've held my tongue when just to speak would have ruined him. But I'll not die, and be put out of the way, and him go unpunished!' I was that frightened, Ned, I could scarcely speak. I told her not to have such dreadful thoughts, and I reminded her again of you, and how fond you were of her. 'Yes,' says she, with a queer smile that made me feel cold; 'Ned would see me righted if any one tried to wrong me. And whether I'm alive or dead he will.'"

Ned Mitchell did not move. His face was set like a rock, and, beyond the fact that he was deeply attentive to every detail, it was impossible to guess what effect the story had upon him. He nodded to the woman to go on.

"'Alive or dead, Nell!' says I, when I could speak for trembling. 'What makes you harp so on death, if you mean rightly by yourself and them that love you? As for the rascal that's brought you to this, if you won't make a clean breast of it to your brother Sam, you'd best keep out of the creature's way, seeing you think so ill of him as to believe him ready to do you a mischief. It's no good of courting harm. You've no need to give way. If Sam was to turn against you when it all comes out, you could go away to Ned; he'd receive you fast enough, whatever you'd done, I'll warrant. Keep a heart in you, my girl.' But she took no notice, and went on eating the green gages, stones and all, in just the same way, till I tried to take the dish away. Then she threw back her head with a hard laugh, and, says she, 'Look here, Mattie, you may as well leave those things here. I'm not cracked; I've a reason for what I'm doing. I shall go and meet him again; I tell you I'm that mad about him I can't keep away when he tells me to come. But if he tries any tricks with me, I've made up my mind that I'll find a chance to swallow something of his, if it's but a shirt stud or a button, so as my body, when it's found, shall bear witness against him just as well as my tongue could if I was alive. Now you remember that, Mattie, if things come to the worst.'

"And with that she was off and out of the house. But I ran after her, and caught up with her, and, 'Nell,' says I, 'when are you going to see this man?' For I had it in my mind to stop her. And she gave me a queer look out of the corners of her eyes. 'I'm going to meet him to-morrow night,' says she. And she snatched away her arm and ran off. That was the last I saw of her, alive or dead."

There was a short pause.

"Then you might have saved her," said Ned Mitchell, at last, in a rasping voice.

"Don't say that, Ned," pleaded the woman in low tones. "Many and many's the time I've said that to myself, and reproached myself. But, remember, she said, 'To-morrow night'—"

"Well, you might have known it was only a blind, with her heart set on the fellow like that. I should have known. However, it's no use wasting words over it now. You thought you would see about it next day, and when next day came it was all over with the girl."

"You've no right to be so hard, Ned; you that were content to let the man who murdered your sister lie peacefully in his bed these ten years!"

"That's different. If I'd come over next day I couldn't have brought her back to life again," said he, in a dogged tone. But the man's conscience was uneasy, and this made him the more harsh towards Martha. "Why didn't you tell this yarn you've been pitching me to somebody that would have seen into things?"

"I did tell it to Sam. But you know Sam, how timid he was, and slow at things. And his wife never could abide Nell, and nothing would ever persuade her the girl hadn't gone off with somebody; and, indeed, many people believe that now, and say Nell Mitchell was always a light sort, and it was just what they'd expected, for her to make a bolt of it with somebody. But I know better."

"How about the parsons? How did they take it?"

"Well, I can tell you the rights of a little story that's not generally known. Next morning, before anybody knew Nell had disappeared, Parson Vernon was at Matherham Railway Station in time for the first train to London. His brother Meredith, who'd been called out of his bed in the small hours to see a dying man, came up with him while he was standing on the platform. My cousin Dick—you remember Dick, the miller's son—saw the meeting; and he says he never saw such a contrast between brothers as those two made; the one coming up all fresh and smiling, and surprised; the other pale and ghastly, with bloodshot eyes, and a wild, hunted look in his face already. 'Why, Vernie,' says the vicar, 'what are you doing here at this time in the morning?' Dick says the other looked as scared as if the hangman's rope was about his neck. He stammered and said something about a morning paper; for Dick had edged near enough to hear. But then the railway ticket fell from his fingers on to the ground, and Mr. Meredith picked it up sharp as a needle. Dick saw by the color it was a third class ticket to London. Then the brothers looked at each other, and Mr. Vernon saw it wouldn't do. The other took his arm and led him from the station, and I suppose Vernon made a clean breast of it, and told him how bad it would look for him to run away. And sure enough, when the inquiry was made, the best point in Vernon's favor was that he had done nothing to escape it. Dick kept his own counsel, except to me that he could trust; and the few people that was about just then had no wish to come forward. For though Mr. Vernon was looked upon as a bit wild for a parson, he was popular too in a way, and

then if not for him they'd have held their tongues for the vicar's sake. So there was just a fuss and a scandal and an inquiry, and Mr. Vernon was had up on suspicion, because some one had heard cries of 'Murder!' near St. Cuthbert's that night. And then it all died away, and everything was the same as before except Mr. Vernon and me; the shock made me what you see; and as for Mr. Vernon, he's been a changed man, and he's that loved now that if you was to have him upagain, on something stronger than suspicion, it's my belief the miners would lynch you."

"I shall take my chance of that," said Ned Mitchell, stolidly, as he rose to go. "So this precious vicar that everybody thinks so much of does all he can to shield his brother?"

"You can hardly blame him for that. You'd do the same yourself."

"Blest if I should! Let those suffer that do wrong, say I. My sister did wrong; but she had her punishment, else I'd not have lifted a finger for her. As for these sermon vampers, it would be small harm if they both swung together, I expect. I've not much respect for parsons out of their proper place, the pulpit."

But Martha looked scandalized at this speech, and seemed to regret her frankness.

"You'll not go insulting the vicar, I hope, Ned," she said, uneasily. "'By their works ye shall know them,' the Scripture says, and if so, you've got nothing against the vicar but a weakness for his own flesh and blood."

"Well, what are his 'works?' What does he do? Does he live in a poor house, to have more to spare for folks poorer than himself? Does he deny himself a wife and children, that he may be a better father to his flock? Or, if he despises temporal things for his parishioners, if not for himself, does he trudge it on foot, all weathers, to give spiritual consolation to people too ill to come for it?"

"No-o; that's Mr. Vernon that does all that. But Mr. Meredith is—just what a vicar ought to be."

"A pretty figure for a pulpit? I see. Oh, I'll let him alone. Nothing I shall say shall take a single one of the well-to-do creases out of his fat face. I've other fish to fry than to go hurting the feelings of your pretty vicar: never fear. Good evening."

He did not wait for his curt salutation to be returned; but slightly touching the hat it had not occurred to him take off, he opened the door, and walked out with his usual ponderous, deliberate step. But after going a few paces he stopped short, and returning to the cottage, thrust open the door and addressed Martha again—

"You say some one heard the cry of 'Murder!' on the night my sister disappeared. Who was it?"

"A lass that was coming back from Sheffield with her young man—Jane Askew. They're married now, and she's Mrs. Tims. They both heard it."

"And they saw nothing, and looked for nothing?"

"They couldn't agree as to where the sound came from; and perhaps neither of them's over brave, and near a churchyard at night too. But going along they met somebody that knew more than them, they think; for he was limping along at a great rate with a

scared look on his face, and he came straight from the churchyard."

"Hey, and who was that?" asked Mitchell, with strong interest.

"A tramp called Abel Squires."

"Perhaps he was mixed up in it?"

"Oh, no, I hardly think that. She was a strapping lass, and he's a poor crippled fellow with only one leg. Besides, what should he do it for?"

"Anyhow, where is he to be found?"

"Ah, that's just what nobody knows. He used to be seen about here often enough, but since that night he's only been caught sight of once or twice, and then always in company with the same person."

"And that person is—"

"Mr. Vernon Brander!"

"Thanks. That'll do for me, I think."

And with that he left her as abruptly as before, and this time walked straight back to his own dwelling without a pause, or so much as a glance to right or left of him.

For some days after that, the stolid figure of the colonist was missed from the village. People began to think that he had decided that the object of his stay was hopeless, and that he had slunk away quietly to avoid the humiliation of owning that his dogged obstinacy had been beaten. The old woman who swept his rooms and washed up his tea things, though much questioned, could tell nothing. He had paid her up to the day of his departure, and had simply told her that he was going away. But whether for a day, a week, or forever he did not say. No board, however, was put up before the cottage to announce that it was to let; so that speculation was in favor of his return. Martha Lowndes was the only person who rightly guessed on what errand he had gone. She alone would have felt no surprise if she could have followed the track of Ned Mitchell as he wandered about the country spending a day here, three days there, always stolidly unsociable, and yet always contriving to get more information out of his neighbors than the chattiest and cheeriest of travellers could have done. He was tracking a man down with the feeblest of clues—a wooden leg and a Yorkshire accent. But he was gifted with a dogged energy and patience which nothing could daunt, and so in the end he found his man. The place was a common lodging house; the time was three weeks after he started on his search; the man was Abel Squires.

Ned Mitchell, when he found himself face to face with the crippled tramp, thought that his work was practically done—a witness found ready to his hand. But he was mistaken. Luckily for his object, he broached the matter with the caution of a skillful diplomatist, so that Abel had no idea of the interest he took in it. But the Yorkshireman in tatters was as keen and canny on his side as the Yorkshireman in broadcloth was on his; he was impervious to attack, either direct or indirect, and at the mere suggestion of bribery he grew closer than ever. Mitchell, however, did not give up the game, and at last he hit upon the means of opening the tramp's mouth. Poor Abel had a partiality for strong liquor, and the temptation to indulge in it was more than he could resist. The wily Ned was cautious,

and contrived to treat his ragged companion, not wisely but too well, without exciting his suspicion. But even under the soft influence of rum and water, the tramp was more difficult to manage than his tempter would have supposed possible. It was not until after a long convival evening that, Abel's rough head having fallen at last on to the table in a drunken sleep, Ned Mitchell was able to stand over him and say to himself, with a gleam of savage and doubtful satisfaction breaking through the heavy stolidity of his expression—

"You miserable, tattered old beggar! Have I got all out of you that you have to tell, I wonder? Anyhow, I think I know enough to hang the right rascal by. But I shall have to work, work, work."

On the following day, just three weeks after he left Rishton, Ned Mitchell was again seen leaning over his little cottage gate, smoking a bad cigar, and staring placidly at the broken stocks in the village green. The first persons to note his return were the vicar and his brother Vernon, who strolled through the churchyard together while he was standing at his gate. The younger man changed color at the sight of the colonist; the elder wished him a cheery "Good-day."

"Ha, Mr. Mitchell, you can't keep up your incognito any longer. We thought you had gone back to Australia without bidding us good-bye."

"Never fear, Parson Brander," returned Mitchell, drily, looking straight into the clergyman's kindly eyes; "there's another man has got to say good-bye to you all before I go back." He glanced from one brother to the other as he uttered these words. Vernon kept his eyes on the ground, but he looked vivid. The vicar smiled, and gently shook his head.

"You'll have to tell me this riddle by-and-by," said he, in his genial tones.

"Whenever you please, vicar," said Ned.

And as the two clergymen passed on, Ned Mitchell, without deigning so much as to glance at the younger, raised his hat to the Reverend Meredith Brander, a most unheard-of mark of respect for him to bestow on any dignitary of the Church.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BEFORE the first day of his return to Rishton was over, Ned Mitchell had to submit to the threatened interrogatory of the vicar.

Ned had strolled into the churchyard, and was examining with a rather cynical expression a beautiful marble monument, one of the chief ornaments of the enclosure, on which were set forth, at great length, in gilt letters, the many virtues of his late brother, "Samuel Robert Mitchell, of Rishton Hall Farm, who departed this life February the eighteenth, eighteen hundred and——, aged thirty-nine. He was a kind husband, a devoted father, a loyal citizen, a faithful member of the Church," etc., etc.

And below was a similar epitaph for "Lydia Elizabeth, relict of Samuel Robert Mitchell."

At the foot of this was a text, cut in larger letters than the rest: "In death they were not divided."

"They were in life though," murmured Ned, shaking his head slowly. "Never a meal passed but they were at it, hammer and tongs, about something or other. Marble had need to be tough or it would split up into shivers under the weight of lies we put on it."

At that moment he became aware that the vicar, who had come over the grass from his house, was standing behind him looking much amused.

"Thinking aloud!" said Mr. Brander. "A bad habit, Mr. Mitchell. Imagine what it might lead to if one had any crime on one's conscience."

"But parsons are supposed never to commit crimes, aren't they?"

"Or never to have any consciences?"

"No, I won't say that. The only criminal of your cloth that has happened to come in my way has felt many a prick of conscience, I'm ready to wager."

The vicar looked at him inquiringly, and did not attempt to hide that he felt some anxiety as to the other's meaning.

"Whoever he may be, I hope so, for the credit of my order," said he, gravely.

"Yes, vicar, and for the credit of your family," retorted Ned, drily.

Mr. Brander did not look surprised, but only deeply grieved. He laid his handsome white hand on the colonist's shoulder, and addressed him in tones of almost fatherly expostulation and entreaty.

"Look here," he said; "I don't want to preach; there's nothing I dislike more than preaching out of the pulpit. But I must say a few words to you now I have the chance; and you may be angry with me if you like."

"All right, vicar, fire away—I mean go on," he corrected, respectfully. "Let me tell you, it's not many men of your profession I would listen to (except in church, where you all have a prescriptive right to do your worst on us. But I've learnt something about you quite recently which makes me think you're different from the rest. So, sir, when you please, I'm all attention."

"Well, then," began the vicar in his most persuasive tones, "don't you think it's very uncharitable of you to come over here with the fixed intention of ruining a man? And all for what? What good can it do your unfortunate sister now to have the past raked up, and her sins as well as those of others dragged again into the light? Now, do you even think, going to work in the spirit you do, that you are sure to light upon the right person to punish? Isn't it possible that, acting with such a vindictive feeling as animates you, you may make an innocent man suffer, for lack of finding the guilty one?"

"No; to be plain with you, vicar, I don't think anything of the kind. As for the feeling which animates me, I think I ought to understand that better than anybody; and I'll let you know what it is. I'm not a generous man, parson; years ago I might have been, perhaps, at least as far as my favorite sister was concerned. But I've roughed it a good bit in the world since then, and all the pretty bloom

has been rubbed off my character, d'ye see? But I'm a just man; and I don't see why, if a man and a woman sin, the woman should get all the kicks and the man all the halfpence. That's a vulgar way of putting it, but you'll know what I mean. My poor sister goes wrong. I don't say she was worth much sympathy; and my private feeling has nothing to do with it; but she had her punishment. She was ruined, and then brutally murdered. Yes, don't tell me any humbugging stories about her going away of her own accord; I know better. Whatever happened, poor Nell was not the girl to slink off like that, and never be heard of again. She'd have come over to me, if she'd had to work her own passage in men's clothes, as they say the lasses do sometimes. Well, that's the woman's end; now for the man. He gets the woman's love, for what it's worth. I don't put much value on such things myself; but anyhow, he gets it. Then when he's tired of it and of her, and the girl grows importunate and her love inconvenient, he quietly puts her out of the way, and no questions asked—"

"Oh, but there were questions asked, and very inconvenient ones too," interrupted the vicar, gently.

Then he bit his lips, as if he had not meant to say so much.

"Aha, vicar, it looks very much as if you had a notion who it is I'm driving at!"

"I don't pretend to deny that you mean my unlucky brother," said the vicar, gravely. "To admit that is really to admit nothing, as everybody knows he was suspected, just as they know too that I myself never believed he did it."

"You judge him by yourself, I expect. You, being of calm and well-regulated temperament, can't understand how a member of your family can be so different from yourself.

"There you are mistaken, Mitchell, as others have been mistaken before you. People think I am calm because I am fat. As a matter of fact, I have been so worried over these suspicions of my brother that my wife has caught me pacing up and down the room in my sleep, too much disturbed on his account to be able to rest."

"It does you great credit to be so fond of him; I don't blame you in the least for it. You do your duty as a brother, and I'll do mine."

"And I believe you'll soon come to the conclusion that it is your duty as a brother to let the unhappy girl and her history be forgotten as soon as possible."

"My duty as a brother is to leave your brother alone, in fact!"

"Haven't I told you I believe him to be as innocent of this business as I am myself? But these suspicions, which he can't ignore—for you take no pains to hide them—are demoralizing in the extreme. They make him silent, sullen, mistrustful; in fact they breed in him all the appearances of guilt."

"Ay, that they do."

"Supposing that he had committed the crime, don't you believe in atonement? After ten years of self-denial and hard work and sacrifice, might not a man reasonably suppose that his sin was,

humanly speaking, washed out, and that he might indulge the hope of some human happiness with a woman who loved him?"

Ned Mitchell turned at this, from contemplation of the highly ornamental, castellated tower of the little church, to curious consideration of his companion's face.

"Oh," he said very drily, "I didn't know you were encouraging him to marry."

A deep flush overspread the vicar's face at this speech. Even his striking amiability was not quite proof against the quiet sneer. No annoyance, however, appeared in his tone as he said—

"Certainly I should not think of encouraging him to marry while these cruel rumors continue to be spread about him. It would only be misery for both of them. But if once the evil reports were silenced and forgotten, I should urge him to find happiness in what I have myself found to be the surest and best place to look for it—domestic pleasures."

Ned appeared to consider this proposition thoughtfully for some moments. Then he said—

"It's curious that you should be the first of your family that I ever heard to be of your way of thinking, parson, isn't it?"

Again Mr. Brander reddened. It was an annoying thing for a popular spiritual autocrat to be questioned in this inquisitorial way by a man in no way qualified to be a judge of him or his family. But his patience was equal even to this trial. He said, very mildly—

"Yes, I am afraid—that is I believe that is so."

"Well, then, I think it's too much to expect to find another in the same generation."

There was a pause; the vicar looking mildly grieved, Ned munching a bit of stick with much relish, while he regarded his companion out of the corners of his eyes.

Evening was closing in rapidly. A thin mist was gathering under the trees on the top of the hill, enshrouding the tombstones and softening the outlines of the little white stone church and of the pretty ivy-grown Vicarage. Not a sound was to be heard in the near neighborhood; and the noises of the village—children's voices, lowing of cattle, and the carter's cry to his horses—came up faint and subdued from below.

Suddenly this peaceful stillness was broken by a long and dismal howl, which startled the vicar and caused Ned Mitchell to turn his head attentively in the direction of his cottage. A minute later it was repeated, and before a word had been exchanged between the two men on the subject of this strange interruption, a yelping and barking began, and mingled with the howls, which still continued, until the air seemed to vibrate with the discordant sounds.

"You've brought back a dog with you, I perceive," said the vicar.

"H'm, yes. I've brought two. Fond of dogs, vicar?"

"Very. Are you going to offer me one of yours?"

"I don't think so. They're not exactly the sort Mrs. B. would

fancy poking about her pretty garden. They've got queer ways have my dogs."

"You've had them some time?"

"Ten hours. But they were being prepared for me beforehand. In fact, they have been some time in training."

"Sporting dogs, eh?"

"Yes, and trained for a particular sort of game."

Ned Mitchell was rubbing his chin slowly and listening to the harsh duet with much satisfaction. There was a quiet significance in his words and manner which kept alive the curiosity of the vicar.

"I should like to see these dogs, Mr. Mitchell," said he.

"Well, sir," said Ned, with great heartiness; "choose your own time."

"Suppose, then, we say now?"

"Now it is, then."

Ned removed his arm from the tombstone against which he had been leaning, and led the way out of the churchyard with alacrity.

"This place gives me the horrors towards night time," he explained as, with unwonted civility, he opened the gate for the vicar to pass out first.

"Why surely a man of your sound practical sense doesn't believe in the ghosts and goblins that keep the ignorant out of churchyards at night?"

"No; but such things can be done in lonely churchyards, under cover of the popular horror. You agree with me there, vicar, don't you?"

This pigheaded colonist would harp always upon the same string. As plainly as if he had mentioned the name, his tone intimated St. Cuthbert's churchyard and the murder of a girl there by Vernon Brander. But the vicar was learning how to "take" him, and he assented at once. They crossed the little village green, under trees whose bare branches began now to show small tufts of delicate young leaves. There was a strip of garden in front of the cottage; it had little space for flowers, but was well filled with shrubs and evergreens, which grew close up to the lower windows and almost shut out all light from the tiny sitting-room on the left-hand side of the door. Ned Mitchell, leaving the path, forced his way through the evergreens, and, holding the branches apart with his hands, beckoned his companion to the window, before which the vicar perceived a couple of strong iron bars had been put up.

"Why," said he, as he picked his way daintily over the moist mould, "is it a menagerie of wild beasts you have in there?"

"Something very like it," answered Ned, as a couple of brute faces, with hanging jaws and bloodshot eyes, dashed up against the window, licking the dusty frames with long red tongues, and jostling each other with hungry eagerness. "Whoa!" cried Ned, as he pushed up the window, and stretching a fearless hand through the bars, stroked and patted their sleek heads with an assured strength and coolness which told them he was their master. "I must have the glass taken out of these panes—what there's left of it—or my pets will be hurting themselves."

"Your pets!" said the vicar, as he peered into the room, felt their hot breath on his face, and listened to their hungry growling. "Well, Mitchell, you have an odd taste in your choice of domestic favorites. If my inclination lay in the direction of a couple of fierce hounds like that, I think I should consider that old kennel in the back garden a near enough abode for them."

"What, for friends I count upon to do me a great service!" exclaimed Ned, grimly. "Oh, no! my hounds are already more to me than his pig is to an Irishman. No place that's not good enough for me is good enough for them. Besides, if they were put into the kennel they would be almost close under some of your windows, and would disturb you and your good lady at night. They make more than a lapdog's yapping when they are uncomfortable, I can tell you," he added, turning with admiration to his hounds, who were snapping savagely at each other, and sniffing the air with dilated nostrils.

"They seem to be hungry," said the vicar, who, if he did not share their master's admiration, was much interested in the brutes.

"Well, which of us wouldn't be, if he'd had nothing to eat all day? It's a part of their education that," he went on, as he drew back from the window and took up an iron spade which stood inside the little porch. "Now I'm going to show you how accomplished they are, if you care to see. If I bury an old bone with next to no flesh on it in any part of this garden, they'll hunt it up. That is, they will if they answer to the warranty I had with them. That's the accomplishment I bought them for."

"Dear me, very curious," murmured the vicar, with great interest. "And this is your first trial of them?"

"Yes. I only brought them back with me in the small hours this morning, and they've been without food ever since."

"And are you sure of getting them out of that room without their making a meal of you?"

"I must chance that. I didn't buy them for lapdogs, and I think I can manage them. Anyhow, I intend to try. I suppose, vicar, you've no mind to help me," he added, rather maliciously, as he turned to go into the cottage. "It isn't work for gentlemen of your cloth, I know. I don't suppose anything fiercer than a toy terrier is allowed by the Thirty-Nine Articles."

"There's no mention of bloodhounds in them, certainly; but I'm willing to help you all the same, if I can," said the vicar, mildly, preparing to follow his host into the cottage.

Ned Mitchell looked surprised. Then he glanced rather contemptuously from the plump hands and neat white cuffs to the handsome, placid pink face, and said, drily—

"I'm afraid they'll make rather a mess of your linen, parson, if they don't of you."

"I must chance that, as you say yourself," said the vicar, calmly.

Ned nodded, and saying he would be back in a moment, he disappeared through the porch with a grim chuckle. When he returned, a few minutes later, holding in his rough fingers a handful of mouldy bones, the vicar was leaning against the porch, thoughtfully turning up his cuffs and his coat sleeves with the most scrupulous neatness.

"Not a very tempting feast that, one would have thought."

"Well, if they want anything more tempting than that to make them hunt with a will, I've been deceived in them, that's all, and back they go to the man I bought them from."

As he spoke he took up the spade, and began to search for a suitable place in which to bury the fleshless bones. He decided on a spot in the back garden, under the prickly leaves of an auricula. There, right under the branches, he dug a deep hole, not without much damage to his hands and his clothes. Into this hole he threw the bones, covering them carefully with the displaced earth. The vicar laughed as Ned flattened down the mould and stamped upon it.

"You are expecting too much of those unlucky brutes," said he. "I quite believe that they might grub up a nice fresh leg of mutton, or the body of a newly-killed rabbit. But old bones like that, and under two feet of earth! No, my dear Mitchell, it's not in reason."

"All right," said Ned, putting his hands in his pockets. "If you think my little experiment is not worth watching, I won't trouble you with my company or my dogs."

"Oh, but of course I must see the end of this. And if your hounds do answer your expectations after all, I quite agree with you that the best room in the house is not too good for such clever beasts."

They went round to the front of the cottage again, and through the porch into the narrow passage. Ned brought a lighted candle from the kitchen, and proceeded to search among a bunch of large keys which hung from a nail in the wall. Meanwhile the dogs, disappointed at the disappearance of their master, from whom they had expected food, howled and yelped with redoubled vehemence, and flung themselves against the door of the room in which they were confined until it shook and creaked on its old hinges. Ned glanced at the vicar with a sardonic smile.

"Have you still a mind to go in there, parson?" he asked, rather maliciously. "You clergymen are holy men, as we all know, but things have changed since Daniel's time, and I doubt, no offence to you, whether he'd have got off so well if he'd been pitched into a lion's cage at the Zoo as he did among those old Persians!"

The vicar looked nervous, certainly. But he still stuck to his resolution of going into the room. Ned shrugged his shoulders, and whistled softly, staring into his companion's face as he fumbled with the keys, and seeming rather to enjoy the notion of the change which would come over that pink, plump, mildly jolly countenance when the fangs of one of the hounds should meet in the clerical anatomy. He felt quite sure that it was the vicar's entire ignorance of hungry bloodhounds and their little ways which gave him such an appearance of placid pluck.

"Are you ready?" he asked, as he put the key in the door. "We shall have to dash in pretty quick to prevent the brutes from coming out."

The vicar nodded, and came close up beside him. Ned gave him a last and, as it were, a farewell look, and opened the door. The hounds, with hungry growls and jaws dripping with foam, rushed at the opening. Ned Mitchell was too quick for them; he was in the room, with the door closed behind him, before either of the brutes

could get so much as his nose outside. Quick as he was, however, the portly vicar was before him, and was well in the middle of the small room by the time the door closed.

Then Ned Mitchell found, cool as he was, that in fancying himself able to master these two fierce brutes, he had reckoned without his host. In a moment he discovered that it was only when satisfied with food and carefullly muzzled, as they had been for their journey in the small hours that morning, that he could attempt to cope with them successfully. Both together they now flew at him, springing, the one at his throat, the other at his right hand. The attack was so sudden, so fierce, that he staggered back against the door, in danger of being overpowered, and struck out with unsure aim, failing to beat them off. He had been forced to drop his candle when the hounds set upon him, and it was almost in darkness that the struggle went on, the man cursing and the animals growling, while they bit at and worried him with the savagery of ravenous hunger.

The vicar was standing, motionless, in the middle of the room. Ned saw his portly figure in outline between him and the faint light, and in the midst of his own occupation wondered, not having any great respect for the physical powers of the Church, that Mr. Brander did not edge further away from the scene of combat, or show some other sign of nervousness.

"Shall I help you?" asked the vicar, tranquilly, when the struggle between man and hounds had gone on for several exciting moments.

Ned was too busy, trying to keep off the dogs, to express the astonishment he felt at these words and the tone in which they were spoken.

"Yes, for Heaven's sake, yes, if you can!" he panted out.

He had scarcely uttered these words in answer, when the vicar came to his aid with a promptitude and dash which a professional tamer of beasts could scarcely have exceeded. Seizing by the throat first one of the hounds and then the other, he choked them off his half-bewildered companion, and held them, yelping and gurgling, while Ned, savagely angry at "the parson's" superiority more than grateful for his timely help, picked up and relit the candle with affected unconcern.

"Well done, vicar!" said he, in a tone which betrayed that he was not particularly well pleased. "If you can manage to hold the brutes while I find the key, we'll soon be shut of them."

"Don't hurry on my account," said Mr. Brander, quite pleasantly.

His bland tone made Ned's blood boil. The colonist resolved, since he seemed to like his occupation, not to curtail his pleasure. He took twice the necessary time to find the key and place it in the lock. Then, before turning it, he inclined his head over his shoulder, and asked, maliciously—

"Getting tired?"

"Not a bit!" said the vicar, mildly.

"Hang you!" muttered Ned below his breath.

The next moment he heard a rush and a growl, and felt the teeth of one of the hounds meet in his right leg.

"Hallo!" cried Mr. Brander; "can't you manage him?"

Ned did not answer. Between pain and rage, indeed, he would

scarcely have been articulate if he had done so. He gave the dog a vicious kick, which sent him howling away, and, turning the key in the lock, beckoned to the vicar to follow him out. Before doing so, however, Mr. Brander had to dispose of the animal he was still holding. His arms, strong as they were, had begun to ache with the strain, for the dog had writhed and struggled the whole time. Then Ned, holding the candle high, and examining the vicar's face with exceeding interest and equal malevolence, saw upon it an expression very different from its habitual, placid mildness. The blue eyes were flashing; the handsome mouth was drawn in a tight, straight line; the clear-cut features seemed to have in a moment lost their plumpness, and to have become hard and cruel; while the soft, white hands looked strong and sinewy as they clasped the dog's throat. Ned watched him curiously. The vicar looked into the animal's bloodshot eyes with the expression not merely of a master, but of a tyrant. Lifting him with both hands high into the air, he gave the dog such a shaking as set him gurgling and howling and twisting his body with pain, and flung him to the far end of the room to join his companion. Then he crossed the room without any haste, and went out at the door, which Ned shut and locked.

"And now," said the vicar, "how about the experiment?"

Mitchell, who was engaged in an examination of his injured leg, looked up quickly.

"Well," he muttered, in unwilling admiration, "you are a cool hand, I must say."

"Cool!" exclaimed the vicar as pleasantly as ever; "one needs to be cool with acquaintances who invite one into a sitting-room furnished with a couple of bloodhounds and nothing else. Ugh!" he cried, as he suddenly noticed the condition of his hands, which were smeared with blood and foam, "what a mess those brutes have made me in!"

Ned laughed shortly, and continued to stare at him with the deepest interest.

"It looks very unsuitable now, that same mess, when you are all the parson again," he said, drily. "But, curse me with book and with bell if I don't think that a minute ago you looked as if you could stand the sight of blood as well as any soldier."

"And why not?" asked Mr. Brander, who had this time wiped his hands, pulled down his cuffs, and almost recovered his usual exquisitely appearance. "People seem to forget that we parsons were not born in the surplice, and that we have all been through the same training as other men from whom a little readiness with wrists and fists is expected at a matter of course."

"That's true, parson. But we'd always looked upon you as one of the meek 'uns. Now if it had been your brother——"

"Ah, poor Vernon! I think all the spirit has been badgered out of him."

"Well, but, parson," said Ned, still gazing at him with the same steady and curious stare, "I think you have spirit enough for two."

Mr. Brander turned and met his look straight, eye to eye.

"Yes," he said quietly and firmly; "and when it comes to an attack upon my brother, you'll find that spirit a more serious thing to deal with than you expect."

They had come through the porch out into the garden again, and were standing very near together, with the setting sun throwing a weak and watery light upon their faces. A passer-by, noticing their attitudes, looks, and tones, would have guessed that a challenge had been thrown down and taken up.

The two men bade each other good-night in a manner which showed on each side both caution and mutual respect. And having retired each to his house, they instinctively tried to get a sight each of the other. The clergyman went to his study, and seated himself with a book at the window; Ned Mitchell took the air at his back door. The vicar remained calm and smiling, and looked amused when he caught Ned's anxious look. The colonist took things less easily.

"That parson 'll be a very difficult beggar to tackle," he said to himself almost despondingly. "I could manage Vernon by himself, but with this old 'Soap-your-sides' behind him it'll be a long job—a very long job."

But he comforted himself before going to bed by a look at his bloodhounds!

CHAPTER XIX.

The Reverend Meredith Brander had not been Vicar of Rishton and compulsory student of the wiles of frail humanity for fourteen years for nothing. When from his study window he saw Ned Mitchell—after many yawns, several sleepy stretchings out of his arms, and an occasional nod of the head—retire from his back door and shut himself in, it seemed to the vicar by no means certain that his neighbor had gone to bed. So he withdrew a little way into the shelter of his window curtains, and remained on the watch, beguiling the time by composing a very pretty opening for next Sunday morning's sermon, wherein the rising moon, as it showed more and more of his laurels, was used to tipify the grace of repentance illuminating the dark places of the heart.

And the result justified Mr. Brander's doubts. Ned Mitchell did, it is true, go to bed, but he speedily got up again, impelled to this freak partly by the pain in his injured leg and partly by his unsatisfied curiosity concerning the accomplishments of his dogs. The vicar smiled as, after an hour and a half's watching, he saw Ned's candle glimmering weakly through the blinds; first on the upper floor of the cottage, and then on the lower. Presently Ned himself re-appeared at the back door, which he set wide open, before proceeding to draw on his hands a pair of stout leather gloves. Then he retreated into the cottage again, and gave the vicar time to open his window a little way very softly. As he did so, sounds of yelping and scuffling reached his ears from the cottage, and a few moments later the hounds rushed out into the garden.

The month was May, and in this cold north country the trees both in the vicar's garden and in that of his neighbor were as yet only thinly covered with leaves; so that there was little to hide the

movements of the animals, which, after a preliminary scamper round the house and an attempt to get through the bars of the gate, began to sneak about close to the walls and under the shrubs, sniffing, prowling, scratching, like uncanny creatures half seen in the moonlight, making the branches of the evergreens sway and rustle, and uttering from time to time a yelping, whining sound, as they grubbed and searched restlessly for food. The vicar pulled aside his curtain and watched with great interest. The hounds were getting —whether by accident or led by scent he could not yet tell— nearer and nearer to the shrub under which Ned Mitchell had buried the untempting bones. Ned himself, from the upper floor of the cottage, was intently watching them. Hither and thither the brutes roamed, in apparently random search for something to appease their hunger. With nose pointed always to the earth they crept slowly along, or bounded a few paces, sometimes raising the night echoes by a deep howl, more often uttering the low, wolfish sounds of half-starved savage creatures. But aimless as their wanderings seemed to be, often as they deviated from a straight course to it, they did both come, slowly but surely, nearer to the auricula. The vicar rose from his chair; Ned Mitchell hung his whole body out of his little window. As the animals drew closer to the place where the bones were hidden, they seemed to the careful eyes of the watcher to grow more excited, to yelp and whine more savagely, to sniff the cold earth with keener nostrils. At last the muzzle of one of the hounds touched the prickly leaves of one of the lowest branches of the auricula. He drew back with a snort of pain. A minute later, however, drawn by his irresistible instinct, he returned, and, making a furious attempt to pass under the low branches, retreated again, whining and savage from the effect of the pricks he had received. The third time both dogs drew near together, and this time—regardless of the scratches inflicted by the thorny boughs on their backs—they pushed their way under the auricula, and began to grub and to scratch up the earth with might and main.

In an incredibly short space of time, considering the depth of earth with which Ned had covered them, the bloodhounds had dug up the buried bones and were crunching them ravenously with their powerful jaws. Ned, uttering a short laugh of triumph, raised his head and caught sight of the vicar, who now, regardless of concealment, was pressing close to the window panes of his study a face which looked of a greenish pallor in the moonlight. Ned watched him with an intent, glaring gaze for a few seconds; then, shutting his little window rapidly and noiselessly, he slipped out of the cottage by the front door, and, making his way round to the back stealthily under cover of the evergreens, crept along in the shadow under the dividing wall until he stood, unseen by the vicar, almost under the latter's window. After the lapse of a few moments his curiosity was rewarded.

"Poor Vernon! My poor brother!" murmured the vicar with a heavy sigh.

Then Ned, hugging himself and indulging in a knowing smile of satisfaction, heard the study window close.

He crept back into his little house by the way he had come, nar-

rowly escaping the attentions of his hounds, which, having quickly finished the scanty meal the dry bones afforded them, seemed inclined to try, as more nourishing, the person of their master. He went indoors, armed himself with a plate of raw meat in one hand and a short whip in the other, and calling them into the house succeeded in shutting them up once more in the room they had previously occupied.

"Good dogs! good dogs!" he said, approvingly, as he stood at the crack of the door and watched them snarling over their the food. "That's nothing to the meal you shall have when you've hunted out the next lot of old bones I shall set you grubbing for."

And with another grim chuckle as he closed the back door and gave a glance at the now deserted study window of the Vicarage, Ned Mitchell retired for the night with a light heart and a good conscience.

Next morning Ned was early on the watch, in spite of the fact that the wound in his leg gave him a good deal of pain. He saw the vicar go out a couple of hours earlier than usual; and instead of walking, as was his custom in the morning, he was on his cob. Ned nodded to him as he went by, and timed his absence by a ponderous gold watch which was with him night and day.

"An hour and twenty minutes," he said to himself, as Mr. Brander returned at an ambling, clerical pace, and, meeting the nurse with his little son descending the hill for their morning walk, gave the boy a ride in front of him as far as the stables. "Yes, parson; just long enough to ride to St. Cuthbert's, catch your brother before he started on his parish work, have a quarter of an hour's chat—about the weather, let us say—and be back in time for your own morning walk."

Perhaps Ned Mitchell's shrewd face betrayed his suspicions; perhaps the wily vicar's knowledge of men was greater than any that books on divinity could impart; for, seeing the colonist leaning as usual over his garden gate, his shrewd eyes lazily blinking in the spring sunshine, Mr. Brander nodded, wished him good-morning, and added, cheerfully—

"On the watch, eh?"

"Perhaps, vicar," answered Ned, touching his hat, with a knowing twinkle in his eye.

"How are the pets this morning, after their night's work?"

"Night's work?" echoed Ned, who had entertained the mean suspicion that the vicar would not own to his noctural observations.

"Yes, I did a little bit of spying too last night," answered Mr. Brander, who seemed to take a frank and boyish delight in an open and declared warfare with his neighbor. "How's the leg this morning?"

Ned, who chose to think that the vicar might have prevented the injury to his limb if it had so pleased him, answered with a tone which was in marked contrast to the good humor of the other.

"It'll do," he said, shortly. "How's your brother this morning?"

Again Mr. Brander seemed to take a buoyant pleasure in his antagonist's cuteness.

"My brother is very well," he said, smiling. "And I'm sure, whatever you may think, that he would be quite pleased to hear of your kind inquiries."

"Well, we shall see about that," said Ned. "Now, come, parson," he went on, persuasively, "you might just as well confess what I know—that you rode over to St. Cuthbert's this morning to put him on his guard against my tricks."

"And may not one with good reason put an innocent man on his guard against an avowed enemy?"

"I am not your brother's enemy, Mr. Brander. I am the enemy of the man who murdered my sister. It is you who are saying that they are one and the same."

"No, no, no!" broke out the vicar, with vehemence unusual to him. "The fact is, you have come here with what you consider a strong case against the poor fellow, and everything you hear goes to pad up that case. If I believed in my brother's guilt, do you suppose I should leave my little daughter in his care, as I have done for the last week, and intend to do for another fortnight?"

"Why not parson?" said Ned, very quietly. "Neither you nor I are simple enough to think the worse of a man because he happens to have made a little slip by the way. The man who murdered my sister didn't say to himself, 'I will change my whole course of life and become a murderer,' as if it were a profession. No, he is going about the world at this moment just like you or me, doing his daily duty as well as he can, and perhaps feeling sorry enough for that little slip to better his life in atonement for it."

"Indeed, indeed he is," broke in the vicar, earnestly. "If you could see how my brother works: how he tries by every means—"

"Hadn't we better leave your brother's name out of the discussion?" asked Ned, with a touch of dry insolence. "You are not anxious to fix the noose round his neck yourself, I suppose."

The poor vicar looked beyond measure crestfallen and disconcerted. After all his assertions of his brother's innocence, to have betrayed himself like that! He stammered and tried to explain away his unfortunate admission; but not succeeding very well, he made haste to cut short the conversation and retreat into the house with his little son.

Ned Mitchell was not left long without an object to interest him. He remained sunning himself at his garden gate for some minutes after Mr. Brander's disappearance, and then retired into his cottage, from one of the tree-shaded windows of which he soon saw a person approaching, at sight of whom his rugged features seemed to tighten, the only sign they ever gave of unusual excitement. It was Vernon Brander. From the curious glances which the clergyman cast in the direction of the room in which the bloodhounds, now asleep after a good meal, were still confined, it was clear he had been fully informed concerning them. He stopped before the garden fence, peering among the evergreens with evident interest. But as Ned appeared at the door, with the intention of a little talk with him, he hurried on towards the Vicarage without another glance at the cottage. Ned looked after him with a curling lip.

"I suppose some people would admire that fellow, with his lanky face and his good deeds. But I never did have any fancy for your martyrs, especially when their private life won't bear looking into."

And after watching the clergyman until he had turned into the

private road, Ned directed his attention to two visitors, who, attracted by certain rumors about the occupant of the cottage, and the menagerie he had set up there, had joined their forces on the way to pay Mr. Mitchell a morning call.

These visitors were Mr. Denison and Fred Williams. Fred had by no means got the better of his violent admiration for Olivia Denison. But having found her persistently "out" when he called at the farm, and persistently curt when he met her out of doors, he had consoled himself for her frigidity by taking a trip to New York, whence he had now not long returned. To signalize his recent achievements in the way of travel, he wore a wide-brimmed hat and a sea-sick complexion, and carried a revolver in a leather belt. This was his first meeting with any of the Hall Farm people since his return, so that, on coming face to face with Mr. Denison, who was passing through the farmyard gate, he overwhelmed him by an outburst of effusive cordiality which astonished that gentleman beyond measure, but raised his spirits, and soothed him with the feeling that here was a friend.

Mr. Denison was one of those simple-natured men who are only too ready to find a friend in any one who addresses to them a kindly word. Things had been going badly with him. Having started farming with all the skin-deep energy of the enthusiastic amateur, he had long ere this discovered the perversity of the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms: the determination with which sheep die of the rot, pigs take the measles, beans and peas refuse to come up at the proper time and crops fail on the slightest provocation, or on none. A suspicion had begun to take root even in his ingenious mind that there was more in farming than one would have thought while going over a farm; and a stronger suspicion still that, if things did not soon "take a turn," his new profession, instead of making his fortune, would land him in the Bankruptcy Court. He could not fail, moreover, to be alive to the sturdy animosity of his rival, John Oldshaw, and to the ever-increasing pleasure which that amiable person showed on meeting him, as his own prospects of finally getting the Hall Farm at an easy rent seemed to grow better. Olivia, who understood her father's temperament too well to communicate to him the smallest fact which was likely to trouble him, had never uttered the name of Fred Williams in his presence, except to say with much haughtiness that he was a quite insufferable person. But Mr. Denison, who never disliked anybody, would have been quite ready to set her aversion down to groundless prejudice when Fred listened sympathetically to a rambling account of the last outbreak of the feud with Oldshaw.

"The fellow's such a cad, too," complained Mr. Denison, mildly. "Not that I should think the worse of him for not being a gentleman," he added. "His son is a nice lad, a very nice lad, and we get on together admirably. If he were only in one's own class there might be a Montague and Capulet end to the business, I fancy; for if he were a little better educated I should almost fancy he was in love with my daughter Olivia. You may have seen Olivia?" he continued, naively, with a touch of paternal pride.

Yes, Mr. Fred Williams might have seen Olivia, but was wise enough not to own to more than this at present.

"Well, the use that young fellow has been to me—me, a man old enough to be his father—is something remarkable. In fact, I don't mind telling you" (Mr. Denison didn't mind telling anybody) "that if it hadn't been for his hints, I should never have been able to carry on the farm at all. Why, if I give him—on the strict Q. T. you know, for it mustn't come to his father's ears—a commission to buy me a few sheep, or a well-bred shorthorn, and his father sends him to market for the same purpose, he'll contrive to get me the best, Mr. Williams—me the best—I assure you."

"Indeed!" murmured Fred, with a deferential courtesy entirely new to him.

"Yes, I assure you it is so. Now I am not one of those old fools who fancy that a young man will do such a thing out of friendship for a man of his father's generation. I see there is something behind it," continued Mr. Denison, astutely. "And I confess," he went on, growing more confidential as his small friend, while listening more sympathetically than ever, linked his arm within that of the farmer, "that I almost wish my daughter hadn't been 'brought up a lady,' as the saying is, when I see what a very good thing young Oldshaw and I could have made of it together—he with his knowledge of practical farming, and I with my—with my knowledge, my—er—my knowledge of the world, in fact."

"A very good idea, sir—a very good idea," assented Fred, enthusiastically. "At the same time you might find a son-in-law who could help you without looking so far beneath you. I say so far," he went on, "because there is a something about you that—er—makes you sort of different from other people, you know; a dignity or high breeding or something; and perhaps your daughter may have a touch of it. I say perhaps, you know, because I scarcely know Miss Denison."

"Well," said Mr. Denison, swallowing the bait with all simplicity, "I suppose there is, as you say, a certain *cachet* about a man who has lived so much in town or near town as I have. And whatever is best about me my Olivia has certainly inherited. But whoever my child marries, it must be for her own good; not for mine."

Simple, selfish Mr. Denison thought there was something rather praiseworthy in this declaration. Fred listened shrewdly.

"It must be much worse to be badly off, or—or not to be exactly flourishing, when one has a family to care for and provide for," he suggested.

Mr. Denison seized his hand.

"My dear lad, that's just it," said he, almost earnestly and in all sincerity. "A man on a farm by himself must be in heaven. On the same farm, with a family, he may be in—in quite another place."

"I see, I see," murmured Fred, pressing his arm against that of the older man. "Money market tight, and all that."

"Tight, I believe you!" assented Mr. Denison, bubbling over with his confidences, as weak men do when they have had to exercise an unwonted self-repression. "You would scarcely believe what the tightness amounts to sometimes. A young man in your position couldn't realize it."

"Oh, yes, I could though. Nothing of that sort that you have ever borne is as bad as what my guvnor's gone through lots of times. It was before he was blessed with me, and of course he don't talk about it; but you may take my word it's true."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Denison, as if this was almost inconceivable. Though in truth the airs of patronage the elder Mr. Williams liked to assume had often caused him to jibe gently in the bosom of his family at the waste of pounds by men who were better used to pence.

"But it seems worse for you, you know—don't seem natural somehow. Seems as if it were the right and proper thing for you to have lots of money. Makes me uncomfortable to hear you haven't, and —and all that sort of thing, you know."

He gabbled out this broken speech with an air of modest confusion which touched Mr. Denison, whose finances were at a distressingly low ebb. He pressed the young fellow's arm in silence— rather awkwardly, but with much feeling. Fred went on, quickly—

"Now don't be offended; you mustn't be offended. I'm not of enough account in the world for a man like you to be offended with me. But if you wouldn't mind—you needn't think anything of it— if you should be tight, I mean strait, anything like hard up, in fact, I should really feel it quite an honor if you would—"

Poor Mr. Denison was quite broken by this offer, which came upon him unexpectedly. He protested, stammered, grew red in the face, and dim in the eyes. He was a gentleman, sensitive, and not without pride. But he was weak-natured—harassed by difficulties he saw no way out of. Although he repeatedly refused Fred's repeated offers and with perfect sincerity; he did so in a tone which encouraged the young man to think that his yielding was only a question of time and of an adroitly chosen moment.

"At any rate, you're not offended with me for making the suggestion?" Fred asked at last.

He was glad to see that Mr. Denison looked rather disappointed to think that he was taken at his word.

"Offended! No, indeed, my dear boy. One can't afford to be offended at a friendly offer nowadays."

"I daresay, you know, I haven't put it as nicely as I might, and that's why you go on refusing. Of course my manners are not up to yours. You're refined; I'm not. But I mean what I say, and that's something; if you can't be refined and all that, any way it's something to be sincere."

"It's everything, in my opinion. I shall not forget your disinterested kindness, Williams. But what put it into your head I can't think."

"Came like a flash, you know," answered the young fellow, promptly. "Gentleman—handsome, dignified gentleman, credit to the parish—looks humped. What's the cause? Sure to be the old thing—money. Besides, we've a mutual interest, you and I; you're fond of dogs. I suppose you've come up to see those hounds they say Mitchell's got?" he suggested.

For, on reaching the garden paling of Church Cottage, they had both stopped, as if their journey were at an end.

"Well, yes—no ; I had come to see Mitchell, certainly ; and I had heard about these hounds he's brought back with him. But that wasn't altogether my reason for coming."

He would have babbled out his reason with his usual ingenuousness if Ned had not interrupted the conversation by calling "Good-morning!" approaching them in a leisurely manner at the same time.

"I know what you've come for," he said, with a nod to the younger man. "They're in there. Don't be too familiar, unless you want to leave a pound of flesh with them."

And he jerked his head back in the direction of the room where the bloodhounds were kept. Fred Williams did not wait for further conversation, but raising his hat with great ceremony to Mr. Denison, and shaking his hand warmly, he went through the gate and up to the cottage window. Ned threw at him with some disdain what may be described as half a glance.

"Unlicked cub, that!" he said, not much caring whether the subject of his remark heard it or not.

The guileless and grateful Mr. Denison demurred at this, and Ned did not think the point worth discussing.

"I suppose you didn't come up to talk about dogs?" he asked, drily.

"Why, no. As a matter of fact," said Mr. Denison, with the hesitation of a person unused to come straight to the point, "I have heard odd reports about ; I—I—"

"Have come to the wrong shop, Mr. Denison, if you expect to hear any village gossip from me."

"Quite so. quite so. But everybody knows now why you're here," said Mr. Denison. "And as the man they say you're after is an admirer of my daughter's—"

"'They say' a lot of things, Mr. Denison, which I'd advise you not to listen to."

"But I've been quite discourteous to this gentleman on the strength of your suspicions!"

"Well, I should find some stronger ground to go upon before I was discourteous again."

"Then you don't believe these dreadful stories?"

"I know nothing of any dreadful stories."

"Mr. Mitchell, I beg you to be plain with me. Am I right in refusing to have anything to say to—a certain clerical neighbor of ours?"

"Mr. Denison, if my advice is worth anything, have nothing to do with any clerical neighbors."

"Thank you, Mr. Mitchell, that is enough for me. I see you wish to steer clear of libel. But I understand your warning, and I thank you. Vernon Brander shall not enter my house again."

He wished the colonist good-morning, and went back to his farm with a more satisfied conscience. His wife, then, had not been so far wrong in her estimate of the Vicar of St. Cuthbert's, though her treatment might have been open to criticism. But Ned Mitchell looked after him with the tight-lipped smile of contempt with which he was always so ready.

"Does he really think a few mumbling words from him will turn that strong-willed lass, I wonder?" thought he.

And dismissing the subject with a short laugh of derision, his thoughts turned to his hounds, and to a plan which he was nourishing very near his heart.

That very day he resolved to put it into practice. In the early part of the afternoon, therefore, he strolled down to St. Cuthbert's, found the churchyard gate securely fastened, and, making a circuit of the walls, discovered a point where it was of no very formidable height.

"I think my beauties could do that!" chuckled he to himself. And returning straight to his cottage, he remained within doors until the sun began to go down.

Then, going, as he now did without fear, into the room where the hounds, again ravenous with hunger, were yelping and savagely howling, he cowed them with a small whip, which he did not scruple to use cruelly, and securing the animals in a leash, left his little dwelling with them. The hounds were fierce, strong, and difficult to manage. Ned, who still limped in pain from the effects of the bite one of them had given him the night before, cursed them below his breath one moment and burst out into enthusiastic praises of them the next. He made his way with them direct to St. Cuthbert's, going over the fields. It was growing dusk; the walk was a lonely one; he did not see a single human being as he made his way slowly along, surprised at the ever-increasing pain his wounded limb caused him.

At last he came in sight of the ruined tower, the patched-up walls of which bulged out dangerously, threatening constantly to fall, a mass of ill-assorted fragments of brick and stone, wood and tiles, into the disused graveyard beneath.

"Steady, my beauties, steady!" said he to the yelping hounds. "Your work is going to begin, my dears! Steady now, steady!"

And he made his way, with the hounds still straining at the leash, to the spot he had picked out that afternoon.

"There are some old bones for you in there, or I'm much mistaken, that will be worth a king's ransom to me, and a good home for the rest of your days to you, my beauties."

The hounds growled and sniffed, and leaped up about him, as if madly eager to begin their grim hunt. Close up to the wall of the old graveyard he came, and peered over at the irregular mounds, overgrown with rank grass and weeds. There was little daylight left, but his keen eyes could still see dimly into each dark corner, filled with old stones and decaying vegetation. His hands were trembling, stolid as he was, with his eagerness to let the hounds go. His eyes were hungrily roaming over the neglected enclosure where he believed the clue to his secret to lie, when suddenly a sound came to his ears which paralyzed his arms and seemed to stop his fast-drawn breath. It was the voice of a little child.

Looking again more intently than before into the chaos of broken and misplaced tombstones, he saw, peering out from behind a tuft of shaggy briar and weed, the face of a little child. It was tiny Kate Brander. Ned looked at the fierce brutes and shivered. Another moment and they would have been loose in the graveyard, ravenous and blood hungry. Then the expression of his face changed,

"Yes, he has got the best of this move; curse him! But the game's not played out yet."

And, with a lowering face, and slow, heavy gait, he turned, with his yelping brood, towards the road home.

CHAPTER XX.

THE stolid calmness of Ned Mitchell's everyday demeanor, which was but a mask for strong passions and still stronger resolutions, broke down entirely under his disappointment. If the mouldy old graveyard of St. Cuthbert's had been a paradise of sweet sights and sounds and scents, he could not have been more maddened by the impossibility of entering it. Even the innocent child herself, whose presence among the ruined graves had prevented him from letting his hounds loose, shared his anger.

"They can't keep the brat there always, that's one thing," he said to himself, as he limped along.

He found the return journey over the fields more tedious than he—a strong, healthy man, used to bear great fatigues without any ill effect—could have thought possible. The hounds were growing every moment more troublesome, straining harder at the leash, snapping and yelping the while. The wound in his injured leg was beginning to smart and burn, the muscles were swelling most painfully, and long before he reached Rishton Hill every step was causing him acute agony. The last field he had to cross brought him out into the road almost opposite the farmyard gate of Rishton Hall. Leaning against the gate and stroking the shaggy head of a poor old mongrel which had attached itself to the farm since she had been there, was Olivia Denison. She looked very sad, and stared out at the fields and the grey hills beyond with a face out of which all the bright girlish vivacity seemed for the moment to have gone. She started and blushed on seeing Ned Mitchell, who had succeeded in reducing his unruly pets to something like submission, but whose temper had been by no means improved in the task.

"Oh!" she cried, running through the gate and coming fearlessly within the range of the leash, "are these the dogs I've heard about?"

"How should I know what you've heard?" snapped Ned. "But I know what you'll feel in a minute if you come within reach of the brutes' jaws."

For answer to this speech, Olivia stooped and laid her hand with a firm touch on the head of the animal nearest to her. Whether he had been cowed by Ned's course of treatment, or whether there was something peculiarly sympathetic to the animals in her bold manner of approaching them, the dog only gave an ungracious growl, but made no attempt to resent her advances more actively.

"And are these—bloodhounds?" she asked, almost with bated breath.

"Yes, that's what they are," answered Ned, as if he had been challenged.

Olivia's breath came more quickly as, still looking down at the brutes, and even playing with the ears of one of them, she listened and evidently read the meaning of his tone.

"What have you got them for?" she asked, raising her head suddenly, and looking at him askance.

"I've got them to play sexton for me in St. Cuthbert's churchyard; to dig up some bones there that were buried with less ceremony than they ought to have had."

"There are a good many bones in that old churchyard. How do you know your hounds will dig up the right ones?"

"It's sixty years since any body was buried there—until ten years ago."

"And if you should happen to come upon these bones, and even be sure they are the right ones, how will you be sure who put them there?"

"I don't say I shall. But at any rate it will be a step in the right direction. And I shall have my eye on any likely folk who may be about, and see how they take the discovery."

"It seems to me you're no better than a detective," burst out Olivia, hotly.

"Well, I hope I'm no worse," said Ned, laconically.

Olivia turned her head away, looking hurt and anxious.

Ned, who liked and admired the girl, felt a little sorry. He moved off with his dogs, and began to whistle; but the pain of starting again made him break short off and draw his breath sharply through his teeth. This attracted Olivia's attention; she watched him as he labored up the hill, and before he had gone very far she ran after him.

"What's the matter with you, Mr. Mitchell?" she asked. "You walk lame to-night. Have you hurt yourself?"

"No. And what's that to you if I have?" he answered curtly.

"Nothing, if you don't think sympathy worth having."

Ned stopped. The strong-limbed, plucky women he had got used in Australia, and from whom he had chosen his own wife, were rather lacking in graceful feminine ways; so this pretty speech and gentle tone, coming from a girl whose spirit he admired, touched and softened him.

"What are you up to now?" he asked, gruffly enough, but not without betraying signs of a gentler feeling than he would have owned to. "I know better than to think you'd trouble your head about an old bear like me if you didn't want to get something out of me."

"Well, I want to get the pain out of you—and perhaps a little of the surliness too," she added, archly.

"The first would take a doctor, and the second would take a magician."

"Are you going to have a doctor?"

"No. I can't go after one myself, and my establishment doesn't include anybody I could send."

"I'll send for one. I'll get one of the farm boys to go; or, if there isn't one about, Mat Oldshaw will go, I know."

Ned looked at her cynically.

"Poor Mat," said he. "And to think I was fool enough myself once to run errands for a girl who thought herself as far above me as heaven from earth. When all the time she was dying of love for another chap too. Just the same—just the same."

Olivia blushed and looked annoyed, but she answered, quietly—

"Mat would do a kind deed for any one, Mr. Mitchell. And I should be sorry for him to think that it is a sign of great wisdom to be discourteous to a woman."

"Very good," said Ned grimly. "Sorry I haven't time to let you exercise your wit on me a little longer. Good-night."

He hobbled up the hill with great and evident difficulty, his dogs slinking behind him. He was absolutely faint with pain by the time he reached home.

It was quite dark in the cottage when he arrived, and he made his way at once to a shelf in a passage where a box of matches and a candle were kept. But he felt from end to end of the shelf without being able to find either. The dogs, having become excited since their entrance, sniffed about the floor, yelped and pulled afresh at the leash, impeding his movements. He had shut the front door on entering, relying on his candle and match box; so that he could not even see the forms of the struggling animals to avoid them. Two or three times he stumbled and set them growling as he groped his way towards the room where he kept them shut up. A dizziness was creeping over him, which seemed from time to time almost to overcome him, while occasionally for a moment it seemed to leave his head again perfectly clear. He remembered, or thought he remembered, that he had left the door of the room wide open for ventilation; but now he went the whole length of the wall, feeling with his disengaged hand, without finding any opening.

The hounds meanwhile were growing more excited—more troublesome than ever; so that, in his dizzy and wearied condition he could not move or even think with his usual precision. Their behavior, however, at last roused a suspicion in his mind.

"Somebody's been in here," he muttered to himself. "And the dogs know it by the scent."

He had grown bewildered in the darkness, and no longer knew in what part of the passage he was standing, as the dogs, still straining to get free, pulled him from side to side. Suddenly he heard the faint creaking of a door. The dizziness was coming upon him again, and he turned, in a half-blind, stupefied way; saw, or thought he saw, a faint light come as if through an open door, and the next moment found himself lying on the floor, while the sound of the hasty shutting of another door behind him fell upon his dull ears. After this he became unconscious. When Ned came to himself, it was a long time before he could remember, even in the vaguest manner, the experiences he had just gone through. He fancied himself in one of the dungeons he had read about in his boyhood, which bold, bad barons built under their castles for unlucky prisoners who fell into their hands. In strange contrast to the prosaic reflections which occupied his mind in every-day waking hours, the most fantastic fancies now passed through his brain; that he was a prisoner, flung down here by an enemy; that fetters of red-hot iron had been fasten-

ed to one his legs. He thought he heard the sounds of every-day life, muffled by the thick stone ceiling between, in the castle above him; the noises of animals; sounds of a man's voice; then of a woman's. He recognized the tones of the latter, he felt sure, though he could not remember the possessor's name. Then suddenly a light was struck in his dungeon and a hand touched him, and it flashed upon him that he had come back, that he was in his own cottage lying on the stone floor of the passage, with a grey-bearded man kneeling beside him, and a woman's skirt brushing against his feet.

"He must have fallen very heavily," whispered the woman.

And Ned's senses came fully back to him.

"Of course," he murmured to himself, "it's Miss Denison."

"He can't have fallen as heavily as that unassisted," said the grey-bearded man, whom Ned now knew to be the doctor.

"Do you mean that he was thrown down?" asked Olivia, in a whisper of tragic earnestness.

"Yes. Look at the blood on the stones."

"Oh!" The girl's teeth chattered with horror.

There was a pause, while the doctor lifted him gently.

"That's the leg he limps with," said the girl.

The doctor touched the wounded limb gently, but the action made Ned moan.

"What shall I do with the dogs?" asked Olivia, presently, in the same low voice. "I think they are kept in one of these rooms. My father said so."

"Turn the brutes loose in the garden."

But Ned, though the movement caused him acute pain in his injured leg, struggled up on one arm and shook his head feebly.

"No, no," he said, in a weak, husky voice; "I'm going to be ill, I know. Take me upstairs to my room, and put the dogs into the room on the opposite side of the landing."

"Oh, come, we can't have that. It wouldn't be a proper arrangement at all—most unhealthy," objected the doctor.

Ned glared at him, and instantly began to try, in a dogged manner, to get up.

"If you won't do it, or let it be done, why, hang you! I'll do it myself," he panted out.

"I'll do it, Mr. Mitchell," said the girl's clear voice.

Ned heard her go upstairs, soothing and encouraging the hounds, which scrambled and shuffled up after her.

"That's a good plucky 'un," he then remarked to the doctor.

And satisfied now that his savage pets were safely disposed of, he fell back on the doctor's arm. For there was a curious buzzing noise in his ears, and his head felt alternately very heavy and very light. He wanted to keep his senses clear until the young girl should come down again, but it was only by a strong and exhausting effort that he succeeded. As soon as she reached the bottom stair, Olivia heard him addressing her in a faint voice.

"Thanks—thanks for what you've done. I'm not ungrateful. Now get me some one—to look after me—who's got a little nerve. For I don't care—how they treat me—but they must take care—of my dogs. For somebody wants to get at my dogs, I know. And

they must be prevented—prevented. You'll see to this. Promise me."

"Yes, I will, I promise," said Olivia, in a firm voice, afraid that she was speaking to a dying man.

She had scarcely uttered the words when he again became insensible.

Olivia was in sore distress as to the manner of fulfilling her promise. On the one hand, she had to keep her word by finding a nurse for him who would not be afraid of the hounds; on the other, she was particularly anxious that, if he should grow delirious, his ravings should not be heard by any one who would chatter about them.

"We must get him to bed," said the doctor, as she stood debating this difficulty. "The young man who came for me—is he about?"

"Mat Oldshaw? Oh, yes, I expect so. He stayed in the garden when we came in. He wouldn't go away without asking if there was anything more he could do."

"Ask him to come in, if he is there, please."

Olivia went out into the garden. As she passed under the porch, she saw a man slink limping away from the side of Mat, who was standing near the gate, and pass behind a bushy screen of evergreens. She sprang forward to the gate, but the man had gone out of sight.

"Mat," she asked, in a frightened voice, "who was that?"

"Nobbut a tramp," he answered. "Nobody to freight yer. It's ten yeer an' more since he wur in these parts."

"Oh, no, it isn't," said Olivia, decidedly. "He was here four months ago. His name is Abel Squires, isn't it?"

"Ay, that be his name, sure enough," answered Mat, with surprise. "Wheer did you happen upon him?"

"Never mind. I want to know what he's doing about here."

"He wants to get a sight o' Mester Mitchell, he says."

"But what did he sneak away like that for when he saw me come out, instead of waiting to ask if he could see him?"

"He doan't want to be seen aboot here, he says."

"Mat," cried the girl, earnestly, after a few moments' thought, "Mr. Mitchell has been knocked down and hurt. The doctor wants you to help carry him upstairs. I wonder if it was this tramp who did it."

"Noa, Miss, but Ah knaw who did," said a rough voice so close to her that it startled her.

She turned and saw the one-legged man whose conversation with Vernon Brander she had overheard in the churchyard. The ground was so soft with recent rains that his wooden leg had made no noise as he approached. Olivia drew her breath sharply through her teeth and felt cold with terror as she looked at his weather-worn, strangely inexpressive face. Here, she thought, was the man whose silence about that miserable night's work of ten years ago Vernon had had so much difficulty in procuring. And he had come with the express purpose of seeing Ned Mitchell, whom she looked upon as Vernon's avowed enemy.

"You know who knocked Mr. Mitchell down?" she said, faintly.

"Ay," said Abel Squires, with a nod.

She had a fancy that this man was trying to implicate Vernon, and she scarcely dared to frame her next question.

"You mean that you saw him do it?" she asked after a short pause.

"Ah werr standin' in's bit o' garden at back theer," said he, jerking his head in the direction of the cottage. "An' Ah see a mon go in, and after a bit Ah see him coom aht. An' if Mester Mitchell wur knocked deaun," he went on, doggedly, "Ah say Ah knaw t' mon as did it. An' it beant no good to ask me who t'was, for Ah mean to keeap me awn counsel; Ah'm used to't."

Olivia did not know what to make of the man. Though his voice was rough, his manner of speech was mild, and betrayed no hostile feeling towards anybody.

"Are yon a friend of Mr. Mitchell's?" she asked tentatively.

"Ay," nodded Abel, good humoredly. "He's never done naw harm to me."

Seized with a bold idea, Olivia scanned the man narrowly from head to foot.

"Will you tell me what business brought you to see Mr. Mitchell?" she asked, frankly.

Abel Squires examined the girl's face closely in his turn.

"What do you knaw abaht it?" he asked, shortly.

"I know that he is trying to find out a secret; a secret which I think you know."

"Maybe Ah do; maybe Ah don't; anyhow, Ah doan't prate abaht it!"

"Then what do you want to see Mr. Mitchell for?"

"Ah think he got summat aht o' me last toime Ah see him; Ah want to knaw how mooch."

The girl's face cleared.

"Could you nurse a sick man?" she asked. "Mr. Mitchell is ill, delirious, and I don't want to trust him to any prattling old woman."

"Ay," said Abel, promptly; "Ah can do't."

"Come in with me, and let us see what the doctor says," said Olivia, leading the way into the cottage with eager footsteps.

She was surprised at her own daring in taking this step; but she argued with herself that if the tramp, possessing Vernon's secret, as she knew he did, should wish to turn informer, there was no possibility of preventing him, while he would be within reach of Vernon's influence as long as he was attending on the sick man. If, on the other hand, he was loyally anxious to keep it, there could be no better person to watch over the man from whom she wished to keep the truth.

The doctor asked Abel a few questions, and agreed that he might be tried as sick nurse. Tramp though he was, Squires was a man of some intelligence, and had picked up many a scrap of practical knowledge in the wanderings in which his life had been almost wholly spent. Before the doctor and Olivia had left the house, they felt that the patient was in no unskilful hands, while the hounds were under control of a man entirely without fear.

As she left the cottage, after listening fearfully for some minutes

to the incoherent mutterings of its unlucky tenant, Olivia met Mat, who was dutifully waiting in the garden to learn whether she had any more work for him. She stopped short on seeing him, and said, "Oh!" in some confusion.

"What is it?" asked Mat, whose loyal admiration for her made him quick of apprehension. "You want summat more done. Whatever it mebbe, Ah'm ready to do 't."

"You are good, Mat," she said, gratefully, with a bright blush. "Nobody is ever as ready to help me as you, or so quick to know when one wants help."

"Ah knaw more'n that," said Mat, encouraged by her praise. "Ah knaw, Ah guess, what you want done."

The color in Olivia's cheeks grew deeper than ever. She said nothing, however; so Mat, after a short pause, went on—

"You want somebody to knaw what happened."

Olivia laughed bashfully. "You're an accomplished thought reader, Mat. Who is the person?"

"Parson Vernon."

"Well, don't you think he ought to know, as—as he's a friend of Mr. Mitchell's?"

"Ay," said Mat. "Ah'll go straight off to him neow."

"Thank you, Mat. And be sure you don't forget to tell him that Abel Squires is going to nurse him."

"Ah'll mahnd that. Good-night, Miss Olivia."

"Good-night, Mat. I don't know what I should have done without you this evening."

Mat blushed. "You knaw, Miss," he said, in a bashful, strangled voice, "you're as welcome as t' flowers in Meay to aught as Ah can do—neow and any toime."

And he pulled off his cap awkwardly without looking at her, and ran off down the hill before he had even stopped to replace it; while Miss Denison, much more leisurely, started on her way home to the farm.

Long before Ned Mitchell's illness was over, poor Olivia had grave reason to repent her choice of an attendant. Old Sarah Wall, who had been in the habit of coming in for a couple of hours daily to do the cleaning, was now installed permanently on the ground floor, which she had all to herself. The front door was kept on the chain, and to all inquirers it was Mrs. Wall's duty to answer that Mr. Mitchell was getting on very well, but was not allowed to see any one. If any further questions were put to her, or a wish expressed to see his attendant, she put on a convenient deafness, and presently shut the door. No one was admitted but the doctor, even when Ned was well enough to sit up at the front window, with one or other of his fierce hounds at the side of his chair, and his odd-looking attendant in the back ground. The evident good understanding which existed between master and man filled Olivia with foreboding, and caused still deeper anxiety to Vernon Brander, who, having called at the cottage day after day, and failed to extract any information from Sarah Wall, deliberately walked round to the back garden and climbed into one of the windows of the upper floor by means of the water butt. Here he came face to face with Abel Squires, who, hearing the

noise, came out of his master's room to find out the cause. He tried to retreat on seeing Vernon, but the latter seized his arm and detained him.

"Look here," said he, in a low voice, but very sternly; "you've broken faith, I see."

Abel's wooden face never changed.

"Well," said he doggedly, "Ah doan't say Ah haven't. Boot it was forced aht o' me when Ah wur droonk. That's all Ah have to say."

And to demonstrate this he folded his arms tightly, and met the clergyman's eyes stubbornly and without flinching.

"So that man knows everything?" asked Vernon, in a low voice, glancing at the door of Ned Mitchell's room.

"Pretty nigh all as Ah knaw."

Vernon's face was livid. He leaned against the window-sill and looked out fixedly into the Vicarage garden.

"He can't do anything," he muttered.

"He means to try," said Abel. "Hast tha seen t' dogs?"

"No, but I've heard about them; and they won't help him much," answered Vernon, quietly.

"Tarn't easy to trick 'un," said Abel, warningly. "He's none so over sharp, but he's sure."

Vernon said nothing to this; after a short pause, he bade Abel good-day very shortly, and went downstairs. Old Sarah Wall was standing at the door, in colloquy with some one outside. She cried out when she felt a man's hand on her shoulder; and Vernon, hastily telling her to be quiet, drew back the chain and let himself out. He started in his turn on finding himself face to face with Olivia Denison. Being overwhelmed with anxiety on his account, it was only a natural result of her girlish modesty that she should appear freezingly cold and distant in her manner towards him, even though her curt greeting caused him evident pain. After the exchange of a very few indifferent words, Vernon raised his cap stiffly and left her; while she, angry with him, still more angry with herself, walked slowly down the hill, more anxious, more miserable on his account than ever.

It was on the ninth day after the beginning of his illness that Ned Mitchell, whose impatience to be well materially retarded his recovery, could at last bear confinement no longer, and seized the opportunity of a short absence of Abel's in the village to make his way once more down to St. Cuthbert's churchyard. He wanted to take his hounds with him, but decided that it would be rash to do so until he was more sure of his own powers of reaching his destination. For he found, much to his own disgust, that he felt weak and giddy. However, he set out on his walk as quickly as he could, taking his way over the fields to escape observation. Evening was closing in—an evening in late June, warm and balmy. He chose to set down to the summer heat the dizziness which he felt creeping over him long before the ruined tower of St. Cuthbert's came in sight.

When he reached the lane which divided the last field from the churchyard, his head swam and he staggered across the road and caught the gate for support. After a minute's rest, he raised his head and looked over into the enclosure. Was he delirious again?

Had the wild fancies of his illness come back to torment him? He saw before him, instead of broken, moss-grown headstones, rank weeds, and misshapen mounds of earth and rubbish, a churchyard as neat and trim as that of Rishton itself, with tombstones set straight in the ground, well gravelled paths, and borders of flowers. The churchyard wall was garnished along the top with broken glass, and two notice boards, respectively at the right and left hand of the gate, bore these words: "Visitors are requested not to pluck the flowers," and "Dogs not admitted."

This last inscription reassured Ned as to the state of his own brain. He laughed savagely to himself, and after a few minutes' rest, which he spent in grim contemplation of the altered churchyard, he turned to go home.

Whether he had "got his second wind," or whether the rage he felt stimulated his powers, Ned returned home much faster than he came. Just outside the cottage gate he met Sarah Wall, wringing her hands and muttering to herself in deepest distress.

"What's the matter with the woman?" asked Ned, in his surliest tones.

"Oh, sir! the dogs, the dogs! It warn't my fault; it warn't indeed! How they got out I know no more than the babe unborn!"

"Get out!" shouted Ned, with fury. "What the d—. You wretched old woman. Are they lost? Have they got away?"

"Oh, sir, don'tee speak like that; don'tee look so; it warn't my fault. Abel should have been there to look after 'em."

Ned kept down his rage until he got out of her what he wanted to know.

"What happened then? Tell me at once, quietly. Where are the dogs?"

"Oh, sir, they're in there," said the old woman, pointing with a trembling finger to the cottage. "And now if you was to flay me alive could I tell you how—"

But Ned did not stay to listen. He was up the garden path and through the porch before she could utter half a dozen words. An oath and a howl of rage burst from his lips at the sight which met his eyes. Stretched on the floor of the stone passage lay the dead bodies of the two bloodhounds, foam and blood still on their jaws, their attitude showing that they had expired in great agony. Ned hung over them for a moment, touched them; they were scarcely cold. Then he stood bolt upright with a livid face.

"They have been poisoned!" he whispered, in a harsh, gurgling voice.

CHAPTER XXI.

NED MITCHELL was not the sort of man to waste much time in the indulgence of an outbreak of passion. After a few minutes' contemplation of the dead bodies of his hounds, he pulled himself together and prepared for action. There had flashed into his mind the

recollection of the evening on which his illness began. He had forgotten until that moment all the details of his arrival home, his groping about for a light, the sounds he had heard as of a person moving in one of the rooms, and the glimpse he had caught of an opening door as he fell senseless to the floor. It now occurred to him for the first time, as he went over the small incidents of that night one by one, that the fall from the effects of which he was suffering was caused by a heavy blow from some one who had forced an entrance into the little cottage during his absence.

"A murderous blow!" he muttered to himself as—alone, in the dusk, with his dead hounds encumbering the ground at his feet—he staggered along by the walls, reproducing the sensations he had felt just before his fall. "It must have been in here that he was hidden," he went on to himself, as he found himself at the door of the room where he had first kept his hounds. "For it was on my right hand as I came in that I heard the noise; I am sure of it." Speaking thus, slowly, to himself, he at last turned the handle and went into the unused room. It was musty and close, and he had to open the windows before he could breathe easily. He had a match box in his pocket; striking a light, he examined every corner of the empty room with the utmost care, and discovered at last, close to the wall in a nook where the light from the windows scarcely penetrated, two dried-up, evil-smelling scraps of meat. "Ah!" said he to himself. "Poisoned, of course! And as the first attempt wouldn't do, he had to try again."

He removed the meat carefully from the room, and hid it away for further examination. Poor, trembling Mrs. Wall having by this time returned to her place in the kitchen, he went in and asked her, in a dry voice, if she had heard anybody about the place in his absence.

"No, sir," quavered she. "Indeed I didn't."

"You were out, of course?"

"No, sir; at least, I'd only gone just half-way down t' hill as far as t' post office, to get in a pound of sugar because you're out of it, sir; and I give you my word, sir, I'd never ha' gone if I hadn't ha' thought as Abel was upstairs, and—"

"And you came back just a minute or two before I did?"

"Yes, sir; not so very long."

"Not long at all, or you'd have had the whole village up here, poking and prying into every corner, I know," said Ned, grimly. "And when you opened the door you saw the dogs lying as they are lying now?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you've heard nobody about?"

"No, sir; at least, no, not to-day."

"Not to-day! Then you have heard somebody in the place since I've been ill?"

"Oh, no, sir, not nobody to matter—nobody at all. Only one day, as I wur talking to Miss Denison from t' Hall, as wur at t' door asking about you, I wur pushed aside quite sudden like; and when I looked it wur parson Brander."

She lowered her voice to a whisper as she uttered the name. For

in spite of her cautious way of putting it, Sarah Wall felt a decided suspicion that the Vicar of St. Cuthbert's, against whom her prejudice was strong, was at the root of this business.

"I don't know where he come from, sir," she croaked on, rather mysteriously. "But it wasn't through t' door, for it wur on t' chain."

Ned, having got out of her all she had tell, turned with an abrupt nod, left the kitchen, and again went out into the garden. Abel Squires, who was hobbling up the hill on his crutch, redoubled his pace when he saw his master at the gate.

"So ye're aht, Ah see," he called out, as soon as he was near enough. "Ah guessed how 't would be as soon as ma back wur turned."

As he drew nearer he saw by his master's face, not only that he was greatly fatigued, but that something serious had happened.

In a few short sentences Ned told him the events which had occurred in his absence: his visit to St. Cuthbert's, the finding of the dogs' bodies, and the discovery of meat which he believed to be poisoned.

"Wall tells me," said he, "that Vernon Brander got into the place one day while I was laid up."

Abel nodded.

"Reight enough: so he did. Got in at t' ooper floor by t' water boott."

"What reason did he give?"

"Wanted to knaw heow mooch you knew. So Ah told him. He's been going abaht loike a churchyard ghost ever since. Ah met 'un just neow on's way oop to t' Vicarage."

"To the Vicarage?"

"Ay."

"Well, I'm going up there now."

And he turned and began to walk up the hill. Abel hopped after him, assuming his most persuasive mien.

"Doan't 'e, Mester Mitchell—doan't 'e," he entreated. "It's naught but cruelty to him as hasn't done it; an' as for him as has, you've got plenty in store for him wi'out worriting of him now."

Ned paid not the slightest heed to these remonstrances, but went on his way, still closely attended by Abel the length of the Vicarage garden wall.

Abel redoubled his pleadings as they caught sight of the two brothers and Mrs. Brander walking in the garden.

"Look 'e here, Mester Mitchell," said he, in a rough voice that, plead as he would, could get no softer. "Ah've kept away from Rishton ten year fur to please parson Vernon, 'cause Ah'm t' only chap as see what happened that neight, an' he wouldn't trust me to hawd ma toongue. What Ah could do fur ten year, couldn't you do fur a neight?"

Still Ned walked stolidly on, vouchsafing no answer, until the party in the garden caught sight of them, and the Vicar of Rishton came down to the side gate to meet them. As he drew near, Abel, after one futile attempt to drag Ned bodily away, tried to escape himself. But Mr. Brander was too quick and too strong for him.

"Why, who have we here?" he said, curiously, seizing Squires by the arm, and looking into his wooden face. "Isn't it Abel Squires, the man who picked up my father's signet ring on the Sheffield road?"

"Ay, sir," said Abel, very bashfully, while he persistently avoided meeting the vicar's eye.

"I thought so," said the vicar, good-humoredly. And without noticing the lowering expression of Ned's face, he turned and shook his hand. "Glad to see you about again, Mr. Mitchell. I must tell you a story about our friend here," he continued, putting a kind hand on the tramp's shoulder. "Years ago, when I was scarcely more than a boy, my father lost a signet ring one night as he was returning home from a sick bed. It was an old-fashioned thing; much too large for his finger. He never expected to see it again; but a fortnight afterwards who should turn up but Abel Squires, inquiring of the servants if anybody in the house had lost a ring. He had picked it up, and having no means of advertising his find, had perseveringly called at house after house on the outskirts of Sheffield where he found it, until he at last got directed to my father as the owner. He was so much struck by the circumstance that he declared it should be treasured up for ever by the head of the family as a reminder that the world had contained at least one ideally honest man."

"You're t' head of t' family, yet you don't wear it though, parson," said Abel, glancing at his hands.

He had listened in much confusion to the account, changing from his wooden leg to his sound one and back again, and looking as if the vicar's speech contained some revelation particularly painful for him to hear.

The vicar, who had been touched by his excessive modesty, was surprised at this retort.

"No, I don't wear it now," he said, laughing genially. "I did though, until I had the misfortune to lose it myself, some years ago. It was too large for me, as it had been for my father, and I never knew how it had gone. And you were not about to find it for me."

"Nay, sir," was all Abel said, with one shy glance at the bystanders.

They had formed a strange group while the vicar's recital lasted. Each one seemed to know that something serious was impending, and to listen, in silence not all attentive, to the vicar's innocently told reminiscences. He was the only person at ease in the little circle. Ned was standing solid and square, listening to Mr. Brander's little story with a contemptuous face; Vernon Brander, who seemed of late to be growing daily more lean, more haggard, kept his eyes fixed upon Ned with an expression of undisguised apprehension; while Mrs. Brander, whose great black eyes were flashing with excitement to which she allowed no other vent, looked steadily from one to the other of the rest of the group, as she stood a little away from them all, motionless and silent, like a beautiful statue.

When the vicar's prattle had come to an end, there was a pause. He seemed himself to become at last aware that the minds about him were occupied with some more serious matter, and he turned to Ned with a look of inquiry—

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Mitchell?" he asked. "You look less happy than a man should do who has just been released from the confinement of a sick bed. Can I advise you or counsel you in any way? Would you like to come into my study?"

Ned raised his head and looked at him like a bull in the arena.

"No," he said, savagely, "the garden will do for what I have to say. It's only this: My bloodhounds have been poisoned"— a little shiver of intense excitement seemed to run through the group— "And by the same hand that killed my sister. Now I give the man who did both those acts till this time to-morrow to confess publicly that he's been a great hypocrite for ten years, with good words on his lips and bad thoughts in his heart. But if in those four-and-twenty hours he don't confess, then he shall be buried at the country's expense before the year's out."

There was dead silence after this speech, which Ned delivered, not in his usual coarse, loud tones, but in husky, spasmodic jerks, and with the manner of a man bitterly in earnest. The vicar listened with great attention; Abel Squires seemed to wish, but not to dare, to move away; Vernon shook from head to foot with high nervous excitement; while Mrs. Brander moved to the side of her brother-in-law, and stole her hand within his arm.

Not a look, not a movement, was lost on Ned, whose features suddenly broke up into a grim and horrible smile as he noted the action of the lady. It was a smile of cunning, of mockery. But Mr. Brander had treated him with dislike and contempt.

"You think," said the vicar of Rishton at last, "that the man who poisoned your dogs was the same who made away with your sister?"

"I don't think; I know."

"I don't want to be hard on you, Mitchell. But it seems to me that you feel the latter loss the more acutely of the two."

"It showed," returned Ned, doggedly "that the fellow is no better minded now than he was then."

"You might say so if they were human beings whose lives he had taken," said the vicar, continuing his gentle remonstrance. "As they were only dogs, I am inclined to take a more lenient view; while admitting that this unknown person——"

"No, not unknown," interpolated Ned.

The vicar went on without noticing the interruption.

"—had no right either to trespass on your premises or destroy your dogs, allowance must be made for the state of mind of a desperate man, who believes, rightly or wrongly, that these animals will be used to discover his guilt."

"Well, vicar," said Ned, who had been staring straight into the clergyman's face with a cynical smile, "I've said my say; that's what I came here for. Now it's done, I'll wish you, and your good lady, and Mr. Vernon there, a very good-night."

The vicar held out his hand.

"Good-night. You will not be offended with me for saying that I hope Heaven will soften your heart," he said in a low voice, in the gentle, almost apologetic tones which he always used when touching upon religious matters.

"No, I'm not offended," said Ned, in a hard, mocking voice.

"And will you come to our hay-making to-morrow?" Mr. Brander continued in a lighter tone. "It will be a very simple sort of festivity, but it may serve as a change from your hermit-like solitude and your gloomy reflections."

Ned began to shake his head rather contemptuously, muttering something rather surlily about being "too old to pick buttercups."

"Mr. Williams, of the Towers, will be here," went on the vicar, as pleasantly as ever. "He is exceedingly anxious to make your acquaintance."

The expression of Ned's face changed.

"Is that the Mr. Williams who has been bothering so about repairing the old church down there—St. Cuthbert's? he asked, with affected carelessness.

And the vicar's expression changed also.

"I believe he did talk about it at one time; but as my brother objected to it, he had to give up the idea," he said, in a low voice, glancing at Vernon, who was talking to Mrs. Brander.

"Ah!" said Ned, with a look down at his boots and a nod. "Yes, I'll come, vicar, and thank you kindly for your invitation," he said, more graciously. "I can't make hay, but I'll be most happy to stand about and look pretty," he added, with a short laugh.

Raising his hat ceremoniously to Mrs. Brander, whom he admired, and whose indifferently concealed dislike therefore irritated him, Ned Mitchell turned on his heel without so much as a glance at Vernon, and made his way down the hill to his cottage, leaning on the arm of Abel Squires, who had bade "t' gentle fowk" a humble and bashful farewell, and hastened to the support of his patient, upon whom the fatigue and excitement of the evening had begun to tell heavily.

Solemnly and almost in silence, Meredith Brander and his wife then parted from Vernon, who took his lonely way over the fields in a state of suppressed excitement so acute that on reaching St. Cuthbert's Vicarage he was highly feverish, with a burning head, hot, dry hands, and a mouth that seemed parched and withered. He lay awake for the greater part of the night. Next morning, his old housekeeper, not hearing him rise as usual, went up to his room, and found him in a restless, uneasy sleep. Seeing that something was wrong with him, and deciding that it was the result of overwork, Mrs. Warmington applied a characteristically rough-and-ready remedy. She ransacked his wardrobe, selecting everything that was fit to wear, and quitted the room as softly as she had entered it, leaving pinned to his pillow the following note:—

"I see you have had no sleep and are unwell. So I have taken away your clothes and locked the door. If you are ready to promise to stay in bed all the morning, and not to go out to-day, knock three times, and I will bring up your breakfast."

When he woke up, Vernon gave the three knocks, after very little hesitation. He felt so ill that he was glad of an excuse to spend an idle day—glad too that in this way he could escape the ordeal of the hay-making at his brother's, and a meeting with Olivia Denison.

For, haunted as he was by the remembrance of her gentle touch, of her softly uttered words of sympathy as he sat beside her by Mrs. Warmington's fireside, he felt that another cold look, another frigid bow, like those she had given him on their last meeting, would be a torture more than he could bear.

Vernon Brander was far too ignorant of the peculiarities of the feminine character to know the significance of that coldness; he thought that it meant in her what it meant in him, a firm determination that all sentiment between them should be for ever at an end. While, as every one knows, if that had been the case she would have been gentle, tender, anxious to soften the cruel blow she was preparing for him, anxious also that there should, after the parting, be a little sentiment left. As it was, poor Olivia, on her side, was suffering a good many torments. While never allowing herself to believe the worst she heard against Vernon Brander, her common sense was continually warring with her feelings, and calling her all sorts of unflattering names for her prejudice in his favor. She hated and despised him, she loved and respected him, all in a breath. She resolved never to see him again, she determined to encourage him in spite of all opposition, in the course of the same day. But the value of the former resolution may be guaged by the fact that she made it very strongly on the morning of the hay-making, and was bitterly disappointed when, on arriving with her father and step-mother at the big field by the churchyard, where the tent had been put up, she learnt from little Kate that he had sent word to say he could not come.

But Olivia was not to go without admirers. Approaching the tent as she came out of it was Fred Williams, dressed in a light grey suit of a check so large that there was only room for one square and a half across his narrow little chest, a very pale brown hat, and a salmon-colored tie. He greeted Mr. Denison effusively, and asked Olivia if he might get her a cup of tea.

"No, thank you," said she, coldly.

But her father, surprised and displeased at her tone, interfered.

"Yes, my dear, I am sure you would like a cup of tea," said he. "Take her to the tent, Fred, and look after her."

Then, as the young man, who looked delighted at her discomfiture, turned to shake hands with her step-mother, Mr. Denison whispered to his daughter, in as peremptory a tone as he ever used to her—

"You mustn't put on these airs, Olivia. Young Williams is a very good fellow, and has obliged me considerably, more than once. I insist on your being civil to him."

Olivia turned white, and bit her lips. A suspicion of the truth, that her father was under monetary obligations to this wretched little stripling, flashed into his mind. She waited very quietly, but with a certain erect carriage of the head which promised ill for the treatment Fred would receive at her hands. He, however, was not the man to be scrupulous about the way in which he attained his ends. He trotted beside her to the tent in a state of great elation.

"Awfully slow these bun scuffles, ain't they?" he said in his most insinuating tones. "I shouldn't have come at all if it hadn't been for the chance of meeting—some one I wanted to see."

This was accompanied by a most significant look; but unfortunately Olivia, who was considerably taller than he, was looking over his head at some fresh arrivals.

"Indeed," she said, absently.

Fred reddened; that is to say, a faint tint, like the color in his tie, appeared for a moment in his cheeks, and then left them as yellow as before. He tried again. She should look at him; it didn't matter how, but she should look.

"Those country girls look at me as if they'd never seen anything like this get-up before. It's the proper thing down in the south, isn't it?"

"I should think so—on Margate 'excursionists,'" answered Olivia, briefly.

Fred was quite unmoved.

"Now what would your father say if he heard you?" he asked, good humoredly. "You know he told you to be civil. Ho, yes, I've sharp ears enough—always catch up anything I want to hear."

Olivia said nothing to this, and presently he went on, in a persuasive tone—

"You know it's worse than wasting your time to be rude to me, because I'm not a bad chap to people I like, and to people I don't like I can do awfully nasty turns."

"Oh, I don't doubt your power of making yourself unpleasant," said Olivia, quietly.

Still Fred Williams only chuckled. They had by this time reached the tent, and he gave her a chair with a flourish of satisfaction.

"There, now you must look up to me to fire off your spiteful little shots, instead of down at me as if I were a worm or a beetle. It's not many men of my size, mind you, that would walk with a girl as tall as you? it puts a fellow at a disadvantage. And as your six-footers are not too plentiful in these parts, it would be wiser of you to make your peace with the little ones."

"I assure you," said Olivia, looking up at him gravely, "that I could get on very well without either six-footers or four-feet-sixers."

"That's a nasty cut. There's not many fellows would stand that," said the irrepressible one. "But, there, I tell you there's nothing I wouldn't put up with from you. I suppose you won't insult my guv'nor if I introduce him to you," he continued, glancing towards a corner of the tent where the elder Mr. Williams was engaged in animated talk with Ned Mitchell.

"Certainly not;" answered Olivia, "I am told by every one that you could scarcely be told for father and son."

This was true. Mr. Williams, though he was not free from the faults of the parvenu, was ostentatious in his charities and respectful towards wealth, had a handsome person and a dignified carriage, and was in every way his son's superior. He had been most anxious to make Ned Mitchell's acquaintance, feeling that in this man, who had begun with little and by his own exertions had made it much, he should meet with a congenial nature. And so it proved. Ned having the same feeling towards him, they had become, at their first interview, if not friends, at least mutually well-disposed acquaintances.

When Fred interrupted their *tete-a-tete*, they were deep in a conversation they found so interesting that Mr. Williams, in reply to his son's request that he would come and be introduced to a lady, waved him away, saying, "Presently, my boy, presently."

He came back, laughing at his father's earnestness.

"He and that colonist fellow are so thick already that there's no separatin' 'em," he said to Olivia. "They're at it, hammer and tongs, about the old tower down at St. Cuthbert's, and as the vicar has just come and shoved his little oar in, I expect they'll be at it till breakfast time."

"The tower of St. Cuthbert's!" exclaimed Olivia, rising hastily from her chair. "What are they saying about that?"

Fred, who noticed everything, saw how keen was the interest she showed.

"Yes. You know my guv'nor was hot on building a new tower to the place, and paying for the repair of it. He likes things brand new, does the guv'nor, and he likes tablets and paragraphs with 'Re-erected by the generosity of F. S. Williams, Esquire, of the Towers,' on 'em. And he was put off it, I don't exactly know how. So Mitchell's working him up to it again."

"Since your father won't come to me, you shall take me to him," said Olivia, brightly, though her lips were quivering.

Fred, still watching her carefully, noticed this also. As they crossed the floor of the tent, he could see that she was straining her ears to catch what she could of the talk of the three men. For Mr. Meredith Brander had now joined the other two, and was taking the chief share of the subject under discussion. This was no longer St. Cuthbert's Tower, but the recent loss which the colonist had sustained by the poisoning of his hounds.

"My own impression," the vicar was saying, in tones of conviction, "is that you must have caused their death yourself during your sleep."

"How do you make that out, vicar?" asked Ned, very quietly.

Since that outburst of fury the evening before he had been very subdued—almost amiable.

"Why, I cannot conceive any motive strong enough to induce anybody else to make away with them. If they were really dangerous to some one's secret, poisoning them was too suspicious an act. Besides, my brother—I mean the churchyard of St. Cuthbert's has just been laid out as a garden, and the wall has been fringed with broken glass to keep out all unauthorized intruders. Now what could a man kill your dogs for?"

"I have my own ideas as to the reason," said Ned. Then, after a short pause, he added, "You see, the poisoning of the hounds led to a delay. Now a hunted criminal lives by delays."

"Hunted criminal!" Poor Olivia echoed these terrible words below her breath. The very sound of them blanched her cheeks and seemed to check the beating of her heart.

It was again Ned who spoke—

"Tell me, vicar, what you mean by suggesting that I poisoned my hounds in my sleep."

"Don't you know," said Mr. Brander, "how an active man forced

into inaction will brood over an idea until it is never out of ihs brain? I imagine that you, moved as you certainly were by fears for the safety of your dogs while you were ill, got these fears so strongly in your mind that at last you got up one night, and with your own hands did what it was always in your mind that some one else would do—laid about the poison which the dogs took as soon as they by some means got loose."

"Dear me! Very ingenious theory—very ingenious!" said Mr. Williams.

"I don't suppose," went on the vicar, modestly, "that the idea would have come into my head if it had not been that in my own family there have been marvellous instances of somnambulism. An ancestor of mine, a very energetic man who loved the sound of his own voice, had been ordered a rest from preaching by his doctor. Well, I assure you that after obeying this injunction three months, he got up one night, got the church keys, let himself in, and was discovered there by his wife in the pulpit, preaching a sermon in his dressing gown and slippers! And there have been numberless other instances in our family—some within this century."

"Dear me, that is singular indeed," said Mr. Williams.

"A very high-spirited family yours, vicar," said Ned, who had not moved a muscle during this recital, "and the spirit is sure to peep out sooner or later. You, I think, though you'll excuse my saying so, are about the only one of the bunch that hasn't let it peep out rather discreditably."

"Perhaps my sins are all to come," said the vicar with a jolly laugh.

And, catching sight of the two young people who were waiting for a hearing, Mr. Brander himself introduced Olivia Denison to old Mr. Williams, and left the group to join his other guests.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE haymaking in the glebe field of Rishton Vicarage was an annual affair, an institution of Meredith Brander's own, dating from the young days of his reign. It had been at its origin a thoroughly Radical institution, a freak of the then very youthful vicar, who had not yet quite dropped all the wild ideas for the reconstruction of society of his university days. Rich and poor, gentle and simple, an invitation had been extended to all; the glebe field was to be the scene of such an harmonious commingling of class and class as had not been dreamed of since the dim days of Feudalism. For a year or two both the villagers and the richer class were represented; the former sparsely, it is true. But there was no commingling. Then the villagers, not quite understanding the vicar's idea, began to have a suspicion that, besides being somewhat bored and bewildered by the entertainment and the necessity for putting on "company manners," they were being laughed at; and thenceforth they stayed away altogether. So that the annual haymaking had now become what Mr. Brander called "a mere commonplace *omnium gatherum*,"

where the lowest class represented was that of well-to-do farmers, whose wives and daughters having replaced the straightforward rusticity of half a century ago for a veneer of fashion and refinement, were tiresome guests, captious, self-assertive, and intolerable.

Among the most prominent members of this last class were the two daughters of John Oldshaw. Despising their shy, good-hearted brother Mat as much as they did their coarse-mannered father, they prattled of Gilbert and Sullivan's last opera, of the newest shape of sunshade, of the most recently published novel, uneasily anxious to show that they were abreast of the times. They hated Olivia Denison for her easy superiority; and while indignant with their brother for admiring her, they were still more indignant at the knowledge that he was too much her inferior for her to treat him with anything but kindness.

Olivia, who was always scrupulously courteous to these young ladies, shook hands with them as she left the tent with her persistent admirer, Fred Williams, who, with little attempt at concealment, tried to draw her away from the farmer's daughters.

"How charming Mrs. Brander is looking to-day!" said the elder, in the loud, unpleasant voice which shivered in a moment all her pretensions to refinement. "She reminds me more of Lady Grisdale every time I see her."

Lady Grisdale was a fashionable beauty, whose photograph, together with those of the Guernsey Rose and Mrs. Carnaby East, adorned Miss Oldshaw's drawing-room mantelpiece in a plush frame.

"Yes," assented Olivia, she is like the portraits of Lady Grisdale. How is your brother? Isn't he coming here to-day?"

The Misses Oldshaw disliked any allusion to their brother, who, they considered, did them little credit. And to hear him mentioned by Olivia Denison was especially galling. It seemed to them to signify, what indeed was the truth, that she ranked Mat, with his rough speech and shy, awkward ways, above themselves, with all their pretensions. Miss Oldshaw therefore answered with a shrill tartness which surprised Olivia, who had certainly no wish to offend her—

"Oh, he's not coming here. His tastes don't lie in the direction of either nice people or nice amusements."

"Indeed! I should have thought they would when he's so nice himself."

"Oh, of course niceness is a matter of taste," said Miss Oldshaw with an affected laugh. "Perhaps you would consider the person he has gone to see nice."

"Very likely," said Olivia, coolly.

"Dear me," interrupted the second sister, with a perceptible sneer; "you forget that Mr. Vernon Brander may be a friend of Miss Denison's."

"If it is Mr. Vernon Brander whom Mat has gone to see, I don't think he has chosen his pleasure badly. At least he is in pleasanter society, than we all have the fortune to meet here."

And Olivia, who had remained very quiet during this disagreeable colloquy, turned away, while her companion burst into a loud fit of

laughter, and glancing over his shoulder at the sisters, remarked in a voice which they were intended to hear—

"Why does Mrs. Brander invite those people? Everybody knows they were both sweet on Parson Longface until they found it was no go."

Olivia made no answer to this graceful remark. She was standing close to the hedge which bounded the field on the side nearest to the village. The trees grew thickly outside, and even at five o'clock the sun was strong enough to make the shelter of the overhanging branches welcome. The devoted Fred had put into her hands a very fanciful little hay rake; but instead of amusing herself by turning over the sweet-scented hay which strewed the field all round her, she only drew the rake listlessly along the ground with an air of being a thousand miles away.

"I'm afraid I bore you," said Fred at last, in an offended tone, finding that all his conversational efforts failed to wake the least sparkle of interest in her eyes; "I should have thought this sort of thing would have been just what you would like: wants such a lot of energy, and all that sort of thing, you know."

"Yes," answered Olivia, dreamingly; "it wants too much energy to be wasted on play, when one has serious things to think about."

"Serious things!" echoed Fred, pricking up his ears, and rushing at this opening. "Yes, I've got a lot of serious things to think about too—one thing jolly serious. I say," he went on, getting rather nervous, "I'm glad you take things seriously; I like a girl who can be serious."

"Do you?" asked she rather absently. "I should have thought you liked a girl who could be lively."

"Well, yes; I like 'em both. I mean, I like one who can be both—or, or—"

"Both who can be one, perhaps," suggested Olivia, laughing.

She had had to stave off proposals before from men whom she was anxious to save from unnecessary pain. But with this grotesque little caricature of an admirer, she felt no sentiment deeper than a hope that he would not be silly. Insignificant as he seemed to her, however, she made a great mistake in despising him, and in forgetting that a small, mean nature is very much more dangerous than a nobler one. So that while she was innocently trying to avoid the annoyance of his love-making with light words and laughter, he was growing every moment more doggedly bent on doing her the honor of making known his admiration. Although the possibility of a refusal had not occurred to him, he felt nervous, as he would have felt with no other woman.

"I say, now, be serious a moment, can't you? Or I shall think I said you too great a compliment just now."

"As I am not used to compliments, perhaps it got into my head."

"Oh, of course I know you have had plenty of fools dangling about you and saying a lot of things they don't mean—"

"So that one more or less hardly counts," suggested Olivia, laughing.

He would not be angry even then. He thought if he affected to drop the subject he should soon bring her to reason; so he said, "Oh,

well, of course, if that's your way of looking at it, there's no more to be said."

But she took him at his word, and, with just a nod of assent to his last remark, ran to the hedge, with a cry, "There's Mat!" as she caught sight of Farmer Oldshaw's son standing under the trees.

Fred Williams looked after her with an ugly expression on his little yellow face.

"Fancy my not being common enough for her, by Jove!" was his modest reflection as he saw her shake hands heartily with the young man.

Olivia with a woman's quick perception, had known at once that Mat had something of importance to tell her.

"What is it, Mat?" she asked, anxiously, as they shook hands.

"Mester Vernon: he's very bad wi' t' fever," said he, in a low voice. "Ah allers weaite at corner o' t' long meadow o' Thursdays, an' walk wi' him as far as Lower Copse, where he goes to 's meeting. An' to-deay he didn't coom, so Ah knew summat wur wrong, an' Ah went to 's home, an' Ah saw him. An' Ah thowt Ah'd let ye knaw, Miss Olivia, so Ah coom here to tell ye."

Olivia had very little shyness with Mat; he knew her secret, and he too loved Vernon Brander most loyally. She thanked him in very few words, but with a look of gratitude in her eyes which stirred in the young man feelings of pain and pleasure she never guessed at.

"I shall manage to get away in a few minutes," she said.

"If you're goin' to see Mester Vernon, you'll let me see ye seafe across t' fields?"

"Yes; I shall be very glad if you will."

With the rapidity of a butterfly, in order to avoid the unlucky Fred Williams, Olivia sped across the scattered hay to the tent where she had left Ned Mitchell and Mr. Williams the elder. They were conversing as earnestly as ever, and certain words which fell upon the girl's ears as she stood waiting for a chance of catching Ned's attention showed her that they were still on the old subject.

"You will scarcely believe me, Mr. Mitchell, when I assure you that nothing but the dissuasions of Mr. Meredith Brander and his brother have prevented my doing it long before. However, I have made up my mind not to put up with this sort of thing any longer. I have no doubt their motives were good—perfectly good. But they are certainly mistaken in letting a private fad for antiquities interfere with the comfort of the parishioners."

"And they won't find on every bush a parishioner rich enough and generous enough to rebuild a church at his own expense," added Ned.

"Oh, well, perhaps not," allowed Mr. Williams, modestly. "Anyhow, I'll get Lord Stannington's permission at once, and the new St. Cuthbert's tower shall be an object of admiration in the neighborhood before the winter comes."

Ned Mitchell was satisfied; he had sowed the seed well. Having now leisure to look round him, he perceived that Olivia, standing by herself, with her eyes fixed earnestly upon him, was waiting for speech with him. With her feminine grace, her high spirit and her

devotion, she was a girl after his own heart; what little of amiability there was in his character always appeared in his face and manner when he addressed her.

"Oh, Mr. Mitchell," she said, in a low, pleading voice, as he nodded to Mr. Williams and walked out of the tent with her, "I want to ask you not to be hard."

"Too late—too late by fifteen years, Miss Denison," said he, not harshly, however. "But what particular proof of hardness have I given you just now?"

"You know," said she, tremulously: "the new tower—St. Cuthbert's tower—"

Ned Mitchell stopped short, and made her turn face to face with him.

"It seems to me, young lady," said he, "that you haven't much faith in your lover."

"Mr. Vernon Brander is not my lover," said she, blushing.

"Not to the extent of having asked you to name the happy day, perhaps. But whether you confess it or not, I know that if Vernon Brander were free to marry, he might have you for the asking."

"Well, yes, he might," said poor Olivia, raising her head proudly one moment, and the next letting it fall in confusion and shame. "And I confess I don't feel sure whether he has done this dreadful thing or not; and—and that it wouldn't make any difference if he had. And it's because I don't feel sure that I'm come to beg you not to have St. Cuthbert's tower touched. And I've just heard that he's ill, and I'm very miserable about it. There, there—now I think I've humiliated myself enough to you."

They were in the open field, with young men and maidens on either side making more or less shallow pretences at haymaking. Olivia could not indulge the inclination that prompted her to burst into a rage of passionate tears. But she was almost blinded by the effort to keep them back; and Ned Mitchell had to guide her steps between the haycocks, which he did gently enough.

"Look here," he said, in a tone which could only express feeling by jerks; "I don't want to hurt you. There's nobody I wouldn't sooner hurt, I think. You're a brave girl. I like you. I approve of you. Hold your tongue, and I'll promise you something."

The last admonition was unnecessary: she was quiet enough.

"I give you my word. Now, mind, you're not to shout out!" She shook her head. "I give you my word no harm shall come to—somebody."

"Mr. Vernon Brander?" she asked, in a whisper.

"Yes."

"Oh, Mr. Mitchell, you are good, then, after all!" she said, with naive earnestness and gratitude.

"Don't be too sure of that. But I do keep my word. He's ill, you say?"

"Mat Oldshaw has just told me that he is in a fever."

"And you are going to see him? What would your father say?"

"I can't help it. I must: I must. He has no friends to visit him."

"Oh, yes, he has. Mark my words: as soon as she hears of it, his sister-in-law will fly to his side."

Olivia seemed to shrink into herself with a shiver at these words. Her warm-hearted outburst of grateful confidence was over.

"What do you mean to imply?" she asked, coldly.

"Nothing: nothing but just what I say. You may tell Vernon that I am coming this evening to look after him. Here you are. You can slip through this gate and be off under the trees and down through the village. And I'll make up a story for your step-mother."

He opened the gate for her, and let her through. Olivia scarcely dared to believe that he would keep his promise of doing no harm to Vernon; still, his kindness to herself was encouraging, and, in spite of doubts and fears, pangs of jealousy of Mrs. Meredith, self-reproach for acting against her father's wishes, Olivia felt lighter hearted since Ned Mitchell's promise, and congratulated herself, as she approached St. Cuthbert's Vicarage, and bade good-bye to faithful Mat, that she was the bearer of good news.

Her heart beat fast as she went up the stone pathway of the barren enclosure before the house. In answer to her knock, Mrs. Warmington opened the door, and uttered a short exclamation, whether of surprise, joy, or astonishment, the visitor could not tell.

"So that's the answer to the conundrum!" was her rather bewildering greeting.

"Is Mr. Vernon Brander at home?" asked Olivia, with some dignity.

But Mrs. Warmington would have none of it.

"Oh, yes, you know he is," she answered, impatiently. "And, what's more, you know he's ill. And he knows you are coming, and of course that's the reason why he wouldn't go back to bed, when he knows as well as I do that bed's the place where he ought to be."

"If he does expect me, it's only guesswork," said Olivia, more softly. "For I've sent him no message, and he has sent me none."

"Oh, the air carries messages between some people," said Mrs. Warmington, impatiently.

"Who is that?" asked Vernon Brander's voice from the front room.

"It is I, Mr. Brander," answered Olivia, in a very meek, small voice.

She opened the door and entered shyly, with a prim little speech upon her lips, something about "so many inquiries having been made for him that she had offered to come and learn how he was." But she only got out a few words and stopped. He was still standing by the door, and she had not yet looked at him. When she modestly raised her eyes, she read in his face such feelings as put her pretty platitudes to flight.

"Oh!" she said, softly, and clasped her hands, while her lips quivered and her eyes filled. But she instantly recovered herself and became very stately and stiff.

"Come and sit down," said he; and, closing the door, he took her

hands in both his, and led her to a battered armchair, which stood beside the worn old sofa from which he had just risen.

Olivia allowed herself to be led to the chair, on which she sat down with some constraint. Mr. Brander took an ordinary cane-seated chair at the other side of the table. There was a silence of some moments. Then the girl spoke.

"I am glad you were not at the hay-making this afternoon, Mr. Brander. The sun was so hot, even up to the time I left, that it was quite as much as we could do to breathe, without the fatigue of making hay."

She did not look at him while she spoke; but as he only said "Yes" in a very faint voice, she slowly turned her head and saw that he was swaying on the table, ashy white and breathing heavily. All her shyness and constraint broke down in a second. She started up, and running lightly round the table, put a strong supporting arm around him.

"Come to the sofa," she said, gently. "You are not well enough to sit up."

For answer he laid his head against her shoulder, and looked rapturously into her beautiful face.

"I don't feel ill," was all he dared to say.

Olivia blushed, but did not withdraw her arm.

"That is all nonsense," she said, imperiously. "You are ill, and I believe you want a doctor, and I mean to fetch one. I'm turning nurse to the parish," she went on merrily; "you know it was I who got the doctor for Mr. Mitchell."

Vernon's face clouded.

"Yes; I know," said he.

"Oh, Mr. Brander," continued Olivia, beginning to stammer and hesitate. "I—I have something to tell you about Mr. Mitchell; something he said—to me, this afternoon."

"Well, what was it?"

"They were talking—he and old Mr. Williams—this afternoon, about the restoration of—of—"

"——Of St. Cuthbert's tower?"

"Yes. Mr. Mitchell was persuading him to build a new tower ——"

"Persuading him! Clever old fox! There's a proverb about cheating the devil, but I think it would be stronger to talk of cheating Ned Mitchell."

Olivia was surprised by the coolness with which he said this. However, she hastened to add—

"But I don't think it will be rebuilt after all."

It seemed to her that something very like a shade of disappointment crossed his face at these words.

"How is that?" was all he said.

"I spoke to Mr. Mitchell afterwards, and he promised me never to do anything to harm you," said Olivia, in a gentle, earnest voice, quite ignoring, in the excitement of this announcement, how much of her own feelings she was betraying.

"Then you think," said he, very quietly, "that the building of a new tower at St. Cuthbert's would do me harm?"

"I—I thought," said Olivia, much confused, "from what I had heard, that you did not wish it to be rebuilt."

"And I suppose you must have some idea why?"

"No," answered Olivia, quickly.

"Quite sure?"

"Of course I have heard what people say."

"If I were a wholly innocent man, how could any discoveries which might be made hurt me?"

"I don't know; I should have thought perhaps they might."

"I can see that your mind is not free from doubts?"

No answer. He was leaning against her, and speaking with difficulty.

"And yet you love me all the same?"

The question burst from his lips in a low, husky, passionate whisper, while his eyes sought hers, and his hand trembled at the contact with her fingers. For answer she flung her right arm round his neck, and pressed her lips tenderly, fervently on his pale forehead. He shivered in her arms as if seized by a strong convulsion of feeling; then, by a feverish effort tearing himself from her embrace, he leaned against the mantelpiece and buried his face in his hands, murmuring, in a hoarse and broken voice—

"God bless you! And God forgive me!"

Oliva's whole heart went out to him in the deep distress from which he was evidently suffering. She rose, and coming to within a few paces of where he stood, said, most winningly—

"Come and lie down on the sofa. I will read to you, sing to you, do anything you would like done; but you must not stand; you are not well enough."

He held out his hand to her with a smile that made his haggard face for moment handsome.

"I will do whatever you wish," he said, "if you will in return do something I am going to command."

"What is that?" she asked with a smile.

"Go back home at once. You are here against your father's wishes, and I am bound in honor to forbid your presence here."

He had already withdrawn his hand from hers; he dared not trust it to remain there. There was a yearning in his eyes which stirred all the pity, all the tenderness, in her nature for this outcast from love and home and happiness. She tried to take his pathetic command with a laugh, as he had tried to give it. But she failed, as he had done. And so they stood, with only a yard of faded and worn old carpet between them, reading in each other's eyes the longing, she to comfort and he to caress, while the sunset faded slowly outside, and the old clock ticked on the mantelpiece, and faint sounds of the clattering of cups and spoons came from the kitchen.

"There is some one at the gate," said he at last. And he crossed to the window and looked out: "Ned Mitchell!"

Olivia started. She was glad Ned had come while she was there, being anxious to note how he met Vernon.

"Come straight in," called out Vernon from the window.

And Ned came in, with his ponderous walk and keen glance. He nodded to Olivia, and walking straight up to Vernon, examined him attentively.

"So you're on the sick list, I hear," he said, not unkindly. "By the look of you I should say you'll be on the burial list soon if you don't take care of yourself."

Olivia uttered a low cry of horror.

"You want a wife to look after you. Some men can get on best without a woman; I'm one: that's why I'm married. Some can't get on without one; you're one of that sort: that's why you're a bachelor. One of the dodges of Providence to keep us from growing too fond of this precious world, I suppose."

"Well, as I choose to mortify the flesh by remaining a bachelor, it's unkind of you to throw my misfortune in my face, isn't it?" said Vernon, not succeeding very well in the effort to speak in his usual manner.

"Sit down, man," said Ned, peremptorily. "You ought to be in bed. On the other hand, if you knock off your work, who's to do it for you?"

"Nobody; there is nobody; therefore I must not knock off," said Vernon, feverishly.

"Oh, yes, you must. Health's everything," said Ned, with his small, sharp eyes fixed on the floor. "Now I've a proposal to make to you. There's not much of a parson's work a rough man like me can do, but there's some, taking messages and seeing people and things like that. Now it's precious dull up at my hole of a cottage. So I'm coming to stay a day or two with you, and your old woman can put me up in the little room that's next to your bedroom. It's all settled, you understand," he added, lifting his hand and raising his voice peremptorily at the same time.

"It's awfully good of you," said Vernon, though his tone betrayed more curiosity than gratitude. "But, at any rate, if you choose to stay here, you shall have the best bedroom we can offer you. The little box next to mine is filled with nothing but lumber."

"That's the room I mean to have, though," said Ned, stubbornly. "I'm of a romantic and melancholy disposition, and I like the view. It looks out into the churchyard."

The curiosity died out suddenly from Vernon's face.

"And if I am compelled to assure you that it is impossible that room should be used?"

"Then I shall have to come and encamp in the neighborhood; that's all."

The men looked straight at each other, and Vernon shrugged his shoulders.

"You can come if you like," said he, indifferently.

Olivia, who had listened with much interest to this discussion, now came forward to bid Vernon good-bye. Ned, with ostentatious discreetness, tramped heavily to the window, and looked out. But he might have spared himself the trouble; for before he got there the ceremony of farewell was over. Olivia had put her hand in Vernon's, and they had given a brief look each into the face of the other. Ned, as he stared into the bare enclosure outside, suddenly felt a light touch on his arm.

"Good-bye, Mr. Mitchell," said Olivia. "Don't forget—your promise."

"I never forget anything," said Ned, drily.

The next minute she was hurrying up the lane, with the eye of both men fixed on her retreating figure.

"That's a good sort," said Ned, approvingly.

To this Vernon Brander assented very shortly.

Olivia had forbidden Mat to wait for her, but she was not to go home unescorted. At the top of the hill, where the lane joined the high road, she found the irrepressible Fred Williams sitting on the bank, making passes at a white butterfly with his walking stick. Olivia uttered an "Oh!" full of impatience and disgust. Fred got up, grinning at her in obtuse admiration.

"I knew where you'd gone," he said, nodding with a knowing air. "So I came to see you home."

He was still rather nervous, which was perhaps the reason why he failed to perceive the full extent of her annoyance at this second meeting. He had, besides, primed himself for a speech, and that speech he meant to make.

"We were interrupted just now in the hayfield," he began—"just when I was on the point of—"

"Oh, never mind now," broke in Olivia, impatiently, "I have something to think about."

"Well, what I am going to say to you don't require thinking about; I want you to marry me. Yes or No."

"No!" said Olivia promptly.

"Of course I knew you'd say that first go off. But let me reason with you a little. You must get married some time. You like another fellow better than me—"

"I do—a great many other fellows!"

"Well, but one in particular. Now you can't have him, and you can have me. And if you do have me, you can do a good turn to the other fellow."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl, turning white at the young man's tone.

"If you'll promise to marry me—seriously, mind—I'll persuade my father not to build the new tower to St. Cuthbert's. Nobody but me can stop him. That chap Mitchell is egging him on to it with all his might."

"He's changed his mind," said Olivia, quietly.

"Oh, has he? Since when, I should like to know? He met me sitting here five minutes ago, on his way down to St. Cuthbert's, where you've just come from" (with another knowing nod), "and he gave me this note for my father. I opened it. Won't you read it? All right; but you shall hear what it says."

Fred was holding a part of the old envelope, which had been scribbled on in pencil and folded. He read it aloud:—

"DEAR MR. WILLIAMS—Hurry on the re-building of St. Cuthbert's Tower as fast as you can. I hear there is a proposal afloat to be beforehand with you, and to deprive you of all the credit of the thing by getting it up by subscription.—Yours, E. MITCHELL."

Poor Olivia was aghast at Ned's breach of faith, but she affected unconcern.

"I don't see how the rebuilding of St. Cuthbert's tower can affect either me or Mr. Vernon Brander."

"Nor do I. But I can see it does. Anyhow, I'll give you till to-morrow morning to consider the thing, and I'll meet you in the poultry run when you feed the chickens—if I can get up early enough. And as I see you want to think over it by yourself, I'll take myself off for the present. Good evening, Miss Denison."

He sauntered away in the opposite direction to Rishton, his mischievous good humor perfectly undisturbed; while Olivia, more concerned for Mr. Vernon Brander than ever, hurried home, and sneaked up to her room to consider the new position of affairs, and to write a pleading note to Ned Mitchell.

CHAPTER XXIII.

OLIVIA DENISON'S thoughts on the morning after the haymaking, were entirely occupied with Vernon Brander, his illness, the possibility of his innocence, and the chances of his escape if guilty; so that when, on entering the poultry yard with her basket on her arm, she found Fred Williams, amusing himself by setting two cocks to fight each other, she uttered a cry of unmistakable annoyance and astonishment.

"You look as if you hadn't expected to see me, and as if, by Jove, you hadn't wanted to!" said he, frankly. As she made no answer, but only raised her eyebrows he went on—"Don't you remember I said I should be here this morning?"

"I had forgotten it, or only remembered it as a kind of nightmare."

"Do you mean me to take your rudeness seriously?" asked Fred, after a pause in which he had as last struggled with the amazing fact that he had met a girl to whom his admiration, and all the glorious possibilities it conveyed, meant absolutely nothing.

"As seriously as I have always taken yours."

Fred was silent again for some moments, during which Olivia went on throwing handfuls of grain to the chickens, and calling softly "Coop-coop-coop-coop!" in a most persuasive and unconcerned manner.

"And you really mean that this is your last answer? I can tell you, it's your last chance with me?"

Olivia turned, making the most of her majestic height, and looked down on him with the loftiest disdain.

"I assure you that if it were my 'last chance,' as you call it, not only with you, but with anybody, I should say just the same."

Fred Williams leaned against the wall of the yard, turned out the heterogeneous contents of one of his pockets, and began turning them over with shaking fingers to hide his mortification.

Still Olivia went on with her occupation, without paying the slightest attention to him. Suddenly the rejected suitor shovelled all the things he had taken out back into his pockets, and with a monkey-like spring placed himself right in front of her.

"I wish there was somebody about to tell you what a jolly fool you're making of yourself," he said, looking up at her rather viciously.

"You may go and fetch somebody to do so if you like," said she, serenely.

"And leave you in peace for a little while, I suppose you mean?"

"Perhaps some such thought may have crossed my mind."

Mr. Fred Williams had not a high opinion of himself, but experience had taught him that his "expectations" gave him an adventitious value; to find neither his modesty nor his money of any avail was a discovery which destroyed for once his habitual good humor, and showed a side of his character which he should by all means have kept concealed from a lady he wished to charm.

"Very well," he snarled, while an ugly blush spread over his face, and his fingers twitched with anger; "very well. You may think it very smart to snub me, and high-spirited and all that. I've stood a good deal of it—a good deal more than I'd have stood from anybody else—because you're handsome. I know I'm not handsome, or refined either; but I don't pretend to be. And I'm a lot handsomer than the hatchet-faced parson, anyhow. And as for refinement, you can get a lot more for twenty-five thousand a year than for a couple of hundred, which is quite a decent screw for one of your preaching fellows. But now I've done with you, I tell you, I've done with you."

"Isn't that rather a singular expression, considering that I've never given you the slightest encouragement?" asked Olivia, coldly.

"Encouragement! I don't expect encouragement; but I expect a girl like you to know a good thing when she sees it."

"I am afraid we differ as to what constitutes a good thing."

"Very likely; but we shan't 'differ as to what constitutes' a bad thing for Vernon Brander; and if you don't see all those twopenny geraniums pulled up out of St. Cuthbert's churchyard, and every stone grubbed up, and every brick of that old tower pulled down, before another week's up, my name's not Fred Williams. There, Miss Denison; now, what do you say to that?"

"I say that you have fully justified your low opinion of yourself."

"And I'll justify my low opinion of Vernon Brander. If he's got any secrets buried in those old stones, we'll have them dragged out, and make you jolly well ashamed of your friend."

"Oh, no, you won't do that," said Olivia, who had turned pale to the lips, and grown very majestic and stern; though you have succeeded in making me ashamed of having called you even an acquaintance."

"Perhaps you have a weakness for—"

Before he could finish his sentence, he found himself seized by the shoulders, and saw towering over him a beautiful countenance, so aglow with passionate indignation that it looked like the face of a Fury.

"If you dare to say that word I'll shake you like a rat!" hissed out Olivia, giving him an earnest of her promise with great good will.

"Stop! stop! unless you—want—to—kill somebody—to be more—like—your—precious—friend," panted Fred, who was not a coward.

Olivia let him go with a movement which sent him spinning among the chickens.

"Well, that's cool," panted he, as he picked up his hat and looked at it ruefully. "You talk about refinement one minute and the next you treat me in this unladylike way!"

"Oh, I apologize for my vulgar manners," laughed Olivia, who was already rather ashamed of her outbreak. "I'm only a farmer's daughter, you know."

"Yes, and you couldn't give yourself more airs if you were a duchess. Your father isn't so proud by a long way, I can tell you," he added with meaning.

Olivia became in an instant very quiet.

"What do you mean?" she asked sternly.

"Oh, nothing but that he's been in the habit of borrowing money of me for some time; only trifling sums, but still they seemed to come in handy, judging by the way he thanked me."

He was disappointed to see that Olivia took this information without any of the tragic airs he had expected.

"I daresay they did," said she. "We are not too well off, as everybody knows."

The simplicity with which she uttered these words made the young man feel at last rather ashamed of himself.

"Of course, I know he'll pay me back," he said hastily.

Olivia opened great proud eyes, full of astonishment and disdain, and said, superbly, "Of course he will."

"And you don't feel annoyed at the obligation, eh?" asked Fred, rather bewildered.

"I don't see any obligation," said she quietly.

"Oh, don't you? Well, most people would consider it one."

"How much does he owe you?"

"Oh, only a matter of forty or fifty pounds."

He thought the amount would astonish and distress her; but as, apparently, it failed to do either, he hastened to add—

"Of course, that's a mere nothing; but he let me know, a day or two ago, that he should want a much larger loan, and of course, I informed him he could have it for the asking."

She did wince at that; but the manner in which she resented his impertinence was scarcely to his taste.

"And you think the obligation is on our side?" she said, sweetly, but with a tremor of subdued anger in her voice. "What have you done except to lend my father a few pounds, which you would never have missed, even if you had thrown them into a well instead of lent them to an honorable man! While he, by accepting the loan, has given you a chance of putting on patronizing airs towards a man in every respect your superior."

"All right—all right! Go on! Vernon Brander shall pay for this!" snarled Fred, at last rendered thoroughly savage by her contempt.

"Vernon Brander will never be the worse for having you for an enemy. I should be sorry for him if you were his friend," she said, defiantly.

"Oh, all right, I'm glad to hear it," said Fred, glad at last to beat

a retreat, and delivering his parting words at the gate of the poultry yard, with one foot in the new-laid egg basket. "Then if anything unpleasant happens to your father or your parson through me, you'll be able to make light of it!"

Olivia felt rather frightened when she saw how discolored and distorted with rage his little weasel's face had become. But she bore a brave front, and only said, for all reply to his threats—

"Won't you find it more convenient to stand on the ground, Mr. Williams? To walk about among eggs without accident requires a great deal of skill and experience."

But when, with an impatient exclamation, he left the poultry yard, Olivia's heart gave way, and she began to reproach herself bitterly for not having kept a bridle upon her tongue. On the other hand, she was glad that her words had provoked the mean little fellow to confess his loans to her father; for she thought she had influence enough with the latter to prevent any more such transactions, and as for the money already owing, means must somehow be found to repay it.

It was late in the afternoon before she was able to start on the way to St. Cuthbert's. She felt, as usual, some self-reproach at the thought that she was acting contrary to her father's wishes; but, as usual, she was too self-willed to give up her own in deference to his. The sun was still glowing on the fields, and pouring its hot rays on the roads, which were parched and cracked for want of rain. The cart-tracks made faint lines in a thick layer of white dust, which the lightest breeze from the hills blew up in clouds, coating the leaves on the hedges and swirling into heaps by the well-worn foot path. The wood that bordered the road for some distance between Rishton and Matherham was as silent as if the birds had all left it; oak and beech and dusty pine looked dry and brown in the glare. It was a long, hot, weary walk; but at last she came near the lonely Vicarage, and slipping down the final few yards of the steep lane, in a cloud of dust which was raised by her own feet at each step, Olivia heard the faint sound of voices coming from the house, and stopped short, fancying she could detect Vernon's voice, and wondering who was with him. But the sounds ceased, and she went slowly on, thinking she had perhaps been mistaken. She entered the garden gate, and walked up the stone pathway, still without hearing anything more, until, suddenly, just as she was within a few paces of the door, she heard a woman's voice, low, but clear and strong, utter these words—

"Remember, you swore it. Ten years ago you swore it to me, and it is still as binding on you as it was then."

"Why should I forget it?"

Olivia knew that it was Mrs. Brander's voice that answered, in a tone full of contempt and dislike—

"Why, this Denison girl, this——"

Neither she nor Vernon had paid any heed to the footsteps on the stone flags.

Now Olivia hastened to ring the bell sharply, and there was silence immediately.

"How is Mr. Brander to-day?" asked she of Mrs. Warmington when the housekeeper opened the door.

"He's not much better, and not likely to be while that uncivilized creature from the Antipodes continues to make his abode here, and worry my master morning, noon, and night," said the housekeeper, tartly.

"Mr. Mitchell? Where is he now?" asked Olivia, eagerly.

"He's out in the churchyard there, poking about among the gravestones. I've been watching him from the window of the little room he sleeps in. I don't know how he got hold of the key. I have a duplicate, for cleaning the church. I don't know myself where my master keeps his."

"I think I'll go and speak to Mr. Mitchell, and come back when Mr. Brander is disengaged."

"Disengaged! He's disengaged now, as far as I know——"

"I think I heard Mrs. Brander's voice as I came up the path."

The housekeeper's lips tightened, and she drew herself up in evident disapproval.

"Indeed! I was not aware she was here."

"Well, I'll be back in about a quarter of an hour, as I should like to see Mr. Brander," said Olivia, hastily.

Mrs. Warmington raised her eyebrows. She was longing to tell Miss Denison that she thought, under the circumstances, it would be more modest to stay away; but she did not dare. So Olivia tripped down the stone path, and was in the churchyard before the housekeeper had had time to make up her mind how much of her suspicions it would be proper to communicate to a young girl.

It was some minutes before Olivia succeeded in finding Ned Mitchell. The sun was setting by this time, and there were dark shadows among the ruined portions of the church. It seemed to her as she walked between the newly laid out flower beds with their bright array of geranium, calceolaria, and verbena, that this innovation was out of place, and only showed up, in a more striking manner, the havoc time and tempest had made among the old stones, just as the mowing of the grass upon them had accentuated the irregular mounds and hillocks which filled the ruined south aisle. Olivia stepped in and out and over the mounds, calling softly, "Mr. Mitchell!" At last, in the corner where the old crypt was, she heard a sound coming, as it were, from the ground under her feet. She stopped and listened, holding her breath. The sounds continued, a soft, muffled "thud, thud," as of some heavy instrument brought again and again down on the earth. She advanced, step by step, always listening, fancying that she felt the ground tremble under her feet at the force of the blows. At last she came close to the place where the rugged steps leading down into the crypt had been blocked up years before. With her senses keenly on the alert, Olivia noticed that some of the stones and earth which blocked the entrance had been recently moved; and prying more closely, she found, behind a bramble and a tuft of rank grass, a small hole, low down in the ground, which looked scarcely large enough for the passage of a man's body. However, this seemed to be the only outlet from the vault, so Olivia sat down on a broken gravestone, and waited.

It seemed to Olivia to be growing quite cold and dark before a scraping and rumbling noise, as of falling stones and earth, drew

her attention to the concealed hole in the ground. She got up, and the noise almost ceased.

"It is I, Mr. Mitchell," she said, without being able to see him; "I've been waiting for you."

For answer, Mr. Mitchell's unmistakable, gruff voice murmured a string of sullen imprecations, of which, luckily, nothing was distinctly audible. However, he put his head out of the hole, and then proceeded to extricate the whole of his person with such exceeding neatness and cleverness that the hole was scarcely enlarged, and the bramble and grass remained intact. He presented a strange appearance, however, for he was in his shirt sleeves; a colored silk handkerchief was bound round his head down to his eyes; in his right hand he held a common kitchen poker; while he was so covered with mould and dust from head to foot that but for his peculiarly heavy movements and rough voice he would have been unrecognizable.

"Well, what are you doing here?" he asked, very ill-humoredly, as he shook himself free from some of the dust he had collected in his subterranean exploration. "I thought I heard somebody messing about up here. How did you get in?"

"In the same way that you did, except that I asked for a key instead of taking one without asking."

She was alarmed to see, when he had wiped some of the dirt off his face with his handkerchief, that he looked savagely self-satisfied, and quite beyond all reasoning. This was proved clearly by his next words. He nodded his head quietly while she spoke, and then said—

"All right. That's so. Now you had better run home, and be careful not to say anything about what you've just seen. For I tell you, little girl, if you do anything to interfere with me and my actions just now, it'll be the worst day's work for your little parson up yonder that ever was done. So now you know."

Olivia shivered, but she did not answer or contradict him. She only said, in a subdued and tremulous voice, "Good-evening, Mr. Mitchell," and walked away towards the gate, stumbling over the chips of stone that lay hidden in the grass, which had been allowed to remain long and rank in this the south side of the graveyard. She unlocked the gate, passed out, and was relocking it when she heard rapid footsteps behind her.

"Give me that key!" said Mrs. Brander's voice, so hoarse, so agitated that Olivia looked round before she could be sure that it was really the vicar's calm, cold wife.

Her large eyes had deep black semicircles under them; her usually firm lips were trembling; her whole appearance showed a disorder, a lack of that dainty preciseness in little things which was so strongly characteristic of her.

"This key!" said Olivia, doubtfully. "Do you know who is in there?"

Mrs. Brander examined the girl from head to foot with passionate mistrust, while at the same time she struggled to regain a calmer manner.

"Who is it?" she asked, with an attempt at an indifferent tone.

"Mr. Mitchell."

The vicar's wife drew back from the gate.

"You mean this? You are not playing me a trick?"

"A trick? No. Why should I?"

There was a pause, during which Mrs. Brander stood looking at her fixedly. As she did not speak, Olivia presently asked—

"Do you still wish to go in?"

Mrs. Brander hesitated, and then drew back with a shudder.

"No," she murmured, scarcely above her breath, "I—I won't go in."

As, however, she did not attempt to go [illegible]y, Olivia bade her "good-night," without getting any answer, and went up the lane towards the house. She did not wish to call at the Vicarage now; she wanted first to have time to think over what she had seen and heard in the churchyard, as well as her interview with Mrs. Brander. A new idea, which promised to throw light on the whole mystery, had come into her mind. But there was the key to be returned to Mrs. Warmington. After a moment's thought, she decided that she would leave it at the back door, and thus escape the risk of a meeting with Vernon.

But when she had reached the gate of the yard behind the house, she heard Vernon's voice calling her.

"Miss Denison, Miss Denison, wait one moment!"

He had caught sight of her from a side window, and in another minute he had come down to her.

"Why did you come round this way?" he asked, taking her hand in one of his, which was hot, and dry, and feverish.

"I—I have the key of the churchyard to return to Mrs. Warmington."

"And you wanted to escape the chance of seeing me. But I was watching for you, you know," said he, looking at her tenderly. Then he suddenly changed his manner. "I thought you would come and see me to-day," he said. "It would be like your usual kindness when any one is ill."

"I did call and inquire," said Olivia, demurely. "But Mrs. Brander was with you."

Vernon looked at her earnestly.

"Ah!" he exclaimed; "then I know when you came. I heard your footsteps." Then he looked at her curiously, and asked, "Didn't you hear voices? Didn't you hear us talking?"

"Yes," answered Olivia, simply. "And I heard something of what you were saying."

"You will tell me what you heard?"

Olivia answered, looking down—

"I heard her remind you to keep an oath that you had made to her, and I heard her mention—me!"

"And didn't you want to know what she meant?"

"I suppose I did."

"And will you be content not to know?"

"Perhaps I shall. For I think I have guessed something of the truth already."

Vernon's eyes glowed with passionate yearning as they met hers.

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"Impossible!" said he, below his breath. "And yet—you women have such quick perception. If it is true that you know," he went on, in a firmer and sterner voice, "I shall never dare to speak to you again."

Olivia was trembling with excitement. It was not true that she was mistress of the secret, but there a dim intuition in her mind which bewildered, sometimes almost maddened, her. She did not attempt to answer Vernon Brander; but drawing sharply away from him the hand he still held, she abruptly wished him "good-night," and putting the church keys on the wall beside him, ran away up the lane as fast as her active feet could carry her.

When Olivia reached home she was greeted by severe silence on the part of her step-mother; while her father, who was usually so careful to try to make amends for any unkindness of his wife's by little unobtrusive attentions, carefully avoided her. The girl learned the reason of this treatment by remarks which Mrs. Denison, apropos of nothing, addressed from time to time to the children, warning them not to spoil their clothes, as they were the last they would have; telling them not to disturb their father, as he was writing to a gentleman to whom he owed money, asking for time in which to repay it; and finally admonishing them to be courteous to Olivia, as she could have the place sold up in a moment by insulting her father's creditors; from which Olivia gathered that Fred Williams had already vented his spite on her father, and thereby prepared a most uncomfortable domestic life for her for some time to come.

She affected to take no notice of this treatment however, and did not even go in search of her father, thinking it would be better to let the first effects both of Fred's and of his wife's ill temper pass off before she spoke to him on the subject of the former's addresses.

Telling Lucy to bring her supper up to her rooms, Olivia left the inharmonious family circle without bidding good-night to anyone, and shut herself up in the east wing, where she could always draw the bolt of the outer door and be free from molestation. This she did, and being in a restless and excited state of mind, passed the next two hours in wandering from one room to the other, considering the mystery of Nellie Mitchell's disappearance by the light of all the facts which, one by one, had come to her knowledge. She had become so accustomed to these rooms that it was only now and then that she remembered their connection with the murdered girl. To-night, however, the recollection startled her at every turn she took in her walks up and down. She seemed again to see the bedroom as it had looked on her first entrance, nearly six months ago, the rat scurrying down the curtains, the carpet lying in damp strings upon the floor, the mouldy books, and the dust lying thickly on chairs and mantelpiece. Everything had been been changed since then; fresh hangings put to the bed; bright cretonne coverings to the old furniture; a new carpet, soft and warm, had replaced the damp rags. But on this particular evening her imagination seemed stronger than reality; as she walked from the one room to the other, she pictured to herself always that the chamber she was not in at the moment was in the state in which she had first seen it. These fancies grew so strong that they drove

more serious thoughts out of her head; just when she wanted to be able to analyze the ideas which the day's occurrences had suggested, she had lost all power of thinking connectedly; nothing but bewildering recollections of the words she had heard and the scenes she had witnessed could be got to occupy her excited mind.

She ran at last to one of her bedroom windows, threw it open, and looked out. It was dark now, for it was past nine o'clock, and the evening had turned wet. A light, drizzling summer rain was falling, and the sky was heavy with clouds. The outlook was so dreary that after a few minutes she shut the window, shivering, lit the candles, and tried to read. But she was in such a nervous state that she uttered a little scream when Lucy, bringing her supper, knocked at the outer door. Very much disgusted with herself for this display of feminine weakness, she would not even allow Lucy, who loved to linger about when she had any little service to perform for "Miss Olivia," to stay for a few minutes' chat. When the supper had been laid on the table in the outer room, and the bright little maid had run down stairs, Olivia did not, as usual, lock the outer door after her. She felt so unaccountably lonely and restless that she went into the little passage outside her two rooms, and set the outer door open, so as to feel that her connection with the rest of the human life in the house was not altogether severed. She even walked to the end of the corridor and glanced out through the large square window at the end, listening all the while for some sounds of household life downstairs. But in this east wing very little could be heard, and this evening everything seemed to Olivia to be unusually quiet.

The corridor window looked out over fields, showing the farm garden, with its fruit trees and vegetable beds on the right, and barns and various other outbuildings on the left. Right underneath was a neglected patch of land—a corner of the garden not considered worth cultivation. Lying among the rank grass were an old ladder and a pile of boards, which had been there when the Denisons took the farm, and had remained undisturbed ever since. It suddenly occurred to Olivia, for the first time, how alarmingly easy it would be for an evilly disposed person to place the ladder against the wall, and to effect an entrance through the window, the fastening of which she noticed was broken, and had evidently been so a long time. Not that such a thing was likely to happen, burglaries being unheard-of things in this neighborhood. Still, the idea got such firm hold of her excited fancy that, two hours later, when all the household had retired to rest, she came out of her apartments in her dressing-gown, to give a final glance outside, and to make sure that her absurd fears were as groundless as she told herself they were.

Opening the window and putting her head out into the drizzling rain, Olivia saw, in the gloom of the misty night, a dark object creeping stealthily along outside the garden wall. Just as it reached that part of the wall which was immediately opposite the window, a watery gleam of moonlight showed through the clouds, and enabled her to see that the object was a man. The next moment she saw him climb over into the garden beneath. Still keeping close to the wall, he crept rapidly along until he was close under the window. Holding her breath, Olivia watched him as he stooped and lifted the ladder

from the ground. Her blood suddenly seemed to rush to her brain, and then to trickle slowly back through her veins as cold as ice.

For she recognized him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LIKE all persons of strong nature, Olivia Denison grew bolder as danger came nearer. When she recognized the man in the garden, underneath the corridor window, it did not occur to her to call for help; but all her energies were instantly concentrated on learning the meaning of this intrusion. She was sure that she had not been seen. As noiselessly as she could she shut the window, and retreated into the private passage which led to her own apartments. There she waited, peeping cautiously out under cover of the black shadows of the corridor, into which the faint moonlight could not penetrate.

She heard the grinding sound made by the ladder as it was set against the wall, and presently she saw a man's head appear just above the ledge outside. He raised his hand, gave three taps on the glass, and disappeared. A minute later he mounted a step higher than before, and tapped again. Then, with scarcely an instant's more delay, he pushed up the window slowly and noiselessly, and, as soon as it was wide enough, put one leg over the sill and stood in the corridor.

Olivia, brave as she was by nature, was transfixed with alarm. What did he want with her? What shocking confession, what horrible entreaties, had he come to make to her like this, in the middle of the night? If she could have shrieked aloud, if she could have run out and alarmed the household, she would have done so now. But horror had paralyzed her. The voice she tried to use gave only a hoarse, almost inaudible rattle. Her limbs were rigid; her breath came and went in gasps, like that of a person dying of asthma. She could only stand and stare at the advancing figure, hoping desperately that the first words he uttered would break this spell, and restore her to herself. Why did he choose the night time to come and make her the victim of his guilty confidences? Were they too ghastly to make by day? That this man was the murderer of Nellie Mitchell she could not now doubt; the demeanor of his everyday life was utterly changed; there was guilt expressed in every furtive movement. All her respect and liking were transformed into loathing and fear; she almost crouched against the wall as he approached.

He reached the entrance to the corridor, and paused. If she could only keep still enough for him to pass her! Then she could escape into the main building of the house, and have time to think what she should do. But he stopped short, and stretched out his hand to knock at the door. In the darkness he could not see that it was open. But how, Olivia suddenly asked herself, did he know there was a door there at all? Although he moved slowly, too, it was with the manner of a man who knew his way about the place. Part of the truth

flashed suddenly into her mind: he had been there before. By this time he had discovered that the door was open. Passing into the corridor, he shut the door, turned the key, and put it in his pocket. As he did so he touched Olivia, but did not appear to know it. Now thoroughly alarmed, she flew along the passage into her bedroom, and was in time to lock the door before she heard his footsteps in the outer apartment. There was no lock to the door between the two rooms. No one was likely to hear her if she shrieked at one of the windows. Before many minutes were over she felt that she should have to face him.

She flew across the bedroom floor to blow out the candle, thinking that in the darkness she would have a better chance of escape. As she did so she stumbled against a chair, which fell down with a loud noise. A moment later there was a knock at the inner door. The girl's heart stood still. She remained motionless, and gave no answer. The knock was repeated. Still she was silent. A third time came the knock, and then a low, hoarse whisper, of one word only, startled her, and came as a revelation—

"Nellie!"

This was the manner in which, years ago, he had visited the girl whose love had ended by wearying him so fatally. By what means he had forgotten the intervening years she did not know, but Olivia recognized at once that it was not she of whom he was in search. The knowledge restored in a moment all her courage. If, as she supposed, fear of discovery had turned his brain, his was a madness with which she felt she could cope. After only one moment's hesitation, she snatched up one of the candles, and unlocking the door she had secured, passed through the passage into the adjoining room.

"Mr. Brander!" said she, in a voice which scarcely trembled.

She had to repeat her words three or four times before he moved to the other door. At last he turned very slowly, and Olivia, holding the candle high, looked curiously, and not wholly without fear, into his face.

His eyes were closed; his breathing was heavy. He was asleep! There flashed through her mind the remembrance of what the Vicar of Rishton had said about somnambulism, and the strange instances of it which had occurred in his family. It was clear to her that the excitement occasioned by Ned Mitchell's obstinate determination had preyed upon the mind of the murderer, and led him at last to perform in sleep an action which had been an habitual one with him eleven years before.

In spite of the horror of this weird discovery, Olivia's fears disappeared at once. She thought she might, without waking him, persuade him to go back as he had come. If he did wake, she knew he would not hurt her. She began in a low, intentionally monotonous voice.

"I think you had better go back to-night. It is getting very late; it is almost daylight."

As before, she had to repeat her words before he grasped the sense of them.

Then he repeated in a whisper, and as if there were something soothing in the sound of her voice—

"Go back. Yes, go back."

"I'll give you a light. Come along," she went on, coaxingly

And without a moment's delay she led the way out into the passage. Much to her relief, he followed, at the same slow, heavy pace.

"Now," she said, when they had reached the outer door, "give me the key, please."

He felt in his pocket obediently, and produced the key, which she, overjoyed, almost snatched from his hand. The noise she made in her excitement, as she opened the door, seemed to disturb him, for he began to move restlessly, like a person on the point of waking. Once in the corridor, however, Olivia was bold; she passed her hands several times slowly down his arms, murmuring in a low, soothing tone, injunctions to him to get home quickly. This treatment succeeded perfectly. His manner lost its momentary restlessness, and it was in the same stolid way as he came that he got out on the ladder, descended, replaced the ladder in the long grass, and climbed over the wall.

Olivia watched his retreating figure as long as it was in sight, and then, feeling sick and cold slunk back into her rooms, not forgetting to lock the outer door of the passage safely behind her. Like most women, however brave, when they have been through an exciting crisis, she felt exhausted, limp, almost hysterical. She staggered as she entered the bedroom, and it was with a reeling brain that she walked up and down, up and down, unable to sleep, unable even to rest. She knew the mystery now, and she felt that the knowledge was almost more than she could bear.

Next morning her appearance, when she came down late to breakfast, was so much affected by the awful night she had passed that even the children wondered what was the matter with her. Mr. Denison, believing it to be the result of his avoidance of her the evening before, was cut to the heart with remorse, while his wife, alarmed at the change in the girl, altered her tone, and did her best to be kind to her. Olivia could not eat. Her cheeks were almost livid; her great eyes seemed to fill her face; the hand she held out to be shaken was cold, clammy, and trembling. Her amiable little half sister, Beatrix, saw an opening for a disagreeable remark, and made use of it.

"Mr. Williams wouldn't say you were pretty if he could see you now," said she. "Would he, mamma?"

Like most children, she was quick enough to detect how inharmonious were the relations between her mother and her step-sister. She was surprised to find, however, that for once she received no sympathy from the quarter whence she expected it.

"Be quiet, Beatrix, and don't be rude," said Mrs. Denison, sharply, with a glance at Olivia, on whom she thought that the reference to the supposed cause of her distress would have some sudden and violent effect.

"Can't you keep those children in better order, Marian?" asked Mr. Denison, peevishly. "Their rudeness is getting quite intolerable."

However, Olivia scarcely heard this little discussion, and was in no way moved by it. But when the talk turned to the proposed re-

storation of St. Cuthbert's and from that to the persons interested in it, she grew suddenly very still, and sat looking down at her plate, listening to each word with fear of what the next would be.

"I wonder how the vicar likes to see his wife about so constantly with another man, if it is his own brother," said Mrs. Denison, who, in spite of her experience as a governess, was one of those people who think it doesn't matter what subjects you discuss before children, because "they don't understand." "I'm sure the last week or so I've scarcely seen one without the other."

"Well, now, do you know, I thought it was awfully good-natured of her. You know the stories that have been flying about lately. I'm sure I don't pretend to say whether there's any truth in them or not; still they have been flying about."

"And not without some ground, you may depend," said Mrs. Denison, tartly.

While avoiding the subject which she supposed to be the cause of Olivia's present distress, her step-mother could not resist the opportunity of giving that headstrong young lady a few gentle thrusts on the subject of her "fancy for murderers." Mr. Denison glanced from his wife to his daughter, who by putting strong constraint on herself, appeared not to notice what was being said.

"Well, and as she must know the rights of the story, it seems to me all the kinder in Mrs. Brander to take any notice of him now, when he's under a cloud, as it were."

Mrs. Denison utter a little sound significant of doubt and scorn.

"It is to be hoped that everybody else will put as kind an interpretation upon her conduct," she said, drily. "Only last Tuesday I met them as I walked back from the Towers. They were sitting in that little cart sort of thing Mrs. Brander drives—not at all the right kind of turnout for a clergyman's wife, in my opinion—and talking together so—well, so confidentially—that they took no notice of me whatever."

"Didn't see you, of course," said Mr. Denison, shortly.

"It may have been that, certainly," assented his wife, incredulously. "Or it may be that they are not too much lost to shame to avoid the eye of a lady whom they respect when they feel they are not behaving quite correctly."

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Denison, shortly.

It was so seldom that the so-called head of the house ventured so near to an expression of adverse opinion that there was a short silence, which his wife broke in a dangerously dignified manner.

"Perhaps," she began, with strong emphasis, "when the whole truth comes to light concerning his relations with other ladies, my opinion on the matter will not be considered 'rubbish' after all."

Reginald, with the delightful relish of an innocent child for conversation not intended for his ears, had left off making patterns on the tablecloth with the mustard spoon, in order to listen and watch with his mouth open. He now broke in with a happy sense that he was making mischief.

"Oh, look, mamma, what a funny color Olivia's face has gone!" cried he, pointing to her with the mustard spoon.

The girl got up and left the room. Her father, who could not bear

to see any one unhappy, was miserable at the thought that he himself was partly the cause of his darling daughter's grief.

"Olivia, my dear child, come down—come here," he called after her from the hall as she fled upstairs.

She never could resist any appeal from him, so she crept down again, unwillingly enough.

"Oh, that woman, that woman! Papa, I must go away, I can't live with her," she whispered as she laid her head on his shoulder and received his caress and incoherent attempts at comfort.

"Well, dear, what can I do?" he whispered, apologetically, back. "You see, you were such a little thing when your mother died, and I hate a household without a woman in it, so that even—"

"Even an objectionable woman is better than none," suggested Olivia, mischievously.

"Oh, no, my dear, I didn't say that," whispered he, hurriedly.

"No, papa, you don't dare," said Olivia, with a touch of her old archness. "I really think that when a man with children marries a second time, he ought to drown the first lot in mercy to them."

Poor Mr. Denison looked down at her ruefully.

"My dear, I hope you didn't mean that," was all he ventured to say.

"Yes, I did."

Here Mr. Denison perceived an opening for a suggestion which his wife, of late, had been constantly urging him to make. Not being quite sure how his daughter would take it, he hurried it out in a shamefaced manner without looking at her.

"Since you don't get on very well together, I wonder you don't take the chance of getting a nice home of your own; you know you could if you like."

"What; by wearing little Freddie Williams for ever on my watch chain?" cried Olivia, turning off the suggestion as a joke to avoid paining her father by expressing the disgust she felt.

"Well, my child, you know I shouldn't press upon you anything that wouldn't make you happy; but if you wait for a husband worthy of you, you'll die an old maid."

"And if you'll go on living till you're about a hundred and five to keep me company, papa, I'll be the oldest old maid in England with pleasure," said she, affectionately, as she kissed his cheek and ran away upstairs.

She had some work to do this morning; work for which she must drive all thought of last night's adventure out of her head. As soon as she reached her own room she unlocked the drawer in which she kept her trinkets, and spreading them out before her on the dressing-table, she mentally passed them in review to decide which were the most likely to be saleable. Not a bad collection for a young girl, they formed; though Olivia, ignorant as she was about the value of jewellery, thought how poor they looked from the point of view at which she was now considering them. A pair of turquoise and pearl earrings and brooch to match, a heavy gold bracelet, a set of garnets and pearls of quaint, old-fashioned design, a handsome silver chatelaine watch, a quantity of silver bangles, a few very modest-looking rings, a diamond arrow brooch, and a massive gold necklet. Every-

thing but the arrow, which had been a present from her father on her eighteenth birthday, looked, in a strictly commercial light, clumsy or out of date. The arrow must be sacrificed, she told herself with a sigh; so must the gold necklet and bracelet, which she rightly judged to be next in value. If she could only sell these things, and get ten or twelve pounds for them, she could pay off a fair instalment of her father's debt to Fred Williams immediately, and she must trust to luck and her own determination for the rest. So she made a parcel of the trinkets she had chosen, and, at the last moment, packed also the turquoise and pearl set; then, dressing hastily, she slipped out of the house, and started at a rapid pace on her way to Matherham.

Before she reached the high road, however, she was met by Fred Williams, who was sauntering about, pipe in mouth, at the point where the roads met, on the chance of meeting her. He surveyed her with a sidelong look of unwilling admiration.

"Good-morning, Miss Denison," he said, curtly, pulling off his cap in a sort of grudging manner. "I suppose you have nothing fresh to say to me this morning?"

"Not at present, though I may have by-and-by," said she, lightly.

"Oh, well, er—do you know whether your father is likely to be about this morning? I want to see him on business."

Olivia looked at him with great contempt from under her sweeping black eyelashes.

"He is about, of course; but I don't think you need trouble yourself to see him, for I have a message to you from him. It is this: the first instalment of the money he owes you will be paid to-day, and the remainder very shortly. And he is very sorry to have put you to any inconvenience by accepting the loan."

With which speech, and a low bow, Olivia left Mr. Williams to the enjoyment of his own society.

Then on she sped towards Matherham, not by way of the wood and St. Cuthbert's, but by the shorter road that went past the Towers. A great bare building it was, standing ostentatiously on very high ground, with a spire here, a minaret there, and various irregular erections springing up from the roof to make good its name. Olivia laughed to herself, and wished the lady who might ultimately obtain the hand of her mean-spirited admirer joy of her bargain. She was not unhappy; the fearful nature of her discovery of the night before had shaken her out of the depression from which she had lately been suffering. She was excited, full of indignation and of energy: her head full of wild surmises, of fears connected with the approaching crisis. As if trying to keep pace with her fantastic thoughts, her feet seemed to fly along the ground. The few persons she passed stared at or curtseyed to her without any acknowledgment; she saw no one but the people in her thoughts.

Suddenly she was roused out of her wild reverie by hearing her own name called in sharp tones. She looked down from the high pathway alongside the hedge into the road, which at this point was some five feet below. There she saw the vicarage pony carriage, containing Mrs. Brander, who was driving, with Vernon sitting by

her side. It was the lady who had called to Olivia. Having pulled up the ponies to the side of the road, she now beckoned to the girl in an impatient, imperious manner, to come down.

"Good-morning," said Olivia, coldly, without attempting to leave the pathway. Her cheeks had grown in an instant deadly white on seeing who was the lady's companion; but she did not glance at him.

"I can't stop this morning, Mrs. Brander: I'm in a great hurry," she said, in an unsteady voice, while her heart beat violently, and she felt that if the interview lasted a minute longer she should not be able to stand without support.

"But I have something important to say to you—very important. I really must beg you to give me a moment; and, if you like, I will drive you into Matherham myself."

"No, thank you," said Olivia, hastily.

"One minute, then, I beg, Miss Denison."

The imperious lady's voice had suddenly broken and become imploring. Olivia, with downcast eyes, and feet that tottered under her, found a convenient place for a descent into the road, and the next minute stood by the pony carriage, on the side where Mrs. Brander was sitting. She neither looked up nor spoke, but left the opening of the conversation to the vicar's wife, whose hands, as she held the reins, shook with a nervousness altogether unusual with her. With strange diffidence, too, Mrs. Brander hesitated before she spoke.

"You are walking into Matherham?" she asked, at last.

"Yes, Mrs. Brander."

"You are sure you won't let me drive you in?"

"Quite sure, thank you."

"Vernon, you know, would get down; he'd rather walk I'm certain."

Olivia's face became suddenly crimson.

"I couldn't think of turning Mr. Brander out," she said coldly.

"I should be delighted," murmured Vernon in a low tone.

In spite of all her efforts to retain her self-command, Olivia shivered at the sound of his voice. She felt, although she never once looked at the face of either, that both the man and the woman were watching her intently. They had some suspicion of the knowledge she had so strangely obtained, she was sure. There was a pause, and then Mrs. Brander spoke again.

"You don't look so well as usual this morning, Miss Denison," she said, not quite able to keep curiosity and anxiety out of her tone. "You are quite pale. We miss your lovely roses."

"I have had a bad night," said Olivia, shortly, and with a sudden determination that it would be better to let them know all she had discovered.

The effort Mrs. Brander made to retain her usual calmness and coldness was piteous to see. Her beautiful features quivered; her great black eyes were dilated with apprehension.

"A bad night?" she repeated, inquiringly.

"Yes. I was frightened. A man got into my sitting-room."

Neither of her hearers made any but the faintest attempt to affect astonishment.

"It must have alarmed you horribly," said Mrs. Brander with blanched lips. "Did you call any one?"

"No."

Over the face of the vicar's wife came an expression of great relief.

"Have you told any one?"

"This is the first time I have mentioned it."

There was a pause.

"Have you any idea—who—the man—was?"

"I recognized him at once, before he got in at the window. He spoke to me, but he did not know who I was. He was asleep."

"He spoke to you?"

"Yes. He addressed me as 'Nellie.'"

Olivia had dropped her eyes, but she heard Mrs. Brander's breath coming quickly, as if she was choking. The girl put her hand out impulsively on the arm of the elder lady, and whispered, without looking up—

"You made me tell you. And, after all, what does it matter? I think you know."

She felt her hand seized with a convulsive pressure.

"You will say nothing?" Then Mrs. Brander snatched her hand away. "No, no; it is asking too much, of course. And perhaps, after all, it would be of no use."

"At any rate, Mrs. Brander, nobody but you will ever hear the story from me."

She ignored Vernon, as she had ignored him throughout the whole of the interview. Mrs. Brander drew a labored sigh.

"I trust you," she said in a hoarse voice. "A woman can keep a secret as well as a man, I know."

"Oh, yes," said Olivia, simply. "Now you will let me go, will you not?"

She was frank, honest; but she was not cordial; scarcely even kind. When Mrs. Brander pressed her hand again, however, she returned the pressure with a firm clasp. Then, still without a glance at Vernon, she bowed and wished the vicar's wife "good-morning," and, turning, resumed her walk towards Matherham. She had not gone many yards before she quickened her pace still more, hearing footsteps she recognized behind, and then beside her.

It was Vernon Brander.

For some time he walked on in silence by her side, not daring to address her. At last he said, humbly, imploringly—

"Won't you speak to me?"

No answer.

"Have you forgotten all you once said to me about friendship?"

"No," she answered in a frightened, constrained voice, still without looking at him.

"Remember, what you saw last night was no worse than what you already believed."

"Yes it was!" panted Olivia. "It was worse; much worse—to see—to hear. It was something I shall never forget. But don't let us speak of it."

"But is it to make this difference, that you will never speak to me again?"

"It is to make no difference; you heard me say so. You wish it; she wishes it. I have promised."

"I take you at your word. If you had discovered nothing you would have let me go into Matherham with you, and you would have told me the object of your going. Will you now?"

"Yes, if you like, Mr. Brander." In spite of herself, her tone was more formal than usual. "I am going to get some money to repay a loan from that wretched little Fred Williams."

"To your father, of course. And I suppose," he added, glancing at the little parcel she carried in her hand, "you are going to sell some trinkets of your own to do so."

"To help to do so," answered Olivia, with a blush and a look of surprise at his perspicacity. "The whole sum is much more than anything of mine could fetch."

"Will you tell me how much?"

"Thirty pounds!"

"And will you, as a pledge of what you said—that you will forget everything—do for me what I know you would not do for any other man?"

"What is that?"

"Let me lend you the money. I spend nothing. I have a considerable sum saved, and it will do me a pleasure—such a pleasure!" he added, earnestly, below his breath. "It would be a mark of confidence which would prove to me, whatever I may have done wrong—and my conscience is not too clear, I know, you know—prove to me that you have a little compassion, a little kindness, for me still."

Without answering in words, Olivia, who was trembling violently, took his hand, pressed it quickly for one moment in hers, and let it drop hastily, as if she had been too bold.

Then, without the exchange of a single word more, they walked through the narrow, hilly streets of Matherham, which they had now reached, until they came to the bank where Vernon kept an account. Olivia walked on while he went into the building; in a very few minutes he overtook her and put an envelope into her hand. She did not thank him; he did not give her time.

"I am very grateful," he said simply; "I—I can't say any more now. Good-bye."

Olivia looked up and spoke with a sob in her voice.

"Good-bye," she said.

Then they looked into each other's eyes with the long, sad look of a farewell, and she was not surprised at his next words.

"I daresay," he said in a hoarse voice, "that I shall be going away from here before long; I daresay I shall have to—when the tower is built," he added in a whisper, looking down. "No, don't say anything—I couldn't bear it."

But Olivia, though she tried, could utter no word. She wrung his hand and looked straight into his face with an expression of passionate sympathy and despair. Then, without another word, they parted.

CHAPTER XXV.

OLIVIA hurried back towards the farm with the little packet in her hand which was to release her father from his hateful indebtedness to Fred Williams. It was true it rendered her herself indebted to somebody else; but, with a woman's perversity, she preferred the greater evil to the less. It was rather an awkward matter, however, to acquaint her father with what she had done, especially as she found him in the lowest depths of despondency.

"Don't speak to me, my dear; don't speak to me," was his greeting to his daughter when she pounced upon him, with a light-hearted laugh, from behind the hedge of one of his own cornfields.

He was contemplating the ripening crop with a most rueful face.

"Why not, papa? Perhaps I may have some good news for you."

"Good news! Oh, no," he answered, dolefully, shaking his head. "It must be for somebody else if you have any good news. So go away, or I may be cross; and I don't want to speak crossly to you, my darling."

There was not much fear of such a thing, evidently; for when she persisted in coming to him, and giving him a hearty kiss, the wrinkles in his forehead began immediately to clear away.

"It's all your fault, you minx," said he, looking affectionately at the girl's bonny face. "You've turned the heads of all the lads about here, and then it's your poor old father that they 'wreak their vengeance on,' as the melodramas say."

"Why, papa," said the girl, blushing, "who's been teasing you now? Produce him, and let me whither him up with a glance."

"Well, the first thing I heard this morning is that the old brute, John Oldshaw, has been making all sorts of mischief about me to Lord Stannington's agent—says I'm ruining the land, and all that; and it's all because he's angry at poor Mat's humble admiration for you, I know. He says I'm not fit to be a farmer. Now what do you think of that?"

The enormity of this allegation made Mr. Denison quite unable to proceed. But Olivia shook her head and laughed.

"I think, papa, that if all Mr. Oldshaw's statements were as veracious as that, he would be a much honester man than he is."

"Why, what do you mean, child?"

"That, if the whole world had been thoroughly scoured to find the one man most unsuitable for the occupation of farming, they could not have done better than light on you."

"Olivia, I'm surprised at you!" said her father, assuming a tone of great dignity, mingled with indignation.

"Ah, you may well be surprised to find a girl with as much common sense as a man," retorted she, merrily. For since her return from Matherham her spirits had risen in an extraordinary manner.

"Now, papa, look at John Oldshaw. He's a perfect type of a successful farmer. And he's mean, and he's vulgar, and he's industrious, and he's economical; while you, pardon me, are none of those things. I don't say that all good farmers are like John Oldshaw, but I'm certain none of them are a bit like you. And if he can persuade you

that you'll never do anything at farming but lose your money, and catch cold looking at oats that won't ripen and turnips that won't come up, he'll do you a very great service."

"But, my dear," remonstrated her father, not quite certain whether to be amused or offended by her wicked plain speaking, "you don't understand these things. Women never do, of course. It's not their province and we don't expect it of them." The poor old fellow's tone grew more confident when he got into these mild platitudes. "John Oldshaw has always shown himself jealous of me: firstly, because I'm a gentleman; and, secondly, because I conduct my farming on different principles from his."

"Yes, papa," said Olivia, demurely, "on very different principles. He gets large crops and you get small ones. And John Oldshaw wants to turn you out, and apply his principles to your land. And I wish you would let him."

Mr. Denison sighed. He could not quite hide from himself that there were grains of truth and good sense in his daughter's suggestions. But the secret admission made him impatient and irritable.

"Of course," he said turning upon her, "I'm not likely to get on here or anywhere while my people insult the friends who would help me to tide over the bad time."

"Do you mean that I've insulted Fred Williams, papa?" asked Olivia who was too straightforward to allow the talk to be carried on by innuendoes.

"Well, and what if I do?" asked Mr. Denison, taken aback. For he was one of those persons who would walk round about a fact for ever without facing it.

"Has the little reptile been worrying you about the money he lent you?"

"Reptile!" echoed Mr. Denison, trying to evade the question. "That is a strong word for a young lady to use, my dear. Not but what I have been disappointed in that young fellow. He seemed such a generous, open-hearted lad that I own he induced me to break my rule and allow him to accommodate me in a little difficulty I was in—"

"And are you out of the difficulty, papa?"

"Well, my dear, I am, in a sense out of that one. But difficulties have such a way of clinging together; where they've been once they come again."

"And this wretched creature has been worrying you, then?"

"Well, he spoke to me about you in such a way that I was mad with myself for having allowed him to oblige me."

"I think I can free you from that obligation, papa," said she, gently. "Only you mustn't ask where the money came from."

"What?" cried he in astonishment. "My dear child, you are dreaming. I owe him thirty pounds."

"Look here."

She opened her little packet, and unfolded before him six five pound notes.

"But, Olivia, I can't take these from you without knowing how you got them," said her father, trying to assume a rather severe paternal air.

"It's very simple; I went into Matherham, followed a rich-looking old gentleman into a quiet street, knocked him down, and robbed him," she answered, laughing. "But you needn't have any qualms of conscience about the proceeds of the deed, for I'm going to hand them over to Fred Williams myself, with a message from you—which I shall make up."

"But, Olivia, I really cannot permit—"

"It's too late now; the power of permission is denied you. But, remember, when you next meet that miserable little goose, you can hold up your head and snap your fingers at him, for there will be no obligation between you any longer."

She nodded good-bye to him very brightly, checked his expostulations with a kiss, and ran off over the fields in the direction of the Towers.

For Olivia was feverishly anxious to pay off the debt, and she had little doubt that she would find Fred lounging on his father's lawn, softening what brains he had by the help of some fluid or other, and a strong cigar. She met him, however, before she reached the gate of the Towers. He had just come from Matherham in a hansom, and was quarrelling with the cabman about his fare; but when he caught sight of Olivia he changed his tone, and threw the man a handful of silver with an ostentatious air. Then he came up to her with a manner full of exaggerated respect, and an expression of face in which the girl instantly detected a good deal of malice.

"Delighted to see you, Miss Denison; it isn't often you do us the honor of a visit up here. You wish to see my sister, I suppose."

"No, I came to see you, and I won't detain you long. I am commissioned by my father to bring you the money you so kindly lent him, and to say how deeply obliged he is for the graceful generosity you have shown him in this matter."

Fred Williams was annoyed, but he did not seem surprised.

"Oh, all right," he said, gruffly. "You needn't sneer. Your guv'nor was precious glad to take it at the time: that's all I know. And you haven't got me on toast as you think, for I saw you pass here this morning, and I followed you into Matherham, and I know what you did there," he added, triumphantly.

"Nothing that I am ashamed of," said the girl, quietly.

"Oh, no, you've too much cheek to be ashamed of anything. You've paid me back to-day, and I'll pay you back to-morrow. For to-morrow the workmen begin to dig in St. Cuthbert's churchyard, and if they should come across anything that'll upset your friend's apple-cart, remember you had the chance to stop it. And perhaps you won't feel so proud then of having got clear of debt to me by running into debt with a murderer. Yes, a murderer, Miss High-and-Mighty," he continued, with a little dance of delight on the garden path. "And if you don't feel jolly well ashamed of yourself and your friend by about this time next week, why, I'm a polished gentleman, that I am!"

"You couldn't say anything stronger than that, Mr. Williams," said Olivia, ingenuously. "I suppose I shall have the pleasure of meeting you to-morrow at St. Cuthbert's. Good-morning."

And, quite unaffected by his threats, she bowed to him with great

ceremony, and tripped away down the road as if greatly pleased with her interview.

But Olivia was not at ease; she only appeared so because she was excited to the pitch of recklessness. As the day drew on, and the time for the commencement of the excavations at St. Cuthbert's grew nearer, she became restless, depressed, and so irritable that she had to pass the time either out of doors or in her own rooms, to avoid the domestic friction which she felt that to-day she could not bear. Next morning she awoke with a deadening sense of being on the brink of some great danger. At the breakfast-table, at which she duly appeared to avoid giving unnecessary alarm to her father, her looks again provoked much comment, which she bore as patiently as she could, being particularly anxious not to encourage a discussion which might lead to interference with a project she had in view. She was so impatient to leave the house that every trifling delay seemed to her to be part of a conspiracy to keep her indoors. When her usual household duties were disposed of, when Mrs. Denison's request that she would make up a parcel for the dyer's had been complied with, she crept upstairs with a heart full of anxiety, dressed, slipped out of the house, and sped away in the direction of St. Cuthbert's.

For all her haste, she could not reach the churchyard much before twelve o'clock, when the workingmen, their morning's labor almost over, were slackening their efforts in anticipation of the dinner hour. Already their invasion had entirely changed the aspect of the churchyard. Piles of scaffolding poles, ladders, and boards lay just inside the walls. Planks placed across the broken gravestones, formed bridges for the passage of wheelbarrows to and from the scene of operations. This, Olivia saw, was the ground at the foot of the tower, extending to the crypt, the entrance to which had been freed from the stones and bricks which had blocked it up for so long. The men seem to be at work in all directions: some were erecting a scaffolding against the old tower, the upper part of which was to be taken down; some carting away stones and rubbish from the east end; some removing that corner of the roof of the south aisle which, in a crumbling and dangerous condition, still remained. But it was upon the corner where the old crypt was that Olivia's attention at once fixed. For here, listening perfunctorily with one ear to old Mr. Williams, who had a self-made man's veneration for his own utterances, and keeping a sharp lookout upon two workmen whose labors within the crypt he was superintending, was Ned Mitchell.

Nothing had happened so far, Olivia easily guessed; no discoveries had been made; no alarm had been given. But to her fancy, there hung over the whole place the hush of expectancy: the workmen scarcely spoke to each other, the onlookers seemed to hold their breath. Another feature of the scene was that these onlookers each seemed to have come by stealth, and to wish to remain unnoticed by the rest. Olivia herself, for instance, remained outside the churchyard wall, seeing only so much of the operations as could be observed from the highest part of the rough and broken ground. Then, lurking behind the hedge on the opposite side of the lane, was the lame tramp, Abel Squires, who from this post could see very little more

than the scaffolding poles, but who had remained there, nevertheless, since the moment, early that morning, when the workmen from Sheffield first made their appearance. Vernon was inside the church, keeping out of the way of everyone but the foreman, to whom he was giving certain structural explanations, while Mrs. Brander watched the proceedings from her pony carriage in the lane, and Fred Williams from the church roof. A small crowd of the country people, chiefly children and old pit women, filled up the spaces, and made the isolation of the others less noticeable. Roaming about the churchyard, in a somewhat impatient manner, was also a gentleman whom Olivia did not immediately recognize as the doctor who had attended Ned Mitchell in his illness.

It was a sultry day; sunless and heavy. The smoke of the Sheffield chimneys hung over the hills in a thick black cloud, and appeared, Olivia thought, to be coming nearer and nearer. The air seemed to choke instead of invigorate; the leaves of the trees hung parched and still. The girl's excitement had all evaporated; she waited there without hope, without fear, in a dull state of expectancy, her clearest thought being a faint wish that she might be able to get quietly home again without having to speak to any one. Still she stood there, and watched the workmen slowly putting on their coats, the doctor as he flitted about the churchyard, without quite knowing whether she was asleep or awake, whether the figures, moving silently about, were flesh-and-blood creatures, or images seen in a dream.

Suddenly a breath of air seemed to pass over every one, and the stirring of a more active life was felt. It was a voice at the gate of the churchyard which broke the hushed silence, and made every eye look up, while the women and children curtseyed, and the workmen touched their caps. The Vicar of Rishton, cheerful and smiling and bland, had worked the change by his appearance alone. A certain listlessness, which had begun to creep over watchers and workers at the end of an eventless morning under a sullen sky, disappeared. There arose a hum of talk; the workmen who had left off work hurried to their dinner cans; the few who were still digging felt a spurt of fresh energy. It was felt that the portly presence of the much-respected vicar gave *eclat* to the proceedings, and new interest to a monotonous occupation. Only Ned Mitchell remained entirely unmoved. He gave the clergyman a glance and a nod, and then turned again to the two men at work in the crypt.

"Get on, you lazy devils!" he said, kicking a stone impatiently. "You might be millionaires, both of you, not to think it worth while to work harder for the chance of a ten-pound note."

"Why, we've turned the whole place out, master, and blest if there's a bloomin' thing to be found there except earth and stones," said one, in a rather grumbling tone.

"Hey, what?" asked Mr. Williams, in a surprised tone, "What's that they're looking for, eh, Mitchell? Something lost? Something buried, eh?"

"Both lost and buried," said Ned, briefly. "What do you think, parson?"

And he turned quickly to the Reverend Meredith Brander, who

had by this time, after a triumphal progress between two lines of admiring villagers, reached the group.

"Well, the churchyard is the place for the lost and buried, certainly," replied the vicar, whose bright complexion and serene smile were a charming thing to see after the anxious and gloomy faces the rest of the assembly had been wearing. "But, as we know, a time will come when we shall recover our lost ones," he added, with gentle solemnity.

"Some of us will recover 'em sooner than we bargain for, perhaps," said Ned, drily.

The vicar did not answer; indeed he looked as if he did not understand. He nodded pleasantly, and looked round, smiling on such members of his family and of his congregation as were in sight. For a curious thing had happened since his coming; all those beforementioned spectators, who had been watching as it were by stealth, now with one accord drew near to the entrance of the crypt, and cast at the vicar sidelong glances of deep interest. Thus Olivia, Mrs. Brander, Vernon, the doctor, and Abel Squires found themselves, as if by preconcerted arrangement, within a few feet of each other, and yet seemed to be unaware of this fact. The vicar also seemed not to notice this, but Ned Mitchell took in the curious situation with a keen glance, and read the varied expressions of curiosity, anxiety, and despondency on the several faces with cynical swiftness.

The men in the crypt did not leave off work with the rest; on the contrary, urged on by Ned Mitchell, whose tone grew sharper with every order he gave, they used pickaxe and spade with renewed energy.

"I don't quite understand the necessity for all this delving in the crypt," said old Mr. Williams, at last, rather pompously.

He was a man by habit too much occupied with himself to have troubled his head about the stories and scandals of the neighborhood, and no suggestion of any mystery connected with St. Cuthbert's had ever reached his ears.

"You'll see presently, perhaps," answered Ned, who betrayed his ever-increasing excitement only by the growing curtness of his tone.

For he perceived, peering down into the gloom where the men were working, that the digging and delving had suddenly ceased, and that, in the remotest corner of the little crypt, both were kneeling down examining the lower part of the wall. Then one of the men struck a match, and a moment later his fellow workman came to the opening.

"We've found something, sir!" said he, in a low voice.

"Eh? What?" asked old Mr. Williams, who began to have an idea that he was being made a fool of.

There was a sort of a rustle and flutter among the bystanders: for though all had not heard the workman's words all knew that something had happened. Ned Mitchell, who was now so much excited that he dared not trust himself to speak, beckoned to the doctor. The latter, who was on the alert, came up immediately. He was an active, brisk little man, sparing of words.

"I think we shall want you now, doctor, please," said Ned, in a

voice which was getting hoarse and rasping. "What is it you have found, mate?" he went on, turning to the workman.

"It's a body, we think, your honor—the body of a woman."

The vicar, on entering the churchyard, had locked the gate, to keep out the swarm of unruly boys who always ooze out of the pores of the earth when anything of an unusual nature is going on. So that few people but those most interested in this discovery were present to hear the announcement of it. These all pressed forward until they stood—a silent, excited group—close to the crypt entrance. Mrs. Brander, although she remained perfectly quiet, laid her hand, either from sympathy or for support, on the arm of her brother-in-law. Vernon himself looked if possible more pale and haggard than ever, but his face wore its habitual expression when in repose, a look of grave and somewhat cynical good humor. The only noticeable thing about his demeanor was his careful avoidance of Olivia Denison; he would not even meet her eyes. The girl herself was white to the lips and cold from head to foot. Fred Williams, in a cheerful voice offered her the support of his arm.

"These are nasty scenes for a lady to be present at," said he, with a little compunction in his voice. "Won't you let me take you away?"

She shook her head, and signed for him to leave her, which he did reluctantly and with some shame. In the meantime the gentlemen had descended into the crypt, with the exception of Vernon, who was detained by Mrs. Brander. By the light of a lantern and a torch, a ghastly sight was soon disclosed to view.

In the lower part of the wall of the crypt, in the corner nearest the entrance, to which no daylight could ever pierce its way, was unearthed between the basis of two of the pillars supporting the roof, the almost fleshless skeleton of a woman, the damp rags of whose dress, still recognizable, hung around the bones in shrunken folds. The flaring and flickering of the lights on what had once been a beautiful face, on the remains of the finery which every other girl in the village had once envied, made an ever-changing, hideous picture, upon which the men all gazed with feelings of pity, horror, and disgust.

A savage exclamation burst from Ned's lips. Old Mr. Williams was struck dumb with horror; for to him the discovery was quite unforeseen. The doctor bent over the skeleton, and taking a lantern into his own hand, looked carefully at the horrible thing, touched it, removed part of the ragged clothing, and muttered something the rest could not hear. The Vicar of Rishton, accustomed to death in many forms, maintained a demeanor of reverend gravity, tempered by amazement. As the doctor stopped, however, he interposed with some haste, and, coming close beside him, tried gently but firmly to thrust him aside.

"There must be an inquiry into this, I suppose," he said; "though, for the sake of the unhappy man who committed this deed, and whom we know to have repented long ago, I trust it may be made as quietly as possible. In the meantime the remains must be laid decently in some suitable place. I would suggest the church itself."

The doctor interrupted him brusquely. He, with the rest, had been listening in dead silence to the clergyman's words.

"Where you like, vicar: but I must make an examination first. If I'm not mistaken, I've seen something just now which will be a positive means of identifying the murderer." Still the vicar insisted, gently, but with becoming determination.

"I really think, in a matter touching the sanctity of the dead, that I, as vicar, ought to have a voice."

"But you're not the vicar of this church," said the doctor, standing his ground. "The Vicar of St. Cuthbert's is your brother Vernon, and if, as you seem to say, he has had anything to do with this business——

There was a stir among the hearers, and old Mr. Williams burst out, "What! What! Vernon Brander! Bless me! You don't mean to say——"

The vicar was protesting; Ned Mitchell was swearing and muttering; Fred Williams, who had crept in during the last few minutes, was whistling softly to himself, to keep off the horrors.

Suddenly the doctor, who had again stooped over the skeleton, silenced them all in imperious tones.

"Stand back, gentlemen! In two moments I can satisfy your curiosity as to who murdered this woman."

The vicar only attempted to resist this command; but the doctor, with a skilful and most unceremonious thrust, forced him back into the rest of the group; and the next moment the reverend arms were pinioned by Ned Mitchell's strong hands.

"Keep back, can't you?" hissed Ned, roughly into his ear; "murder will out, you know! And people might say such ugly things if they thought you wanted to hide the truth."

After this there was a sickening, death-like pause, while the doctor's hands moved rapidly about the horrible heap of human bones and tattered finery. Then he sprang up, and made quickly for the light. The rest followed, huddled together, panting, bewildered, like a flock of frightened sheep. For the doctor's face, old practitioner though he was, was livid and tremulous with a great horror. Standing in the open daylight they found him, looking at something he held half concealed in his hand. Mrs. Brander, Vernon, and Olivia Denison stood a little way off, watching him, but not daring to come near. He closed his hand as the men gathered round him.

"Gentlemen," he began, gravely, in a very low voice, "there are circumstances in this case so revolting that I think that no good can come of making them public. But you shall judge. I have found, inside the remains of that poor girl, a ring which, there can be no doubt, was the property of the murderer. In spite of the decayed state of the body, I can undertake to say that this ring was swallowed by the girl just before her death. Here," and he held up his closed hand, "is the ring. Shall I show it you?"

"No!" said the Vicar of Rishton, sharply. They all turned to look at him.

"Why not?" asked the doctor, quietly.

Meredith Brander had recovered the composure which, indeed, he could scarcely be said for a moment to have lost.

"What good would it do?" he asked, gazing blandly in the doctor's face.

Doctor Harper returned his look with astonishment which became almost admiration.

"Well," he answered, "it would show up the most remarkably perfect specimen of a consummate humbug that I have ever had the honor of meeting."

A curious thing had happened before this short colloquy was ended. The rest of the group had gradually dispersed, and left the two men alone together. As he uttered the last words, the doctor also turned abruptly away, so that the vicar was left by himself. He did not seem disconcerted, but walked, with a half smile on his face, in the direction of the churchyard gate. His wife, whose handsome face was as pale as that of a corpse, and whose limbs tottered under her, moved, with faltering step, in the same direction. At the gate stood Abel Squires, who stood back to allow the vicar to pass out first. But Meredith Brander would not allow this. He turned to him with a kindly nod.

"Well, Abel," said he, "I'm afraid this is a sad business for somebody."

"I'm afeard so too, sir," replied Abel, with an immovable face.

"We must hush it up. I'm sure you would not like any harm to come to my brother."

"No fear o' that, sir," said Abel. "I could prevent that."

"Why, how so?"

"Ah wur wi' him all that evenin'. An' if he hadn't kept my tongue quiet all these years hissen, truth would ha' been aht long ago."

The vicar went through the gate without another word. But before he had taken many steps in the lane outside, he felt an arm thrust through his. It was his brother Vernon, who pressed his arm warmly two or three times before he spoke.

"Cheer up, old chap!" he whispered, huskily. "For Evelyn's sake and the children's we can get it kept quiet still."

Then, for the first time, Meredith threatened to break down. He wrung his brother's hand with a force which made Vernon turn white, and when he answered, it was with sobs in his voice.

"I'm a scoundrel, Vernie," he almost gasped. "But if you save me again, on my soul I'll be better to them than many an honest man."

CHAPTER XXVI.

NED MITCHELL, although he had let Meredith Brander off easily at the moment of the discovery of the body, had no intention of letting his sister's murderer escape the just punishment of his crime. The discovery of the vicar's ring inside the poor girl's remains had not been altogether unexpected by Ned and by the doctor, whom he had taken into his confidence. He had had the wit to connect the vicar's loss of his ring, which the girl must have stolen and secreted unnoticed by him in the course of their last fatal interview, with the strange threat Nellie Mitchell had uttered to Martha Lowndes. He

had confided his suspicions to the doctor, who had thus been on the alert to prevent Meredith from touching the remains of the murdered girl before he himself had examined them.

After a few words of explanation to old Mr. Williams, and a little substantial advice to the two workmen who had dug out the skeleton. Ned marched off with Abel Squires in the direction of Rishton Vicarage. On the way they passed Vernon Brander, who wished to stop Ned. But the latter hurried on, and to all the entreaties he tried to utter, turned a deaf ear.

"If you've been fool enough to hold your tongue for ten years, and bear the blame of somebody else's crime, that's nothing to do with me. You may talk till you're tired, but my sister's murderer shall get what he deserves."

And he walked on stubbornly with the tramp.

When they reached the Vicarage, and asked to see the vicar, they were shown into the drawing-room, and left waiting there for some minutes. When the door opened, it was Mrs. Brander, instead of her husband, who came in.

"What, has he run away already?" asked Ned, in a hard, jeering tone.

"No, my husband does not yet know you are here," she answered, in a very sad voice. "I knew you come, and so I told the servant to announce your arrival to me."

"What's the good of that?" asked Ned, roughly. "You've done no harm, and we've nothing to do with you, except that we're going to set you free from a rascal."

Abel Squires had withdrawn to the farthest window, and tried to hide himself behind the curtain. Rough fellow as he was, to hear a man speak in a bullying tone to that beautiful, dignified lady was too much for him.

Mrs. Brander had never in her life before looked so handsome as she looked now, standing erect before this coarse man, with a flush of deep humiliation in her cheeks, and passionate entreaty softening her proud eyes.

"But, my children, my poor children: they have done less harm in the world than your sister did, and if you hurt my husband you sacrifice them. Think of that. You have children of your own. You don't dote on them passionately any more than I do on mine; therefore you can enter into my feelings. Is it fair, is it just, that they should suffer? I don't appeal for myself, for you don't like me. But just think of this: for ten years I have been a dutiful wife to this man, who was unfaithful to me even in my fresh youth, when I was beautiful, so they said, and loving, and devoted. Listen. I knew of the murder on the night he committed it; for he came straight back with stained hands, and a face I never shall forget. Do you not think that was something to forgive? But I did it, and I implore you to do it too. I am not asking you an impossible thing, for I have done it myself. And think under what circumstances!"

But Ned remained as hard as nails.

"I suppose—no offence to you, madam—your motives were not entirely unselfish; and even if they were, that's no business of mine. If you chose to put up with him, that was your lookout. I came

back here to punish my sister's murderer, and I'm not going to be made a fool of by a woman when the game's in my own hands."

Ned spoke the more harshly, that he was really rather touched by her beauty and her high spirit. There was something in her frank, straightforward manner of pleading more to his taste than any amount of tearful, hysterical incoherence would have been. But Mrs. Brander had a most unexpected ally near at hand. Thumpety-thump came Abel Squires, with his wooden leg, out of his hiding place. He did not look at the lady, but going straight up to Ned, jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of where she was standing.

"Hold hard, Mester Mitchell," said he, without moving a muscle of his dried-up face; "Ah didn't bargain fur this when Ah coom here to-day. A woman's a woman. An' t' woman ye're so soft abaht's dead, but t' woman ye're so hard on's alive. Steady theer, Mester Mitchell, or Ah'll hev to swear Ah killed t' lass mysen."

The poor woman broke down at these words from the rough tramp; she turned away abruptly to hide the tears which sprang to her eyes. Ned, who was hard, brusque, and determined, but not inhuman, moved uneasily about the room.

"Women have no business to interfere in these matters," said he, angrily.

Mrs. Brander saw that there was hope. She moved nearer to him, clasping her hands, not in supplication, but because they would twitch and tremble, and so betray the anguish she was suffering. She tried to speak, but couldn't. But with one piteous look out of her proud eyes, she turned away again.

"Well," said Ned, in very ill-tempered tones, "we're wasting our time here, Abel, and Mrs. Brander's. So, please, madam, let us see your husband, and have done with him."

But Mrs. Brander hastened to intercept him on his way to the door.

"You will not be too hard," she pleaded, in a breaking voice. "You are not vindictive, I am sure."

"I beg your pardon, madam, that's just what I am," snarled Ned. "And if I'm fool enough not to insist on the hanging he deserves, I'm not going to let him off scot free, I can tell you."

"Of course not, of course not," said she, in a tone of great relief. "He has done wrong—great wrong; and he must suffer for it—we must suffer for it. Only don't expose him. Anything but that."

"Yes, anything but what he deserves, of course. Let us pass, madam, please. He is in the library, I suppose?"

"I suppose so," she faltered.

Ned turned round abruptly.

"You suppose so! Well, if he's given us the slip, and left you to bear the brunt of it all, it'll be the worse for him."

Mrs. Brander drew herself up in the old, proud way, and spoke with her accustomed cold haughtiness in addressing a person she disliked.

"You need not be afraid, Mr. Mitchell. I can stand by a criminal husband: I would not by a cowardly one."

"Do you call it courageous, then, to kill a woman, and let another man bear the blame for ten years?" asked Ned.

Mrs. Brander did not answer. She led the way across the hall to the study, and knocked.

"Come in," called out the vicar, in his usual voice.

She opened the door, and signed to the two men to follow her in. Abel would have slunk away, but Ned Mitchell kept a tight hold on his arm. Both, however, kept in the background, near the door, while the lady went up to her husband, and laid her hand upon his shoulder. He leant back in his comfortable chair, pen still in hand. He had been busy writing, and the table was covered with large sheets of MS. He faced the two intruders with an air of mild annoyance, which would have made an onlooker think that he was the injured person. Ned, with astonishment, which he would not admit by word or look, examined the bland, fair face, with its healthy complexion, frank blue eyes, broad white forehead, and saw on it no trace of shame, guilt, or even of anxiety. It was his wife's face which bore all these signs. As she stood, upright and daring, by her husband's side, handsome, majestic, and brave. Ned Mitchell felt that to deal with Meredith as he deserved, while she remained there, was impossible. He half turned, as if anxious to put off the interview. The vicar changed his position, wheeling his chair round, so that he could face the two men.

"Well," he said, "you wish to speak to me, do you not?"

His tone was mildly peremptory.

"Yes, we do. But what we have to say we wish to say to you alone."

"Go, my dear," said Meredith, turning kindly to his wife.

She hesitated, and he pushed her gently away from him. Then she stooped, kissed his forehead, and with an imploring, yet still dignified, look into Ned's reluctant eyes as she passed him, she slowly left the room.

"Now," said Mitchell, in a louder, more assured tone, as if much relieved, "we've got an account to settle with you."

"Well, sit down, and let us have it out."

Meredith was not in the least discomposed. He took up the pen he had been using, wiped it carefully, and then crossing his legs and clasping his hands over them, assumed the attitude in which he was accustomed to give private advice or consolation to members of his flock.

"I'm afraid we are interrupting you," said Ned, ironically; so he prepared to sit down, which Abel shyly refused to do.

"Not at all. I was writing my sermon for next Sunday, but as I suppose it lies with you whether I shall be allowed to preach it, I can't complain of your visit as an interruption."

"You take this business pretty coolly," said Ned, losing patience.

Meredith looked at him with a sudden flash of fire in his blue eyes, a spark of the same fierce spirit which he had revealed to Ned on the night when he conquered and controlled the bloodhounds at the cottage.

"Do you suppose that I have kept my head for ten years to lose it now?"

Ned was taken back. There was a pause before he said, in almost a respectful voice—

"You admit everything, then."

"I admit everything you know, of course. This man here could prove whatever I might deny. Besides, everybody knows that ring is mine; I did not know until to-day how I lost it, as you may guess; else I should have been prepared with some story."

Ned Mitchell, who had brought the ring with him and had just produced it, thinking to confound the vicar, slipped it back into his pocket with uncertain fingers.

"And you are prepared for the consequences?"

"As much prepared as a man ever is for a very unpleasant contingency."

"Even if the contingency is—what the law prescribes for discovered murderers?"

"You mean hanging?"

Ned Mitchell nodded, and the vicar paused.

"I won't say that I am prepared for that; I can't say that I ever contemplated such a possibility seriously. It would be a terrible precedent to hang a vicar. I should probably get off as of 'unsound mind,' and be confined 'during her Majesty's pleasure.'"

"And if they shouldn't be so lenient?"

"Then I should go through with it as well as a man may."

"And if I let you off the full penalty," said Ned, wondering if it were possible to disturb this stolid serenity, "what would you feel towards me?"

"Nothing," answered the vicar, promptly. "You would do it, not for my sake, but out of admiration for my wife, pity for my children, and because my arrest would involve my brother's, as an accessory after the fact. He saw me immediately after the—the deed: the crime, in fact; and he concurred, if he did not assist, in the concealment of the body, as Abel here probably knows."

"Ay," said Abel Squires, who was standing, awkwardly, as near the door as possible. "Mester Vernon and me had walked nigh all t' way from Sheffield together, and we heerd cries o' 'Murder!' An' Mester Vernon he left me, an' he jumped o'er t' wall into t' churchyard, an' when he coom back he looked skeered loike, and his reight hond wur stained red, as if he'd held another hond that wur redder still. An' somehow Ah guessed whose hond it wur as he'd been holdin'."

Abel, after delivering this speech in a mumbling, shamefaced manner, ended abruptly, and looked at the door, as if he felt that his unpleasant mission was over. The vicar listened with interest, and nodded assent to the latter portion of the tramp's words. Ned Mitchell continued to gaze at Meredith like a bear baulked of his prey.

"I don't believe you've even felt much remorse all these years," he said, savagely.

The vicar faced him frankly.

"To tell the truth, I haven't," he said. "That's not in my temperament. I suppose this sounds especially remarkable because I am a clergyman. But my profession was forced upon me; I had to put an unnatural curb upon myself, and succeeded in attaining a pitch of outward decorum such as none of my family had ever reach-

ed before. But the strain was too great, for I am not by temperament virtuous; none of my family are. Vernon has an accident, and not his nature, to thank for his superiority. That is all I have to say."

The vicar leaned back in his chair, as if weary of the discussion.

"Then you don't seem to have any conscience," said Ned, regarding him in bewilderment.

"Not much, I suppose," answered the vicar; "though indeed lately I have had troubled nights, and shown the family tendency towards somnambulism; so my wife tells me. And in rather an unfortunate way," he added, with a half smile.

As the vicar finished speaking, Ned came forward with his ponderous tread, laid his hand heavily on the writing-table, and looked down at the clergyman's bland face with the air of a strong man who has definitely made up his mind.

"Now then, parson, I'll tell you what you'll have to do. You take that pen that you've just been writing your precious sermons with, and you write a detailed confession of your intrigue with my sister, your visits to her at night, your correspondence with her, the way in which you murdered her, and the way in which you disposed of her body. Then sign your name and put the date in full, and me and Abel here will oblige you by putting our signatures as witnesses."

"And if I do this, what follows?" asked the vicar, taking up the pen and examining the nib.

"Then you get my permission to leave this country for any other you choose with your wife and children. And as long as you keep away, this paper will never go out of my possession."

"And if I don't do this?"

"What's the good of going into that?"

The eyes of the two men met, and they understood each other. Without wasting more words, Meredith turned to the table, invited Ned with a gesture to sit down, and proceeded to draw up the prescribed confession. This he did fully and frankly, adding at the end certain graceful expressions of contrition which Ned, reading the document over carefully, took for what they were worth. The main body of the composition satisfied him, however; and after appending his own signature to the confession as a witness, and insisting on Abel's adding his, he sealed up the paper with great solemnity. Then, intimating to Meredith Brander that the sooner he carried out the remaining part of the compact and left the country, the better it would be for him, he left the room with the curtest of farewells, and hastened out of the house to avoid what he called "another scene with the woman."

Once outside he looked back at the vicarage with great interest.

"If one had to be a rascal," said he, with some irrepressible admiration, "that's the sort of rascal one would choose to be."

Then Abel Squires left him and hobbled off, and Ned was left to his pipe and his reflections, both which he chose to enjoy, not at his garden gate as usual, but at the bottom of the hill, outside Rishton Hall farmyard.

Before he had been there more than a few minutes, the event he

was prepared for took place. Olivia Denison, pale, excited, tearful, yet radiant, came to the gate, looking out anxiously. Seeing Ned, she ran out to him with a cry.

"Oh, Mr. Mitchell," she said, almost in a whisper, "I must ask you to forgive me. I had such unjust thoughts of you. I thought, until the night before last, that you meant to ruin Vernon, in spite of your promise."

"Um," said Ned; "you hadn't much faith in your lover, now, had you, to think him capable of——"

"Hush! never mind that. You see, I must have felt at the bottom of my heart that he was really good. For I loved him all the time just the same."

"That doesn't follow at all. Women always go by contraries. The more of a villain a man is, the more a woman likes him. Look at the vicar here, and the way his wife sticks to him. And look at me, as honest a fellow as ever lived, and what do you think my wife cares for me or my affections? Not a single straw, I tell you."

"Well," said Olivia, smiling, "considering the small amount of affection you seem to waste on her, I think it's just as well for her happiness that she is not dying for love of you."

"Ah, you're full of these new fangled notions about the equality of the sexes. Now, I say, men and women are different. The man does all the hard work, and even if he goes a little bit off the straight sometimes, it's no more than he has a right to, provided he fills the mouths at home. The woman has nothing to do but look after the home and children, and mend their clothes and her husband's. And if she can't find time besides to be devoted to her husband, and to think him the finest fellow on earth in return for what he does for her, why, she ain't worth her salt; that's all. Now that's my marriage code, Miss Denison, though I can see by your face it isn't yours."

"I really haven't considered the subject much," replied Olivia, demurely, but with a bright blush.

"You might do worse, though, than consider it, now that things have shaped themselves a bit," said Ned, in a dry tone. "Our dear friend the vicar here is going to leave this country, in consideration of a certain little matter being hushed up—"

"Oh, I'm so glad?" interrupted Olivia, with a deep-drawn breath of relief: "that is good of you, Mr. Mitchell. For it would have been—dreadful—dreadful!"

Ned was looking away over the corn-fields, where his sharp eyes detected a figure he recognized, wandering about in an aimless manner.

"I think you'd better take a walk out into the meadows there," he said, after a minute's pause, turning again to the young lady, with a kindly look on his hard face. "It will do you good after all the excitement and botherment of this morning."

Olivia blushed again.

"Thank you," she said, with a proud turn of her head. "I don't care to go out again this afternoon. The air is much too oppressive."

"Oh, all right," said Ned with a dry nod; "then I musn't keep

you out here talking in the 'oppressive' air, I suppose. Good-day, Miss Denison."

"Good-bye," she said, gently, holding out her hand, which he shook with a firm pressure.

Then he walked up the hill, talking to himself.

"These old-country lasses are fine creatures," he meditated. "There's Mrs. B., whom I didn't care for, and Miss D. whom I did, and I'm blest if they haven't both got too good a spirit to be married at all. Yet one wouldn't care to see them old maids, either—nor yet men—nor yet angels. These high-spirited ladies, who can think and act for themselves, don't seem to fit in somehow. One would feel they were kind of too good for one. Give me a nice, comfortable lass, whom you needn't study any more than a potato. You know what to be at with one of them. By-the-bye, now I suppose I must take ship and see how my own potato is getting on."

Nevertheless, from the top of the hill he looked down rather sentimentally in the direction of the old farm. As he did so, he caught sight of a girl's tall figure in the meadows. He laughed maliciously.

"She's gone to meet him. I thought she would. I'd have let off half a dozen scoundrels to give that lass her heart's desire; that I would!"

And he watched her till a rising in the meadow ground, and a thick, flowering hedge, hid her from sight.

After a few minutes' arguing with herself, Olivia, who guessed the reason of Ned Mitchell's suggestion of a walk in the fields, decided that she ought without delay to let Vernon Brander know the result of the interview between his brother and the colonist. So she darted through the gate and across the road with the agility of a deer, in spite of the oppressive air. So excited was she, so full of joy at the turn affairs had taken, that she almost ran along the footpath, beside the sweet-scented hedges, with an occasional little leap or bound of most undignified happiness. Thus it happened that when she came unexpectedly face to face with Vernon Brander on rounding a thicket of bushes and small trees, she was springing into the air with her face radiant with delight, and a soft song—something about "birds" and "love"—upon her lips. Vernon, on his side, looked, if anything, even more haggard and woebegone than usual. Both stopped short, and Olivia, who had become on the instant very subdued, drew a deep breath of confusion.

"Mr. Brander," she began, in a cool, almost cold, voice, "I—I—er, I have just met Ned Mitchell, and I think you ought to know what he says."

"For Heaven's sake, yes: tell me!"

"He is going to hush it all up, on condition that your brother leaves the country altogether."

Vernon drew a deep breath of relief, and almost reeled against the fence which protected the thicket on one side.

"Thank God!" he whispered.

And he put one hand to his face as if to shut out the fearful picture his imagination and his fears had been conjuring up. Olivia waited impatiently as long as she could. At last when she could bear this neglect no longer, she said, rather tartly—

"Mrs. Brander will have to go too."

"Of course, of course; she will go with her husband."

Vernon was still in a dazed state, not yet understanding what a great change in his prospects of happiness the day's events had made.

"I think it was very silly of you to keep silence all these years just to please her. It was she who made you, I suppose—came to you, and wheedled you. Men are so easily coaxed," continued Olivia, disdainfully, with her head in the air.

She had never been curt and dictatorial, like this, with him before. Poor Vernon, quite unskilled in the wiles of her sex, was abashed and bewildered.

"Yes," he admitted, humbly. "She came to me and begged me not to say anything if people suspected me. And, you see, I had been so fond of her, and she was in delicate health, and I had no wife or children to be hurt by what people might think of me. And so I promised."

"And she made you promise not to marry, didn't she?"

"Well, yes. Poor thing, she had to do the best she could for her husband and children; and, of course, she thought if I married, I should let out the secret to my wife, and my wife would insist on having things explained."

"I should think so," said Olivia.

"And now," said Vernon, who was getting more and more downcast under the influence of this surprising change in her, "I'm too old and too sour to marry, and I think I shall go away with them, and have my little Kitty to console me."

"Yes," said Olivia, quietly, her voice losing suddenly all its buoyancy as well as all its momentary sharpness; "I think that will be a very good plan. You will let us know when you intend to start, won't you, for my father and mother owe you an apology first? Now, I must be getting back. Good-evening."

Dull Vernon began at last to have a glimmer of insight into the girl's secret feelings. He shook hands with her, let her walk as far the very end of the field, noticing with admiration which had suddenly, after the strain of the morning, again grown passionate, her springing walk and graceful, erect carriage. Then he ran after her on the wings of the wind, and placed himself, panting, with his back to the gate she was approaching.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," he said, as he looked with sparkling eyes into her face. "But you seem to forget I've lent you thirty pounds. I shall want it back to pay my passage."

Olivia caught her breath, and her face, which was wet with tears, grew happy again.

"I'd forgotten all about it," said she, in a tremulous voice, half saucily, half demurely. "But anyhow, you can't have it."

"And why not, Miss Denison?" asked Vernon, coming a step nearer.

"Because I—I don't want you to go away," answered she.

And she fell into his arms without further invitation, and gave him a tender woman's kiss, an earnest of the love and sympathy he had hungered for these ten years!

The true story of the murder at St. Cuthbert's never became commonly known. At the inquest which was opened on the remains found in the crypt, nobody who had anything to tell told anything worth hearing. But, then, nobody was very anxious to discover the truth, for rumors too dreadful for investigation began to fly about; and nobody was astonished when, the health of his children requiring a change to a warmer climate, the Reverend Meredith Brander got, by the interest of his uncle, Lord Stannington, an appointment at Malta, for which place he started, with his wife and family, without delay,

The vacant living of Rishton was given by Lord Stannington to his other nephew, Vernon; and Olivia, though lamentably unlike the popular ideal of a clergyman's wife, became as much idolized by the poor of the parish as her husband was already.

John Oldshaw got Rishton Hall Farm; for Mr. Denison's friends persuaded him to give up farming while he had still something left to lose. But the farmer did not long survive his coveted happiness. Dying in a fit of apoplexy, he left his broad acres in the care of his son Mat, who, instead of setting up as a country gentleman, as his sisters declared he would do if he had any spirit, married little Lucy, made her a good husband, and remained for ever, in common with his wife, the idolatrous slave of her late mistress.

"Theer bean't more'n one woman in t' world," he would say, "too good for Parson Brander. Boot theer be one, and thot's his wife."

But though "Parson Brander" himself agreed with this, he was mistaken; for, like every other good woman, she was the better, and the little world around her was the better, for the fact that she was the noble and true mate of a noble and true man.

THE END.

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