

# Lover and Husband

A Novel

Mrs. Molesworth

The background of the lower half of the page is a vibrant green. Overlaid on this are various blue geometric shapes: a large 'X' in the upper center, a triangle pointing up in the middle, a triangle pointing down in the lower left, and several horizontal and diagonal lines of varying lengths. A white text block is positioned in the bottom right corner.

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# LOVER AND HUSBAND

A Novel

BY

# ENNIS GRAHAM

“The history is a tragedy as all human histories are.”  
CARLYLE'S MIRABEAU.

IN THREE VOLUMES  
VOLUME I.

LONDON:  
CHARLES J. SKEET, 10, KING WILLIAM STREET  
CHARING CROSS  
1870  
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## CHAPTER I.

### ANTECEDENTS.

*“——The children of one mother,  
You could not say in one short day,  
What love they bore each other.”*

WORDSWORTH.

LONDON in September. A dull, close, airless day. The streets would have been dusty enough too, no doubt, had there been a breath to stir the dust, which one felt instinctively, was lying there in masses, ready on the slightest provocation to rise in choking clouds. A day when one longed for the sea, or failing that, for a breeze of fresh air. A day when one could hardly believe in the reality of cool green fields, or babbling, trickling brooks. Not that it was so much hot, for there was little sun, as dry, and heavy, and intensely dull. Dull everywhere, but especially so in one of the somewhat old-fashioned, but unmistakably respectable squares of which there are not a few in London, so much resembling each other as to require no special description. The square at this season looked its very dullest and ugliest; under these circumstances, I should suppose, the more nearly fulfilling the aim, as regards outward appearance, of the melancholy architects who planned it. Half the houses were shut-up, and of the remainder, several were evidently shortly about to be so, for in some, hot and dusty housemaids were to be seen pulling down window curtains, and in one or two more an acute observer, by dint of a little peeping, might have discovered business-like trunks and carpet-bags ready packed and strapped for starting, or else gaping open while undergoing the mysterious process called “airing,” in

some of the lower regions where such domestic rites are usually performed.

In one of the dullest of the dull houses, in a sort of library or morning room on the first floor, a young girl sat alone. The room was not a pretty one. At the best of times it might have been called comfortable, but nothing more for its furniture, though solid and good of its kind, was like the rest of the house, heavy, dark, and ungraceful. On this day the room looked especially uninviting, for there was about it that peculiar look of business-like disorder, which, even in the neatest of households, inevitably accompanies preparations for "leaving home." Torn letters, bits of string, and address labels, a work-basket half emptied of its contents, all told their own tale.

The only pretty thing in the room was its occupant. She was certainly not beautiful, but like many people to whom that word, in its ordinary and superficial sense, could not be truthfully applied, she was most thoroughly pleasant to look upon. Possibly a thought too thin, and hardly rosy enough for what one likes to see in a girl of nineteen, but with no lack of health and vigour in her firm, well set frame, and pale, though not sallow complexion. And with no want of intelligence or quick perception in her grey eyes, as a glance from them would soon have told. A good, gentle, pretty girl, just such, I think, as one would like to see one's own daughter, though with rather more thoughtfulness of expression than seems quite natural in so young a creature. This came, however, from her rather too quiet and solitary life, and from no original dearth of the bright hopefulness and gaiety of spirit hardly in theory to be separated from the idea of healthy youth.

The girl sat at her writing-table, but not writing. Rather wearied with all her little preparations, she felt glad to sit still doing nothing, and though looking very thoughtful, as was her habit, still, to tell the truth, she was thinking of little in particular. There was perfect silence through the house, and the occasional roll of wheels in the neighbouring streets sounded rumbling and heavy through the still, drowsy air. Marion, I think, was very nearly on the point of succumbing to these various influences by falling asleep outright, when her reveries were disturbed by a sharp, sudden ring at the hall-door. She started up, but sat down again lazily, saying to herself, "Oh, I forgot, it will be only Cissy." "Cissy," evidently not being a person to be treated with much ceremony. But a second start was in store for poor Marion's nerves, had she been conscious of possessing any such undesirable things. A moment's interval and then came the sound of hasty feet up the stairs; the door opened suddenly and an unexpected visitor

entered. A boy of course. No one but a boy, and one too in a hurry, could have come up stairs in that three-steps-at-a-time sort of way, or opened the door with that indescribable sort of fling, neither bang nor jerk, though partaking of the nature of both. Though, after all, perhaps, it is hardly fair to this particular boy, to introduce him as so thoroughly one of his rather objectionable class; for when he was not in a hurry or very unusually out of temper, Harry Vere, my Marion's brother, did not by any means forget the small proprieties of life. A good boy, in the main; certainly neither a sneak nor a bully. His looks would have belied him had he been either. He had a fair, open, honest face, with, however, much less strength than his sister's, and also less promise of future development. He hurried in, looking flushed and travel-stained, and anxious too, as the girl's quick observation was not slow to discover.

"Harry!" she exclaimed, "you here! How did you get off, and what is the matter? Is anything wrong?" asking, after the manner of people in a hurry to get an answer, three questions, where one would have served the purpose.

"No, no, nothing is wrong," said the boy "at least, nothing much. I have not been expelled, or broken my legs, as you can see for yourself. Don't get into a fuss. I only came up because I wanted so much to see you before you go. You shall hear all about it in a minute; but first tell me one thing. My father is still away? There no fear of his seeing me today?"

"Oh no, not the least," replied the girl, evidently by no means surprised at the unfilial spirit of the question; "he has been away since Monday, and won't return till the day after tomorrow. But I am leaving tomorrow, you know. When I heard your ring I thought it was Cissy Archer, for I am expecting her this afternoon, to settle definitely about our train. I see though," she added, glancing at the time-piece, "she won't be here for an hour yet, so we have plenty of time for a talk."

"Not so very much," said Harry, "for I must have some luncheon, as I can't get back to school till late, and my train goes in an hour and a half. You can fancy how very much I wanted to see you, Marion, for even though I came second-class, my fare will all by clear me out; and I can't now get leave to be away again before Christmas, so I shall miss the match at Barrow next week."

Before answering Marion rang the bell and ordered some cold provisions in the way of luncheon for her brother. As the servant was leaving the room Harry said to him rather awkwardly and hesitatingly, "Brown, you needn't say



anything to your master about my having come up to see Miss Vere before she goes.”

Brown being fortunately of the order of discreet domestics, answered simply:

“Very well, Sir, I will take care that your wishes are attended to;” muttering however to himself as soon as he was outside the door, “Lucky for poor Master Harry that none of them other chattering idiots saw him come, and that I got the cold beef and bread unbeknownst to cook.”

When Harry was comfortably seated at his repast, Marion repeated her request.

“Now, Harry, tell me all about it.”

“Well, Marion, the long and the short of it is, I’ve got into a scrape. Not a bad one though,” added he hurriedly, seeing the increasing anxiety in his sister’s eyes, “nothing disgraceful or ungentlemanly. You would never fear that for me, May? It was a good while ago; but I did not tell you about it at Midsummer, because I thought then I should be able to set it right, but now it has got worse. I know I was a fool for my pains to hide it from you. Several months ago, one holiday at school, I hired a horse. Of course it is against the rules but lots of fellows do it. I am really very fond of riding, though I don’t know about it, but I don’t think I should have been tempted to do it in this underhand sort of way if my father had sometimes let me have a little in the holidays. But then—you know as well as I how he thwarts me; but that’s an old story. Well, as ill-luck would have it I lamed the beast. I am no judge of horses, but still I think it was above the average of a livery stable. The man made an awful row, said he had that morning refused sixty pounds for it, and it was now worthless. He threatened to complain to the head-master. I don’t know what is the law in such matters, but I was in such a fright that he would really tell on me, that I made on the spot the best terms I could with him, which were to pay him twenty pounds down the next morning; though when I promised this I had not the least idea where to get the money. I went straight to Cuthbert, my great chum, you know, Marion, and told him all about it. He begged me not to make a fuss, and I should have the money in time. And sure enough by next morning he had it for me, and I paid the man, as I had promised.”

“But Cuthbert!” said Marion, in amazement, “how could he get it, Harry? His

people are not at all rich, and I should think he has even less pocket-money than you.”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Harry, “there’s the pull. Cuthbert knew I would pay him as soon as I could, and he has been awfully good about it. But only last week he came to me in great distress and told me the whole affair. It seems he got the money in his own name from a wretched Jew at a hideous rate of interest, trusting to my being able to pay him, in part, any way, last month; as I quite hoped I should have got something from Aunt Tremlett on my birthday. Of course she was ill and sent me nothing. Now poor Cuthbert must pay it before the 15th of October, and this wretch has made it somehow or other come to thirty instead of twenty pounds. The exposure would utterly ruin Cuthbert. That’s the horrible part of it; to think what my folly has brought him into, good fellow that he is. Why he never spends a sixpence he can help on himself! Now Marion what can I do? How ever am I to get thirty pounds before the 15th of October?”

“If only I had it,” sighed poor Marion, “but you know I never have five pounds in my own hands, much less thirty.”

“I know that quite well. I never had the least idea of getting it from you, May. All thought of was, that as two heads are better than one you might help me to find out some way of getting it. Of course, if the worst comes to the worst, rather than let Cuthbert suffer I will go to my father. He would pay it. I have no doubt, but would probably never speak to me again. Any way all chance of my going into the army would be over, and just when I am so close upon it too: leaving school at Christmas for good. Oh, what a fool I was! But for both your sake and my own, May, I would rather do anything than speak to my father. It would be perfectly horrible to have to do it. I declare I would rather run away, if only I could beg, borrow, or steal the money in the first place.”

“Hush, Harry,” said his sister, “don’t talk nonsense, but think seriously what to do. If only Aunt Tremlett had not been so ill, she might have helped us.”

“Not she, indeed,” replied the boy impatiently, “or if she had even agreed to do so, she would have been pretty sure to discover that it was her duty to tell my father. Old idiot that she is.”

“You need not waste your time in abusing her, Harry, for as things are, she is

out of the question. But Harry, dear," she added anxiously, as the sound of the clock striking caught her ear, "I fear your time is almost up?"

"All but," said the boy, with a rather poor attempt at a laugh, "so Marion you don't see any way to helping me out of my trouble? And think what a time it will be before we see each other again! You are to be at Altes with Cissy Archer for six months, didn't you say?"

"Six months, certainly, I believe," said his sister, "I should like the thoughts of it exceedingly, but for the one drawback of not seeing you in the holidays. But that can't be helped! And now about this trouble or yours, Harry. Do nothing just yet. Wait, any way, till the end of the month; that will be a fortnight from now, and I will see if by then I can hit upon any plan to prevent your having to tell Papa; for that would really be too dreadful. Not so much the disagreeable of it as the after consequences, for he would never forgive it, or trust you again."

"Never," said Harry, emphatically. "But Marion, I must go. Thank you, dear, for being so kind about it. Many a sister would have scolded or preached, but I am far more sorry than if you had done either. Well, then, you'll write within a fortnight and send your address. I suppose you don't know it yet? Good bye, and mind you don't fuss about me more than you can help." And with a more affectionate parting hug than he would perhaps have liked Brown major or Jones minor, to be witness to, Harry departed, his heart considerably lighter, as is the way with selfish mankind, for having shared its burden with another.

Marion, poor child, sat down again where he had found her, burying her face in her hands as she vainly tried to solve the problem so unexpectedly placed before her: "Where to find thirty pounds?" She had never before actually cared about the possession of any sum of money, for though by no means luxuriously brought up, still, as is the case with many young people, the comforts of life had, as it were, "grown for her." Her father's peculiar ideas as to the inexpediency of treating his children as reasonable or responsible beings, had left her, in many practical respects, singularly inexperienced. She had certainly often wished, like all young people in a passing way, for things beyond her reach; but still, whatever was really necessary to her comfort, or suitable for her position, Mr. Vere had provided and paid for. In proportion, therefore, to her previous exemption from anything in the shape of financial anxieties, were her alarm and consternation at the present difficulty. And terrible, indeed, appeared the alternative of laying the matter before her falter. Sad perversion of what should

be the most tender and trustful of relations; that between parent and child, when, in his distress and perplexity, or even in his shame and remorse, the child's first impulse, instead of being to fly for counsel or comfort to the one friend who should never refuse it, is, at all costs, to conceal his trouble from the parent who has indeed succeeded in inspiring him with fear and distrust,—but alas with nothing more! And this is done every day, not by hard or indifferent fathers only, but by many who, according to their light, honestly enough desire to do their best by the young creatures committed to their charge.

Mr. Vere, the father of this boy and girl, was perhaps less to be blamed than some parents, for the fact that his children did not regard him as their friend. An extreme natural reserve of character and manner had, in his case, been so augmented by the unhappy circumstances of his life, that to his children from their earliest years, he had never appeared otherwise than hard, forbidding, and utterly unsympathising. Yet in reality he was a man of deep feeling, and capable of strong and lasting attachments; but along with these healthy characteristics were to be found in him a large amount of morbid weakness on certain points, and a peculiarity which I can best describe as narrow-heartedness. The one passion of his life had been his love for his wife, a lovely, silly, mindless baby, whose early death was certainly not the bitterest disappointment she caused him. Their married life was short, but it lasted long enough for the freezing, narrowing process to begin in the husband's heart. He lost faith in affection, or at least in his own power of inspiring it. The want of breadth about him prevented his seeing that though he had been so unfortunate as to make the one "grand mistake," an uncongenial marriage, it did not necessarily follow that every other relation in life was, for him, to be in like manner a failure. He made up his mind beforehand, that were he to allow himself to seek for consolation in the love of his children, in that, too, he would but be laying up fresh disappointment for himself. And therefore he was weak and cowardly enough to stifle, so far as he could, the natural outflowings of fatherly affection. He did not altogether succeed in this, for his heart was still, in spite of himself, sound at the core; but, alas, as time went on it proved no exception to that law of our nature, by which all unused members gradually contract and wither. From his children's earliest years, as I said, Mr. Vere checked in himself all outward demonstration of affection, and this, of course, quickly reacted upon them. Little people are not slow to understand when they and their innocent caresses are unsought, if not unwelcome. Fortunately, however, for these poor little things, they had each other; and the affection of two as honest, loving little hearts as ever beat, refused to vent in one direction, only flowed the more vehemently in the remaining one.

And to give the father his due, he certainly was not unmindful or careless of their actual comforts and requirements. They had everything to be desired for their health and happiness, except their father's love. As they grew older, time brought no improvement to the state of matters. Extreme strictness, not to say severity, was the basis of Mr. Vere's theory of education. This, and the fact that he never in the slightest degrees confided in his children, or appeared to consider them as reasonable and intelligent companions, extended the already wide gulf between them. Yet he continued, solicitous about their health and comfort, and was even scrupulously careful in his choice of their teachers, books, and the few companions he thought it wise to allow them. Had any one taxed him with not fulfilling to the utmost his duties as a parent, he would have been utterly amazed and indignant; for so one-sided and warped had his whole being become through the one great mistake of his life, that it simply never entered his imagination that, by not loving his children, he was denying to them the first of their natural rights; or that his systematic coldness could possibly be to them an actual injury and injustice.

For himself, he came in time to be so absorbed in other interests, those of a political life, as not in the least to miss the affection he had so deliberately stifled in its birth. In a rather narrow way a clever, though never a brilliant man; accurate, painstaking and calm, he gradually became very useful to his party. And thus, contentedly enough, he lived his life, rather congratulating himself than otherwise, on what he had made of it, and on the strength of character which had so thoroughly thrown off and outgrown the bitter disappointment of his early manhood.

The childhood and youth of Marion and her brother had not, however, been on the whole desolate or unhappy. Indeed, it takes a great deal, thank God, to crush the happiness out of healthy children. And they don't miss what they have never known.

The first great sorrow was Harry's going to school; but at the same period, a kindly disposed and very terrible governess appearing on the scene, Marion's life was by no means solitary and loveless as she had anticipated. The happiest times they remembered, poor children, were the summer months, Harry's holidays, which with this kind Miss Jervis, they every year spent in Brentshire, their father's native county, and where he still owned, near the little village of Bradley, a pretty cottage and a few acres of land—the remains of a once considerable property. In Brentshire, too, at the dull little town of Mallingford,

lived the old Aunt Tremlett, Harry's godmother, from whom they learned the few particulars they ever knew of their pretty young mother and her early death.

Their father never accompanied them to Brentshire. He still shrank with a morbid horror from ever revisiting the place where he had first met his wife, and where, so few years after, she was buried.

The Veres had in past days been people of no small consideration in their own county, and though for two generations the head of the family had been settled in a different part of England, there were still plenty of people about Mallingford to whom the name in itself was a recommendation to show kindness to the two children who bore it. And as they were loveable and engaging, they soon gained hearts on their own account. There was old Mr. Temple, the clergyman, who had married their parents, and seen the sad end of that story, and his two young-lady daughters, in particular Miss Veronica, who played the organ on Sundays, and sometimes invited May or Harry as a great treat to sit up in the loft beside her, Then there was jolly old Mr. Baldwin, of the Bank, always so merry and hearty; and Geoffrey, his son, the great tall schoolboy, who used to carry both children at once, when they were very small, one perched on each shoulder. He came to see them one Christmas in London, and told them of his kind father's death, looking so sad and lonely that both Marion and Harry cried when he went away. That was several years ago, but they had never seen Geoffrey Baldwin since; for as they grew older, their visits to Brentshire became fewer, and at last ceased altogether. Their father sold the cottage, and the Midsummer holidays were now spent in London, with the exception of a fortnight or so at the seaside, if it happened to strike Mr. Vere that town was unhealthy in hot weather for young people.

I think there is very little more to tell of Marion's early life. Simple and uneventful enough it had been, and with but few of what are usually considered young girls' special privileges and pleasures. But, on the whole, by no means an unwholesome training for a rich and vigorous nature, though it might have crushed and stunted a poorer one. Such society as, since she grew to womanhood, she had seen at her father's house, had been almost confined to that of the few friends whom he now and then invited to a somewhat ponderous dinner. Clever men, all of them, in their different ways; interested, if not absorbed, in topics, much of which Marion hardly understood, but from which, not being a common-place young lady, her quick intelligence led her to glean much material for quiet thought and speculation, which certainly did her no

harm, and probably more good than the “finishing” touches she would at this period have been undergoing, had her education been more in accordance with prescribed rules.

That anything in the shape of a “coming-out,” so called, was necessary or even advisable for his daughter, had never occurred to the pre-occupied mind of Mr. Vere; but as some of his friends took a kindly interest in the girl, she had not been quite without an occasional glimpse into the doings of the gay world. And now a very unexpected treat was before her, in the prospect of spending several months at the far-famed wintering place of Altes, under the care of the pleasantest of chaperons, the aforesaid Cissy Archer.

Six or seven years before this, when Marion was a thin, shy little girl of twelve or thereabouts, this cousin, then Cecilia Lacy, had been to her a vision of beauty and loveliness such as she could hardly imagine excelled by any even of her favourite fairy princesses. And this childish admiration had not been misplaced. Cissy had been an exceedingly pretty girl, and now at eight-and-twenty was an exceedingly pretty woman. A good little soul, too, as ever lived. Possibly not exactly over-flowing with discretion, but so thoroughly and genuinely amiable, bright and winning, that it was utterly impossible to wish her in any respect other than she was. She had married happily. Her husband was considerably older than herself, and by his rather overwhelming superabundance of discretion, good judgement and all other model qualities of the kind, more than atoned for his pretty, impulsive wife’s deficiencies, if indeed they could be called such. There were people who called Colonel Archer a prig, but it was well for them that loyal little Cissy never heard the sacrilege; for, dissimilar as they were, yet the two were entirely of one mind in the most important respect, of each thinking the other little short of perfection. The greater part of their married life had been spent in India, where their only trouble had been Mrs. Archer’s extremely delicate health, which at last, about a year before this time, had obliged her to return home to try the effects of the long sea voyage and English air. The experiment had in a great measure proved successful, and Cissy, now hoped to be able, before very long, to rejoin her husband. The one winter, however, which since her return she had spent in England, had rather tried her strength, in consequence of which she had been advised to spend the coming six months of cold weather in a milder climate. She was now, therefore, on the point of starting for Altes, accompanied by her only child, a very small boy known as Charlie, and also, to her great delight, by her young cousin, Marion Vere. A pretty stout battle Cissy had fought with the awful Mr. Vere, before obtaining his

consent to his daughter's joining the little party, but Mrs. Archer had what the old nurses call "a way with her," and the uncle had rather a weakness for his captivating niece. She was the child of his dead sister, whom not so very long ago he remembered just as bright and happy as her daughter was now. So the end of it was as might have been expected. Mr. Vere gave in, and Cissy came off triumphant.

Master Charlie, at the age of five and a half, was already one of that devoutly-to-be-avoided class—*enfants terrible*. Frightfully spoilt by his mother since he had had the misfortune to be under her exclusive care, and yet a loveable little monkey too, for the spoiling had principally resulted in making him preternaturally sharp, rather than selfish or exacting. He was a chivalrous mite in his way. He firmly believed himself to have been entrusted by his father with the exclusive care of his mother, and thought it simply a matter of course that his opinion should be asked before any important step could be decided upon. His extreme views on the subject of "Mounseers" had for some days caused the journey to Altes to remain in abeyance; but a bright suggestion of his nurse's, that he might turn his experiences to profit by writing a book about these objects of his aversion and their queer ways, had carried the day triumphantly.

His deficiencies in literary respects, for he had not yet succeeded in mastering the alphabet, fortunately presented no insurmountable difficulties; as he had already engaged the services of Miss Vere as amanuensis, at a liberal rate of a penny a week, provided she was "very good, and wrote all the book in red ink with a gold pen."



## CHAPTER II.

### ACROSS THE CHANNEL.

“Besides ‘tis known he could speak Greek,  
As naturally as pigs can squeak.”

BUTLER'S HUDIBRAS.

As Harry Vere turned the corner of the square, a carriage drove past him, in the direction of his father's house. It passed quickly, but not before he had recognised the lady seated in it.

“What a blessing,” thought he to himself, “that Cissy was looking the other way, or as sure as fate she would have stopped, and cross-questioned me in that chatter-boxing way of hers. People all say she is so lively and charming. I dare say she is, but all the same I think Marion is worth a dozen of her.”

And so thinking, the boy hailed a passing hansom, and was quickly whirled off to the railway station.

Marion sitting alone, meditating sadly enough on Harry and his troubles, was soon interrupted. A soft rustle outside, the door gently opened, and her cousin entered.

“Oh, Marion, dear,” said she, as she kissed her, “I am in such a terrible fuss, and have been so busy all the morning that I have not got half my shopping done. So if you don't mind, instead of my staying home, will you come out with me and help me to finish it, and we can settle all our plans on the way.”

“By all means,” replied Marion, “I shall be ready in two minutes,” and so she was, being in certain respects somewhat of an exception to young-ladyhood in general. There are, I think, by-the-way, some advantages to a girl in being brought up in a masculine household. With no sisters to back her small delinquencies, she is pretty sure, sooner or later, to discover that it is really much better and more comfortable to follow the example of the menkind about her, in such trifles as punctuality and other “minor morals” of the kind; adherence to which women in general seem to consider by no means an addition to their charms.

Hardly was Mrs. Archer again seated in the carriage when she commenced to pour into the sympathising ear of her cousin the recital of her many and all but overpowering afflictions.

“Only think, Marion,” said she, with the most self-pitying tone, “this whole day have I been rushing about in this carriage to one register-office after another, only varied by frantic dives into institutions for finding, or rather not finding unexceptionable governesses. Me, of all people on earth, to be entrusted with the selection of a model governess as if I hadn’t long ago forgotten every thing any of mine ever taught me. Though I must say, looking for nurses is almost as bad. And with the horrible feeling on me all the time, of how this carriage hire will be running up. It is really too bad of that tiresome old lady and that stupid girl. Just when I meant to be so economical too, and clear off all my bills before going away; for I really owe such a dreadful amount. I declare, Marion, I have a great mind to set off for India at once, instead of going to Altes.”

All this medley of grievances little Mrs. Archer ran through in such a hurry, that but for being pretty well accustomed to her rather bewildering way of talking, Marion would have been utterly at a loss to make sense of it. Knowing by previous experience that it was useless to attempt to put a word, till Cissy stopped from sheer want of breath, she patiently waited till this occurred; and then said quietly,

“Really, Cissy, you should have some pity on my dullness of apprehension. Why have you been running about to register-offices? I heard nothing of all this last night, when I saw you. I haven’t the slightest idea what tiresome old lady and stupid girl you are talking about. Nor can I see how going to India would pay your debts?”

“For goodness sake, Marion, don’t be so precise and methodical, or I’ll shake you,” replied Cissy, “how could I have told you last night what I didn’t myself know till this morning. And as to my bills, of course I am all right in India, as George looks after me there. He is so dreadfully particular never to owe anything, and not to spend too much and it is knowing this that makes me hate so not to manage with what he sends me, for I know it is the very utmost he can afford. I suppose I am one of those people Aunt Tremlett always speaks of as ‘very deficient in good management, my dear.’ But I really can’t help it. I’m too old to learn.”

“Well, we shall be very economical at Altes, Cissy,” said Marion, cheerfully; “I won’t let you buy anything. Not even velvet suits for Charlie! Though I’m sure you can’t want money more than I do,” she continued, with a sigh.

“You, child. What nonsense!” exclaimed her cousin, “if you don’t get money itself you get money’s worth, and no trouble of bills or any thing. You are talking rubbish, Marion. Wait till you are married, and the cares of life are upon you, before you talk wanting money.”

“It’s true, nevertheless,” maintained Marion; “but never mind about that now. You haven’t yet explained about the nurse and governess difficulty. Whom are you looking out for? Not for yourself? I thought you were so pleased with the maid you had engaged; and you don’t want a governess for Charlie?”

“Of course not; but that reminds me that I promised to buy him a bottle of red ink. Don’t let me forget. And also a wedding present for him to give to Foster, for she is a good soul really. She has put off her visit home till next week, so that she will see us safe off from Paris. It was only this morning I heard that the maid I had engaged can’t possibly come. She is ill or something. It is impossible to get one in her place at such short notice, so I have made up my mind, as Foster can go so far with us, to wait till we get to Altes, and get a French girl there to look after Charlie. It will be just as well, for she can teach him French. Provided he does not take it into his head to hate her for being what he calls a ‘Mounseer.’ ”

“Not a bit of him, if you tell him it would be rude and silly. I wish however that I could have helped you by taking my maid. But you see, I can’t do so, unless it had been arranged before, for mine, you know, is a rather venerable individual, and acts housekeeper to some extent. Tell me now about the governess mystery.”

“Oh!” said Cissy, “it was a letter I got this morning from old Lady Severn. They have just returned to Altes from some place or other where they have been during the summer, and she is in a great state to get a good English governess, for the very few daily governesses there have as much as they can do. So hearing accidentally of my going there, she write to ask me if I can hear of one, as it would be so much more satisfactory for me to see the unfortunate young lady in the first place. I daresay it would! But where the being in question is to be seen I haven’t yet discovered. I have got the names and addresses of two or three to tell her about, but I don’t think they seem particularly promising.”

“But what does an old lady want with a governess?” asked Marion; “didn’t you say Lady Severn was old?”

“Yes, of course,” answered Mrs. Archer, “sixty or seventy, or eighty for all I know. A regular old lady. But that does not prevent her having grandchildren, does it? Surely, though, Marion, you have heard of the Severns? Lady Severn is a step-sister of Lord Brackley’s in Brentshire. Did you never hear of them there?”

“No, not that I remember,” said Marion thoughtfully; “but you know I have not been there for several years. How is it the grand-children live with Lady Severn? Are their parents dead?”

“Yes, both,” replied Cissy, “and that’s how we know them. I mean,” she went on, “it was owing to George and these children’s father, the eldest brother, having been great friends at school and college. Old Lady Severn was devotedly attached to this son, Sir John, (the father died many years ago) and she has always kept up a correspondence with George for his sake. She and I have never met but she has written very cordially several times, and I was quite pleased to hear this morning of their being at Altes. I should have got her letter sooner, but not knowing my address, she sent it to George’s mother at Cheltenham to forward to me, which has, you see, caused all this hurry and fuss about a governess at the last minute.”

“How many children are there?” asked Marion.

“Two, both girls, ten and twelve, I think, their ages are. Their father died two years ago, so their uncle, Ralph Severn, is now the head of the family. Lady Severn has never got over Sir John’s death. It was very sudden, the result of an

accident. He was her favourite too. I don't fancy she cares very much for Sir Ralph, but, as far as I can judge, don't think it is very much to be wondered at."

"Why?" asked Marion, "is he not a good son?"

"Oh dear, yes," said Cissy, "unexceptionably good in every respect. In fact, I fancy he is something of a prig and not half so attractive as his brother was. And besides, Sir Ralph has not been very much with his own family. John Severn was splendidly handsome, George has often told me. A grand, tall, fair man, and with the most winning manners. The sort of man who did everything well; riding and shooting and all those sorts of things you know. No wonder his mother was proud of him! Whereas Ralph is quite different, quite unlike his family, for they are all remarkably handsome people, and he is not at all so, I should say. Dark and sallow and gloomy looking. Horribly learned too, I believe. A great antiquary, and able to read all the languages of the Tower of Babel, I've been told. So he's sure to be fusty and musty. He spent several years poking about for all manner of old books and manuscripts somewhere in the East."

"How do you happen to know so much about him? Did you ever see him?" enquired Marion."

"Yes, once, on our way to India, he met us at Cairo. He had been vice-consul somewhere, I think, but when I saw him he was in the middle of his poking for these dirty old books. I thought him a great bore, but George rather liked him. He had not the slightest idea then of getting the title, and I believe he hates having it. But I declare, Marion, we have been chattering so about the Severns that we haven't said a word about our plans."

Whereupon ensued a Bradshaw and Murray discussion, in which Cissy, having previously crammed for the occasion, came out very strong. Marion felt dull and depressed, but glad that her cousin's pre-occupation prevented her observing that she was less lively than usual.

The shopping was at last satisfactorily executed. Just as they were about to separate at Mr. Vere's door, Marion remembered a message which her father had charged her to deliver to Mrs. Archer.

"Oh, Cissy!" she exclaimed, "Papa said I was to tell you that instead of leaving money with me here for my expenses, he has sent some to Paris, so that you won't have any trouble about the exchange. I was to ask you when we got

there, to call at somebody or other's bank, I have the name written down, and there you will find fifty pounds waiting for you to use for me. And then Papa wants you, after getting to Altes, to make a sort of calculation as to what my expenses will be, and he will send whatever sum you need."

"Awful prospect!" exclaimed Cissy. "Imagine me drawing out a set of what do you call them?—statistics, isn't that the word?—for Uncle Vere, as to the average prices and probable amount of bread, meat, fruit, &c, likely to be consumed by a young lady with a healthy appetite in the course of six months. I declare I can't do it, Marion, but we'll see when we get there. So good bye till tomorrow morning. I needn't impress upon such a model as you the expediency of being ready in time, and not forgetting your keys."

And so saying she drove away.

The next morning saw our little group of travellers fairly started on their journey. Mrs. Archer in a violent, but amiable state of fuss; Charlie, thoughtful and meditative, as became a would-be author, but perfectly ready, nevertheless, to take the whole party, luggage included, under his small wing, and inclined also to be severe and cutting to his nurse on the subject of her lachrymose condition, owing to the fast approaching separation from her darling.

"It's what I've told you thousands of times, Foster," he observed; "if you love me better than Mr. Robinson, then marry me, and we shall never be parted no more; but if you do marry him I won't be angry, and come and have tea with you on Sundays if you'll let me spread my own toast."

Marion was standing by the book-stall, idly eyeing its contents, when the sound of a voice beside her, enquiring for a newspaper, struck her with a half-familiar sound, and involuntarily she glanced at the speaker. He was quite a young man, six or seven and twenty at most he appeared to be. The momentary glimpse of his face, before he turned away, gave her the same vague impression of having met him before, though where or when she had no idea. A very pleasant face, any way it was. Somehow Cissy's words, when describing Sir John Severn to her the day before, came into her mind. "A grand, tall, fair man, with the most winning manners." Of which last, in the present case, she had soon an opportunity of judging, for at that moment Charlie, running up to her eagerly, stumbled and fell, poor little fellow, full length on the hard platform. The blow to his dignity was worse than the bump on his head, and his mingled feelings

would, in another moment, have been beyond his control, had not the stranger in the kindest and gentlest way lifted the child from the ground, holding him in his arms while he carefully wiped the dusty marks from his face and hands.

“There, that’s all right again. Nothing for a brave little man like you to cry for, I’m sure,” said he brightly, at which well-timed exhortation Charlie was speedily himself again.

“Thank you very much,” said Marion. “Now Charlie, we’ll go hack to your mamma.”

But at the sound of her voice the stranger started.

“Surely,” he began, but the sentence was never completed, for at that moment went the bell rang, and Mrs. Archer hurrying up, swept them all off in her train, leaving the young man standing with a puzzled expression on his face, as Marion, involuntarily smiling at their mutual perplexity, half bowed in farewell as she passed him.

“Who could that be, Cissy?” said she, when they were at length satisfactorily settled amidst railway rugs and shawls, and Charlie having related his misfortunes to his mother, had been further consoled by a biscuit.

“Who could it be?” she repeated, “that tall, fair man who picked Charlie up so kindly. I am sure I have seen him before.”

But Cissy had not observed him, and though Marion amused herself by trying to guess the riddle she not succeed in doing so. The incident, however, was not without its use, for during the long journey to Paris, it took her thoughts a little off what had been engrossing them to an undesirable extent—her brother’s troubles.

Thinking seemed to bring her no suggestion as to any way of obtaining the thirty pounds, so she at last made the manful resolution for a time to dismiss the subject from her mind, and when arrived at Altes, if no other idea should strike her, to consult with Cissy, who was certainly quick-witted enough, and also thoroughly to be trusted once she really understood the necessity for silence on any particular subject.

The journey to Paris, including that horror of mild voyagers, crossing the

channel, was safely accomplished. A day or two in the Paradise of milliners, during which time Cissy underwent torments, compared to which those of Tantalus were as nothing, from the sight of palaces of delight, yclept “magasins de modes,” into which she dared not venture, and from which her only safety was in flight.

A heartrending parting scene between Foster and her beloved Master Charlie, whose heroic fortitude gave way at the last; and again the little party, now reduced to three, are off on their travels.

“Now my dear Marion,” said Cissy, with the air of a very small Jeanne d’Arc about to lead an army into battle, “now our adventures are about to begin. Behold in me your only pillar of defence, your only refuge in danger, and—all that sort of thing, you know. Do be quiet Charlie; what is the matter with you?”

“Foster promised to buy one a gun in case we meet wobbers and fiefs,” said Charlie dole-fully, “and she forgot.”

“Never mind, child, I’ll get you one at Altes. I only wish we were there!” said his mother.

“By-the-by, Cissy, have you heard any more about our lodgings at Altes?” enquired Marion.

“Oh dear yes, I got an answer to any letter just as we started this morning, but I’ve hardly read it yet,” and as she spoke, Mrs. Archer drew it from her pocket. “Yes, that’s all right. It is from Bailey, the English doctor at Altes, to whom mine at home gave me an introduction. It’s really very kind. He says he has engaged a charming *apartement* for me, and cheap too, and that the daughter of the somebody—who is it, Marion? Oh, I see, the *propriétaire*. Yes, the daughter of the *propriétaire*, Madame Poulin, will be very happy to act as maid and look after Charlie. That’s a blessing. And he, that’s Dr. Bailey, will send some one to meet us on our arrival, so after all, Marion, we need not be afraid of meeting with much in the way of adventures.”

“Is inventures fiefs, Mamma?” asked Charlie, “for if they are, you needn’t be afraid. I can pummel them even without a gun. And take care of you too, May, if you’re good.”

“Thank you, Charlie,” said Marion, laughing, “I’ll not forget your promise.”



And then, turning to Cissy, she asked if she knew anyone else at Altes besides Lady Severn.

“I had one or two introductions,” Mrs. Archer replied, “but I know no one personally, except old Major and Mrs. Berwick, who are residents there. They used to live at Clifton, and one of the daughters was at school with me. She can’t be very young now, for she was some years older than I.”

And so, chatting from time to time they beguiled the weariness of a long day shut up in a railway carriage. Charlie fortunately was very good, and when he got tired of looking out of the window, had the good sense to compose himself for a little siesta, which lasted till they were close to the town where they were to stay for the night. This they spent in a queer, old-world sort of hotel, where the windows of the rooms all looked into each other, and the beds were panelled into the wall, something like those in old Scotch farmhouses. I write of some few years ago. No doubt imperial rule has by this time “*changé tout cela*,” and, travelling in France is probably fast becoming as commonplace as anywhere else. The rest of the journey, which occupied two long days, was performed *en diligence*, an irksome enough mode of procedure, as those who have had the misfortune to be shut up in a *coupé* for twenty or thirty hours it a stretch can testify.

The country for some distance was fertile, and here and there, when one got rid of the poplars, even picturesque. But halfway to Altes on the last day, it altogether changed in character, becoming utterly waste and sterile. Now, as far as the eye could reach, nothing was to be seen on either side of the road, but long stretches of bleak, barren moorland. Hardly, indeed, correctly described by that word, for our northern moors have a decided, though peculiar, beauty of their own, wholly wanting in the great, dead-looking wastes of this part of France, known as “*les landes*.” To add to the gloomy effect of the scene, a close drizzling rain began to fall, and continued without the slightest break, the whole of that dreary afternoon.

Marion, though neither morbid nor weak-minded, was yet, like all sensitive and refined organisations, keenly alive to the impressions of the outer world. A ray of sudden sunshine; a tiny patch of the exquisitely bright green moss, one sometimes sees amidst a mass of dingy browns and olives; or the coming unexpectedly towards the close of a dusty summer ramble on one of those fairylike wells of coolest, purest water all shaded round by a bower or drooping

ferns and bracken,—these, and such things as these caused her to thrill with utterly inexpressible delight. But on the other side she, of necessity, suffered actual pain from trifles which, in coarser natures, waken no sense of jar or discord.

I do not, however, believe that this latter class of feelings is ever roused by nature herself, except where she has been distorted, or in some way interfered with. Even in her gloomiest and wildest aspects, the impression she makes upon us is of awe, but never horror; of melancholy, but never revulsion of pain, in some mysterious way so far transcending pleasure, as to be, to my thinking, the most exquisite of all such sensations.

In a half-dreamy, half-pensive mood sat Marion, this dull September afternoon, in the ugly, dingy old French diligence, intently gazing as if it fascinated her, on the far stretch of grim, brown waste all round; the rain dripping and drizzling, and the poor tired horses patiently splashing on through the mud, now and then encouraged by the queer outlandish cries of the driver. At last, the girl glanced round at her companions. Both fast asleep. There was nothing else to do, so she again betook herself to the window, and yielded to the gloomy fascination of the moor and the rain. It began, at last, to seem that her whole life had been spent thus, that everything else was a dream, and the only realities were the great trackless desert, and the diligence rumbling on for ever, where to and where from she seemed neither to know nor care. Then, I suppose, she must have fallen into a doze, or perhaps asleep outright. However this was, she must have shut her eyes for some time, for when she next was conscious of using them, all was changed.

Still the wide-stretching moor all round; but no longer brown and grim, it now appeared a field of lovely shades of colour; for far away at the horizon, the beautiful sun was setting in many-hued radiance, and the rain had all cleared away, except a few laggard drops still falling softly, each a miniature rainbow as it came. Marion watched till the sun was gone. Then the golden light grew softer and paler, the clouds melted from crimson and rose, to the faintest blush, and at last all merged in a silvery greyness, which in its turn gradually deepened again to the dark, even blue of a cloudless night. And one by one the stars came out, each in its accustomed place; all the old friends whom Marion had first learnt to call by name from the windows of the little cottage at Brackley. Somehow the strangeness and the loneliness seemed to leave her as she saw them, and a feeling of tranquil happiness stole over her. But this solitary evening in the old

diligence was never forgotten, for it became to her one of those milestones in life, little noticed in passing, but plainly seen on looking back.

Soon, a rattle on the stop y, and lights of another kind from those overhead, told the travellers that their wearisome journey was ended at last. Cissy woke up brisk as ever; for whatever weak points Mrs. Archer may have had, she was certainly strong that of being an agreeable travelling companion. It is a trite saying, that there is no trial of temper equal to that afforded by being shut up together for weeks in a ship, or for days in a railway. But both of these tests Cissy's amiability had stood triumphantly. Now rubbing her eyes as she sat up and looked about her, she exclaimed brightly, "Here we are, I declare, and now we shall soon be able to put this poor little fellow to bed comfortably," glancing at still sleeping Charlie. Then, in the sudden inconsequent manner peculiar to very impulsive people, added hastily:—

"Marion, do you know it has just this instant struck me that I quite forgot to answer Lady Severn's letter. How very stupid and careless of me! I shall have to go to see her to-morrow to explain about it."

As she spoke, they drove into a covered courtway. The diligence drew up at last with a squeak and a grunt, as if it sympathised with the tired, cramped travellers it had brought so far. A jabber outside, and the conducteur jerked open the door, enquiring if Madame Archère were the name of "*une de ces dames*."

"Archère. Archer," repeated Cissy "yes, certainly, by all means. Now Charlie, my boy, wake up;" and so alighting from their coupé, they found that the very obliging Dr. Bailey had sent a man-servant and carriage to convey them to their *appartement* at the other end of the queer, rambling, up-and-down-hill little town.

It was not so very late after all, though past poor Charlie's bedtime, when they found themselves installed in the pretty little suite of rooms, which for several months to come they were to consider "home."

The first thing to be done, of course, was to get the small gentleman of the party safely disposed of for the night. He pronounced himself too sleepy to want any supper; but brightened up in the most aggravating manner at the sight of pretty Thérèse Poulin, already prepared to commence her new duties as his personal attendant.

"Little Miss Mounseer," said he deliberately, seating himself on a stool and

staring lap in her face, “tell me what your name is.” To which, on Marion’s interpretation, the girl replied smilingly:

“*Thérèse, mon cher petit monsieur. Thérèse Poulin.*”

“Trays,” repeated he meditatively; “Trays, very well then, Trays. I’ll let you undress me if you’ll always let me spread my bread myself.”

Delighted at the promising aspect of the much-dreaded new nursery arrangements, Cissy and Marion made their escape to the little *salle-à-manger*, where Madame Poulin, a cheery active old body, had providently prepared tea à *l’Anglais*, as she phrased it, for their refreshment.

Happening to ask, as she left the room, if the ladies had any messages they would like executed that evening; any letters to be posted for instance, a thought struck Cissy, and she enquired if the post-office were near at hand. To which Madame Poulin replied briskly, that it was in the very next street, just round the corner.

Then,” said Mrs. Archer, “pray send some one to ask if there are any letters lying there for me, for,” she added, turning to Marion, “it is quite possible there may be, as I gave no address, but, *poste restante*, and all yours will come under cover to me, as we agreed would be best.”

Five minutes later, Thérèse entered the room with two letters for Madame, which had been waiting her arrival since the day before. Tearing one open an enclosure fell out, addressed to Miss Vere, who seized it eagerly.

“From Harry, I see,” said Mrs. Archer, “what a model brother to write so quickly!”

But Marion did not respond with her usual brightness to her cousin’s remark, for before opening the envelope a misgiving came over her that its contents would not be of a cheerful nature. Nor, alas, were they! Poor Harry wrote in sore trouble. It appeared that the money lender, the “wretched little Jew,” of the boy’s story, had begun to have fears about obtaining from Cuthbert the sum he declared to be owing to him. The very day Harry had seen his sister in London, the man had stopped Cuthbert in the street, and had loudly threatened him with exposure unless the money were speedily forthcoming. The distress and anxiety all this was causing his friend, Harry very naturally felt must be put a stop to,

and he wrote to say that he only waited for Marion's reply, in the faint hope that some idea might have struck her, before making up his mind to risk all, and boldly apply to his father.

Marion shuddered at the bare thought. She was tired too, and over-excited by her several days' travelling. Cissy was engrossed by her own letter, and did not for a moment or two notice poor Marion's face of despondency and distress.

Suddenly looking up to tell some little piece of news, in which her young cousin might take interest, she was startled by the girl's expression. "May, my dear child, whatever is the matter? Have you had news from home?" enquired she anxiously.

"Oh, no," answered Marion, "at least, not exactly. Nothing but what I knew before."

But the ice once broken, the impulse to confide her trouble to kind, sympathising Cissy, was too strong to be resisted, and in another minute Mrs. Archer was in possession of all the facts of the case.

She listened attentively, only interrupting Marion by little soft murmurs of pity for her anxiety. And when she had heard the whole she agreed with her cousin that it certainly would be very awful to have to apply to Mr. Vere, only she "really didn't see what else was to be done."

"If only, I could possibly spare the money," she said, "but alas—"

"Cissy, you know I wasn't thinking of that," interrupted Marion; "I know you are rather short of money yourself, just now."

"Indeed, I am," said Cissy dolefully; "but now, May dear, you must go to bed and try to sleep. I promise you I'll cudgel my brains well, and we'll see by to-morrow if we cannot somehow or other help poor Harry out of his scrape."

With which rather vague consolation, Marion, for the present had to be satisfied. And with an affectionate "good night," the cousins separated.

## CHAPTER III.

### BLUE SKIES

*“To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”*

WORDSWORTH.

*“They order,” said I, “these things better in France.”*

STERNE.

THE next morning was bright and sunny. Marion woke early, feeling, thanks to her eighteen years, perfectly rested and refreshed. Under these circumstances too, as might be expected, her spirits were considerably better than they had been the previous night, when she cried herself to sleep in her fatigue and distress.

She lay quietly for a few minutes, hazily glancing round at the quaint little room, exquisitely clean and fresh, certainly, for Madame Poulin was a model housewife, but looking somewhat bare to Marion's thoroughly English eyes. Still, the very strangeness was pleasant, and the sunshine pouring in through the uncurtained window, was bright enough to fill even this plain little room with light and beauty.

Feeling buoyant and cheerful, Marion sprang up, and was nearly dressed, when a small tap at the door, and the request, “May I tum in?” announced the presence of Master Charlie. His tidings were not of the cheeriest.

“Poor Mamma was very tired and couldn’t get up, and May was not to wait breakfast.” It was really not to be wondered at, for Cissy was by no means a robust person, though fortunate in the possession of a most cheerful disposition and a wonderful amount of energy and spirit. Notwithstanding, however, all the good will in the world, she was now forced to confess herself on the point of being very thoroughly knocked up; so Marion breakfasted alone. But for the remembrance of Harry’s letter, she would have felt very bright and happy this first morning at Altes. The weather was exquisitely beautiful. From the little terrace on to which opened most of their rooms, there was a lovely view of the mountains, standing out sharp and clear against the intense, perfect blue of the sky. What a colour! How utterly indescribable to those who have never chanced to see it! How different from the bluest of our northern skies is this rich intensity of azure! In the reaction of the present clay against exaggeration of sentiment or language, it has, I know, become the fashion to disbelieve and decry many “travellers’ stories” that used to be undoubtingly accepted. Still, as all reactions do, this one has gone too far, and a spirit of cynical scepticism is fast undermining much of the pleasure simple-minded stay-at-home people (certainly a very small minority now-a-days) used to derive from the descriptions of their more fortunate sight-seeing neighbours.

People are told that it is all humbug and nonsense about southern skies having a richness and depth of colour unknown in those of the north. That the Mediterranean is just like any other sea, and the tints of its waters not one whit more varied or brilliant than may be seen at any English coast on a sunny day. Doubtless, the north has its own peculiar and precious beauties, and well and fitting it is that its children should appreciate and prize them. But why therefore set ourselves to ignore or make light of the more vivid and striking loveliness we must turn southwards to see? For my part I can only tell of things as they seemed to me; and I come too of an older generation; one in which people were not ashamed to wonder and admire, heartily and even enthusiastically. No poor words of mine could ever in the faintest degree picture the marvellous perfection of those blue skies of the south, at which I gazed with a very ecstasy of delight, or of the waves like melted emeralds and sapphires lapping softly the silvery sparkling sands. They come to me in my dreams even now, and I wake with a vain longing to hear their gentle murmur.

Think, in contrast, of the faint, sickly hues brought before us by our English words “sky-blue” and “sea-green!” Assuredly those who love chiefly beauty in colour, must not look for it hereabouts.

Marion stood on the terrace for some little time in perfect enjoyment. She was just at the age to take unalloyed pleasure in the loveliness of the outer world. It woke no painful remembrance, stirred up no bitter association or fruitless longing. Alas, alas, that there should be so few, so very few, to whom, in later years, the beauty of this beautiful world, if not altogether hidden by the thick veil of past sorrows, is truly what is always meant be, a delight, a refreshment, “a joy forever.”

Surely it is more or less in our or power keep or make it so? At least, one cheering thought might be drawn from it by even the most weary and heavy-laden spirit. It tells us that we and our sorrows are not forgotten, for there, before us in every leaf and blade of grass the Universal Beauty reveals to us the Universal Love. But a girl at eighteen does not stop to analyse the sensations of pleasure aroused by a beautiful landscape. Marion only thought that it was lovelier than anything she had ever imagined, and well worth coming so far to see. She was fortunate in being so fresh to such scenes. It seems to me most mistaken kindness to take young children sight-seeing, even of nature’s sights. They become familiar with beauty of these noblest kinds long before it is in the least possible that they can feel or appreciate it. And this familiarity ends generally in utter indifference; ignorance in short that there is anything to admire. Not that children should be brought up among dinginess and ugliness. The prettier and sweeter their surroundings the better. But oh parents and teachers, do leave the little creatures simple and fresh! To my mind a child of ten years old, who has been half over the continent, and chatters pertly of Switzerland and Mont Blanc, Naples and Mount Vesuvius, is in-finitely more to be pitied than we children of long ago, who talked to each other with bated breath of these wonders we should see “when we grow big,” and who believed implicitly in Robinson Crusoe and the Swiss family, if not in Liliputland and Hassan of Balsra!

Some time passed, and then Marion reluctantly withdrew from the terrace and re-entered the little salon. It looked quite dark from the contrast with the flood of light outside; and as the girl’s eye fell on her little writing-desk which she had set on the table intending to write to Harry, it seemed as if the darkness had entered her heart too.

“What can I say to him?” thought she, “and poor Cissy ill and tired. I can’t even talk to her!”



And then there came before her a picture of Harry compelled to confess all to his father. A terrible scene of parental reproaches and harshness. Harry cast of for ever, perhaps running away to sea, and his life utterly separated from hers, and from all happy and wholesome influences. It was too dreadful to think of! Very foolish and exaggerated no doubt. Still such things have been! Then too, there was great excuse for Marion's anxiety, even if carried too far. Harry, though little more than two years her junior, had been almost like a son to her as well as a brother. She was naturally stronger in character than he, and also much more thoughtful and considerate. And then to a gentle unselfish girl it comes so naturally to act a mother's part at almost any age. I think as I write of a tottering nursemaid of six or seven, all but overwhelmed by the baby in her arms, at first glance quite as big as herself. A cold day and the clothing of both babies of the scantiest. Of course the small nursemaid has a tiny shawl. Small nursemaids always have. Her charge at last succumbs to cold and sets up a dismal howl. Then see the poor little woman, poor baby that she is, untaught, unkempt, uncared for. With what sweetest tenderness she soothes the crying infant, seating herself with infinite pains on a door step, and wrapping round the other the poor little rag of a shawl which was the only protection of her own shivering shoulders. Dear, good little girl. True-hearted, unselfish child. How many such as these are in our streets! Ugly, dirty little creatures we shrink from them as we pass, who yet are already fulfilling nobly, in utter unconsciousness, their part of woman's work.

As Marion's dismal imaginations had reached their height, she was again interrupted by Charlie.

"Mamma is awake and wants to speak to you," was his message, which Marion was very glad to hear.

"May," said Cissy, after assuring her cousin that she was much less tired now and would be quite herself by the afternoon, "May dear! do you know I've been thinking ever so much in the night about this affair of Harry's. Don't think me hard or cruel for what I am going to say, for I'm sure I don't mean to be; but I can't help having a sort of feeling that perhaps after all it would be best for you to advise Harry to tell all to your father. Though he is stern I don't think he is really hard-hearted. And then it is such a pity for a boy to begin any concealment from his father. Don't you think so yourself, dear?"

"As a rule certainly I do," said Marion, "but in this case it is so different.

Cissy, you don't know Papa. It is not the harshness at the time that I so dread for Harry, though that would be bad enough. It is the thought of the dreadfully galling way he would be treated afterwards. Papa would make him feel that he had utterly lost confidence in him. He would run away before long, I am sure. And think what might become of him! No, Cissy, I can't advise him to go to my father if there is any possible way of avoiding it."

"Well, dear, I suppose you know best," replied Mrs. Archer, "only thinking it over last night it seemed to come before me that it would be *right* for Harry to confess his fault (for after all it was undoubtedly his own fault), to Uncle Vere, and take his reproaches manfully as a merited punishment. Not that I do not feel very sorry for him, poor fellow, for after all it was a mere piece of boyish folly."

"And folly which he bitterly repents, I assure you," said Marion; "but oh, Cissy, can't you think of any plan to help him? I must write to-day."

"I can help you so far," said Cissy. "I can lend you the money for two or three months. You see we are sure to be here for six months, and I can let some of my bills, the rent, I dare-say, run on till Christmas any way. So there will be no fear of our running short. I only wish I could clear poor Harry of this horrible debt altogether. But if the worst comes to the worst I can write to George and he will only think I have been rather more extravagant than usual."

"That you certainly shall not have to do, dear Cissy," exclaimed her cousin; "rather than that, I would face Papa myself and risk the worst he could say or do to me, for he should never know it had been Harry's debt, though I fear he would suspect it; but if you can really lend me the money, Cissy, I promise you I shall find some way of repaying it before we leave Altes. I shall not tell Harry how I have got it, as he would be dreadfully hurt at my having told you, and still more ashamed of my having borrowed it in this way, so remember it is my debt and not his, and if I don't pay, it you may put me in prison," he added, gaily, so great her relief at the thought of Harry's safety.

"Very well, you may be quite sure that I shall do so," replied Cissy, "and now run off and write your letter. I will give you three ten pound notes, so that you may send the first halves of them to-day."

Gratefully kissing the kind little woman, Marion obeyed. Her high spirits lasted till her letter was written, and with its precious enclosure carefully posted

with her own hands. Then as she walked slowly homewards a little of the weight returned to her mind. How was she now to repay Cissy? That her cousin should suffer more than the mere temporary inconvenience of having advanced the money she was determined should not be the case. Certainly there was no immediate hurry about the matter, but Marion was not one of those people who think it quite time enough to face a difficulty when it is close at hand, and her active imagination at once set to work on all manner of possible and impossible schemes.

She would take in fine needlework and get up at unearthly hours to do it without Mrs. Archer's knowledge, She would paint some exquisite landscapes that would be sure to sell.

On reflection, however, she saw obstacles in the way of executing either of these projects. She was not, in the first place, remarkably proficient with her needle, nor was she conceited enough to think that her water colours were much above the average of most young-lady-like productions of the kind.

And in the second place, supposing she had anything to sell how could she, an utter stranger in a foreign town, find a purchaser?

And so one after another or half-a-dozen promising looking schemes was passed in review and rejected by her common sense as impracticable.

Still on the whole she was rather amused than distressed. Her mind at ease about Harry, all other considerations seemed trifling. There was even something, exciting and exhilarating about the novelty of the idea. And she was young and strong, and to such the grappling with a difficulty has a curious charm of its own. Even about such a sordid matter as the making or earning of thirty pounds! That in some way or other her voluntary promise to her cousin should be redeemed she was determined. And the girl was not one to undertake what she would not fulfil.

It was too hot to leave the house for some hours after noon. Cissy herself on a sofa in the coolest earner, declaring it felt something like India, and then suddenly remembered her housewifely responsibilities, rang for Madame Poulin, and entered, somewhat vaguely it must be confessed, on the subject of dinners. All, however, was charmingly satisfactory. Though not professing to do much cooking herself, the good lady assured Madame all could be agreeably arranged,

for her brother was the head of the best hotel in Altes, but a two minutes' walk beyond the post-office, and would supply regularly a dinner for any number from two to a dozen, at a really moderate price. Or if *ces dames* would prefer a little variety now and then, there was the table d'hôte at this same hotel every day at five, where the choice of viands would be greater and the company of the most select.

“That would be rather amusing now and then for a change” observed Mrs. Archer.

Marion preferred the idea of a private repast, but agreed that they might go and “see what it was like.”

For to-day, however, Madame Poulin was requested to order a comfortable little dinner in their own quarters, and after some further conversation on the subject of Charlie's tastes, the pleasant old lady retired, leaving behind her a decidedly favourable impression, which longer acquaintance only confirmed.

A few minutes passed in silence till it occurred Marion that it would be as well for her to write her father announcing their safe arrival. This task accomplished, and Cissy declaring she was too tired to go out, Marion settled herself in a snug corner by the window with an interesting book, which she had read half of on the journey. But alas for her pleasurable intentions! Hardly had she opened the volume when an interruption appeared in the person of Charlie in a state of tremendous eagerness to write a letter to Foster. The poor little fellow had really been very good all day, doing his best to get on pleasantly with Thérèse, who was certainly good nature itself, and had been making, on her side, super-human efforts to amuse her small charge and to understand his observations. Still as she was us wholly innocent of English as the child of French, it was rather trying work for both. Marion felt that, Charlie deserved some reward, so she laid down her book and established him on her knee with a sheet of note-paper before him and a pencil in his hand.

The nature of their occupation being a very engrossing one Marion did not hear the sound of a carriage drawing up at the door below the little terrace, nor did she pay attention to the slight bustle of bell-ringing, enquiries made and answered, which ensued.

In another moment, however, the door of the room opened and Thérèse

ushered in a visitor, whom Cissy started up to receive. Marion was reluctant to disturb Charlie, and being almost hidden by the curtains sat still, quietly observing the new corner who, cordially greeting Mrs. Archer, had evidently not noticed that there was anyone else present.

The visitor was an elderly lady, tall, and well dressed, with some remains of former beauty, of a pleasing, though not very striking, kind. Her expression was gentle, but somewhat anxious and uneasy, which was soon explained, by her announcing herself to be very deaf.

“Very deaf, indeed, my dear,” she repeated to Mrs. Archer in her fussy way. Whereupon poor Cissy, of course, set to work shouting in a shrill, high-pitched tone, of all others the most impossible for a deaf person to catch the sound of.

After one or two trials, however, she got on a little better, and succeeded in explaining to Lady Severn, as Marion had already guessed her to be, her regret at having failed in meeting with a desirable young lady as governess, owing to the delay in the letter’s reaching her which contained her friend’s request.

Lady Severn was evidently disappointed, but consoled herself by entering at great length into her troubles and anxieties with respect to her grand-daughters’ education. Mrs. Archer listened sympathisingly, as was her wont. But so absorbed was the elder lady by her own recital, that it was not till she rose to go, that she remembered to make enquiry for her hostess’s child, or children, and for the last news of Colonel Archer.

The satisfactory state of her husband’s health having been communicated, Cissy, suddenly remembering that, in the confusion of Lady Severn’s unexpected entrance, and the subsequent discovery of her deafness, she had not introduced her young cousin, turned to look for her. There the pair was still seated in perfect content. Charlie, perched on Marion’s knee, as quiet as a mouse, had found ample amusement in peeping from behind the curtains at the funny old lady whom Mamma was shouting to.

But now, at a sign from his mother, he slipped down and ran forward to be kissed and admired as a fine little fellow, and “so like his papa was when I first remember him,” said Lady Severn, adding in an undertone, as a tear glistened in her eye, “They were two such fine boys, my dear, your husband and my poor John. And he left no son to succeed him, you know. Only the two little girls. Not

but what they are very dear creatures, but I can't help wishing there had been a boy. And so does Ralph himself, for that matter! But it can't be helped."

Marion listened with some curiosity to these allusions to the family history she had already heard. Half unconsciously stepping forward into the room, Lady Seven's glance at last fell upon her, and Cissy hastened to apologise and explain. Unfortunately, however, in her eagerness to introduce her pretty guest, Mrs. Archer pitched her voice badly, and the result was that the old lady caught no words of the sentence but the two last.

"Miss Vere," Cissy had ended with.

"Miss Freer," repeated Lady Severn with satisfaction at her own acuteness. "Miss Freer, I hope you will like Altes. And you, too, my dear little fellow"—to Charlie—"there are some lovely walks in the neighbourhood, which I do not think Miss Freer will consider too far for these sturdy little legs."

"Vere," ejaculated Cissy, "my cousin, Miss Vere."

"Miss Vere," again repeated Lady Severn with perfect satisfaction; "oh yes, I caught the name, thank you. I am generally rather clever at catching names correctly. Besides, it is familiar to me. It is the name of our much-respected surgeon at Medhurst. Perhaps he may be a relation of yours, Miss Freer? It is not a very common name."

Marion replied, with malicious calmness, that she was not aware that she had any relations at Medhurst. But, by this time, Cissy was beyond attempting further explanations. She controlled herself sufficiently to accompany Lady Severn to the head of the stairs, where the good lady favoured her with some further remarks still more distressing to her gravity, on the subject of Miss Freer; and then she rushed back into the room, scarlet with suppressed laughter, though, at the same time considerably annoyed.

"Marion, how could you," she exclaimed, "standing there in that demure way, and answering that you had no relations at Medhurst? Do you know that the old goose thought you were my companion or Charlie's governess? I am not sure which. Imagine Uncle Vere's face, if he had seen it! She told me, as she said goodbye, that she only wished she could meet with just such a young lady for her two dear creatures. I tried to explain, but it was hopeless. Really, you might have helped me."

“Truly, I don’t see how,” said Marion: “would you have had me confuse the poor lady still more by shouting my name into her one ear while you were doing the same into the other? And she was so pleased at her own cleverness. It would really have been a shame to undeceive her. Besides,” she went on more seriously, “I truly don’t see what harm it does me for Lady Severn, or anybody else, to take me for a governess. Don’t vex yourself about it, Cissy. It really doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter,” said Mrs. Archer almost angrily, “and it was all my own stupidity, too, in not introducing you properly at first. But I was all but asleep when she came in, and then I *couldn’t* make her hear.”

“But how does it matter?” asked Marion gently, seeing that her cousin was really annoyed.

“In a hundred ways. I want you to enjoy your visit here, and have a little more variety than in your dull life at home. I want you to make some nice acquaintances, and to be admired, and all that sort of thing, you know. And what a stupid beginning, to be mistaken by our only acquaintance for a governess!”

“Governesses are not altogether debarred from all the pleasant things you name, are they?” said Marion, “I really can’t see anything dreadful either in the mistake or the reality, had it existed. But seriously, Cissy, leave off thinking about it, do.”

This incident, however, or something, gave Marion herself ample subject for reflection; for she was unusually thoughtful and silent all the afternoon. In the course of the evening, Mrs. Archer received a note from Dr. Bailey, apologising for not having already called to see her, and expressing hopes that, when she had got over the fatigue of her journey, Mrs. and Miss Bailey might have the pleasure of making her acquaintance.

“He must be a civil, kindly old man,” said she after reading it, “but I don’t exactly see the necessity of a friendship with Madame and Mademoiselle. I wonder how they know anything about me, unless they call in a semi-professional sort of way on all the papa’s lady-patients.”

“I should hardly think they could find time for that,” said Marion “but perhaps they have heard about you from some one.”

“Oh, yes, by-the-bye,” exclaimed Cissy, “I remember Lady Severn said she had got my address from the Baileys. Really, Marion, it was horribly rude of me not to answer her letter! I suspect it was her eagerness on the governess question that brought her to call so quickly. But I daresay she’s very good and kind. Indeed, I know she is, for George says she was almost like a mother to him, long ago, when his own mother was in India.”

“Lady Severn doesn’t look particularly delicate,” remarked Marion, “do they always spend the winter abroad?”

“Oh dear no. She’s not delicate, if by that you mean a consumption, or anything of that kind. I daresay she is not remarkably strong, and then she is no longer young. Sir John’s death aged her terribly, I believe. But it is principally on account of one of the little girls, that they have spent the last two or three years on the Continent. The younger one, I think—Sybil she is called—who was very ill soon after her father’s death, and her grandmother thought she was going to die, and came abroad in a fright. The child’s all right again now, but I suppose Lady Severn is over anxious and fussy. I fancy, too, she dislikes the idea of returning to Medhurst, for it was there her son died.”

“I can’t help thinking,” said Marion, after a minute or two’s silence, “that there is some-thing unnatural in Lady Severn’s devotion to the memory of the one son, and apparent indifference to the other. Even what she said to-day, about regretting that Sir John had left no boy, struck me as a curious thing to say, considering that Sir Ralph is her own son. Unless, indeed, he is peculiarly unlovable, or has, in some way or other, forfeited his mother’s affection by his own fault?”

“Well, it does seem queer,” replied Cissy, “but still from what I have heard, I can understand it in a sort of way. You see from boyhood John Severn was looked upon as the heir, and Ralph was so different. Quiet and grave, and not the sort of character to be much noticed in any way. Whereas Sir John must have been a splendid fellow really. I don’t suppose it ever occurred to any one that Ralph *could* become the head of the house! But if you are interested in the family, May, I dare say you will have opportunity enough while here to study their various peculiarities.”

“What is the other child called?”



“I don’t know, or if I ever did I’ve forgotten. Girls of ten and twelve don’t interest me particularly; though I liked you, May, when you were a little girl,” said Mrs. Archer, affectionately; “you were such a dear, shy little thing, and you had such funny, quaint ways. I never can believe you are the same. You seemed to me to become grown-up all in a minute. With my never seeing you all these years after toy marriage, I kept fancying in that silly way that I should come home and find you just as I left you.”

“Then you don’t think me very childish now, do you?” asked Marion, rather anxiously, “do I look much younger than I am, do you think, Cissy?”

“What has put that in your head all of a sudden?” said Mrs. Archer, laughing. “I thought you were far too wise ever to think about outward looks at all. That’s the very thing about you that is so unlike most girls. You are such an indescribable mixture of extreme girlishness and preternatural wisdom. You look such a perfect child sometimes, at the very moment that I am shaking in my shoes before you, and your dreadfully good advice. You certainly would make a capital governess, Marion, if you kept your pupils in as good order as poor me! Only you are far too pretty. All the big brothers and gentleman-visitors would fail in love with you to a certainty.”

“Don’t Cissy, please don’t joke in that sort of way. I want to ask you seriously; do you really think I should make a good governess?”

“Of course you would. I believe you might make a good anything you chose. You are certainly clever enough to manage me in a way that fills me with amazement and admiration. But do think of something more interesting than governesses. Thank goodness there’s no fear of your ever having to be one.”

“Isn’t there? Well, I don’t know. Stranger things happen every day. Why Papa might lose all his money, and I might have to earn my bread like a model young lady in a story book.”

“You might, undoubtedly, but also you might, not,” answered her cousin, carelessly, and then changing the subject, she continued: “What should you say to our dining at the *table d’hôte* to-morrow? Wouldn’t it be rather amusing?”

“If you like,” replied Marion, “though it would be pleasanter if we knew anyone likely to be there. Didn’t you, say you knew another family there?”

“Oh, yes, the Berwicks. I must, look them up, I suppose, for they are old friends, and they don’t know I’m here. But I’m getting sleepy, Marion. Are you ready to say good night? I hope you won’t mind breakfasting alone again, for I want to be quite rested by to-morrow afternoon, so that we may go a walk or a drive. I’m afraid it has been very stupid for you today.”

“But it would be much more stupid if you were to get ill, Cissy dear,” said Marion, “so rest by all means. I shall have breakfast early and perhaps go out a little walk on my own account, with Charlie and Thérèse, before you are up.”

As she spoke her eye fell on a calling-card lying on the table. It was that of Lady Severn, which, Thérèse being rather untaught in such matters, had followed instead of preceding her into the room. Marion took it up and looked at it closely. In the corner was written the temporary address: “*Rue des Lauriers*, No. 5.” A trifle, but it decided a good deal. “Now that I know the address,” thought the girl, “I can go there in the morning before Cissy is up.”

## CHAPTER IV.

### A FRIEND IN NEED

*“Sweet fickle Love, you grow for some,  
And grip them to their grief,  
As sudden as the redwings come  
At the full fall of the leaf.*

*“And sudden as the swallows go,  
That muster for the sea,  
You pass away before we know,  
And wounded hearts are we.”*

W. P. L.

“*Rue des Lauriers, No. 5:*” last thought in her head at night, first when she woke in the morning. In her dreams too the words had been constantly before her: “No fear of my forgetting the address,” said Marion to herself.

Breakfast over, she arranged with Thérèse and Charlie, to accompany them in their morning walk about twelve o’clock. And then she fidgeted about, unable to settle to anything; rather frightened, if the truth must be told, at the thought of what she was about to do.

It is a crisis in our lives, when, for the first time, we take what we believe to be an important step, entirely on our own responsibility. Well for us when this crisis does not occur too soon. Well too, when it is not deferred too late. Of the

two extremes, doubtless the latter is the more to be dreaded. Better some sad tumbles and bruises; better indeed a broken limb, than the hopeless feebleness of members, stunted, if not paralysed for want of natural use. Experience is truly a hard schoolmaster, but we have not yet found a better one. Some day we must be self-reliant, or else be utterly wrecked and stranded. So, if for no higher motive than mere prudence and expediency, it is well not to delay too long the testing of our own powers, the trial of our individual strength.

Cissy had said truly that Marion was a curious mixture of simplicity and wisdom, child and woman. I wonder if in this lay her peculiar charm? But this, indeed, I cannot tell. The charm I have felt, deeply too, but like other sweet and beautiful things, I endeavoured in vain to analyse or define it.

The girl tried to read, or write or work; but all her attempts were useless. Like a naughty schoolboy, who has resolution enough to plan it truant expedition, but fails to conceal his excitement beforehand, so Marion was on the point a dozen times that morning, of betraying her strange intention. Had Cissy not been tired and sleepy when Marion peeped in to wish her good morning, she would infallibly have detected some unusual signs of excitement in her young cousin's manner. A word from her and the whole would have been in her possession, and then — Marion's life might have been more happily common-place, and this story of it would, in all probability, never have been written.

However it was not so to be. Twelve o'clock came at last, and with her little cavalier and Thérèse as escort, Marion sallied forth. The Rue des Lauriers she learnt from Thérèse, was about a quarter of a mile only from the street in which Mme. Poulin's house was situated. Anxious that Charlie's walk should not be curtailed on her account, and perhaps not sorry in her secret heart to delay, if only for half-an-hour, the task she had set herself, Marion proposed that they should in the first place take a stroll beyond the town. The day was much cooler than the preceding one. Indeed, it was cloudy enough to suggest the possibility of not far distant rain. Marion's beautiful mountains were all but hidden in mist, and it was difficult to believe in the blue sky of yesterday. Still there were now and then breaks in the mist and clouds, showing that the loveliness was veiled only, not destroyed, Charlie's remarks apropos of everything, from the fog-covered bills to the sisters of charity with their enormous flapping caps, were amusing enough. But Marion was too engrossed by her own thoughts to listen with her usual attention. As they reached the end of Rue des Laurier's, a slight drizzle began to fall and Marion told Thérèse to hasten home with Charlie, as

she herself had a call to make some little way up the street.

“Tell your mamma, Charlie,” she cried, as they separated, “if she wants me, that I shall be home in a very little while.”

No 5 was at the other extremity of the street, avenue almost it might have been called; for it was prettily planted with trees at each side, and the gardens of the houses, standing, many of them, detached or semi-detached in villa fashion, were bright and well kept. Those at the upper end were evidently of older date. No. 5 especially had a somewhat venerable air. It was built round three sides of a court laid out with turf and flower-beds, in the centre of which a little fountain was playing lazily. A damp, drizzling day, however, is hardly the occasion on which such a place is seen to advantage, and Marion decided mentally that she would have been sorry to exchange the little terrace on to which rooms opened, for the quaint old court-yard, however picturesque.

She rang bravely at what appeared to be the principal door, which to her surprise was opened by an old woman who informed her that the apartment of Miladi Severn was on the other side, *au premier*. The entrance opposite was open, so Marion ascended a flight of stairs and rang again at the first door that presented itself. This time she felt sure she was right, for a man-servant in English-looking attire appeared in answer to her summons. In reply to her enquiry as to whether she could see Lady Severn on a matter of business, he said that he would ask, and ushered her into a very pretty sitting room, opening, to her surprise, on to a pleasant garden. The mystery as to how she found herself again on the ground floor without having descended any steps, was explained, when she remembered that the Rue des Lauriers was built on a steep hill, at the upper extremity of which stood No. 5. How it came to be number five instead number one was a problem never satisfactorily solved.

Marion waited a few minutes and then the servant re-appeared, to say that Lady Severn would be ready to see the young lady almost immediately, if she would be so good as to give her name.

Here was a poser! Marion could not, yet bring herself to say “Miss Freer.” But a lucky compromise occurred to her.

“I have no card with me,” she said, “but Lady Severn will know who I am if you say I have come from Mrs. Archer’s.”

The name apparently was all required, for in another moment Lady Severn entered the room. She came in looking rather puzzled, but shook hands kindly enough with Marion, saying, as she did so, that she hoped. Mrs. Archer was not feeling ill or that anything was wrong with little Charlie.

“Oh dear no, thank you,” said Marion, “they are both very well. At least, my cou—Mrs. Archer is only a little tired still from the long journey. I should have remembered that you would be surprised at my calling so early, but I trust you excuse my having done so. The truth is I called on my own account, not on Mrs. Archer’s.”

“Indeed!” Lady Severn, looking still more puzzled, when a bright idea suddenly striking her, she exclaimed “oh, perhaps you have some friend, Miss Freer, who you think might suit me as governess for my little girls. A sister possibly,” she continued, for the expression of the girl’s face did not seem to contradict her assumption.

Profiting by Cissy’s dire experience of the day before, Marion took care to speak in a natural, regular tone, which she was pleased to find her companion heard perfectly. Probably her voice was rounder and fuller than Mrs. Archer’s, but however this may have been, the result was eminently satisfactory, and very possibly, still further prepossessed Lady Severn in her favour.

“Not exactly that,” she replied, “I have no sister. But what I have to propose is myself, as governess to your grand-daughters.”

“Yourself, my dear Miss Freer,” exclaimed lady Severn in amazement, “but how can that be? Are you not engaged already to Mrs. Archer? I supposed that you had accompanied her from England. And, excuse me, Miss Freer, but I should think on no account of interfering with any arrangements Mrs. Archer may be depending upon, even though you may not consider yourself exactly bound to her. You must not mind my speaking plainly, Miss Freer. Young people, and you look very young, are not always as considerate in these matters as they should be.”

In spite of herself, Marion felt a little indignant. This was the first slight taste of the disagreeables and annoyances (“insults,” a hotter-tempered and less calm-judging girl would have called them) to which, by the strange and almost unprecedented steps she had taken, she had exposed herself. What is commonly

called “a dependent position,”—though whose are the *independent* positions I have not yet, in the course of is long life, been able to discover,—has, I suppose, peculiar trials of its own. Yet I am anxious in the present case not to be misunderstood as exaggerating or laying undue stress upon those attendant upon governess life. Much harm has been done already in this way, and were I desirous of entering at all upon the subject, I would much prefer to draw attention to the bright side of the picture; side which, I am happy to say, my own personal experience call vouch for us existing. It is a *false* position which is to be dreaded, and which is, in the evil sense of the word, a dependent one.

Marion seldom, if ever, blushed. But now, when this speech of Lady Severn’s roused her indignation, she felt the strange tingling sensation through all her veins, which agitation of any kind produced upon her, calm and self-possessed as she appeared. She replied quietly:

“If I were capable of behaving in any dishonourable way to Mrs. Archer, I should not think myself fit to be entrusted with the care of your grand-daughters, Lady Severn. But I assure you there is no such objection to my proposal. I only came from England with Mrs. Archer as a friend. We are indeed very old friends. I should not think of leaving her for more than a part of the day. What I was going to propose was that I should be the little girls’ daily governess—morning governess, I should say, for I should require to spend all my afternoons with Mrs. Archer.”

“Oh, I see,” replied Lady Severn. “You must pardon my not having quite understood the state of the case at first. What I wished, however, was to meet with a residential governess for the young ladies, my grand-daughters.”

Marion winced again, but pulled herself up in a moment. “Certainly,” thought she, “it must sound rather free and easy my speaking these children, whom I have never seen, as the little girls.” So she answered demurely,

“I understood that a residential governess was what you wished for the young ladies, but my idea was that in the meantime, while you have not succeeded in meeting with one, I might at least be able to employ the morning hours profitably. I think any rate I could help them from forgetting what knowledge they have already acquired.”

“Certainly, certainly,” replied Lady Severn graciously. “I have no doubt you

could do far more than that, and I really think your idea, a very good one. I should, however, like to consult with my niece, Miss Vyse, before deciding anything. She takes a great interest in her little cousins, and is herself most highly accomplished. And as to terms, Miss Freer. Have you thought what you would wish to have as compensation for your morning hours?"

Wince number three! "How silly I am!" thought Marion, and answered abruptly:

"Thirty pounds; I mean," she added hastily "if I were staying at Altes six months, and I taught the lit—the young ladies all that time would fifteen pounds a quarter be too much?"

Something in the child-like wistfulness of the sweet face appealing to her, so timidly and yet so anxiously, touched a chord in the not unkindly, though somewhat self-absorbed nature of the eider lady, and she exclaimed impulsively,

"Fifteen pounds a quarter too much, my dear? No, certainly not. I should much prefer making it twenty. But, my dear, you are so very young. Are you sure this is a wise step for your own sake? Would not your friends prefer your making a real holiday of this little time abroad with Mrs. Archer?"

"My friends are not likely to interfere," said the girl, adding sadly, "I have no mother."

How much those few words left to be inferred! They came very close home to Lady Severn's heart. "No mother!" A sad little picture, as far as possible removed from the truth, but none the less touching on that account, rose before her mind's eye of this motherless girl's probable home. But though somewhat curious to hear more, she made no enquiry, which for aught she knew, might have touched some tender spot. She only said very gently:

"Poor child," and then went on more briskly, "Well then so far there appears no difficulty. The sum I named would quite satisfy you, Miss Freer? Twenty pounds each quarter."

"Twenty," repeated Marion; "that would be forty pounds in six months. Oh no, thank you. I would much rather have only fifteen. Truly I don't want more," she added earnestly.



“But my dear, do you know you will never get on in the world if you are so very—the reverse of grasping?” remonstrated the old lady, half laughing at this very eccentric young governess; “your friends, even if they do not interfere with you in general, would certainly disapprove of your not taking as high a salary as is offered you, and which indeed from what I see of you, I feel sure you would do your best to deserve. Besides I should look to you for a good deal. My granddaughters” (they were no longer the young ladies) “have several masters, for music, drawing, German, and so on. But I should wish you to superintend their preparations for their masters, as much at least as you found time for, besides yourself directing their English studies. You would feel able to undertake all this I suppose?”

“Oh, yes,” said Marion. “I think I could do all that would be required by girls of their ages. I can play pretty well, I believe,” she said, with a pretty little air of half-deprecating any appearance of self-conceit—“at least I was well taught. I don’t draw much, but I could help them to prepare for their master, and I have studied German a good deal and Italian a little.”

“Do you sing too?” asked Lady Severn. “You should do so, and well, to judge by your voice in speaking which is peculiarly clear. Indeed, it is very seldom I can hear anyone as easily as you. I should like the children to sing a little now and then. Not much, of course. Not so as to strain their voices while they are so young, but I should like them to learn a little. Some of the simpler parts of glees, for instance. Their uncle, Sir Ralph Severn, is very fond of music, and has a remarkably fine voice. We often have little concerts among ourselves in the evenings, and it would be nice for Charlotte and Sybil to be able to join in them.”

“I do sing,” said Marion. “Not very much, though. But I could teach them in the simple way you wish, I am sure.”

“Then this terrible money appears the only obstacle?” said Lady Severn, smiling; “but, my dear, you must really think what your friends would say.”

“I assure you,” replied Marion, “I am quite free to judge for myself. Indeed, when I came to Altes I had no intention of making any money in this way. It was only hearing of your difficulty in meeting with a governess; it struck me I might do temporarily, for I was very anxious to make thirty pounds while here. Not more, truly. My friends could not object, for it was—” she went on hesitatingly,

feeling she was getting on unsafe ground, “it was for one of them, the nearest of them, that I so much wanted the money at present.”

“Very well, then,” said Lady Severn, “very well. As you wish it, we will leave it so at present:” adding to herself, “though you shall be no loser by it in the end, poor child,” And then aloud, “If you will call here to-morrow at the same time, I will give you my decision, and introduce your pupils to you. As to references, there need be no delay,” (fortunate that Lady Severn was thus easily satisfied, for references hail never entered poor Marion’s head) “for your being a friend of Mrs. Archer’s, is quite enough. And at your age, you cannot have had much former experience of teaching.”

“No,” replied Marion, “I never taught anyone regularly before.”

“I thought so, but I do not regret it. The children will probably be all the happier with you, than if you had been older and more experienced. And, for so short a time, it will be no disadvantage.”

So, with a cordial good morning from Lady Severn, and a kindly message or remembrance to Mrs. Archer, Marion took her departure. With a curious mixture of feelings in her heart, she slowly descended the flight of stairs to the courtyard, so wholly absorbed in her own cogitations, that she all but ran against a gentleman just entering the doorway, whose attention on his side was engrossed by the endeavouring to shut a rather obstreperous umbrella. A hasty “*Pardon,*” and he passed her, quickly running up the stair. She noticed only that he was slight and dark, and that he had on a very wet “*Macintosh;*” in those days, when but recently invented, not the pleasantest of attire, unless one had a special predilection for the odour of tar and melted India-rubber combined. “How can anyone wear those horrible coats?” said Marion to herself. But very speedily she was forced to confess that she would not be sorry were she to find herself magically enveloped in such a garment; for it was pouring, literally pouring, with rain. No longer drizzle, but good, honest, most unmistakable rain; and, of course, with her head full of blue sky and brilliant sunshine, as the normal condition of weather at Altes, she had brought no umbrella. There she stood, rather despondently staring at the fountain, which seemed to her in a much brisker mood than when she had observed it on entering. As far as she herself was concerned, Marion really was by no means afraid of a wetting, but then she knew the sight of her with drenched garments would seriously annoy Cissy, whom at this present time she was most especially anxious to conciliate. She

thought of turning back and borrowing an umbrella from Lady Severn, but she felt rather averse to doing so, and had just made up her mind to brave it when a voice behind her made her start.

*“Pardon, Mademoiselle,”* it said, *“il paraît que vous n’avez pas de parapluie, et il pleut à verse. Permettez moi de vous offrir le mien.”*

The French was perfectly correct, the accent irreproachable, but yet a certain something, an undefinable instinct, caused Marion to hesitate in her reply, as she turned towards the speaker. She stopped in the *“je vous remercie”* she had all but uttered, and for it substituted a hearty “thank you,” as her glance fell on the gentleman who had a few minutes before passed her on his way in.

“Thank you,” she repeated, “you are very kind indeed.”

“Ah,” he said, with, she fancied, a slight expression of amusement on his quiet, grave face, “my accent still betrays me, I see. But I am not sorry it is so in the present ease, as nothing is more ridiculous than forsaking one’s native tongue unnecessarily. I think,” he added, “my umbrella is a good-sized one, and will protect you pretty well, opening it he spoke. This was more easily managed than the shutting had been, and, with repeated thanks, Marion had turned to go, when suddenly recollecting that she was in ignorance of the name and address of the owner of the umbrella, she stopped and asked if she should return it to number five.

“Yes, if you please,” he replied, “I live here. You will see my name on the handle. But do not trouble about sending it back at once. Any time in the next few days will do. I believe I have another somewhere. And, indeed, I much prefer being without one. These charming coats are much better things,” he added, regarding his attire with supreme satisfaction.

“Charming they may be to the wearer, but assuredly not becoming, Mr. Whatever-your-name-is.” said Marion to herself, as she crossed the courtyard under the shelter of the friendly umbrella. “I do think it was very kind of him, though, to lend me this, so I should not laugh at his queer appearance in that hideous coat, By-the-bye, I wonder what his name is.” By this time she was in the street, and stopped for a moment to decipher the letters on the handle: “R. M. Severn.”

“How funny!” thought she, “really my introductions to this family are rather

peculiar. How amused Cissy will be!”

But, with the thought of Cissy, came back rather uneasy sensations. Marion's satisfaction at the success of her visit to Lady Severn, had for the moment caused her to forget the still more awful business before her: the confessing all to Cissy, and extorting from her a promise of co-operation, without which her scheme must infallibly fail. The part of the whole which she least liked to think of, was the being known under a false name. And yet this very mistake of Lady Severn's had been one of the strongest inducements to her to offer herself as governess to these children; for, as Miss Vere, she felt that she could not have ventured on so bold and unusual a proceeding. Now, however, that the Rubicon was passed, it appeared to her that the turning back would entail greater annoyances and mortification on both herself and her cousin, than they could possibly be exposed to by perseverance in her intention. This she hoped to be able to demonstrate to Cissy, and thus to induce her to refrain from opposition. But the more she thought of it, the more she dreaded the coming interview. No use, however, in delaying it. She had hardly made up her mind as to how she should enter upon the awful disclosure, when she found herself at their own door, which was standing open, Cissy anxiously looking out for her.

“Oh, Marion,” she exclaimed, “how very naughty you are to stay out in the rain! I have been in such a fuss about you.”

“Oh, Cissy,” replied the delinquent, “how very naughty *you* are, to stand at the door catching cold!”

“Don't be impertinent, Miss, but come in and take off your wet things, and then tell me what you have been about. Oh, I see, you had an umbrella. What a great, big one! Is that your own one?”

“No I got the loan of it,” said Marion hastily closing the conspicuous umbrella before Cissy had time to observe it more particularly. “Go into the drawing-room, Cissy, and I'll be with you in five minutes, and tell you all my adventures in the rain.”

The five minutes had hardly elapsed when Marion rejoined her cousin. The damp day had rendered a tiny fire acceptable. Cissy was seated near it, and Marion knelt down on the rug before her, looking up into her face with a curious, half-anxious expression on her own.

“What is the matter, May? Have you really any adventures to tell me?” asked Mrs. Archer.

“Yes,” replied the girl quietly, “at least I have a confession to make to you. What do you think I have done, Cissy?”

“What do I think you have done? How can I think till I know? Don’t frighten me, May: tell me quickly what you mean.”

“Well, then, I will tell you quickly, Cissy. What I have done is this: I have engaged myself as daily governess to Lady Severn’s grand-daughters, for three months certainly, and, if possible, for six.”

“Marion,” said Cissy excitedly, “you are joking. You don’t mean that you have really done such a mad, unheard-of thing. You, Marion Vere, a daily governess! You Uncle Vere’s daughter! No, nonsense, you can’t be in earnest.”

“Yes, Cissy, I am, thoroughly and entirely in earnest. It came into my mind yesterday, when Lady Severn mistook me for Charlie’s governess. I saw before me a simple, easy way of making the money I required to pay back poor Harry’s debt, and I determined to carry out my scheme without telling you of it till it was done.” And then she gave her cousin a full account of her interview with Lady Severn, and the arrangements proposed; and without giving Cissy time to make any remarks, or to urge any objections, she went on to show her how easily and naturally the thing might be managed without anyone’s ever being in their secret. How Lady Severn’s mistaking her name, and the fact of her being a perfect stranger in Altes, would effectually prevent her identity with the daughter of the well-known Mr. Vere ever being suspected.

“And after all,” she continued, “it is such a very thrilling thing. I shall only be away for a few hours in the morning, and often indeed shall be home almost before you are dressed. The work itself, such as it is, will be exceedingly good for me in every way. I am really looking forward to it with the greatest pleasure.”

“It is not that part of it I am thinking of so much,” said Cissy gravely, “it is the disadvantage it may be to you in a hundred indirect ways, which you are too childish to think of. Even supposing, as may be the case, that the truth is never suspected, there is something very anomalous and undesirable about the whole affair. Especially the being known under a name that is not yours. Fancy, in after

life, if it came out in the queer way that things do, that you had spent six mouths abroad under an assumed name! You must own, Marion, that it is enough to startle me to think of what you may be exposing yourself to; and to think it is all for the sake of that wretched money! As if I would not twenty times rather have lent you six times as much, whether you ever repaid it or not.”

“But Cissy, you couldn’t, and that settles the matter. You couldn’t have lent it, and I certainly wouldn’t have borrowed it without repaying it properly. The choice lay between my doing what I have done, or applying to Papa; and rather than go to him for it, I really think I would be a governess all my life. Besides,” she added, “seeing that so much is done, can it be undone? It seems to me the attempting to undo it, would entail all manner of disagreeable things; explanations of private matters to Lady Severn, a perfect stranger to me, and personally hardly better known to you. One thing I am quite sure of, and that is, that she would not forgive the part I have acted in the matter. Indeed I myself should feel dreadfully small! As far as my chances of enjoying my visit to Altes are concerned, which you, dear Cissy, think so much of, I assure you I am more likely to do so, as Miss Freer, Lady Severn’s daily governess, than as Marion Vere. I couldn’t get over the mortification, at having appeared so cunning. If I really earn the money, I shall feel that I am working for Harry, and somehow that prevents my feeling as if I were deceitful or scheming.”

And the more they talked it over, the more awkward appeared the complication. Or at least, Marion talked Cissy into thinking there was nothing for it but to go on with the plan.

“For indeed,” said Marion, by way of triumphantly summing up her argument, “I am under promise to Lady Severn to undertake the post, if she thinks me suitable. And I couldn’t go back from a promise.”

So, tired of discussion and rather bewildered by Marion’s eloquence, poor Cissy gave in, sorely against her will.

“It really will be great fun, putting every thing else aside,” said Marion. “Remember, Cissy, you must never call me ‘my cousin,’ or ‘Miss Vere.’ Fortunately we have no English servants with us, and Charlie always calls me May. Then all my letters, which won’t be many, come under cover to you. It will all answer beautifully.”

"I am sorry I can't join you in seeing anything beautiful about the whole affair from beginning to end," said Cissy," but having given in, I must not be cross about it. I know you did it from the best of motives, but all the same it was fearfully rash. I believe it's leaving off raining," she added, as a sudden gleam of sunshine entered the room, "that reminds me, May, where did you borrow that great umbrella? Did Lady Severn lend it you?"

"No," replied Marion, and then, not sorry to distract her cousin's thoughts, she related her little adventure.

"Yes," said Mrs. Archer, "that must certainly have been Sir Ralph. But don't feel flattered by his civility, Marion. At this moment I have no doubt he has not the slightest idea if the person he lent it to was an ugly old woman or a pretty young girl. Very probably he would have lent it all the more heartily had you been the former."

"Very likely," said Marion, laughing, "outward appearance evidently does not trouble him much."

And then, as it had really cleared up wonderfully, they set off for a walk.

"Remember, Cissy," said Marion, "that Dr. Bailey is coming this afternoon.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Archer, "I had not forgotten it. But Marion, if I give in to this mad scheme of yours, you must instruct me what I am to do. Must I introduce you on all occasions in this new character of yours?"

"There will very seldom be any necessity for introducing me at all. You can speak of me and to me as you always do, which will seem quite natural. I told Lady Severn we were very old friends, and that I had just come abroad with you for the pleasure of the visit."

"Very well," said Cissy, "you shall hear me introduce you to Dr. Bailey, as a deserving young person whom I have a very good opinion of."

But this introduction proved to be unnecessary. Dr. Bailey had hardly sat down before he remarked to Mrs. Archer, how pleased he was to hear that her young friend had undertaken, temporarily, the charge of the studies of the little Misses Severn. "An excellent arrangement," he pronounced it, "your new pupils, Miss Freer," (he had heard the name even!) "are charming children. The younger

one especially is a great friend of mine. She has been far from strong, poor child, but is now much better. I should not, however, advise her being pressed forward in her lessons. Time enough for that, time enough." And so he chattered on in a kindly, uninteresting way; told Mrs. Archer the names of the principal families, English, French, Russians, and Germans, who intended this year wintering at Altes; advised her by all means occasionally to dine at the table d'hôte of the "Lion d'Or," as the variety would be good for her and the cooking excellent; and then took his leave with the promise of a speedy visit from the ladies of his household.



## CHAPTER V.

### AU LION D'OR

*“A feast was also provided for our reception, at which we sat cheerfully down; and what the conversation wanted in wit was made up in laughter.”*

VICAR OF WAKEFIELD.

“YOU HAVE no objection to dining at the table to-day, have you, Marion asked Cissy when Dr. Bailey had taken his departure.

“Oh dear no,” said Marion, “I am perfectly willing to go if you like.”

So when the dinner hour drew near, the two sallied forth to the “Lion d’Or.” They were ushered into a good-sized room, where a long table stood prepared for a considerable number of guests, of whom, however, only a few had as yet made their appearance. As strangers, Mrs. Archer and Marion found themselves placed at the lower end; the younger lady’s seat being at the corner, at the right of what in a private house would have been the host’s chair, commanded an excellent view of the whole table. The persons already assembled did not strike Marion as in any way interesting. There were several English, mostly elderly and common-place in the extreme. A rather stout German lady with a very stupid, though not unamiable-looking daughter, and a couple of awkward half-grown sons. Just as Cissy had, in a low voice, confided to her cousin, that in future she thought it would be nicer to dine at home, the door opened to admit several other guests. A little group of three persons, seating themselves on the vacant chairs

beside Mrs. Archer, immediately attracted that observant lady's attention. They were evidently father, mother, and child, the last a nice little girl of fourteen or thereabouts. The mother, still young and bright-looking, was decidedly prepossessing in appearance, and her devoted attention to her husband, evidently the invalid of the party, touched a wifely chord in Cissy's affectionate little heart. Mrs. Fraser, for so her neighbours soon discovered that she was named, happened to sit next to Mrs. Archer, and but a few minutes elapsed before the two somewhat congenial spirits were in friendly conversation.

Marion, by her position at the table slightly separated from them, felt herself at liberty to sit silent and amuse herself by observing her companions. Of these the liveliest and most conspicuous were some six or seven gentlemen, who had entered the room immediately after the Fraser family. They came in together, talking and laughing, though not noisily, and evidently belonging to one party. Marion soon gathered from their conversation that some excursion was in question, preliminary to which, they had all met to dine at the "Lion d'Or." She found them an amusing study, as from time to time she glanced at them demurely. In the little group of six or seven young men, several nations were represented.

First came John Bull, in the shape of a good natured, substantial, rather handsome man, apparently about thirty years of age. Then a lively, energetic little Frenchman, brisk and amusing, but with something unquestionably refined about him too. Next to him sat an exceedingly conceited young man, fair, and with good features, of which the most striking was exaggeratedly Roman nose. The nationality of this individual somewhat puzzled Miss Vere, as did also that of his immediate neighbour on the left, a very young man, a boy almost, whose handsome face and thoroughbred air rendered him the most attractive of the party. He and his Roman-nosed friend, soon proved themselves to be famous linguists, for in the course of less than half an hour, Marion heard them speak English, French, German, and a word or two incidentally, of Italian, each, so far as her ear could discover, with perfect ease and fluency. The rest of the party consisted of a frank-mannered young man, an English officer home from India; and a half clerical-looking individual, middle-aged and stiff, whom Marion decided and rightly, to be the tutor of the handsome cosmopolitan. Snatches only of their conversation reached her, but enough to amuse and interest her. The whole party was full of the anticipated enjoyment of the mountain expedition. As far as she could gather they intended starting that evening, driving a considerable distance and ascending to a certain point in time to see the sun rise.

“Not that I care much about seeing the sun rise,” said the heavy Englishman, shivering at the thought; “but I daresay it will give us good appetite for breakfast.”

“After which think you, my friend, to mount still higher?” asked the Frenchman, “or will you that while you repose we then ascend? In this case can we again find you as we recome.”

“You don’t mean to say, De L’Orme,” interrupted the young officer, “that you ever dreamt of Chepstow’s getting to the top! By all means, leave him half way. We should certainly have to carry him the best part of the way up, and he’s no light weight, remember.”

“Nonsense,” said the substantial Chepstow, there’s no reason why I shouldn’t get to the top.”

“Not the slightest, my dear sir, why you should not both get to the top and stay there if you find it agreeable,” observed the Roman-nosed gentleman, with what seemed to Marion a rather impertinent sneer in his tone.

Mr. Chepstow, however, being one of those happily self-satisfied, matter-of-fact people to whom the possibility that they are being made fun of, never occurs, commenced a ponderous speech to the effect that his friend had misunderstood him in supposing that he had any wish to settle for life on the summit of the “*pic noir*,” which speech unfortunately was destined never to be concluded, for the person to whom it was addressed, taking not the slightest notice of it, turned to his neighbour on the other side, “the handsome boy,” as Marion had mentally dubbed him, saying:

“How is it, my dear —” (she could not catch the name) “your hero has then disappointed you? We are not to be honoured with his company after all? Ah, what a loss! Think only how we might all have profited by twenty-four hours in the company of so learned an individual. You, especially, Chepstow,” he added, turning sharply to that gentleman, hardly yet recovered from the surprise of finding himself not listened to.

“Not so fast, Erbenfeld,” replied the younger man, “I still hope for my friend’s company. Mr. Price met him this afternoon, and at that time he spoke of joining us. Did he not, Mr. Price?” he enquired of the semi-clerical gentleman.

“Certainly, he did,” answered the person addressed. But just then the little Frenchman broke in with a vivacious description of something or other, and Marion lost the thread of the conversation.

All this time Cissy had been chattering busily to her new acquaintances; but though from the position or her seat, she had not so good a view as her cousin of the party of young men, it must not be thought that they had escaped her observation. Far from it. She had been making good use of her time, by extracting from her lively and communicative companion quite a fund of information respecting the little world of Altes society. Before the end of dinner she was perfectly informed respecting the names, rank, antecedents, and expectations, of the several gentlemen composing the group at the other end of the table; and now with a smile of satisfaction she whispered to Marion that she had lots to tell her when they got home.

Poor Cissy! I am afraid it must be admitted that she was something of a gossip; but after all, if no one ever said worse of their neighbours than she did, the world at large would be in a considerably more amicable state of mind than it is at present.

Half way through the meal there was a new arrival. A gentleman, who came in quietly and made his way to the head of the room where the party of young men was seated, and before taking his place said a few words in a low voice to Mr. Chepstow; of apology for his tardiness, Marion fancied, thereby confirming her guess that the substantial Englishman was in the present instance the entertainer of the others.

The appearance of the new-corner seemed to affect the members of the group variously. Mr. Chepstow shook hands with him in a hearty, hospitable way, that would have seemed more in place in an English dining-room than at a French *table d’hôte*. Erbenfeld greeted him with the slightest possible approach to a bow, which, however, he could not succeed in rendering haughty or dignified as he evidently intended; the Frenchman was airily cordial; and the young officer looked sulky and rather disgusted, as if he thought the jollity of the party had received its death-blow. But over the thin, careworn face of Mr. Price, there crept an expression of pleasure touching to see, and the handsome boy, his pupil, started up with a bright smile of welcome which made Marion think of her own Harry at home.

The stranger's face had not yet been fully turned in her direction, but the sound of his voice was slightly familiar. That voice, had he known it, was his strong point. Not too deep, though round and mellow; in no wise weak, though it could be gentle as a woman's; firm and penetrating, without a shade of hardness. And above all it was a voice that rang *true*. When at last he sat down and Marion saw him distinctly, the familiarity of the voice was explained. It was the hero of the umbrella! As he glanced round the table she half fancied that his eye for a second rested upon her, with the slightest possible expression of recognition. But very probably this was only a trick of her imagination. She was glad when he entered into an evidently interesting conversation with Mr. Price and his pupil; as he then turned slightly aside and she ventured now and again to glance at him. No, Cissy was right; he was most certainly not handsome. And yet not exactly plain-looking either. A certain quiet, self-contained gravity of expression attracted her. She knew him to be an unusually clever man, but had she not known this from hearsay, she fancied she would have discovered it for herself. The brow was good, the eyes too deeply set for beauty, the nose passable, the mouth well-shaped, but with lines about it that would have made it hard, had it not been for a gentler expression, half of humour, half of melancholy, which went and came, now brightening, now saddening, but always softening all the features of the dark, quiet face. Knowing, as she did, nothing of his history and character, it seemed to Marion that it would not be difficult to understand this man; if not to like him, at least to respect and be interested by him. I think it was what she had heard of his somewhat isolated and solitary life, that inclined her to feel already a sort of regard, pity almost, for him. Her life had not been so bright and full, but that she had some knowledge of lonely hours and lonelier feelings. How easily she could picture him to herself as a boy, shy and backward beside his more brilliant brother. How well she could enter into the little understood suffering carelessly alluded to in those few words of his mother's when expressing her wish that Sir John had left an heir, "and so does Ralph himself wish, for that matter."

Marion sat dreaming thus to herself, and half started when a question from Cissy as to what in the world she was thinking of, drew her into conversation with her cousin and Mrs. Fraser. Dinner was about over and in a few minutes the whole party dispersed. Mrs. Archer greatly delighted by Mrs. Fraser's request that she might call to see her the next day.

"She is really a very nice little woman, isn't she, May?" said Mrs. Archer, as they were walking home. "Mrs. Fraser, I mean."

“In the first place, my dear Cissy, she is at least half a head taller than you. As for her niceness I hadn’t much opportunity of judging; she was so busy talking to you. She is certainly very nice-looking, and I like her husband’s face too.”

“Yes, poor man, but how dreadfully ill he looks! There isn’t a chance of his living long,” said Cissy, briskly.

“Indeed! Was that part of his wife’s very entertaining communications?” enquired Marion, drily.

“May, for shame! Of course not. I could see it for myself in half a minute. You do take one up so for whatever one says,” exclaimed Mrs. Archer, indignantly. “But I was going to tell you all I heard about the people here. Mrs. Fraser knows the Berwicks, slightly that is to say. At least she knows the ladies of the family and the old major. By-the-by that sunburnt young man among those gentlemen at the head of the table was the son, young Berwick. Captain, I think he is now. He is home on leave for two years. I never saw him before, but George knows him a little I think. Mrs. Fraser says he’s rather nice by all accounts. Mrs. Berwick and the eldest daughter, Blanche, are rather stupid. Blanche always ill and the mother fussing about her. The younger daughter, Sophy, is good-natured and lively, but is allowed to run rather wild, I fancy. She had a great flirtation with that fair young man with the queer nose. Erbenfeld is his name; a Swede. But he found out in time that she had no money; all this happened last year and so it came to nothing.”

“Really, Cissy, your new friend must be a regular gossip.”

“Not at all, Marion, you don’t understand,” said Mrs. Archer, with a slight shade of annoyance in her tone. I am very glad to have got to know something of all these people in this sort of way. There was no harm whatever in Mrs. Fraser giving me a little information about them. She saw I was a perfect stranger in the place, and I told her I should like to know something about the society here. Perhaps it was a little rash of us both, but I know that she is a nice person. I felt it instinctively, and perhaps she felt the same towards me. Her husband was laughing at her a little for gossiping, but he said she made a point of collecting all the stories she could to amuse him with, for often he can’t leave his room for days together. But if you would rather not listen to my ‘gossip,’ Marion, I’m sure you needn’t hesitate to say so.”

“Nonsense, Cissy, I was only teasing you. Well, what more about Mr. Erbenfeld?”

“About Mr. Erbenfeld? Oh, there’s not much to tell about him. He’s a sort of adventurer, I should say. He has spent the two last winters here on pretence of his health, but really, they say, because he hopes to pick up a rich English wife. He is rather clever—accomplished, at least—and visits all the best people here, being fairly good-looking and gentlemanlike. But Mrs. Fraser says he is a good deal laughed at on account of the airs he gives himself about his old family and grand relations in Sweden.”

“I thought he was very rude indeed to Mr. Chepstow,” remarked Marion.

“Oh, yes, that’s the stout, big man. How did you hear his name?”

“I heard that Mr. Erbenfeld mention it. ‘Shepstow’ he pronounced it. But what can a man like Mr. Chepstow be doing here? I am sure he does not look as though he were an invalid.”

“But, my dear child, do get it out of your head that everyone at Altes is an invalid. It is quite a mistake. At least half the people here simply come for amusement. Mr. Chepstow, as it happens, is here to recruit his spirits, for his wife died a few months ago, and he found his home so miserable without her that he couldn’t bear to spend the winter there. He’s an enormously rich man, Mrs. Fraser said.”

“Did you notice the gentleman who came in when dinner was half over?” asked Marion.

“Not particularly. I don’t think Mrs. Fraser knew him—at least she made no observations about him.”

“*You* should have him, though,” said Marion.

“I; why?” exclaimed Cissy. “But now I think of it, by-the-by, his face did strike me as familiar in a sort of misty way. I know,” she went on, eagerly; “Yes, I know now. It was Sir Ralph Severn.”

“So I supposed,” said Marion; “for it was certainly the gentleman who lent me the umbrella this morning.”

“How stupid of me not to recognize him,” said Cissy; “but I might just as well say how stupid of him not to recognize me! He is a good deal changed, naturally, for it is seven years since I saw him at Cairo, and then only for a few hours. He is more manly-looking, but even graver than he was then. But what a handsome young man that Russian was! Didn’t you think so, Marion?”

“Yes, I liked his face exceedingly,” she replied. “Ah! that explains his speaking so many languages—his being a Russian, I mean. What is his name?”

“Count Vladimir Nodouroff, or some name like that,” answered Mrs. Archer; “his family comes here every winter. He has a beautiful sister. That stupid-looking man was his tutor. The little Friendship’s name is Monsieur de l’Orme. Mrs. Fraser knows him a little, and says he is charming. They are all setting off on a mountain excursion tonight.”

“Yes, I heard them alluding to it,” said Marion; “so after all, Cissy, your Sir Ralph can’t be such a very unsociable person.”

“I never said he was,” answered Cissy; “I only said he was much less popular than his brother. Indeed, I know very little about him; but those learned people are always stuck-up and disagreeable. But oh, May, how I hate this governessing scheme of yours! Mrs. Fraser asked me if you were my sister, and when I said ‘no,’ I, as nearly as possible, added that you were my cousin.”

“Poor Cissy! What did you say? I saw you looking at me rather



uncomfortably.”

“I said you were a great friend of mine, and that not being particularly wanted at home, I had persuaded your friends to let you come abroad with me. Thinking it was as well to get accustomed to my *rôle* in this farce, I went on to say that, rather against my wishes, you had determined on accepting a situation as daily governess while at Altes, rather than be idle. Mrs. Fraser said, ‘Poor girl; well, if she has to do it, the sooner she begins the better?’ I felt such a hypocrite, Marion. I managed to avoid naming you, though. I really couldn’t have called you Miss Freer.”

“But you will have to do so, sooner or later, Cissy; though, I confess, it’s the part I least like of the affair myself. Did you bear anything of the Bailey family from Mrs. Fraser?”

“Yes; she says they are plain, good sort of people. The mother is gentle and amiable, and the daughter takes after her. Mrs. Fraser was here all last winter too. She says there are excellent subscription balls. They are kept very select indeed. You can only get tickets by giving your name to one of the committee. Major Berwick is on it so there will be no difficulty for us if we feel inclined to go. Somehow I don’t think I shall like the Berwicks much. Mrs. Fraser was cautious in her way of speaking about them, but I gathered that old Mrs. Berwick is rather a mischief-maker, though she professes to live quite out of the world, on Blanche’s account. Poor Blanche! At school, I remember, she promised to be a very pretty girl. But she was always delicate.”

An hour or so later, as Marion and Cissy sat quietly reading and working, they heard the sound of several carriage wheels passing quickly. Strolling on to the terrace they caught sight of the party of gentlemen setting off on their expedition. It was a lovely evening after the rain, the moon just appearing as the daylight began to fade. The young men’s voices sounded cheerfully as they drove past, just below the terrace.

“How I envy them!” said Cissy “don’t you, Marion? Think how delightful it would be to drive ever so far in the moonlight!”

“Yes,” replied Marion, with a sigh, “yes, it would be very delightful.”

And as she spoke a sort of childish discontent with her quiet humdrum life came over her. She wished that she was very rich and very beautiful, and free to

enjoy some of the many pleasant things that there are in the world. And then her mood gradually altered. A feeling stole over her that a change was impending, what or how she could not have put in words. A vague presentiment that she had reached the boundary of her simple, unruffled girl-life, and that womanhood, with its deeper, fuller joys—but also, alas! its profounder sorrows and gnawing anxieties—was before her. A voice seemed to warn her, to ask her not to be in haste to leave the careless, peaceful present for the unknown, untried future. But she answered in her heart defiantly, “I am not afraid to meet my fate, to take my place in the battle; the sooner the better. I am strong and ready to do my part, and bear my mead of suffering. Only give me my woman’s share of life. Let me feel what it is to live.”

Poor child! Poor little bird, eager to try its newly-fledged wings, little knowing how tossed and torn, how very weary, they would be before they were again folded in rest!

But, thank heaven, there are many bright days in young lives, and of some of these we must tell.

## CHAPTER VI.

### FLORENCE

*“With every pleasing, every prudent part,  
Say what can Chloe want?—she wants a heart.”*

POPE.

FIVE minutes after Marion had left Lady Severn’s drawing-room that rainy morning, another young lady entered it. A tall, handsome girl. Beautiful almost; at least, to those who define beauty as material perfection of form and colour, not troubling themselves too much about the nature of the soul within. That in appearance she was what is called “striking” no one could have denied. Well-made, in a certain sense graceful, and thoroughly well-dressed, her figure would have stood the test of pretty sharp, even feminine criticism.

As to complexion, exquisitely fair; of which, however, she paid the penalty, if such it be, in the colour of her hair, which though fine, soft, and abundant, was undoubtedly red. A deep, warm red, however—in itself, a lovely shade, though, probably, few would admire it as that of hair. But now comes a surprise. The eyes were good, hazel, I think; but whatever their precise tint they always looked deep and lustrous, for they possessed the inestimable advantage—little to be looked for in conjunction with such hair—of dark, almost black, lashes, and clearly-defined, slightly arched, eyebrows to match.

Oh! what ill-natured things were said about those eyebrows and eyelashes! How the sandy freckled Misses Macdonald, husband-hunting at Altes,

whispered, about, "What a pity, is it not? Still quite a young person, and really not bad-looking, if she would only leave herself alone." Each sister, all the same, secretly experimenting in the privacy of her own chamber, with "bâton" and "bandoline;" nay, for aught I know, with camel's hair-brushes and "lamp-black," alias "*noir velouté*;" in the vain hope of rivalling the beautiful Florence. Vain hope truly, for as to eyebrows and eyelashes, the girl was indebted to nature only; and, indeed, had she been less gifted than she was in these respects, I question much if such expedients would have occurred to her, so perfectly satisfied was she with her outward appearance. Naturally so, it must be allowed. The youngest and fairest of the three daughters of a widowed and struggling mother, her surpassing beauty had, from earliest childhood, been impressed upon her as the great fact of her existence. A fact utterly impossible to question or dispute.

That this same beauty was to be turned to the best account in the matrimonial market, followed naturally enough, as the second article of belief in the poor girl's creed.

Of the two plainer sisters, one, the elder, was married respectably, though by no means brilliantly, to a young curate, over-worked and under-paid; in these particulars, I fear, no exception to his class. The other was hopelessly engaged to a lieutenant in the navy, dependent on his pay, which had hitherto barely sufficed to keep his own head above water, and whose only prospects consisted in a vague talk of far distant "promotion."

But there was Florence! Florence the beautiful, whose brilliant marriage was to be the turning point in the fortunes of her family:—to obtain a comfortable living for her older brother-in-law; and in some mysterious way to bring the Admiralty to a sense of what was owing to the meritorious but unappreciated lieutenant.

Hardly was the girl out of short frocks and pinafores, before the anxious, scheming mother set to work to plan her future and obtain for her the desired opportunity. Nor must we judge her harshly. Poverty, and above all poverty of the striving, pinching, keeping-up-appearances kind, is not an influence likely to exalt or refine the character, and poor Mrs. Vyse, no lofty-minded woman to begin with, sank and deteriorated beneath it, as many better people have done before and since.

In one direction her efforts met with success.

It happened thus. Among the few friends, who in the long weary years of her widow-hood and adversity, still remembered Mrs. Vyse, none was kinder, or showed her more substantial proofs of good will than Lady Severn, her husband's cousin by marriage. No very near connection certainly, but there was another reason for this kindness to the poor widow and her fatherless children. The history of Dame Eleanor Severn, like that of most people in this world, had begun with a first volume, or which the hero was *not* her lamented and much respected husband, the late Sir Ralph Severn, but a certain harum-scarum sailor cousin of his, a handsome auburn-haired boy, with beautiful black-fringed eyes: Gordon Vyse by name. Of course it was "utterly out of the question." She was, an heiress, consequently it would never have done for her to have married a prospectless younger son. In time, suppose, she herself was brought to see the thing in this rational light. Any how she married Sir Ralph, her own cousin, and (she being an only child), heir to her father's title, though not to his wealth, which was all settled on Eleanor Severn herself. So title and wealth were reunited by this marriage; a highly satisfactory arrangement in the eyes of the family and the world at large. Nobody troubled him or herself much about poor Gordon; who before long consoled himself by marrying, considerably beneath him, a rather pretty, inferior-minded, managing little woman, who made him as good a wife as she knew how, and after his death did her poor best by the three daughters left to her care. They got on somehow. Florence seemed the most fortunate, for Lady Severn saw her as a child, took a fancy to her, and paid for her education at a fashionable boarding school. Questionable good fortune; but the girl was capable of gratitude, and honestly loved her mother and sisters. So she made what she truly believed to be best use of her educational privileges, devoted herself to accomplishments, including the art of dressing, and arranging her magnificent hair to the best advantage; and so succeeded as become, before she left school, the show pupil of the establishment. The thought of furnishing the inside of her head with any knowledge really worth acquiring, never occurred to her. And indeed it is difficult to say if she could ever have succeeded in doing so, for the cleverness which she certainly possessed, was of that self-conceited, essentially superficial kind, to teachers far more hopeless to deal with than any extreme of good, honest, modest, stupidity.

Grown up at last, ready in every sense, of the word to "come out," had there been any one to introduce her, for a tiresome year or two the beautiful Florence languished at home. For some time the distress in the Severn family put a stop to

all hopes of a helping hand in that quarter. At last, however, Mrs. Vyse plucked courage. A gratefully expressed and judiciously timed letter to Lady Severn, resulted in an invitation to Florence to visit her abroad for a few weeks. So well had the girl profited by her mother's instructions that the few weeks lengthened into months, and the latter had already numbered more than twelve, and still there was no talk of Miss Vyse returning home. She knew how to make herself useful her hostess, who, on her side, treated her with the greatest generosity; for she was proud of her handsome young relative, niece as she preferred to call her, though in point of fact the connection was much more remote. Every where Miss Vyse was admired and made much of, and on the whole she had spent a very agreeable year. Still, the great object of her ambition, a wealthy husband, had not been attained, and for some time past this consideration had caused her no little anxiety.

There were difficulties in the way. Lady Severn's continued mourning and Sir Ralph's indifference to society, caused their life to be a very quiet one, which to Florence was the more provoking, as she saw plainly that wherever they went, it only rested with themselves to have the *entrée* of the most select portion of the fashionable world. On coming to Altes this winter, Lady Severn had kindly volunteered to relax little from her usual seclusion on her young friend's account. Pleasant news for Florence! She was, however, too far-seeing to hope for very much in the way of gaiety, considering the habits of her entertainers; and she was far too prudent to take advantage of Lady Severn's promise in any but the most careful and moderate manner, fearing lest the slightest appearance of discontent with their somewhat monotonous life, should weaken the influence she had gained over the mother, and, equally important, the favour she *hoped* to acquire in the eyes of the son.

For it had come to this! Gradually, but steadily, for some months past, Florence's thoughts had been concentrating to this point. True, Sir Ralph himself was far from rich, but then there was considerable wealth in the hands of his mother, of which, even during her life, were he to marry to please her, Florence had every reason to believe a fair portion would be his.

It was rather a bold idea; but she was not burdened with over-delicacy or scrupulosity, and on the other hand, was by no means deficient in tact, and possessed besides the inestimable of supreme, unruffled self-confidence. And, to do her justice, poor girl, she was strengthened by the thought of the happiness the news of such a marriage would diffuse over the dear, care-worn faces at

home!

Two distinct objects lay before her to achieve. In the first place there was Lady Severn to be won over, unconsciously, to her side. Liking must be deepened to affection, esteem, and admiration judiciously heightened; till one day it should suddenly break upon the good lady, entirely as an idea of her own, that here, beside her, in the person of her young favourite, the daughter of her own, never-forgotten, first love, was the very wife for her son; the woman of all others, beautiful, sensible, and cheerful, whom she would choose as a helpmeet for the dreamy, studious, unpractical Sir Ralph. So thought Florence for Lady Severn, and so, ere long, the unconscious lady was made to think for herself. For, though no plain words had as yet passed between them on the subject, Florence believed, and rightly, that the first of her designs was in a fair way towards being accomplished.

But with the contemplation of the second came the “tug of war.” Florence with all her self-belief, with all her happy confidence in the irresistible nature of her charms, felt at a loss. “Tug of war” is not a happy quotation in this instance, for it was no case of Greek *versus* Greek, but the involuntary repulsion of an utterly alien nature, which so baffled this girl in all her efforts. Ralph puzzled her. There were so many things about him which he could not understand. No wonder! For, if only she had known it, it would have been nearer the truth to say that there was hardly *one* thing about him; which, with all the good-will in the world, all the capacity for lending herself to his peculiarities on which she prided herself, she could ever have come to understand.

Her opinion of human nature in general was by no means an exalted one. Disinterested goodness, in the highest sense, was to her incredible, or rather inconceivable. Strange, at first sight, this may appear. Strange in so young a girl, for Florence was little more than twenty, and her actual experience of the world had not been very extensive. Strange, and no less sad, for the disbelief, or slowness to believe, in the truth and goodness of our fellows, which is almost excusable in a soured and world-tried man or woman of middle age, revolts and repels us in a very young person. Meeting with it we cannot but suspect some terrible defect in the early up-bringing of such an one, if not some crooked tendency of peculiar strength innate in the character itself.

So, as I said, Ralph puzzled Florence. His devotion to study for its own sake, utterly indifferent to its bringing him name or fame; his distaste for society, in

which, nevertheless, his rank and prospects would have insured him a cordial reception; his goodness itself; the union of strength, with gentleness which to her seemed almost weakness; nay, more, his very faults—his whole nature, in short—baffled her utterly.

And, above all, his indifference to her charms! For in this last there was a certain amount of inconsistency. Not in his being always kind and attentive to her; that went for nothing, she knew he would have been so to any woman. But, over and above this, she saw that he admired her. In a quiet, cold sort of way, as if she had been a picture or a statue. She was pleasing to him as a beautiful object, for his perceptions were refined and correct to a fault. And even *she* felt, and truly, that to be thus admired by him was worth all the coarser adulation of the many—the vulgar triumph of reigning as a ball-room belle.

But this was all! Beyond this point she could not succeed in impressing him. At last, after much cogitation, she decided in her own mind that he, a student, if not already a “*savant*,” must be of a different nature from other men, and she must content herself accordingly. One comfort certainly was hers. She need fear no rival, past, present, or future. His never having been specially attracted by any young lady had become, as it were, a proverb in the family. And as for anything else—. No; she felt instinctively there was nothing to fear. No awkward entanglement which might have precluded the idea of matrimony, or engendered a distaste thereto. And she was right. The life of this man, from earliest boy hood to the present time, would have stood the strictest scrutiny.

He must have always been, she decided, just the same peculiar being she found him now. It was simply not in him to fall in love, “to lose his head about anyone,” as she phrased it to herself. The best she could hope for was, that he should become, as it were, accustomed to her, regard her with quiet friendliness and respect, feel a certain amount of pleasure in her society; so that when his mother should one day make the proposition to him, for which Florence was thus carefully paving the way, the idea should not, at least, be repugnant to him. He would marry her, no doubt, if his mother wished it, provided it could be done without much trouble or interference with his usual habits. Still, it was mortifying to think of, that with this faint, colourless sentiment she must be content. For though herself too cold, or perhaps too thoroughly selfish, ever to experience the all-absorbing, self-devoting, uncalculating intensity of a genuine love, she was yet by no means insensible to the extreme gratification, the agreeable triumph of awakening such a feeling in all its depth towards her in the



bosom of another. She had all the elements that go to the making of a thorough-paced coquette; but she was wise enough to see that, in her critical position, the exercise of any such arts might result in the direst misfortune to herself; and, through her, to the only three people in the world she really cared about.

The one consolation to her wounded vanity—Ralph's evident admiration of her beauty for its own sake, she sedulously cultivated. She was perfectly aware that it was merely the gratification an artist experiences when brought into relation with harmony of any kind. An utterly different feeling from that, happily far more common-place one, by no means confined to artist natures, which makes the outward form precious for the sake of its owner. The feeling which makes Rochester declare that "every atom of Jane's flesh" would, must be, dear to him, in pain, in sickness—yes, even in the wild paroxysms or insanity. The feeling so exquisitely described in another sense, in that lovely picture of motherhood, when Heather tells how precious to her is every freckle on her little Lally's snub nose.

Well aware that Ralph's admiration for her sprung from no root of this, kind, Florence found it the more necessary to nurse and cherish, with the utmost care, the delicate plant.

Never, in all the months they had been members of the same household, had Ralph seen her in any but a perfectly well-chosen and tasteful "toilette." Unless, indeed, on one or two occasions when he had "accidentally" caught sight of her in the most becoming of studied "*negligés*." Her magnificent hair escaped from its trappings perhaps, or decorated with a wreath of flowers to please her little cousins in a game of play, which had flushed her usually pale cheeks with an exquisite bloom.

This sort of thing, she imagined, kept up with Sir Ralph her character of gentle artlessness, somewhat subdued by the trials of her past life. Whereas, in reality, she neither sat nor moved, looked nor spoke, when in his presence, save with the one purpose of strengthening and increasing his admiration.

This girl, then, as I have shown her, this Florence Vyse, was the young lady who entered the room that rainy morning, just as Marion had left it.

"Oh, Florence, my love," said Lady Severn, as she came in, "I am so sorry you did not happen to come before. Such a nice young person has been here

applying as daily governess. Really, quite a superior, lady-like girl. Evidently well brought up. I should fancy, from what she said, that her family must be in reduced circumstances. I wish you had seen her; I should have liked your opinion.”

“I am sorry I did not know you wanted me, dear Aunt,” replied the young lady, seating herself on a comfortable low chair, near enough to Lady Severn to be heard without the disagreeable exertion of raising her voice. “I am very glad to hear of a suitable governess for the dear pets,” which, indeed, she was from the bottom of her heart; having, of late, had sundry most uncomfortable misgivings, that unless such a person appeared she would before long, for the sake of her character of unselfish amiability, be obliged to offer her services temporarily at least, as instructress. Mentally resolving that this unexpected deliverance must be accepted, even though the candidate for the undesirable post should be a suspected tool of the Jesuits, or something equally objectionable, she proceeded to cross-question Lady Severn on the subject, and had got the length of hearing that Miss Freer was a friend and guest of Mrs. Archer’s, when the door opened and Sir Ralph entered.

“Oh, Ralph,” said his mother, “I was just telling Florence what a nice governess I have all but engaged for the children.

“Indeed,” replied he; “she must have dropped from the skies to oblige you, for at breakfast this morning Florence was bewailing your disappointment that somebody or other—Mrs. Archer, wasn’t it?—had not succeeded in finding some unfortunate lady willing to torture herself and the children for so many hours a day. Really, mother, I think you might leave them alone for a while. Sybil is too delicate and Lotty too flighty to do much good at lessons.”

“I must beg you, Ralph, not to speak in that foolish way. How can you possibly be able to judge about the education of young girls? Florence, who really may be allowed to have an opinion on the subject, agrees with me that they have been running wild far too long.”

“Oh dear Aunt, pray don’t speak as if I would dream of interfering,” interrupted Miss Vyse, “I only happened to say the other day that I wished I had my school-days over again, now that I saw to how much better profit I might put them. Though, perhaps, after all it would not be much use; for I am so stupid. And being with minds I can really look up to, has made me of late painfully

conscious of my own deficiencies!” she added, with a gentle little sigh.

She wanted Sir Ralph to say that he hated learned women, but he took no notice of her self-depreciation. “He is really horribly boorish,” she thought to herself, as after waiting till she had finished her pretty little speech, he turned to his mother and enquired, “Where and how have you heard of a governess then, mother? Of course if she is a desirable person it will be a good thing for the children. I am quite aware such things as lessons are unavoidable, sooner or later.”

For the second time Lady Severn related the history of the lucky coincidence that had brought Miss Freer as an applicant for the post. She ended by saying that the young lady (she had called her “a young person” to Florence, but “Ralph had such queer notions”) had only just left her. “Ah then,” he said, “I must have seen her as I came in. I lent her my umbrella.”

“Lent her your umbrella, Ralph. What for?”

“To keep off the rain,” he answered, quietly.

“Pray, Ralph, do not answer my questions in that ridiculous way. You know what I mean, perfectly. You are not in the habit of lending your umbrella to the first person you happen to meet in the street.”

“Certainly not, mother. And as it happens I did not meet this *protégée* of yours in the street at all. I saw her as I came in, standing at the foot of the stairs, looking out at the rain rather disconsolately. It never occurred to me till I had run up stairs that perhaps she had no umbrella, and so I ran down again to see. I had no idea who she was. Young or old, ugly or pretty. I passed her quickly, thinking of other things; which was stupid enough, for I might have thought a lady would not be standing, staring at the rain for any pleasure in the prospect.”

“And when you ran down again did you see her, Cousin Ralph?” asked Florence, softly.

“Yes, Cousin Florence,” he replied jestingly; “but I am afraid I can’t tell you much about her. I only saw a young girl with pretty brown hair, for she was standing with her back to me, and hardly turned round to thank me, so eager was she to run off as soon as she had the umbrella.”

He did not add that as the girl had retraced a step or two to ask his address, her veil had flown back and revealed a pair of grey eyes, which the word "pretty" would not have adequately described. But "pretty brown hair!" What evil genius prompted Ralph to use the expressions? The first seed sown of many, that were in time, to yield a harvest of bitter fruit. The first small prejudice planted in the heart of a jealous and scheming woman. "Pretty brown hair, indeed," said Florence to herself, and she never forgot the words. Ralph so seldom seemed to notice anything, pretty or ugly, about a woman, that the slightest expression of admiration at once caught her attention. And in the present case another feeling was aroused. Notwithstanding all her self-satisfaction Florence was, to tell the truth, touchy about the colour of her hair. She thought it, really and truly, the loveliest that ever grew on a woman's head, but yet she was aware that there was a diversity of opinion on the subject. Vulgar people, uneducated eyes might call it a defect. Spiteful people might say spiteful things about it, were they so inclined. She was sure that Ralph admired it, for under none of these heads could be classed. He, whose taste was refined and cultivated in the extreme, must, could not but think it beautiful; but yet — she could not endure him to speak of another woman's "pretty brown hair."

They went in to luncheon. As they were taking their seats at table they were joined by the two grand-daughters, "the children," Florence's "dear pets." Charlotte, the elder, was a tall, well-grown child. Handsome already, and with promise of considerable beauty of the large, fair type. "Quite a Severn," as her father had been before her, and already well aware of the fact.

Sybil was as unlike her, as in childhood, Ralph must have been unlike his handsome brother. A quiet, mouse-like little girl, with a pale face and straight, short-cut, rather dark hair. Sweet eyes though; and, indeed, far from plain-looking, when one examined the features more critically. Few, probably, were ever at the pains to do so, for she was precisely the sort of child that gets little notice; partly, perhaps, because she never seemed to expect it. She was rather an unsatisfactory child. Her grandmother loved her and cherished her, but yet somehow she did not, or could not, understand her. Her great delicacy and the constant care and indulgence it necessitated, would have utterly spoiled most children; but it had not done so with Sybil. Not, at least, in the ordinary way.

Lotty, one could see at the first glance, was tremendously spoiled. But she was by nature honest and hearty, though selfish, headstrong, and conceited. Conceited, however, in a childish, innocent sort of way. Laughable enough now

and then. After all I hardly think the conceit was indigenious in her. I suspect Miss Vyse had had a hand in the sowing of it. Lotty was her avowed favourite, and on the whole had not improved in character since Florence had taken up her residence among them.

Lotty burst into the room and seated her-self opposite her cousin, without any of the gentle, half appealing air so pretty to see in a girl of her age.

“Soup” she said, coolly, in answer to her grandmother’s question as to what she would take; “that’s to say if it isn’t that horrid kind we had yesterday.”

But observing a look of gentle reminder on the face of Miss Vyse, who intended Sir Ralph to see it too, she added—

“I beg your pardon, Grandmamma, for calling it horrible, but Florence and I both think—”

“Never mind what we both think, Lotty,” interrupted Miss Vyse, smilingly. “Sybil, dear, will you have some or this?”

Little Sybil was sitting quietly by her uncle; her favourite place, for though frightened of him, she was always pleased to be near him. He stroked her smooth, soft hair, and she looked up in his face with a smile.

“Are you going up the mountain to-day, Uncle Ralph?” he asked.

“Not to-day exactly, but very early to-morrow,” he replied.

“What you going to do early to-morrow?” asked Lady Severn, who had not heard Sybil’s question.

“I am going to ascend the ‘*Pic noir*,’” he answered. “I think I mentioned it some days ago. There is a whole party going; rather more than I care about, but poor Price and Vladimir Nodouroff were very anxious for me to join them. We dine at the Lion d’Or today, and start this evening, if fine. I shall not be back till the day after to-morrow, but I suppose that will make no difference to you?”

“Oh, dear no,” his mother, “but by-the-by, do not stay away longer than that. I want you on Friday to take us all to Berlet. It is rather too far to go without a gentleman, but the view, I hear, is lovely.”

“I shall be very glad to take you,” said Ralph, quite pleased at Lady Severn’s wish for his company; “you must all come. The children, too, may they not?”

“We shall see,” was the reply. Oh, how provoking a one to childish ears.

“By-the-way,” said Ralph, “a Mr. Chepstow has arrived here lately, who is anxious to make your acquaintance, mother. He is a friend of the Bruces, at Brackley, they told him of our being here. He has lately lost his wife. He seems an honest, stupid sort of man. Shall I tell him you hope to see him? He is going with us tonight.”

“Any friend of the Bruces, of course, I shall be glad to see,” said Lady Severn, in a rather formal voice—(in her heart she disliked the Bruces; her eldest son’s wife had been one of them)—“but I must say, Ralph, you manage to describe people and things in a most peculiar way.”

“In a most characteristic way, *I* should say,” murmured Florence, as just at that moment her aunt rose from table and led the way from the room.

She could not tell if Ralph heard the little compliment. He gave no sign of having done so. Truly, his manners were very objectionable!

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE LITTLE GOVERNESS.

*“ ’Twas frightful there, to see  
A lady richly clad as she,  
Beautiful exceedingly.”*

CRISTABEL.

*“Here’s metal more attractive.”*

HAMLET.

As she had promised, Marion called the next day to hear Lady Severn’s decision.

She had not much fear of its being unfavourable, and from the readiness with which the servant threw open the drawing-room door, announcing her, unprompted, as Miss Freer, she felt little doubt but that the fact of her new honours had already transpired to the retainers of the family.

Lady Severn was not in the room. Only Miss Vyse. She was lying on the sofa as Marion entered, but rose and came forward to meet her. For half a moment, one of those strange half-moments that seem so long, the two girls looked at each other. Florence was mentally measuring this little governess with the pretty brown hair. Measuring and weighing her; and she did it correctly enough so far as her weights and measures went.

“Not pretty, but pleasing. Not striking, but with a something that might develop into a certain kind of attractiveness. Well-bred looking, certainly, and as to character—well, not exactly a goose, but by no means a person much to be dreaded. Far too ingenuous and transparent.”

Florence felt relieved, and inclined to be amiable and patronising; which agreeable sensation increased when in Marion’s grey eyes she read evident admiration for herself. More than admiration. Marion’s first glance at Florence actually dazzled her. She had forgotten all about the existence of such a person as Miss Vyse, and had entered the room expecting to see only Lady Severn, when this radiant creature rose to greet her. In her gracious mood, Florence spoke courteously and kindly, yet with a certain inflection of condescension, some few words of apology for Lady Severn’s absence.

“My aunt was obliged to go out this morning,” she said; “she asked me to see you instead, and talk over a little the plans for my cousins’ lessons; the hours, and so on. So pray sit down, Miss Freer. Lady Severn may perhaps come in by the time I have given you a little idea of what she wishes.”

“Thank you,” said Marion. And as Miss Vyse seated herself gracefully, she thought again, “How very beautiful you are.” But, somehow, she did not think it quite in the same way since hearing Florence speak. Something in her voice repelled her. Not the tone of condescension, that was simply rather laughable; and irritating, perhaps, for the moment. It was no incidental inflection that she disliked. It was something in the voice itself: or, rather, it seemed to her something wanting in it. An absence, not of depth nor refinement, nor sweetness; of no one of these exactly, but of something including and yet surpassing them all. And, in a strange way, it seemed to her as if her immediate perception of a want in the voice revealed to her at the same moment an equally indefinable want in the whole being of the woman before her. And yet she was so beautiful! If only she had been a picture instead of a living being, Marion felt that she could have admired her with perfect satisfaction!

But she was brought back from these fancies by Miss Vyse’s proceeding to inform her that Lady Severn was anxious to know if she could commence her new duties as soon as the following Monday.

“Oh, yes,” said Marion; “I am sure Mrs. Archer will be able to spare me by then. She only asked me to be as much with her as possible this week, as I can



help her in arranging things a little.”

“Certainly,” said Miss Vyse; “and then as to hours. Can you be here regularly by half-past nine?”

To which proposal also Marion agreed; and had next to listen to a dissertation from her companion on the subject of the studies to which Lady Severn especially desired her to direct her grand-daughters’ attention. Miss Vyse had rather got herself up for the occasion, and talked so fluently about books and methods, the system on which she herself had been educated, &c., &c., that she ended by frightening Marion far more than Lady Severn had done the previous day. She was just beginning to wonder if Miss Vyse would ever leave of talking, when, to her great relief, their *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by the entrance of Lady Severn and her two grand-daughters.

“Good morning, Miss Freer,” said the elder lady. “I was quite obliged to go out early this morning with my grand-daughters, but I have no doubt Miss Vyse will have said to you all I wished. I am glad you are still here, as I can now introduce these little girls to you. Charlotte, my dear, this is Miss Freer, who has kindly undertaken the charge of your studies.”

Charlotte came forward frankly enough, shook hands with Marion in an easy, careless sort of way, and then, turning to Miss Vyse, began eagerly to relate to her the event of the morning—a visit to the dressmaker; not seeming to think it necessary to bestow any more attention on her prospective governess.

Little Sybil put her hand in Marion’s, shyly, glanced up half wistfully in her face, and there, evidently reading encouragement, drew closer and held up her mouth to be kissed. Marion’s heart was, of course, won on the spot, and she began talking pleasantly to the child. Sybil answered timidly, but at last, gathering fresh courage from Marion’s gentle manner, became, in her childish way, quite communicative and confidential.

“We are going a beautiful drive on Friday,” she said, “all the way to Berlet, and we are to have tea in a cottage at the top of the hill. Will you come too?”

“No thank you, dear,” said Marion, “but you will tell we all about it on Monday.”

“Yes, but I would like you to come. Grandmamma, will you please let Miss

Freer come to Berlet?"

Marion felt rather annoyed at the child's pertinacity, but the suggestion appeared strike Lady Severn in a different way.

"I should really be very glad if you would come, Miss Freer," she said, cordially, "it would be an excellent way of making acquaintance with the children. And Mrs. Archer too. Do you think she would care to be of the party? We shall have two carriages, so there will be plenty of room."

Marion thought it very probable that Mrs. Archer would enjoy the little excursion, and promising to let Lady Severn know their decision by the following day, took her departure, after another kiss from Sybil, a graceful bow from Miss Vyse, and a rather cross shake of the hand from Lotty, when interrupted by her grandmother, in the midst of her conversation with her cousin.

"How I wish Sybil were to be my only pupil!" thought Marion, as she walked home, "though Lotty seems a frank sort of child. But I am sure she is dreadfully spoiled. I can't make up my mind about Miss Vyse. How very handsome she is, and yet I don't think I like her. I wonder if I should have liked her better had we met as equals, instead of my being a governess. I wonder how she and Sir Ralph get on."

And so she wondered on till she got home, and then amused Cissy by her morning's adventures. Mrs. Archer had never heard of Miss Vyse, and from Marion's description of her felt curious to see her. She readily agreed to join Lady Severn's party to Berlet, and evidently was beginning to think better of her cousin's masquerade, as she called it; seeing that its results so far, had been by no means disastrous. That afternoon and the next brought quite an influx of visitors to Mrs. Archer's pretty little drawing-room. Mrs. Fraser, who proved on further acquaintance to be really an intelligent and agreeable woman. Mrs. and Miss Bailey, the former a good motherly creature, and the latter a pretty childish girl, incapable of inspiring, very vehement feelings of any kind. Her chronic insipidity was increased at the present time by her imagining herself to be the victim of unrequited affection, in which melancholy condition she fancied it suitable and becoming to sit with her head on one side, staring before her in a vacant and slightly imbecilic manner. She took it into her head to form a sudden and vehement friendship for Miss Freer, who was rather puzzled by her at first, not being behind the scenes of the silly Dora's heart. Marion's want of

responsiveness, however, did not appear to chill her in the least. She grew more and more communicative, and by the end of the half hour's visit had all but confided to her patient listener the name of her cold-hearted hero. Fortunately Mrs. Bailey rose to go before this juncture; greatly to Marion's relief, for her experience of the gushing order of young ladies had been extremely limited. Friday brought the Berwick family *en masse* with the exception, that is to say, of the invalid, Blanche. Major Berwick was an old Indian, which expresses a good deal. His wife was sharp and fussy, and evidently perfectly ready to gossip on the smallest provocation. Sophy, a rough and ready sort of girl, impressed Marion rather more favourably than the rest of the family. Her strong affection for her brother, "Frank," the good-looking young officer of the table d'hôte party, inclined Marion's sisterly heart towards her. Before the end of the visit, Captain Berwick himself appeared. He was full of the adventures and amusement they had met with in their mountain expedition, which, he declared, had turned out famously.

"Our party was capitally arranged," he said, "just the right number, and all well up to the work. Excepting Chepstow," he added, to his sister.

"Poor man," said she, "what did you do with him?"

"Left him half way," he replied, "but he really is an awfully good-natured fellow. It is too bad the way that conceited Erbenfeld makes fun of him."

Sophy coloured:

"I don't think Mr. Erbenfeld is half as conceited or disagreeable as Sir Ralph Severn," said she.

"Indeed," said Cissy, "I am sorry to hear Sir Ralph is so undesirable a companion; for we are going to drive to Berlet with the Severns tomorrow. "

"Sophy is very foolish, Mrs. Archer," said her brother. "Sir Ralph is much nicer when one comes to know him. I, myself, did not at first take to him at all, but now that I have seen a little more of him I really like him."

Sophy looked rather annoyed:

"Next time you intend to change your opinion of any one in such a hurry, I wish you would give me notice, Frank," she said; and then turning to Mrs.

Archer, she began a rattling conversation on every subject under the sun, making fun of all the people it Altes, one after another.

Marion felt disappointed. Something in the girl had attracted her, but this sort of talk wearied and repelled her. She much preferred hearing from Captain Berwick a more detailed account of his mountain expedition, which he, pleased at the interest this pretty girl took in his recital, was nothing loth to give her. He several times alluded to the young Russian, Nodouroff.

Marion asked who he was.

“Oh, they’re rather grand people, I believe,” said young Berwick; “the father is an official, of course, something about the court. The mother and daughter come here almost every winter. The daughter, Countess Olga, is the most beautiful girl here. At least, in my opinion. Some people admire Miss Vyse, Lady Severn’s niece, more. Have you seen her?”

“Yes,” said Marion “I think her very beautiful.”

“So she is undoubtedly; but the Countess Olga’s expression is much more to my taste. I am sure you would think so too. There is something melancholy about her face. I don’t know if she is really so, for I have never spoken to her.”

“But beautiful people always look more or less melancholy, don’t you think?” asked Marion.

“No, not *all*. Miss Vyse doesn’t look melancholy, though she tries it, now and then,” said Captain Berwick; “but her face is too hard for that sort of thing, I hate a hard expression. Even a goose like Dora Bailey is more to my taste than a beauty like Miss Vyse.”

“Who is the English gentleman with Count Vladimir?”

“Oh, his tutor, Mr. Price, you mean. He used to be Severn’s tutor. Poor wretch! I do think tutors are more to be pitied than any order of human beings, except governesses. Do you remember, Sophy, how fearfully you bullied yours?”

A frown from Sophy revealed to the unfortunate Frank that he had made a terrible blunder.

Marion pitied him, though not a little amused at his confusion. She said quietly:

“I don’t think all governesses are to be pitied. Not, at least, those like me who live at home and only give daily lessons. You don’t think I look very wretched, do you, though I am daily governess to Lady Severn’s little girls?”

“Pray forgive me, Miss Freer,” said the young man; “and pray believe I am the very last fellow on earth to—“

“To say anything to hurt any one else,” suggested Marion, good-humouredly. “Yes, I assure you you are quite forgiven, Captain Berwick.”

But the young soldier did not forget the little incident, nor did it tend to lessen the favourable impression left on his mind by Mrs. Archer’s pretty friend.

As Mrs. Berwick took leave she expressed a hope that they should “see a great deal of Mrs. Archer.”

“You must always come to us on Thursdays,” she said. “By-the-by, what day are you going to choose for receiving your friends?”

It had not occurred to Mrs. Archer that any such formal arrangement would be necessary. But Mrs. Berwick and Sophy hastened to explain that every one had an “at home “day at Altes. The English society being limited, people found it necessary to make the most, of it; and, as Sophy said, “It was very provoking to spend an afternoon in calling on one’s friends, and to find them all out. And then, on getting home, to find that half of them had been calling on us.”

So Cissy told her always to come to see her when she could find no one else at home.

“We shall not be such gad-about as other people, Miss Berwick, for we have not a great many acquaintances, and besides I am not very strong,” she said.

“Oh, within a fortnight you’re sure to know every one here,” said Sophy: “and I assure you you had better fix a day.”

“Well, then, you choose one for me.”

“Let in see,” considered Sophy; “ours is Thursday. Then on Wednesday the band plays, and I know several people have Mondays and Tuesdays. Suppose you take Fridays?”

“So be it,” replied Cissy; “then on Fridays, if you have nothing better to do, I shall hope to see you here, to join Marion and me in our afternoon tea, which, when it is fine enough, we can partake of on the terrace. I haven’t much of a garden, but what there is looks pretty enough from the end of the terrace. “

“That’s a capital idea, Mrs. Archer. Tea on the terrace. You may expect to see Sophy and me every Friday without fail,” said Captain Berwick. And then the visitors departed.

“Oh, how tired I am, May,” exclaimed Cissy, curling herself up in a corner of the sofa. “I am not in love with the Berwicks. I like the son the best. Ring for tea, Marion. I must have a cup, or I shall faint.”

So they consoled themselves for the fatigues of the afternoon. Before-dinner tea was as yet hardly a domestic institution; but Cissy, be it observed, had a mind in advance of the age.

“How I hate old Indians!” she exclaimed. “Marion, if ever you catch me talking Indian ‘shop,’ I give you leave to cut my acquaintance.”

Friday came, but in clouds and rain. So the Berlet excursion was given up, and Marion’s becoming better acquainted with her pupils had to be deferred till Monday, when her new duties began.

The first morning’s lessons passed off better than the inexperienced governess had ventured to hope. Charlotte was marvellously docile and attentive, though evidently totally unaccustomed to anything like regular study. The secret of her good behaviour transpired in the course of the morning, when the children informed Miss Freer that if they were very obedient and industrious at lessons up to Thursday week—which happened to be Sibyl’s birthday—on that day the Berlet expedition was to take place, on a much grander scale than had been originally contemplate.

“And you are to come, Miss Freer, and that lady where you live,” said little Sybil, launching out into such enthusiastic descriptions of all they should do and see, that Marion was obliged to remind her that by too much talking in school-

hours they might be in danger of breaking their grandmother's condition.

"Little girls can't be industrious at lessons if they're thinking of birthday treats all the time, you know, Sybil."

So the child dutifully set to work again, labouring hard at words of two syllables, which was the stage she had reached in her spelling-book. She was very ignorant for ten years old; and, indeed, the little she did know, had been imperfectly and irregularly acquired. She was naturally slow, though by no means stupid. There were strange, fitful gleams of decided originality about her; a delicacy of perception, and an almost morbid sensitiveness, which would have suffered terribly in the hands of many teachers. But Marion, though herself so young and inexperienced, understood the child instinctively. Still, the spelling-book was hard work, and but for the extreme docility of the pupil, and the patient gentleness of the teacher, would have been the cause of no little irritation to both.

Lotty was decidedly clever when she chose to exert, or rather, I should say, to concentrate her powers. Strong and healthy, quick-witted and warm-hearted, under good management, she promised to turn out a sensible and intelligent woman. But, hot-tempered and self-willed, fond of admiration and amusement, the risk to such a nature from injudicious training was far greater than to that of her little sister. That Lotty would develop rapidly for good or evil was evident. Sybil, on the contrary, might be stunted or withered, but would never run wild.

But they were both interesting children; and Marion was very happy this morning in the receipt of a grateful letter from Harry. A letter which cheered her about him in every way. He had "had a good lesson," he said, but, thanks to her, had incurred no disgrace; and he begged her to believe that never again would he cause her such sorrow and anxiety. "I won't make grand promises," he wrote, "but I think the future will show that I mean what I say. I shall always feel that but for you, dear May, my whole life might have been spoilt. As you ask me not to tease about where you got the money I won't do so, but I do trust it has not greatly inconvenienced or harassed you."

So the morning's studies passed off prosperously, and Marion wrote on two slips of paper her report of her pupils for Lady Severn's edification.

"Charlotte: obedient and attentive."

“Sybil; very painstaking.”

For which she was rewarded by a hug from Lotty, and an affectionate kiss from Sybil.

That afternoon, as Cissy was resting on the sofa, after walking with Marion to return some of the visits paid them the previous week, they were surprised by the entrance of Sir Ralph Severn.

He seemed pleased to renew his acquaintance with Mrs. Archer, and apologised for not having recognized her at the table d’hôte.

“Your not knowing me was very excusable, I think,” said Mrs. Archer; “remember, it is seven years since we met at Cairo.”

“Seven years only,” said he; I could fancy it was fifteen.”

“Do I look such an old woman already?” asked Cissy, maliciously.

Sir Ralph looked confused.

“I do beg your pardon, Mrs. Archer,” he exclaimed. “I am sure I have said so. Indeed, I doubt if I was ever anything else. My remembrance of you at Cairo is that you then looked very, very young. A mere child, I was going to say, but I am not at all sure that such an expression would not be as bad as the other was.”

“Supposing we take the middle course, then,” said Cissy; “being neither an old woman nor a mere child, I may consider myself as somewhere between the two. But seriously, Sir Ralph, though you needn’t call me an old woman, I hope, for my husband’s sake, you will consider me as an old friend. George will be really pleased to hear of your coming to see me; and if you don’t find the company of two ladies unendurably stupid, I hope now and then you will look in when you have nothing better to do.”

Sir Ralph seemed pleased.

“You are very good, Mrs. Archer. I shall like to come and see you now and then. I should like to hear about George—Colonel Archer, I should say. You don’t know how kind he was to me long ago. Indeed, I have more to thank him for than any one knows. I may as well tell you what I mean, for I should like you



to tell him about it some day. It was long ago, before you were married. An unlucky, stupid misunderstanding had arisen between my brother, his friend, and me. John was, naturally enough, provoked at me, and I, utterly mistaking him, was in a wretched state of wounded pride and mortification. My mother tried to set it right, but failed. I was on the eve of going abroad, with all this miserable cloud between us, when, luckily, George Archer came to Medhurst. It is a thankless task meddling between relations, but he braved it, and succeeded, as he deserved. John and I parted the best of friends; and you will understand how doubly grateful I felt to Archer, when I tell you that I never saw my brother again in life.”

Cissy’s warm little heart was won.

“Thank you, Sir Ralph,” she said, “for telling me. But have you never seen George since then?”

“Oh, yes, at Cairo, you remember? But that was very soon after all this happened. And at that time I little thought that my farewell to John (thanks to Archer, a friendly one) was indeed a farewell for ever in this world. Yes, I should much like to see Archer,” he added, dreamily. “I think he would enter into some of my feeling’s, for he was very fond of John. Those poor little girls! Have you seen them, Mrs. Archer?”

“No, not yet; but I have, of course, heard a great deal about them from Marion. Marion, dear,” she went on, but looking round no Marion was to be seen.

“Ah—Miss Freer,” said Sir Ralph. “How stupid I am! I have frightened her away by engrossing you in my selfish conversation. Pray, Mrs. Archer, ask her to return. I really want to thank her for her kindness in undertaking to teach those dreadfully ignorant children.”

Charlie, at that moment appearing most opportunely, was sent to recall the truant.

“May!” he shouted, “that gentleman wants you, this minute.” Which intimation or her presence being desired, did not by any means hasten the young lady’s movements.

When she re-appeared she was greeted with reproaches from Cissy and

apologies from Sir Ralph.

“I thought you had a good deal to talk about,” she said.

“Nothing, I am sure, that Sir Ralph would have minded your hearing, May,” said Cissy; “he has only been making me more conceited than ever about my husband.”

“The surest way to winning Mrs. Archer’s favour, I can assure you,” observed Marion.

It had been on his lips to say something to her of his satisfaction that she had undertaken the charge of his nieces; to give her even, should he have an opportunity, a little advice about these children. But something in her manner made it impossible for him to carry out his intention. A certain unconscious taking-for-granted of perfect equality in their positions. An utter absence of anything like the feeling of dependence in her whole air and bearing. Nothing presuming, nothing affected. She was evidently quite at her ease, and accustomed to feel so. Anything more unlike the shrinking, modest young governess he had, from his mother’s description, expected to meet, it was utterly impossible to imagine. He could not make her out.

“Whoever she is she cannot have been brought up with the idea of occupying a dependent position,” he said to himself, and then thought no more about it; but gave himself up to the, to him, rare pleasure of spending an hour with two agreeable women, one of whom was lively and amusing, and the other something more than either. What he could, not exactly say. Not beautiful, not brilliant, not fascinating. *What* then? Something that suited and interested him, something original, unlike what he had seen in other women; and so unconscious, so artless, so thoroughly womanly. Over and over again he found himself asking, “Where lay the charm?” Grey eyes, brown hair, sweet voice, sweeter smile, which of you all has to answer for it? None, yet all. A something including and surpassing all these, a something so subtle and indefinable, that not in all the long roll of years since this old world began, has poet breathed or minstrel sung, words, which, to those who have never felt it for themselves, can in the least picture or describe this strange, sweet, sad mystery.

Poor Ralph! It was only the beginning of the old, old story, after all, little though he thought it, that pleasant afternoon, when he sat in Mrs. Archer’s pretty

drawing room, talking lightly and merrily even, with these two. Of books and flowers and music; of all manner of things under the sun, it little mattered what. Marion somehow had a knack of understanding one's words almost before they were uttered. She said the right things in the right way. At least, when she felt she was with those who, on their side, liked and understood her. How they all three talked and laughed, agreed and argued!

Ralph, walking home, thought what a pleasant, refreshing afternoon he had spent. After all he was glad to find he was not yet so old and stiff but that he could now and then unbend a little. Of course, when in company with younger and more brilliant men, he could not expect to be so made of and entertained as he had been today. But for once in a way it was a pleasant change. And then he fell to thinking how strange it was that he should be so different from other men.

“Why have I always lived so lonely and apart? Why have I never cared, when I was younger and in the way of such things, for any sweet, gentle woman, who might in time have learnt to care for me?”

Surely it was very strange! It never occurred to him that after all it was not yet too late for the tree of his life to bear the fruit of love; all the richer and fuller, perhaps, for having been somewhat late of maturing.

He imagined himself altogether beyond the pale of such things. Too hard and dry, too naturally unimpressionable. Might he not think so? He had escaped heart-whole from much fascination, for his life had not been altogether spent in a study or a cell. He had seen beauty in all its forms. He had even, most unanswerable of all, been unimpressed—nay, rather revolted than, attracted—by charms displayed expressly for his benefit. Those of the beautiful Florence Vyse.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

MARGARET. *“For this reason I should wish never to be in love all the days of my life. The loss would grieve me to death.”*

MEPHISTO. *“Joy must have sorrow, sorrow joy.”*

HAYWARD'S FAUST.

THE lessons went on fairly enough. There were days on which Lotty's conduct could not be truthfully described as “obedient and attentive;” days, too, on which poor Sybil was provokingly absent and dreamy. Still there was nothing of sufficient importance to risk the children's forfeiture of the promised treat.

Sybil, indeed, was not deserving of blame for the sleepy, stupid moods that occasionally over-powered her. As Marion learnt to know her better, she found that these always preceded periods of sharp suffering for the poor child. Some hours of headache, almost maddening in its intensity, and invariably followed by prostration and weakness painful to witness. It seemed to Marion, anxious for the child's peace and comfort, that there must be some cause for these attacks, for they evidently had to do greatly with her mental and nervous condition at the time. She tried gradually to gain the little girl's confidence, for that there was something to tell she felt convinced; but whenever she thought that Sybil was on the verge of disclosing her secret distress, the child seemed to grow frightened again, and would say no more.

The days passed on smoothly and pleasantly.

The acquaintances Mrs. Archer had already made, were increased by a few more, so that every day brought its own little plan or amusement. Some one to call on, the band playing on the "Place," and on Fridays their own miniature reception on the terrace. Captain Berwick was as good as his word, and unfailingly made his appearance. He asked and obtained Mrs. Archer's permission to introduce to her his friend, Mr. Chepstow, who was certainly fully deserving of the epithet of "the most good-natured fellow living." Notwithstanding his condition of inconsolable widowhood, he managed to get on very comfortably, every house in Altes was open to the reputed millionaire; whose endless variety of carriages and horses was always at the disposal of his friends. He entreated Mrs. Archer to consider as her own a charming pony-carriage, which she was one day rash enough to admire. The offer was made in all sincerity and kind-heartedness, but Cissy had too much good sense to avail herself of it to any great extent. Not so, Sophy Berwick. She, notwithstanding her brother's remonstrations, drove Mr. Chepstow's ponies, rode Mr. Chepstow's horses, whenever the inclination seized her for either of these amusements. And this at the very time that she was making fun of him in all directions.

"Vulgar old cotton-spinner, that he is," she said one day to Marion, when they happened to meet at Mrs. Fraser's, "Frank is always going on at me as if one should be as particular with those sorts of people as with one's equals. He is certainly very good-natured, otherwise I would not put myself under an obligations to him. But seriously, he may be very much obliged to me for exercising his horses. He is so fat, the pony-carriage would break down if he got into it, and he is far too frightened to attempt to ride. Don't you agree with it Miss Freer?"

"I would, much rather you did not ask me, Miss Berwick," replied Marion.

"As if I didn't know what that means!" exclaimed Sophy; "I can see you don't like me, Miss Freer. I am too noisy and rattling for you. But truly I am very good-tempered, and I would really like you to tell me what you think. I won't be a bit offended, I assure you."

"Well, then, if you will have, it, Miss Berwick," said Marion, "I do think your brother is quite right. In the first place it would to me be very disagreeable to put

myself under an obligation to any one, a gentleman especially, who was not much more to me than a mere acquaintance. And in the second place it would be to me not merely disagreeable, but actually impossible, to receive benefits from a person whom I looked upon with the contempt which you appear to feel for Mr. Chepstow. More than contempt. You ridicule and deride him constantly, make fun even of his personal peculiarities on all occasions. I don't like it at all, Miss Berwick, though I should never have said this unless you had asked me."

Marion spoke indignantly, for she really felt so.

"Vulgar," Sophy had called Mr. Chepstow. Strange perversion, that she should be so sharp to perceive the outward deficiencies in speech or manner of the honest, good-hearted millionaire, and yet be so utterly blind to the far more repulsive vulgarity of her own speech and behaviour.

Sophy did not answer. Marion began to fear she had really offended her, when looking up she saw that the girl's face, though grave, bore by no means an angry expression.

"Miss Freer," she said at last, "I think I deserve what you say. I have got into reckless, careless sort of way of going on. To tell you the truth, I am not very happy at home, and so long as I can get something to amuse me; riding or driving, or making fun of people, it does not much matter which, I fear I think very little about how I get it. Frank is the only person who cares about me at all, and even he gives me credit for very little good. One thing I will promise you, and that is, to leave off making fun of poor old Chepstow, so long, at all events, as I continue to use his horses. There now, Miss Freer, isn't it true that I am good-tempered?"

"Yes, indeed it is," said Marion heartily.

"And even more amiable than you think," Sophy went on; "I don't believe any other girl with a favourite brother would have tried to make friends with a girl that same brother is always praising up to the skies, and holding up as an example sister to follow! You will let me make friends with you, Miss Freer, won't you?"

"Don't you think I have done so already?" asked Marion. "I assure you I wonder at myself for speaking so plainly as I did. I could not have done so to a person I had not a friendly feeling for."

“Thank you,” said Sophy, “that is a very pretty way of taking out the sting of your very decided home-thrust.”

And then, girl-like, they rambled on to other subjects. The excursion to Berlet, in which the Berwicks were to join, the balls Sophy was anticipating, and some few allusions to the home-troubles she had hinted at. Her father’s irritability, her mother’s overweening partiality for Blanche, Blanche herself, with her everlasting ailments:

“And yet with all, I think I could be very fond of her if she would let me,” said Sophy “she is really sensible and satisfactory when she chooses; and long ago, Miss Freer, she was so pretty.”

“So I have heard,” said Marion, not however encouraging further revelations of Sophy’s home secrets.

The girl was really not without many good qualities. Wanting in delicacy no doubt, far too self-confident and *pronouçée*; but affectionate, and open to good impressions. And above all thoroughly honest and true. This was the reason of the liking Marion felt for her. This was why she so much preferred Sophy, rough, and even in a sense unrefined, to the graceful, faultlessly lady-like Florence.

Sir Ralph’s call was not repeated for some little time. Cissy and Marion met him one day, and when the former reproached him for not having come again to see her, he confessed that he had been on his way thither the Friday previous, but meeting Captain Berwick and hearing from him that this was “Mrs. Archer’s day,” had thought better (“or worse,” Cissy suggested) of it, and turned back.

“Well, then, I think you very silly and provoking,” was all the sympathy he got Cissy.

“Particularly provoking,” she added, “for we had quite a little concert, and I know you like music. Indeed a little bird once told me you sang yourself. Bye-the-by, we are short of a gentleman’s voice for that pretty glee, Marion,” turning to her; “I wonder if Sir Ralph would take that part.”

Sir Ralph looked any thing but inclined to do so:

“Truly, Mrs. Archer,” he said, “you give me credit for powers I do not

possess. Little birds at Altes, I am sorry to say, as well as in England, tell a great many stories. My singing is a thing of the past, not that it ever was much of a thing at all." And then, as if anxious to change the subject, he turned abruptly to Marion. "Do you sing then, Miss Freer?" he asked.

"A little," replied she, and then smiling at herself, she added, "you must not laugh at my very young-lady-like answer. In my case it is simply the truth."

"I should like to hear you, and then I can judge," he said.

And without giving Cissy time to invite him to come to her house, for the purpose of criticising her guest's singing, he exclaimed hurriedly, "I really must not keep you standing. Good morning, Mrs. Archer, I am sorry I have forfeited your good opinion." And so left them.

"Well, Marion," said Cissy, "though I thought him so nice the other day, I cannot say that I think so now. He is very rough and ill-tempered."

"But Cissy, you teased him on purpose. I think you deserved what you got."

"You are an impertinent little cat, Miss Freer," replied her cousin. After which relief to her feelings, Mrs. Archer recovered her good humour, and they spent an amicable evening. This was the day before Sybil's birthday. There had been some slight discussion, consultation rather, between Lady Severn and her niece, as to the advisability of inviting the daily governess to make one of the party to Berlet. But as Lady Severn wished to pay some attention to Mrs. Archer, and it would have been awkward to invite that lady without the young girl whom she evidently looked upon as a valued friend and guest, it was decided that the invitation should include Miss Freer. The children would have rebelled had their dear Miss Freer been left out; indeed they would naturally enough have looked upon such an omission as a gross breach of promise, as their governess had been asked to make one of the previous expedition, which the weather had put a stop to.

"Still, dear aunt," suggested Florence the sensible, "I think for every sake, her own especially, it is well to show that she is invited as the children's governess. Of course, had she been governess to any one else, the mere fact of her staying in Mrs. Archer's house would not have made it necessary for you to notice her."

"Of course not, my dear," replied Lady Severn; "but how can I draw the



distinction? I quite agree with you about it but I don't see how it is to be done."

"It is difficult, certainly," said Florence, "that is the worst part of a somewhat anomalous position, like Miss Freer's. I am glad she is coming to-morrow, for I am anxious for the children's sake to get to know her a little better. I have gone into the schoolroom now and then, but I am so afraid of seeming to interfere in any way."

"It is very kind of you, my dear, to take such an interest in the children. Miss Freer could not possibly think any such kindness on your part, interference," replied Lady Severn.

"Well, I don't know. It is better not to risk it. Besides, I really think Lofty and Sybil are getting on very well with her. But do you know, aunt, I can't quite make her out. She is inconsistent altogether. Her manners, her general appearance, her dress even, are not the least like what one expects in a girl brought up to be a governess."

"I have not observed any inconsistency of the kind," said Lady Severn, "but I dare say my eyes are not so quick as yours. The only time I can really say I had any conversation with her was the first day she called, when she appeared a gentle, modest young person. I understood her to say that her family had met with misfortunes, which had led to her becoming a governess. These things happen every day you know, my dear, in the middle classes. Rich one day and poor the next! But to return to our plans for to-morrow. What arrangement do you think will be best about Miss Freer?"

"I was thinking," said Miss Vyse, "that it might be as well if Miss Freer were to come as usual, at half-past nine, and start from here in the same carriage as the children. You, dear aunt, might propose to call for Mrs. Archer on your way past her house, which would save her the fatigue of the walk here in the first place."

"Yes," said Lady Severn, "that will do very well. Knowing that Charlotte and Sybil are with their governess, I shall feel comfortable about them. I must consult with Ralph about the carriages. There are our own two, and Mr. Chepstow has offered any of his we like."

For Mr. Chepstow had called at the Rue des Lauriers, and been graciously received by the dowager and her fascinating niece.

It was part of Florence's worldly wisdom always to be civil to people in the first place. Time enough to snub and chill them if they turned out useless, or not worth cultivating further. Easier, far, to do this than to undo the prejudicial effects of a haughty or freezing manner on first introduction. And in the present case, that of Mr. Chepstow, if he were only half, or even a quarter, as rich as report said, he would still be well deserving of some judicious attentions—according to Miss Vyse's scale of judgement on such matters.

Another little *tête-à-tête* conversation on the subject of the Berlet expedition took place this same Thursday evening between Mrs. Archer and her cousin. A note from Lady Severn, explaining the proposed arrangements for the morrow, brought the subject to Cissy's mind.

"By-the-by, May," she said, "what are you going to wear to-morrow?"

"I was thinking about it," replied Marion, thoughtfully. "I should *like* to wear that gauzy dress; white, you know, with rosebuds. It is deliciously cool, and then my white bonnet matches it so beautifully."

"Well and why shouldn't you wear it?" asked Cissy; "it is a perfectly suitable dress."

"Suitable, certainly, for Marion Vere, but I am by no means sure that it is equally so for Miss Freer," replied Marion.

"What on earth do you mean, child?" asked Cissy.

"Just what I say. As long as I have to act, what you call my farce, I think I should do so as consistently as possible. And from some little things Lofty Severn has told me, I am afraid I have been careless. Miss Vyse, it appears, has remarked, in the children's hearing, that my dress is unbecoming to my station; and, of all people in the world, I should least like her to begin making remarks about me."

"Why 'her of all people?' " asked Cissy.

"I don't know," replied Marion. "I don't like her, and I don't trust her, and that's about all I can say. No doubt if she were finding out about who I really am, she might do me great mischief."

“Of course she might,” said Cissy. “But one thing I must say, Marion: were it found out that you are not really Miss Freer, I should feel myself bound, in your defence, to tell the whole story from beginning to end. I could not consent to screen Harry’s part in it any longer.”

“Harry has had no part in it,” said Marion, eagerly. “You know this governing scheme was most entirely my own. No one could be blamed for it but myself.”

“H—m,” was Cissy’s reply. “I am by no means sure of that. I should most strongly object to meeting Uncle Vere after he had learnt *my* part in it! However, I should bear that, and more too, rather than not let your conduct be seen in a proper light. But there’s no good talking about it. I trust, most devoutly, you may continue Miss Freer, as long as we are at Altes. I have only warned you what I should think it right to do, in case of any fuss.”

“Very well,” said Marion.

But the conversation was not without its result. With a girlish sigh of regret, she put away the pretty rosebud dress, and laid out for the morning’s wear an unexceptionably quiet and inexpensive costume of simply braided brown-holland.

But I question much if so attired, my Marion was any less winningly lovely than in the glistening, delicately-painted gauze. The grey eyes looked out as soft and deep from under the shade of the brown straw hat, as from among the flowers and fripperies of the dainty Paris bonnet. Still, she was not so much above the rest of her sex and age but that this called for some self-denial.

Friday morning was cloudlessly fine. The sky was of that same even, intense blue, which had so impressed Marion on her first arrival in the south; and as she walked to the Rue des Lauriers, the girl felt joyous and light-hearted. She found Lotty and Sybil watching for her. In their different ways the two children were full of delight at the prospect of the day’s treat, and Marion felt glad that lessons had formed no part of the morning’s programme, as such a thing as sitting still would have been quite beyond the power of her excited little pupils.

By ten o’clock the various carriages assembled. Lady Severn and two middle-aged friends of hers, the English clergyman at Altes and his wife, seated themselves in the first, and drove off to pick up Mrs. Archer. Marion, looking

out from the schoolroom window, did not envy Cissy her long drive in such company! Then came Mr. Chepstow's dog-cart, driven, in the height of his exhilaration, by that adventurous individual himself. Miss Vyse was invited to occupy one of the two vacant seats, but, in some graceful manner, succeeded in evading the honour. After a little consultation, Sophy Berwick, nothing loth, took her place, followed, somewhat unwillingly—(but then, in pleasure parties the wrong people always get together!)—by her, so gossips said, former admirer, the cynical Erbenfeld. Next appeared a larger, and evidently hired, carriage, already occupied by Papa and Mamma Berwick, and a pale, worn-looking girl, whom Marion rightly concluded to be the invalid Blanche. No one appearing ambitious of making a fourth in this vehicle, it drove on.

Now dashed up, what penny-a-liners call, a “perfectly appointed equipage,” driven by the handsome young Russian Nodoureff. Seated beside him was his tutor, Mr. Price, who, however, descended, leaving, two places to spare. Some discussion ensued as to who should occupy them, which was ended by Captain Berwick hoisting up a laughing, romping girl, whom Lotty informed Marion, was Kate Bailey, the younger sister of the languishing Dora.

“She's only two years older than I am, Miss Freer,” said Lotty, virtuously, “and yet she goes to all sorts of parties. I'm sure I don't know how she ever learns any lessons.”

Vladimir's horses growing impatient, young Berwick jumped in after Kate, and off they set. Next drew up a pretty waggonette, belonging to Mr. Chepstow. Into it, without hesitation, stepped Miss Vyse and Dora Bailey, followed by the little Frenchman, De l'Orme. But where was the fourth? In some unaccountable manner this being, whoever he was, had disappeared. No one but Mr. Price stood waiting to ascend. An angry toss of the head from Florence, an impatient order to the driver, and they drove off quickly. Rather lose the chance of the companion she had hoped for than, by longer delay, run the risk of Mr. Price's uninteresting society!

Lotty and Sybil were beginning to think themselves forgotten, poor children, when a familiar voice sounded at the door.

“Now Lotty, now Sybil old woman, the carriage is coming round, for you. Ah! Miss Freer, too!” Ralph added, as he saw her. “I beg your pardon; I thought you were to have been picked up on the road with Mrs. Archer. But, never mind,

we shall pack in.”

As they passed through the court-yard there stood Mr. Price, looking somewhat disconsolate, not quite sure that he had done right in quitting his seat by the side of his pupil, which, yet, his shrinking modesty would not have allowed him to retain, unless all the rest of the company had been already provided for.

“You, too, still here, Price!” exclaimed Sir Ralph. “I thought you had been whisked off in the waggonette. However, it’s all the better! If Miss Freer does not mind a little crowding, that’s to say?”

Miss Freer, in her sensible brown-holland, being happily careless of crushing or squeezing, the whole party was soon comfortably established in the roomy carriage.

Sybil’s little face wore an expression of perfect content. Lotty, having obtained her uncle’s consent to sit beside the driver, was no less well pleased. Her incipient airs of fine ladyism forgotten for the time, she became the hearty, happy child nature meant her still to be, chattering to the coachman in her broken French, and translating his replies for the benefit of the less accomplished Sybil. Both children really were their very nicest selves that day; and nice children are by no means a bad addition to a party of pleasure. For one thing, they are pretty sure to enjoy it, which is more than can be said of their elders.

What a merry drive they had! Marion hardly recognized the silent, melancholy Mr. Price in the agreeable, humourous man beside her. Sir Ralph and he amused her with reminiscences of their younger days, from time to time saddened by a passing allusion to the brother she had already heard of. The “John” so affectionately mentioned by Sir Ralph when speaking to Mrs. Archer.

Now and then the conversation became more general. Subjects of public interest were broached and commented upon by the two gentlemen, in a manner which caught Marion’s attention; for such discussions were not as strange or incomprehensible to her as to most girls of her age. Sir Ralph had the latest arrived English paper in his pocket. He glanced at it as he went along, from time to time reading out little bits for the edification of his companions. Once or twice Marion, half unconsciously, made some remark in response to his; remarks

which showed that she knew what she was talking about, though, probably, of no great depth or originality.

The second or third time this happened, Sir Ralph glanced at her with a slight smile of surprise and amusement.

“Why, Miss Freer,” he said, “you must be a great newspaper reader! You are certainly better up on that last speech on the education question of the member for —. Bye-the-by, what place does Vere stand for?” he asked, turning to Mr. Price, who could not satisfy him on the point. “Never mind,” he went on “how is it you know so much about it, Miss Freer? As I said, you are decidedly more at home in it than Price here, and that is saying a good deal; as I haven’t, in fifteen years, succeeded in finding a subject he was *not* at home in.”

“Nonsense, my dear boy,” said Mr. Price. “You will really make me blush, and that would look very funny on an old man like me. Would it not, Miss Sybil?”

Oh! how grateful Marion was to the all-unconscious Mr. Price, for thus opportunely turning the conversation!

The title of some forth-coming new book next attracted Sir Ralph’s attention, and led to an animated discussion on the previous works of the same author, in interest of which, Marion forgot her embarrassment. She little knew how keenly her fresh, bright thoughts and enquiries, uttered with perfect simplicity and self-forgetfulness, were appreciated and enjoyed by her two companions. Cultivated, nay even learned men, that they were, yet not too “fusty and musty,” as Cissy had called it, to value the clear sparkling of an unprejudiced, but not uneducated youthful intellect; and better still, the softening, beautifying radiance of a true, gentle, woman’s heart.

Mr. Price, as he looked at her, wondered if the little infant daughter long ago laid to rest beside her young mother, in the far of church-yard on a Welsh hill-side would ever, had she lived, have grown to be such a one as the sweet, bright girl beside him.

Sir Ralph, as he looked at her, thought to himself a “what might have been,” had he met this Marion in years gone by, before, as he fancied, youth and its sweet privileges, were over for him.

And with these thoughts, mingled in the hearts of both her companions, a manly pity for this young creature, apparently so alone in the world, and already, at the age when most girls think of nothing but pleasure and amusement, working, if not for her daily bread, at least towards her own or her friends' support. "For surely no girl would be a governess if she could help it," thought Ralph, as ever and anon the curious, indefinable inconsistency struck him between this girl herself and her avowed position.

"Here we are," exclaimed he, rather dolefully, as the carriage stopped at the little inn at Berlet, where all vehicles "arrested themselves," a Monsieur De l'Orme called it. The ascent of the hill, from the top of which was the far-famed view, could only be managed on foot or donkey-back. Some of the elderly and more ponderous ladies had preferred the latter safe, though inglorious, mode of conveyance, and had already set off by a more circuitous path. The younger members of the party, intending to climb up the most direct way, were just about starting, when the last carriage, containing our happy little party arrived.

As Marion was stepping out, she heard herself addressed by name:

"Miss Freer," said a voice beside her, "I cannot understand how it is that you and the girls came in this carriage. There must have been some strange mistake, which you should have rectified. Lady Severn is not a little annoyed at it, for she particularly wished you and your pupils to come *alone*," with a strong accent on the last word.

Marion turned round, her cheeks pale with the paleness that tells of deeper indignation than quick mantling crimson.

"Miss Vyse," she said quietly, "I do not understand you. If Lady Severn has anything to find fault with in me, I am perfectly ready to hear it. But—"

The words were taken out of her mouth by Mr. Price, who standing beside her had, unawares, heard the little conversation.

"I think, indeed," he said, "there has been some mistake. Miss Freer took her seat in the carriage in which she was asked to place herself. On these occasions little *contre-temps* are apt to occur. I myself did a very stupid thing, for I was as nearly as possible left behind altogether."

Instantly Florence turned round, her face radiant with smiles:

“Oh. Mr. Price,” she said, “I hope you don’t think me so silly as to be cross about a trifle; but you don’t know how particular Lady Severn is in all arrangements about the children, and I was so afraid of her thinking either Miss Freer or I had neglected her wishes.”

Mr. Price looked puzzled but said nothing.

However, he resolutely attached himself to Marion; as the party dispersed into twos or threes, to begin the ascent.

Sybil clung to Marion, who felt some misgivings as to how the little creature would get to the top, when a cheerful “halloo” behind them made her glance round.

There was Frank Berwick dragging along a reluctant donkey, which Sir Ralph was encouraging on the other side to hasten its movements. With a cry of pleasure little Sybil ran hack to her uncle, who lifted her on to her steed. Hardly had he done so, when Vladimir appeared with a pencilled note for Sir Ralph. He glanced at it, and with a clouded face, turned to the young officer.

“Berwick,” said he, “I must go to look after some or my mother’s other guests. Will you help with Sybil’s donkey? I any sorry to trouble you, but unless some one leads it, she could not make it go up this steep path.”

“Certainly,” said Frank, heartily, “you may trust me to get it safely to the top.”

So Ralph left them. On the whole, I don’t think Frank would have regretted if Mr. Price had done the same. But this did not appear to be that worthy gentleman’s intention. So Captain Berwick consoled himself by engaging Marion steadily in conversation, and thus obliging her to walk at the other side of the donkey’s head; for she could not have been cold or inattentive to one who was showing such good nature to her little pupil.

At last they got to the top. Most of the party were there before them, for the donkey’s tardiness had delayed them. There was a sort of terrace round the cottage, or *châlet* rather, from which the view was supposed to be seen in perfection. It was indeed beautiful! If only there had not been such a crowd of people talking about it! How the young ladies cluttered and admired, how the gentlemen thought it their duty to agree with their observations, however inane!



All but Ralph. When Marion first caught sight of him he was standing perfectly silent beside Florence, who was speaking to him in a low voice, from time to time raising her beautiful, lustrous eyes to his face, with a look half of questioning, half of appeal. It was some mere trifle she was asking him about, but, as she watched them, Marion thought to herself that Sir Ralph must indeed be strangely almost unnaturally callous, to resist the fascination of such loveliness.

Somehow she felt glad when the chorus of enthusiastic admiration calmed down again and, the little groups dispersed. Before long whispers of "luncheon" began to run through the party, and they all adjourned to a smooth lawn on the other side of the *châlet*, where picnic parties were accustomed to dine.

Marion found herself seated near Cissy, who looked rather tired. She whispered to Marion: "How nice it would be if all these people were away!"

Still, it was very amusing, on the whole. There were dignified Lady Severn and fat Mrs. Berwick, seated on the grass, vainly endeavouring to preserve the equilibrium of their plates and glasses. Mr. Chepstow, in a peculiar attitude, looking more like a magnified frog than a portly, middle-aged Englishman; and insisting, in his exaggerated politeness, on constantly unsettling himself to fetch something or other which he imagined some lady beside him to be in want of.

"You have no salt, Mrs. Harper," he exclaimed to the clergyman's wife. "Allow me to fetch you some. I brought some of my own, knowing it is so often forgotten, I shall get it in a moment. It is in the pocket of my over-coat. And up he started.

"Stay one moment, my friend," interrupted Mons. De l'Orme; "here is of the salt that one has not missed to bring."

Upon which Mr. Chepstow was, with difficulty, induced to re-settle himself.

"How charming it is, this scene," continued the little Frenchman, with effusion; "it must absolutely that I visit England. All that I of her see fills me with admiration. Above all these 'peek-neeks.' What can one desire of more agreeable than at the once to enjoy the delights of the nature, the charms of the society, and the sweet allures of the life of family."

"Bravo! De l'Orme," exclaimed Erbenfeld; "may I ask who assisted you in

the composition of this little oration? I strongly suspect Chepstow had to do with it. It is in his style. Do you not think so, Miss Sophie?" he asked of his neighbour, with whom, failing better, he had, in a rather lukewarm manner, renewed his last year's flirtation.

Sophy was on the point of replying in the same strain, but, happening to glance in Marion's direction, had the self-control to remain silent.

In an opposite corner Marion espied Dora Bailey, looking so marvellously brisk and lively, that one would hardly have recognized her. The secret of the change was soon revealed, when looking again, Miss Freer perceived that young Berwick was her neighbour, for poor Dora had long before this disclosed his name as that of her chosen hero. Frank, however, did not appear to be in correspondingly good spirits.

But everybody talked and laughed, and eat cold chicken and drank champagne, as if they had been in England. So I suppose they all enjoyed themselves.

After luncheon they dispersed in little parties to ramble about the hill, one side of which was covered by a charming miniature pine-forest. Cissy was tired, and went into the *châlet* to rest. Miss Vyse and the other young ladies went off to choose pretty "bits" to sketch, followed by their attendant gentlemen.

Marion, finding them all scattered, proposed to Lotty and Sybil to go a little way into the forest, and there find a nice seat, where she would tell them a story.

Her proposal was accepted with delight, Sybil only stipulating that they should not go far enough into the forest to meet bears or wolves. The story extended into two or three before the children were satisfied. Then at last they agreed that "poor Miss Freer must be tired;" and they amused themselves by discussing the rival merits of her narrations. "Beauty and the Beast" was Sybil's favourite, though she shuddered as she listened to the description of the dreadful, though amiable monster.

Suddenly a quick step approached them, and Sir Ralph appeared. He threw himself down beside them, exclaiming as he did so:

"I beg your pardon, Miss Freer, but I am so horribly tired. I have been on duty all this time, and if had stayed longer, I should infallibly have said

something rude to somebody, so I ran away to avoid getting into a scrape.”

“You’re like the Beast, Uncle Ralph,” said Lotty, oracularly.

“Like a beast!” he exclaimed. “I hope not, Lotty. What on earth do you mean?”

“I said *the* Beast. We have been talking about Beauty and the Beast, and I thought when you came growling so, you were just like him.”

“Thank you, Lotty,” he said; “or, rather, I think I should thank Miss Freer for the compliment, should I not? That’s what Miss Freer teaches you, eh, Sybil? To call your poor old uncle a beast.”

Marion laughed, but Sybil looked distressed.

“Oh no, dear Uncle,” she said, “Miss Freer didn’t ever say you were a beast. Lotty only said it because you growled. But, besides, Uncle Ralph, didn’t you know that the Beast was very nice, really he was, a beautiful prince at the end.”

“Really, was he? And how did he come to be so improved?” asked Ralph, with an air of the profoundest interest.

“Oh, because Beauty—” began Sybil.

“But who was Beauty, in the first place?” interrupted heir uncle.

“Beauty was a pretty, sweet young lady,” replied Sybil.

“Oh, indeed. Like you or Lotty, perhaps?” he suggested.

“No, oh no. Not a little girl. A *young lady*, Uncle. A big young lady, like——like——oh, yes! Just like Miss Freer. A pretty, sweet young lady, just like Miss Freer.”

“And she turned the Beast into a beautiful prince, you say? I wonder how ever she could do that,” he said, thoughtfully.

“Can’t you guess? Well, I will tell you,” said Sybil, full of importance. “You see, the Beast was very good and kind, though he was ugly. And the fairy fixed

that whenever any pretty young lady would love him for being good and kind, and not mind his being ugly, then that minute he was to turn into a beautiful prince. So the very minute Beauty said, 'I do love you, my dear good Beast,' he turned into the prince. Isn't it a pretty story, Uncle, and don't you think Beauty must have been just like Miss Freer?"

"A very pretty story, indeed, Sybil," replied he, to the first question; but to the second he made no answer. As he lay on the ground, however, he managed to glance up slyly to see how the "big young lady" took all these rather personal remarks. But he did not get much satisfaction. Marion's face was rather graver than usual, but for all other change in its expression, her thoughts might have been far away, too far away to have paid any heed to the child's chattering.

What was she really thinking?

The old puzzle: "I wonder how Sir Ralph and Miss Vyse get on together!" And why from the first have I disliked the one and liked the other?"

Ralph seemed suddenly to grow restless. He sat up and looked at his watch, and then said it was time for them to return to their party. So they all left their pleasant nook, considerably to their regret.

Sir Ralph stayed beside them till they were close to the edge of the wood, helping them to climb up the steep, rough paths. Then he hastened on before them, saying they had better follow at their leisure. Soon after they had reached the *châlet* it became time to think of rejoining the carriages.

They all descended the hill together; an easier managed business than the ascent; and returned home as they came, except that, by Lady Severn's request, Marion took Mr. Harper's seat in her carriage, that gentleman occupying her former place, and was set down with Mrs. Archer at the door of their own house, which was passed on their way to the Rue des Lauriers.

So ended little Sybil's birthday pic-nic.

## CHAPTER IX.

### “DE CAP A TU SOY MARION”

*“And will thee, nill thee, I must love  
Till the grass grows my head above.”*

TRANS. OF DES POURINNS BÉARNAIS SONGS.

*“Ihre Augen waren nicht die Schönsten die ich jemals  
sah, aber die tiefsten, hinter denen man am meisten  
erwartete.”*

WAHRHETT UND DICHTUNG.

THE weeks passed on quietly, and to outward seeming, uneventfully enough.

Cissy and Marion grew so accustomed to their calm, pleasant, life at Altes, that save for occasional home letters, they could have fancied themselves permanently settled in the pretty little southern town.

Harry wrote frequently and very cheerfully, only bewailing, as the Christmas holidays drew nearer, that they must be spent away from Marion. At rarer intervals there came paternal epistles from Mr. Vere, to which Marion always dutifully replied. Cissy, as her share, had regular letters from her husband, who latterly had alluded to a prospect before him of obtaining ere long a staff appointment in a part of the country sufficiently healthy for his wife to rejoin him there without risk.

Mrs. Archer was in great spirits at this news, and chattered away about returning to India, as if it were the most easily managed little journey in the world. But Marion, as she looked at her, felt certain vague misgivings. She was not satisfied that her cousin was gaining strength from her sojourn at Altes, for at times she looked sadly fragile. The slightest extra exertion utterly prostrated her, and yet so buoyant and high-spirited was she, that Marion found it impossible to persuade her to take more care of herself. Poor little Cissy! What a baby she was after all! And yet a difficult baby to manage, with all her genuine sweet temper and pretty playfulness.

Marion's governess duties were faithfully, performed, and on the whole with ease and satisfaction. Certainly it was not all smooth sailing in this direction, but still the storms were rarer, and less important, than might have been expected. Sybil caused her from time to time anxiety, but never displeasure. Lotty, on the other hand, was now and then extremely provoking; disobedient, inattentive and impertinent. But Marion had succeeded in gaining the child's affection, and in the end these fits of haughtiness were sure to be followed by repentance, genuine, though somewhat short-lived.

Now and then Miss Vyse favoured the schoolroom party with her presence. These were the days the young governess dreaded. Not that then, was anything in Florence's manner actually to be complained of. She refrained from the slightest appearance of interfering, and indeed went further than this; for she paraded her respect for the governess, in a way that to Marion was more offensive than positive insult or contemptuous neglect. She it was who always reproved the refractory Lotty for any sign of disrespect or inattention.

"Oh, Lotty," she would say, in an inexpressibly mischief-making tone, "how can you be so forgetful of your duty to Miss Freer! Remember, dear, what your grandmamma was saying only yesterday. I am sure you were never so troublesome with me when I helped you with your lessons. And that was only a sort of play-learning you know. Now Miss Freer is here on purpose to teach you; you know dear, you *must* be obedient."

All of which, of course, further excited the demon of opposition, and defiance of her gentle governess, in the naughty Lotty's heart!

Florence managed too to show that she came, in a sense, as a spy on Miss Freer. Little remarks made, as it were, in all innocence; half questions,

apologised for as soon as uttered: in these and a hundred other ways she succeeded in making Marion conscious that she was not fully trusted. And far worse, she instilled into Lotty, by nature so generous and unsuspecting, a most unsalutary feeling, half of contempt, half of distrust of the young governess; the being, who of all that had ever come into contact with Charlotte Severn, might have exercised the happiest influence on the child's rich, but undisciplined, nature. Marion did not see much of Lady Severn, whose civilities to Mrs. Archer were generally of a kind that did not of necessity include Miss Freer. A proposal to "sit an hour" with her in the morning before lessons were over in the Rue des Lauriers, or an invitation to accompany the dowager in her very stupid afternoon drive: these, and such-like little attentions she showed her, some of which accepted as a duty, though by no means a pleasure; to the last day of her stay at Altes, Mrs. Archer could not succeed in making the deaf lady hear what she said without ludicrous, and well-nigh superhuman exertions.

One thing in her daily life, for long struck Marion as curious. She never, by any chance, saw Sir Ralph in his mother's house. Had she not been informed to the contrary, she would have imagined he was not a member of the establishment. The children talked of him sometimes, indeed Sybil would never have tired of chattering about him, but Marion did not encourage it. Much chattering would effectually interfere with lessons, and besides this, the girl-governess had of late begun to suspect that her discretion in this could not be carried too far; as she had a sort of instinctive fear that all or a great part of the schoolroom conversation was extracted from Lotty by Miss Vyse. Not that she cared about the thing itself; though the feeling of a spy in the camp, is not a pleasant one, even to the most candid and innocent; and in her present position, Marion could not feel herself invulnerable. But it was very trying to her, trying and almost sickening, to see the sweet child-trustfulness gradually melting away out of Lotty's nature.

She thought it better to say very little about the children to Sir Ralph, when she met him in Mrs. Archer's house. And, indeed, he by no means encouraged her doing so. The mention of her morning's employment always appeared so to annoy him that at last it came to be tacitly avoided, and really, for the time being, forgotten. For they were at no loss for things to talk about, those three, in the afternoons, generally one or two a week, that Sir Ralph spent in Cissy's drawing-room.

Pleasant afternoons they were! To him indeed there could be no doubt of their

being so, as otherwise he would not have thus sought them voluntarily. He took care, however, never to come on a Friday. Sophy Berwick's chatter, Dora Bailey's silliness, and Mr. Chepstow's ponderous platitudes, all at one time, in one little room, would really, he declared irreverently, have been too much for him.

"And so," said Cissy, "just like a man, you leave us poor weak women to endure as best we may, what you confess would be beyond your powers."

"Now, Mrs. Archer," he replied, "that's not fair at all. 'What's one man's meat is another man's poison.' I can't suppose your drawing-room-full of friends is disagreeable to you, as, to speak plainly, you have yourself to thank for it. If you don't want to see all these people, what do you ask them for?"

"I never said I didn't want to see them," said illogical Cissy; "I only said you might come and help me to entertain them. Besides," added she mischievously, "there's Marion. She didn't ask them, so she's not to blame for the infliction, if such it be. You might come to help her to get through the afternoon."

"Great use I should be!" he said, lightly, and then went on more seriously, "Besides, do you know, Mrs. Archer, I am really busy just now."

"Busy; what about?" she asked coolly.

"Oh, things that you would think very stupid. Hunting up specimens of the old language and dialects once spoken about here. I'm doing it for a friend who is taking up the subject thoroughly."

"I should think that very interesting work," said Marion.

"Yes, indeed," he replied warmly; "indeed, interesting is no word for it. It has quite reconciled me to spending the winter here. A prospect that was dreadful enough to few months ago, I can assure you."

Just at that moment Charlie appeared with a whispered message to his mother, who, thereupon, left the room, saying as she did so, that she would return in a few minutes, and that in the meantime, Sir Ralph might amuse himself and Marion by giving her some specimens of the ancient language he was so interested in.



Charlie followed his mother, but stopped for a moment as he reached the door, to announce in a stage whisper, with a confidential nod:

“It’s only the dressmaker!” which piece of impertinence was audibly punished by a box on the ear from his indignant mamma.

“Is your name, Miss Freer—the name Marion, I mean—spelt with an A or an O?” asked Sir Ralph, somewhat irrelevantly, it appeared to the young lady.

“With an O,” she replied.

“Oh, I fancied so,” he said, with satisfaction. “Mrs. Archer told me to amuse you with specimens of the old dialects just now, but she would be surprised if I told her that there is an old song, old though not ancient, actually dedicated to a lady who must have borne your name.”

“Is there, really?” exclaimed Marion. “I had no idea my name was to be found anywhere out of England, or Great Britain, I should say, for there are plenty of Scotch Marions. Oh, tell me about the song, Sir Ralph; or can you show it to me? Is it pretty? And has it been set to music?”

“It has been set to music, and *I* think it very pretty,” he replied. “I could show it to you, for I have both copied it and translated it. But I can’t show it you just now. Indeed, I am not sure that it would not please you more if I gave it to some one else to show you.”

He looked at her closely as he spoke. But she only appeared puzzled.

“If you gave it to some one else to show me?” she repeated. “I don’t understand what you mean, Sir Ralph. Really I don’t.”

“Really, don’t you?” said he again; “truly and really?” He spoke, as it were, in jest, and yet something in his voice sounded as if he were in earnest.

“Think again, Miss Freer. Though you may never have seen this little song, you may easily enough fancy that, pretty and simple as it is, there was only one person who could have ventured to address it to the Marion of those days without fear of its being scornfully rejected. That Marion must have been young and fair; but now-a-days there are others as young and as fair. And there are knights, too, gallant enough, though not exactly cast in the mould of the old-

world ones. You see, Miss Freer, I should not like my poor little song to be scorned. I would rather keep it till the true knight passes this way, and I am anxious to—”

He stopped, at a loss to finish his sentence. Half ashamed, indeed, of having said so much.

Marion had listened quietly. No sign of displeasure in her face, but an expression of slight bewilderment, and somewhat, too, of sadness, overspread it.

“Sir Ralph,” she said, “I won’t say again I don’t know *what* you are talking about; but, truly, I may say I don’t know *whom* you are referring to. You wouldn’t wish to vex me, I know. If even there is anything you wish to warn me about, I am sure you would do it most gently and kindly. I am not very old, and I daresay not very wise,” she added, with a smile; “but, truly, I don’t quite understand. No knight, as you call it, is likely to pass this way on my account.”

She spoke so earnestly and simply that Ralph all but moved out of his habitual self-control, looked up again with the sun-light look over his face.

“Miss Freer,” he began, eagerly, and still more eager words were on his lips; but— —the door opened, and in walked, with the air of one thoroughly at home, and sure of a welcome, Frank Berwick!

It was not the first time Ralph’s pleasant afternoons had been interrupted by this young gentleman. He rose, the bright look utterly gone from his face, shook hands with Frank, and, Mrs. Archer shortly after returning to the room, seized the first opportunity of taking leave of the little party. As he bade good-bye to Marion he said, in a low voice, heard by her only:

“Forgive me, Miss Freer, for what I said. I must have seemed very impertinent, but, truly, I did not mean to be so. Remember how many years older I am than you, and let that prevent your thinking me unpardonably officious.”

Marion said nothing, but for one half instant raised her eyes to his face, with a curious expression, part deprecating, part reproachful. The sort of look one sees in the face of a child who has been scolded for a fault which it does not feel conscious of or understand. Then she said, or whispered—or, indeed, was it only his fancy; the words were so faint and low?—

“How little you understand me!”

When Ralph left Mrs. Archer’s house he did not turn towards the Rue des Lauriers, but walked briskly in the opposite direction. Like many other men, he had a habit, when perplexed or annoyed, of “taking it out of himself,” as he would have called it, by sharp, physical exercise. Not till he was some way out of the town, in a quiet country lane, did he slacken his pace, and begin steadily to think—thus:

“What a weak fool I am, after all! Can it really be that after all these years, I, now that I am middle-aged (for thirty-three is more than middle-aged for men like me), have caught the strange infection, hitherto so incomprehensible to me? What is there about this girl, this grave-eyed Marion, that utterly changes me when in her presence? Oh! Madness and Folly are no words for what I was nearly doing just now, who of all men in the world am least fitted, have indeed least right to marry! Lucky it was that that boy, Berwick, came in when he did. Not, after all, that it would have mattered much. She *could* not care, or ever learn to care, for me. But the thing might have distressed her all the same, and increased the discomfort of her position. How odious it is to think of *her* trudging backwards and forwards every morning as a daily governess, and that hateful Florence sneering at and insulting her in her cat-like way!”

At this point he stopped short in his meditations, and laughed at himself.

“Really, I am too absurd! Now to be reasonable about it, what shall I do? So far, surely, I am not so very far gone. No necessity for my running away from Altes. And before long, I have very little doubt, the temptation will be beyond my reach, for of young Berwick’s intentions I have not the shadow of a doubt. He is not a bad fellow, by any means, and will make a fair enough husband, I dare say. Not good enough for her, of course, but then that’s the way in such things. Besides, going out to India with him is, suppose, a preferable lot to being a governess at home. But I hope his people will treat her properly. My poor little girl! But what right have I to even *think* of her so? Ah! After all, if things had been different!”

Thus he thought to himself as he slowly walked homewards. Turning the thing round and round in his mind, and looking at it from all sides. Finally deciding that all he could do was gradually to dismiss this wild dream from his mind (not realizing in his inexperience, that in such matters it is *hearts*, not

minds, we have to deal with), and so far as possible forget that it had ever visited him.

As no one but himself was involved, no one's happiness or suffering in question but his own, he decided he need not absent himself from Altes for a little, as had been his first impulse, on making this extraordinary discovery. Not, at least at present. But he would be careful. He would not lay up for himself unnecessary perplexity or suffering; for after all, his belief in his own self-control had received a great shock. So he resolved, and acted upon his resolution by not calling at Mrs. Archer's till the next week; when, trusting to the safety, which we are told, lies in numbers, he purposely chose a Friday for his visit.

It was disagreeable, as he had anticipated, and indeed almost hoped it would be.

The day being chilly, none of Mrs. Archer's friends ventured out on the terrace, and the small drawing-room was therefore rather crowded. There was the usual set; the Bailey girls, Mr. Chepstow, and Monsieur De l'Orme, the Frasers and Sophy Berwick, accompanied, of course, by her brother. Erbenfeld was there too, amusing himself by trying to get up a flirtation with Mrs. Archer; by no means an easy undertaking, as he found to his cost; for Cissy's self-possession, quick wit and unaffected, utter indifference to his graceful compliments and sentimental allusions, baffled him far more effectively than any affectation of matronly dignity, or the most freezing airs of propriety. It was really rather amusing to watch, for Erbenfeld was clever enough in his shallow way, and evidently quite unaccustomed to have his flattering attentions thus smilingly rejected. Ralph had not been there two minutes before he began to wish himself away; but he had resolved to say half-an-hour or so, to avoid the appearance of any marked change; and so he sat on patiently, thinking to himself it was no bad discipline for his powers of self-control to sit there trying to talk nonsense to Sophy Berwick, all the time that he was intensely conscious of Marion's near presence at the piano, where she was eagerly examining some new music which Frank had just brought her, the giver, of course, standing close by, replying to her remarks with a bright smile on his handsome face.

Suddenly some one proposed that they should have, a little music. The glee party collected round the piano, and went through their little performances successfully enough. This over, there was an exhibition of instrumental music from one or two of the young ladies. In the moving about the room that ensued,

Ralph found himself, for the first time that afternoon, near Marion. In his nervous hurry to say *something*, he, of course, said about the stupidest thing he could have chosen:

“Do you sing, Miss Freer?”

She looked up at him with surprise, but when she saw the perfect good faith in which he had asked the question, she began to laugh in spite of herself.

“Yes,” said she, “I think I have told you before that I sing a little, and if you had been listening you would have heard me singing just now.”

“Were you singing?” he said, “truly I did not know. Certainly I would have listened had I known it was you. I was thinking the other day how odd it was I had never heard you sing.”

“I was not singing alone, just now,” she said, more seriously, “I only took a part in those glees.”

“Ah!” he replied, “then it was not bad of me after all. But I should very much like to hear you sing alone. When Miss Bailey finishes this affair she is playing, will you sing, Miss Freer?”

“Oh, yes, if you like,” she answered lightly. But in a moment a thought struck her, and she added mischievously, “what would you like me to sing, Sir Ralph? Is there any song you think would suit me?”

“Several,” he replied, in the same tone. But as at this moment Miss Bailey’s twirlings and twitchings suddenly ceased, and as Marion rose, he said in a lower voice: “one in particular, but I can’t give it you.”

She seemed as if she hardly heard him, and at a sign from Cissy, took Dora’s place at the piano.

Her voice was certainly not a very powerful one, but neither could it be called weak. It was true and sweet, but its chief beauty was its exceeding freshness. Clear and bright, and yet with an under-tone of almost wild plaintiveness. The sort of voice one would be inclined to describe as more like a young boy’s than a woman’s. It made one think of a bunch of spring field flowers, freshly gathered and sparkling with dew. So, at least, Ralph fancied as he listened, and went on in

his own mind to compare Florence Vyse's rich contralto to a perfectly arranged group of brilliantly coloured and heavily scented exotics. The simile was not however a perfect one, for it did not sufficiently express the tenderness and cultivated refinement of Marion's singing.

What her song was, Ralph did not know nor care. It was German, so much he discovered, and some words reached him, which sounded like these:

“So ist verronnen  
Meine Jugendzeit.”

A sort of sorrowful refrain they seemed to him, and they set his thoughts off again in the direction of wishing they were less true as applied to himself. But he pulled himself up short, thanked Miss Freer quietly, said good bye to Mrs. Archer and her guests, and was just about to take his departure when the door opened, and “Lady Severn and Miss Vyse” were announced by Mrs. Fraser's man-servant, whose mistress very goodnatureedly lent him to Mrs. Archer on Fridays.

It was rather annoying. Ralph so seldom called on any lady, that his presence here could not but surprise his mother. However, it was much better than if the worthy lady had taken it into her head to call on Mrs. Archer on one of the several afternoons he had spent in the company only of Cissy and her guest. He made the best of the situation, gratified Florence by asking if they had a seat to spare in the carriage, in which case he would wait and return home with them, and altogether made himself so sociable and agreeable, that Lady Severn began to think, with pleased astonishment, that after all her unsatisfactory Ralph had inherited something of the “Severn” affability. So all seemed smooth and smiling; but for all that Florence had her eyes open that afternoon; and bitter thoughts were in her heart as they bowled home to the Rue des Lauriers, though the words on her lips were honeyed and soft.

A few days after this, the second of the Altes balls took place. Mrs. Archer and her cousin had not gone to the first, as on the day it was held the former had not been well enough to risk the fatigue. But having been, or fancied herself, stronger of late, she was bent on attending the forthcoming one. Marion had no objection to accompanying her, save her former fear of appearing inconsistent. But this time Cissy was not to be moved. Marion was to go to the ball, attired in the prettiest of dresses, and for this one evening to enjoy herself thoroughly, and forget all about that “odious governessing.”

So the girl yielded, not unwillingly, I dare say. They arranged to go with the Berwicks, Frank and Sophy warmly applauding Mrs. Archer's determination that Miss Freer should make one of the party.

"Of course you should come," said Sophy. "I should think it bad enough to have to be shut up all the morning with those brats, without thinking it necessary on that account to forego a pleasant way or spending an evening."

"Oh, well," replied Marion, "for once in a way I daresay there can be no objection to it."

"Once in a way," repeated Sophy; "it is absurd to hear you, a girl ever so much younger than I, talking like that. You don't mean to remain a governess all your life, do you, Miss Freer?"

Marion felt and looked rather annoyed at this not very delicately-expressed inquiry; but, before she had time to reply, Cissy, who was present at the time, came to the rescue.

"Of course not, Miss Berwick," she exclaimed, rather indignantly, but, on catching a beseeching look from Marion, she changed her tone, and added, half laughingly, "Don't you know, Miss Berwick, that Marion is going out with me next spring, to marry a nabob whom she has never seen? A real nabob, I assure you, as rich as—as I should like to be, and that's saying a good deal, I assure you. By this time next year, imagine Miss Freer converted into Mrs. Nabob, with more fine dresses and diamonds than she knows what to do with. What a charming prospect! I hope you will remember, May, to give me some of your cast-off grandeur."

"How can you be so silly, Cissy!" said Marion, half laughing and half annoyed.

Sophy looked curious and mystified. She could not make out how much was fun and how much earnest of Mrs. Archer's announcement. Miss Freer's "How silly," very probably, only applied to her friend's exaggerated way of telling it. It was quite possible, Sophy decided, that the young lady was in fact engaged to some rich Indian, and was only a daily governess for a short time, perhaps to make some money towards providing a trousseau, being of a more independent spirit than some brides elect in similar circumstances.

It seemed rather a plausible way of accounting, for the mystery, which even Sophy, whose perceptions were not of the acutest, felt there existed about this girl. She would have uncommonly liked to hear reason, but, was not bold enough to make further inquiries. Besides which, Marion evidently wished the subject to be dropped, and Sophy would have been really sorry to annoy her. So no more was said; but, as Sophy was leaving, Marion accompanied her to the door, and said to her, earnestly, but in a low voice:

“Miss Berwick, will you be so good as not to think anything of what Mrs. Archer said today? I mean, will you please not to talk about it. You don’t know how exceedingly it would annoy me if any reports were spread about me; if, indeed, I were spoken about at all, it would vex me, for it might cause much mischief.”

“Certainly, Miss Freer, I won’t be the one to spread reports about you,” replied Sophy; “I like you far too much to wish to annoy you. You may depend upon my discretion.”

“Thank you,” said Marion, looking more comfortable, for she saw that Sophy meant what she said.

Still it was not very wise of her to have made this appeal to Sophy. It only impressed upon the thoughtless girl’s memory what otherwise she would probably have soon forgotten.

Marion returned to the drawing-room, intending to scold Cissy, but the naughty bird was flown.

This was the day of the ball. Mrs. Archer’s head was full of her own and Marion’s toilettes. In justice to her it must be said her young cousin’s appearance interested her quite as much as, if not more than, her own. The result in both cases, was eminently satisfactory. Cissy, always pretty, showed to advantage in a ball-dress; and Marion was at the age when a girl must be plain indeed, not to look bright and sweet in a robe of floating, cloudy white, here and there dotted with rosebuds of as delicate a tint as the unaccustomed flush on the wearer’s cheeks. Marion was far from plain. “Bright and sweet” would but ill have expressed what Ralph Severn thought of her, as almost immediately on his arrival in the room he caught sight of her, not dancing, but sitting quietly beside old Mrs. Berwick, Cissy not far off. Ralph had come as a duty, because his



mother had desired it. He had been present at the previous ball for the same reason, and had spent a most disagreeable evening. He hated dancing, or fancied he did (for he danced well, and judges in such matters say that no one who hates this "amusement" can ever be a proficient therein). However this may have been, he certainly did most devoutly hate dancing with Miss Vyse, which, to his dismay, he found himself expected to do, to a considerable extent. So, his previous experience having been the reverse of reassuring, he, with fear and trembling, for the second time prepared to obey the maternal commands. He entered the room hating himself and everybody else. In plain English, not in the sweetest of tempers.

But one glance in a certain direction, one glimpse of a white dress and blush rosebuds, one moment's view of a graceful little head, round which the bright brown hair was wound in thick, smooth coils; and the whole scene was changed to him. And yet, but a few days before, he had calmly decided that this dream of his was *but* a dream, a passing fancy, that he could easily overcome, and, ere long, forget!

A strange reaction came over him this evening. From being unusually gloomy and morose, he suddenly became, in the opposite extreme, high-spirited, and, as he could be, in rare excitement, brilliantly lively and amusing. He delighted and amazed Florence by dancing with her twice in succession, waltzing, as she told him, "exquisitely." This duty over, and having seen his fair charm! engaged to the end of her card, he found himself free to saunter up the room.

Yes, there she was, still sitting. She had not danced yet, then. How could that be?

A friendly greeting from Mrs. Archer, a few words of commonplace small talk, and he turned to Marion.

"Have you not been dancing, Miss Freer?"

"Not yet," she answered, smiling; "I am engaged for two or three dances further on, but you know I have not a great many acquaintances here."

As she spoke Mr. Erbenfeld came up eagerly to Mrs. Archer, whom he immediately began urging to break her resolution of not dancing. As his glance fell upon Marion he bowed to her in the very stiffest and slightest manner.

“Will you dance this with me, Miss Freer,” asked Sir Ralph, “whatever it is? I don’t know, but it really doesn’t matter.” And as she rose and took his arm, and they walked away, he added, “What have you done to offend that fellow—Erbenfeld?”

“Nothing,” said Marion, “only—I think you forget.”

“What?” he asked.

“That I am a governess,” she answered simply.

“Miss Freer,” he said, earnestly, “don’t vex me by that sort of thing. I won’t insult you by supposing for an instant that you *mind* any vulgar insolence of that kind, but it hurts me for you to seem conscious of it. Please, put all that nonsense aside. I am in a very good humour to-night, which, you must know, is a rare occurrence, and deserves to be commemorated. So I am going to enjoy myself, and you must do the same.”

“I assure you I intend to do so,” she said. Please remember it was you, not I, that took any notice of Mr. Erbenfeld’s manner.”

“Well, forgive me for having done so,” said he. “And now tell me what is your idea of enjoying yourself? Shall we dance this, or find a comfortable corner for ‘sitting it out in’?”

“I should like to dance this,” said she; “if you don’t mind?”

“Mind!” said he; but the one little word held a good deal

So they danced and enjoy it; Marion being young enough, and Ralph not so old after all as he fancied. He found his views on various subjects undergoing a curious change this evening. Dancing and its attendants no longer seemed to him so utterly insane and ridiculous as he had hitherto considered them. The music was really very good, the floor capital, and some of the ladies’ dresses exceedingly pretty. Marion was amused at his expressions of satisfaction.

“You really must be in a *very* good humour, Sir Ralph,” said she, “or else you have hitherto belied yourself. I always understood you detested balls.”

“So I do, in general,” he replied, “this one is an exception. Do you care about

such things, Miss Freer?"

"Yes," answered Marion, "I think I do. Not exceedingly perhaps, as some girls do. But then my life has been different. I have no mother or sister, and I have lived very much out of the world."

"But you are not an orphan?" he asked hesitatingly; "your father is alive? He is a clergyman, I think, is he not?" And before his mind rose a picture of the struggling curate, and the unluxurious home in which this girl had probably been reared. Though, how, under such circumstances, she had come to be what she was, was a mystery beyond his powers to fathom.

They were sitting in a quiet corner, and as he spoke, Marion's face was full in his view. She was looking down, but as he asked these questions he distinctly saw her colour change, as it rarely did. There was a change too in her voice as she replied:

"No, my father is not a clergyman. He—;" but then she stopped and hesitated.

"Ah," thought Ralph, "there is something worse than poverty here. She is not a girl to be ashamed of anything but real disgrace."

And there was a deepened tenderness in his tone as he quickly tried to set her at ease by instantly changing the subject. She felt it. How grateful she was! How gladly at that moment would she have agreed to be indeed Miss Freer, the poor little governess, able to answer his kindly questions with perfect frankness, with no secret from this man, whom already she was learning to trust more than any other on earth. A sudden impulse seized her to tell the truth. But the words died on her lips as she thought to herself what might be the results of her betraying her secret. In all probability she, and not only she, but Cissy too, would for ever forfeit his respect. What might he not think it right to do? Possibly to write to her father, in which case all she had striven for, would be lost, and Harry after all disgraced. Sir Ralph, at the best, would feel obliged to tell all to Lady Severn, and would naturally be indignant at the trick that had been played her. The story would get wind, and would spread beyond Altes, for Marion's father was too much of a public character for his daughter to masquerade with impunity.

All this flashed through her mind in an instant, and arrested the words on her lips. Ralph saw that she was nervous and uneasy, and blamed himself for having turned her thoughts in an evidently painful direction. He tried to gain her attention, to amuse her, but in vain. At last he stopped and laid his hand gently on her arm. Marion started.

“Miss Freer,” said he, “I see I have spoilt your pleasure by my inconsiderate talk. Most unintentionally, poor child, I have brought back to your mind sorrows and anxieties which I would give more than I can express to banish far from you, not for one short evening, but for ever. I am so angry with myself that I can’t bear the reproach of your sad face. Won’t you forgive me and look happy again. Believe me I am the last man on earth to pry into another person’s private concerns. Unless, indeed, I could do anything to help you?”

“You are very, very good and kind,” replied Marion; and I truly did not mean to look reproachful. No, thank you, you can’t help me in any way. After a while things will come right.”

“So you are patient as well as brave?” said he, with a smile.

“How do you know I am either?” asked she.

“Because,” he began, eagerly, but slackened a little as he went on, evidently changing what he was going to have said, “because I have seen you in peculiar circumstances which have called for both, and you have not failed.”

“You think better of me than I deserve,” said Marion, in all sincerity, though the phrase she had used is seldom so uttered. “I fear if you knew all about me you would greatly change your thoughts of me. I *fear* you would,” she repeated, half questioningly, and as she spoke she laid her hand on his arm, and looked up in his face with a sort of wistful appeal. She did it in all simplicity, poor child. Somehow her secret weighed heavily on her that evening; and oh! how she wished she could tell him the whole!

Ralph did not speak for a moment. Then, as if in spite of himself, he said, hoarsely almost, “Child, do not try me too far.”

But before another word could be said by either, Cissy’s voice was heard behind them.

“Marion, how ever have you and Sir Ralph managed to hide, yourselves? I have had such a hunt for you. There’s poor Captain Berwick in such a state at having lost one of his dances. You know you promised him the first two when he came, and he couldn’t get here sooner. Do come. Sir Ralph, pray bring her hack to the dancing room. Thank you, Mr. Chepstow” (who was her cavalier), “my shawl’s always tumbling off.”

Ralph escorted Marion back to the dancers; at the entrance to the room to be relieved of his charge by Frank Berwick, radiant with eagerness and murmuring gentle reproaches to the truant partner as he led her away to redeem her promise.

It seemed to Ralph that they danced together all the rest of the evening, for he hardly let them out of his sight, though he spoke to neither again till the very close.

Then, as Frank, with a face that to so acute an observer as Ralph Severn, would, had he been less preoccupied, have told its own tale, was leading Marion to the cloak-room, she heard herself addressed. There were several people crowding round where they stood, but Ralph made his way near enough for her to hear him, though he spoke low.

“Miss Freer,” he said, “I am going to leave Altes to-morrow for some weeks, months perhaps. Will you say good-bye to me?”

“Going to leave Altes to-morrow,” repeated Marion, with a quiver in her voice, which he did not hear, or if he did, set it down to a different cause, “going away, to-morrow! Good-bye, Sir Ralph. Good-bye. And—thank you for being so kind to me.”

“The last words were very low. If only he had looked at her, had seen the tears welling up and all but running over! But no, he looked resolutely aside. Only wrung the soft little hand and repeated again, “Good-bye.”

It was all Marion could do to keep from crying right out in the dark carriage on the way home. She had had enough to excite and distress her that evening, and might well have been excused had her self-control failed her at last.

Only the knowledge that Cissy would discover her tears as soon as she reached home, enabled her to keep them back till alone in her little room.

## CHAPTER X.

### A SUDDEN RECALL.

*“O that spectre! For three years it followed me up and down the dark staircase, or stood by my bed: only the blessed light had power to exorcise it.”*

A REVELATION OF CHILDHOOD. MRS. JAMESON.

*“That way madness lies.”*

—KING LEAR.

IT was quite true. She had not misunderstood what he said. Sir Ralph, for reasons best known to himself, left Altes the next day for an indefinite time. It seemed to Marion that there had been something prophetic in his calling her “brave and patient.” She needed, at this time, to be both. And she succeeded, poor child, in her endeavour to act up to his opinion of her. Day after day the appointed hour saw her in the schoolroom, doing her very best with her pupils, bearing with Lotty’s tempers and poor little Sybil’s moods. And no one, not even Cissy, suspected that she had even these to bear, far less the deeper, though hardly even to herself acknowledged sorrow—disappointment—call it which you will, the magnitude of which unconsciously swallowed up the lesser daily irritations. It was not merely a sorrow, a loss, a something gone out of her life, which she had not known was there till she missed it. It was more than these. She was mortified, ashamed of having given her regard, she would call it by no more tender name even to herself, unasked. For Ralph’s strange words and manner she, in her morbid self-reproach, now explained as entirely traceable to

his generous pity for her. Pity, in the first place, for her dependent position, and secondly (ah, how it wounded her to think so!) for her unmaidenly, because unsought and unreturned, revelation of her “regard” for him. How extraordinarily people misunderstand each other! Thus she was thinking and suffering, at the very time that Ralph was repeating to himself over and over again, “Under no possible circumstances, had there been no shadow of a rival in the field, could that bright, sweet being have learnt to care for a soured, dried-up, in every way unattractive man like me!”

At this period, I think, could Marion have been assured that such were Ralph’s feelings for her, she would have looked upon permanent separation from him as a comparatively small trial. For mortification, self-abasement of this kind are very hard upon a sensitive, pure-minded girl.

“If only I could think he did not despise me,” she said to herself.

It never occurred to her that so far, as least, as Ralph himself was concerned, her being a governess might have in any way have influenced him. She was too unpractical to realize the possibility of this; or was it, perhaps, the instinctive trust one genuine, noble nature feels in a kindred spirit? For Marion had been quick to perceive Mr. Erbenfeld’s contempt and Miss Vyse’s condescending insolence.

But time wore on, as it always does, through the weariest weeks, as through “the roughest day.” Christmas came and went. January far advanced, and Marion began to think indeed, she was never to see Ralph Severn again, for Cissy still spoke of the not-for-distant “spring” as the probable date of her return to India. April had been originally mentioned as the limit of their stay at Altes, but before then, she heard from the children, the Severn household was to be removed to Switzerland for the summer.

Sybil sometimes spoke of her uncle. He had been in London for the last month, she said. And then two or three days after, with great delight, she showed Marion a letter he had sent her from Paris, dated from the Hôtel de ——, where he said he was going to stay a week or two.

“And after that, perhaps, he will come home here,” said Sybil.

“Nonsense, Sybil,” said Lotty, hastily; “that’s not at all certain. He may, perhaps, not return to Altes at all. What do you know about it, I’d like to know?”

She spoke roughly and rudely, and Sybil began to cry. Marion checked Lofty, and desired her to attend to her lessons, and not interfere with her sister. Then she tried to soothe Sybil, but it was difficult to do so. Of late the child had seemed far from well. Her timidity and nervousness had increased to a painful extent, and Marion felt strangely anxious and uneasy about her. More than ever she felt persuaded that some unhappy influence was injuriously affecting the child, though in what it consisted, or how it was exercised, she was utterly unable to conjecture. This morning Lotty happened to be sent for by her grandmother, a few moments after receiving her governess's reproof for her roughness to Sybil. When left alone with the poor little girl, still sobbing piteously, Marion again tried to soothe her. She took her on her knee, and spoke kind, loving words, while she kissed and caressed the throbbing brow and tear-stained cheeks.

"Sybil my darling," she said, "try and leave off crying. It will make your head ache so. Lotty did not mean to be unkind; she only spoke thoughtlessly, as she does, but you must not mind it so very much."

Sybil clung to her more closely and tried to check her sobs as she answered.

"It isn't Lofty I'm crying about, dear Miss Freer. I'm thinking Uncle Ralph isn't coming back."

"But he's sure to come back before long, dear," said Marion;" Lotty only said he wasn't perhaps coming just yet."

"Oh! but I want him so much," said Sybil, "so very much. I was thinking I would tell *him*. I couldn't tell any one else."

"What about, dear?" asked Marion, gently. "If you will tell me, perhaps I can help you."

"No, you couldn't," answered Sybil. "Besides I mustn't tell you. I said I wouldn't, and it might hurt you. I didn't mean ever to tell anybody, because of what Emilie said. But since it has been so bad, I thought I would tell Uncle Ralph. He is big and strong, you know, and he wouldn't laugh at me."

"Laugh at you, dear," said Marion, eagerly; "no, indeed, he would not. Nor would I, Sybil. You know I wouldn't. Won't you tell me this secret, darling, unless, of course, you are sure it would be wrong to do so?"



“It wouldn’t be wrong,” said Sybil, “only I promised. And then—— Oh!” she exclaimed, suddenly, while a sort of shiver ran through her—“oh, it is so dreadful. *Can’t* you make me forget it, dear Miss Freer? Last night I said my prayers a hundred times over without stopping, before Emilie came to bed, but it was no use. I *couldn’t* go to sleep, and it gets so hot under the clothes I can hardly breathe.”

“But how do you menu, before Emilie came to bed?” asked Marion; “doesn’t she sit in your room after you are in bed? I am sure I have heard that she was told to do so.”

“Yes,” answered Sybil in a whisper; “yes, Grandmamma did tell her so, after Lotty went to sleep in Florence’s room. I was always able to go to sleep before that. But Emilie won’t stay in my room till I go to sleep. That is what has made it so bad. Only she told me not to tell. If I did, she said I should get into a fit and die. All alone, Miss Freer, all alone except for them,” the child added in a whisper of the utmost horror, her eyes dilated as she looked up into Marion’s anxious face. Suddenly she threw herself back into her governess’s arms, clutching her tightly in her terror and distress, and burying her face on her shoulder.

“Oh!” she exclaimed; “don’t make me tell any more. Don’t, please don’t.”

“Very well, darling,” replied Marion, soothingly; “we will talk about some nice things. Only tell me, dear Sybil, does any one know? Any one besides Emilie?”

“Florence knows part,” said the child; “Emilie told her I was very naughty, and Florence wasn’t kind at all. She scolded me *very* much, and said if I told that Emilie didn’t stay with me, she would get me sent away to school. She said it was very unkind of me to want Emilie to sit all the evening in my room. But I think Emilie didn’t tell it her all, or she would not have scolded me so. Emilie does tell little stories, Miss Freer, and I don’t like her, but Florence likes her because she does a great deal of work for her, and then she says I give her so much trouble, she has no time to do the things that Grandmamma wants done. And it isn’t true, Miss Freer,” said Sybil, emphatically, clenching her little hands in indignation.

“Well, dear, it should make you not mind so much what Emilie says, if she is

so careless in her way of speaking. If your secret is about something Emilie has told, I would try not to think any more about it.”

“Yes, but that *is* true,” repeated Sybil, relapsing into her awe-struck whisper; “I know *that* is true, because of what I saw, Miss Freer.”

She shuddered as she spoke, and Marion, fearful of uselessly exciting her—as it was evident she must not at present insist upon the child’s full confidence—hastened to change the subject. After some efforts, she succeeded in interesting and amusing her little charge, who by the end of the morning looked brighter and happier. Still the young governess felt very anxious and uneasy when the hour came to leave her pupils for the day. Sybil looked ready to burst into tears again, but Marion whispered to her that to-morrow she would arrange to stay an hour later, to finish a delightful story that had been broken in the middle; which promise brought back a smile to the woe-begone little face.

“What can I do?” thought Marion. “I can’t bear to leave things as they are, and yet any interference on my part would probably do no good, and only cause me to be set down as presumptuous and officious. It might even lead to my being dismissed, and then how miserable and forlorn Sybil would be! It is evident that wicked Emilie is terrifying the poor child to prevent her complaining of her. And Miss Vyse supporting such conduct! Though I agree with Sybil that Emilie must have told the story in her own way. Miss Vyse would not be so utterly heartless, if she knew what the child is actually suffering. Though it is shameful of her to have accepted Emilie’s statement as to Sybil’s naughtiness in that careless way.”

So Marion thought to herself. But she could see nothing likely to do such good in her power. All her cogitations ended in wishing Sir Ralph were back again. But she resolved in the meantime to watch Sybil closely, and if no improvement became manifest, to brave all, rather than conceal the hidden mischief she now had proof was at work. Emilie, the children’s maid, she had seen little of, but the girl’s manner and appearance she disliked. Lady Severn unfortunately had an exceedingly high opinion of her; and Miss Vyse, as Sybil had said, was sure to take her part, for the reasons the child had been quick enough to discover.

The next day Sybil seemed better again, and told Marion she had had “a very nice sleep all night.” But the day after the child was evidently very ill. There were black circles round her eyes, telling of sleepless hours and nervous

suffering. The pain in her head was so bad, she said, she could not see the words in her lesson-book when she tried to read; and at last Marion gave up the attempt as useless. Sybil would not speak much, and was evidently in terror of Marion's renewing the subject of her secret alarms. So, after trying to soothe her by reading aloud some of the little girl's favourite fairy tales, in which however she seemed hardly able to take any interest, the young governess was obliged to leave her for the day. Lotty did not seem much impressed by her sister's suffering, saying carelessly:

“Oh! Sybil's always sulky when she has the least bit of a headache.”

When lesson hours were over, Marion asked to see Lady Severn, intending to tell her of Sybil's evident illness. Considerably to her annoyance, Lady Severn sent to ask her to see her in the drawing-room, in consequence of which Miss Vyse was of course present at the interview, which effectually dispelled Marion's faint hopes of being able to do poor Sybil any real good by what she might say to her grand-mother.

“You wished to see me, Miss Freer, I believe?” began the dowager, in a rather icy tone.

“Merely to tell you that I think Sybil is far from well this morning,” replied Marion rather shortly, at which Miss Vyse smiled contemptuously as she bent over her writing-table. Miss Freer's entrance into the room she had acknowledged by the slightest and most indifferent of bows, or rather nods.

“Of that I am quite aware,” said Lady Severn; “I make a point of seeing the children *every* morning, Miss Freer, and I am thoroughly acquainted with Sybil's constitution. She is only suffering from one of her old attacks, and the usual remedies have already been applied. Your intention was good, Miss Freer, I have no doubt, but I assure you, it is quite unnecessary for you to add to your duties the care of my grand-daughters' health. It is in older and naturally more experienced hands than yours. At the same time, I thank you for your well-meant attention to Sybil's indisposition.”

Again Miss Vyse smiled quietly to herself.

Marion was paler than usual, as she made another effort for her poor little pupil:

“You must excuse me, Lady Severn,” she said “if I seem officious or presuming, but I am very anxious about Sybil. I think she has been falling off for some time. I am afraid she does not sleep well, and bad nights are sure to hurt a child. In the morning she often looks as if she had been awake all night.”

“She has never been a good sleeper,” replied Lady Severn, but not unkindly. “It arises merely from her general delicacy. It is not to be expected she will get over it till she is older. But in this respect she is already improved. Emilie says she sleeps soundly now, does she not, Florence, my dear?” she inquired of Miss Vyse.

“Perfectly so, dear Aunt,” replied the young lady, with the same sneer in her voice that Marion had detected in her smile. “Of course Miss Freer cannot understand her in the same way that we do. I myself think her wonderfully improved of late in her health, though I sometimes fear the improvement in her temper and disposition is not so great.”

“I quite agree with you my love,” said Lady Severn. “Do not think I am finding fault, Miss Freer, but you must allow me to say that I think your anxiety would be better directed were you to turn it to the points my niece has alluded to.”

“Sybil’s temper and whole behaviour are all I could wish when she is *well*, Lady Severn,” said Marion stoutly. “At present I am convinced there is much amiss with her, and believe it arises in great measure from her having bad nights. I believe she sometimes cannot go to sleep for hours after she is in bed. I am sure I would gladly come every evening to sit by her or read to her, till she goes to sleep, if that would do any good.”

Miss Vyse’s delicate black eyebrows rose in supercilious amazement at this proposal, and Lady Severn at first seemed too astonished to reply. At last she said:

“Really, Miss Freer I suppose I must again give you credit for kindly and well-meant intention; but your must allow me to remind you that I have an ample staff of servants in my household for waiting on the young ladies. You really need not fear they are in any way neglected.”

“Neglected indeed!” repeated Miss Vyse with a silvery laugh at the absurdity of the idea. “Why Emilie sits the whole evening besides Sybil, till her little

ladyship goes to sleep. And not a little difficult to please, poor Emilie has found her of late, I can assure you, dear Aunt. Sybil is a child that requires very judicious management, young as she is.”

“She certainly does,” said Marion, quietly, looking at Florence as she spoke. And then, as it appeared that Miss Vyse had exhausted her stock of impertinent sneers and innuendos for the present, she thought it as well to take leave.

Her cheeks burned as she thought quietly over the interview. “Poor Sybil, I have done you more harm than good, I fear!” she said to herself. And then in her genuine anxiety for the suffering and mismanaged child, she unselfishly forgot her own personal annoyance and mortification.

That afternoon as she was sitting with Cissy, Charlie, attended by Thérèse, returned from his stroll in the park. He told her he had met “those two little young ladies you go to play with every morning, May. And the littlest one had red eyes, as if she had been crying,” he added sympathisingly.

“Poor baby!” said Cissy. “She looks horribly ill now and then, Marion. I fancy they are rather rough with her sometimes. She has cowed, cowering look I can’t bear to see in a child’s face.”

All of which added not a little Marion’s uneasiness. An hour or so later when she was alone in her room, Thérèse entered.

“If you please, Mademoiselle,” she said, “the little young lady asked me to give you this, but that no one should see it.”

“This” was a leaf of copy-book paper, on which was written in Sybil’s large, round text hand (the letters shaky and crooked, and the whole bearing marks of being a laborious and painfully accomplished production) the following words:

“DEAR MISS FREER,—I meet the little boy and his kind nurse often, and Lotty would tell, if I had told you this morneng. Please writ to Unkel at Paris, and say I will dye if he wont come. I coudent tell eny boddy but him. Sybil.”

Marion’s resolution was instantly shaken. She fortunately remembered the name of the hotel at which Sir Ralph was staying; and that evening’s post bore to him a letter from her, enclosing poor Sybil’s piteous appeal. She told Sir Ralph that she was unable to explain the cause of the child’s suffering; but that she

suspected that some cruel trick had been played by Emilie, the maid, for the sake of terrifying her into silence. She apologised for her boldness in writing to trouble him about it; but added that she saw nothing else to do, as her own efforts had failed to awaken Lady Severn's anxiety about the poor little girl; and she ended by begging him to return to Altes as soon as possible to judge for himself, without of course betraying her confidence, or that of the poor child.

Once her letter was fairly gone, Marion began to be rather frightened at what she had done. She was perfectly satisfied that the step she had taken was a right and indeed unavoidable one; but then there came the after thought.

“What will he think of me for having done it? Knowing what I do of his opinion of me, how could I have been the one, for any reason whatever, to summon him back here before I leave!”

And she felt half inclined to run away from Altes before he could possibly arrive! And yet with it all, there was a strange under current of inexpressible happiness in the thought that now she was almost sure to see him again, to hear him speak, to feel him looking kindly at her once more.

“Once more!” If only that, and nothing beyond, yet that once more was worth living for.

Two—three days passed. Then came the fourth, the day before the one on which Marion had calculated it might be possible to receive an answer from Paris. She had not been alone with Sybil for more than a moment since receiving her note. Lotty seemed inquisitive and suspicious, and Sybil was evidently afraid of her. Marion could only manage to whisper to the child that she had done what she asked, without any further explanation passing between them. Sybil brightened up wonderfully on hearing this, and for some few days looked so much better that Marion began to think Sir Ralph would consider her alarm about his little niece very exaggerated, if not altogether uncalled for. The reflection was not a pleasant one! There was no letter on the fifth morning, nor up to the eighth! which did not make her feel any the more comfortable, and on her way to the Rue des Lauriers, one week after her letter had gone, she really began most heartily to wish she had not written at all.

But the first sight of Sybil changed her feelings entirely. The child looked exceedingly ill, and was, as before, utterly unable to attend to her lessons. She

lay on the sofa without speaking, and hardly took any notice even of her kind friend. Only as Marion was leaving, and bent down to kiss her, Sybil whispered, hurriedly:

“Is he coming?”

“Yes, dear, I hope so,” replied Marion, in the same voice.

There was no time for more, for just then Emilie entered the room with some medicine, which poor Sybil was obliged to take every two hours; and the child shrank back in fear.

This was the evening of the last Altes ball before Lent. Cissy was not inclined to go, not feeling particularly well, and Marion, too, was much better pleased to stay at home. They spent till evening as usual, quietly reading and working. From time to time the roll of carriages in the street below reminded them of the gaiety which the little world of Altes was about to enjoy. Marion did not envy the ball-goers, but she could not help thinking, half sadly, of her one ball at Altes, and all that passed there. Mrs. Archer was tired, and went to bed early, leaving her cousin alone. To get rid of her thoughts Marion got a book, and forced herself to attend to its contents, in which she so succeeded that an hour or two went by, and it was close to midnight before she moved.

Suddenly, she was startled by the sound of a carriage driving up rapidly and stopping at their door. Knowing that all the servants were disposed of for the night, and fearing, that a sudden ring of the bell might frighten Cissy, Marion went quickly to the front door, which she unlocked and opened softly, and stood with it slightly ajar, watching to see if indeed the carriage contained any visitor for them. She heard the driver’s voice, replying to some question, but it was a very dark night and she could distinguish nothing distinctly. In a moment more she felt, rather than saw, that some one was approaching the door, which, to prevent this person’s ringing the bell, she immediately opened more widely. Evidently the stranger took her for one of the servants; for, though apparently rather surprised at finding the door open and some one behind it the unseasonable visitor inquired in French if it would be possible for him to see “*une de ces dames, Madame au Mademoiselle.*” The voice told more tales this time than that its owner was an Englishman!

“Sir Ralph,” said the girl, whom in the dim light he had taken for a servant,

“Sir Ralph, it is I—Marion.” (Even then she could not say Miss Freer.) “Come in and tell me what is the matter. Oh tell me! Tell me quickly,” she added, as she saw that he bore a burden in his arms. Something covered with a shawl, but which he held tenderly and closely, as if he would guard it from touch or approach. “What is that Sir Ralph?” she almost screamed, as he entered the passage, and she saw that what he carried was like a lifeless nerveless body, hanging limp and loose and heavy in his grasp, though she could see no face or features.

“Hush! Marion,” he said, unconsciously calling her what she had called herself; “hush! I know you will control yourself and help me. What a mercy you were still up!”

He spoke in a matter-of-course tone that marvellously quieted Marion’s first thrill of horror. But she could hardly control herself as he had told her, when he gently laid his burden on the sofa in the still lighted drawing-room, and softly removing the shawl from the face showed Marion that it was Sybil! Poor little Sybil, there she lay, her eyes closed, but her brow contracted as if with pain or terror, ghastly pale, with the paleness it seemed to Marion that could only come from one cause—death!

“Is she dead?” she whispered.

Ralph turned suddenly to her.

“My darling,” he said, “how could I be so cruelly thoughtless as to forget you in my anxiety about this poor child. Dead! no. Indeed, no. She is only fainting, and will revive again in a few moments. But dead indeed she might have been but for you. Your goodness, your promptness have saved her. If anything had been wanting to—but what am I saying?” he exclaimed, with a sudden change of tone. “Marion—Miss Freer, you must think me mad.”

But she said nothing. She leant over Sybil, and would not look up for fear of meeting his eyes, as she asked quietly,—

“What can we do to revive her?”

“Nothing,” he said; “she is already coming round. Only be sure to let her see you and this room, as soon as she opens her eyes. She has already fainted once or twice, and was sent into hysterics again as soon as she came round, by the



sight of that room. And then she begged me to bring her to you, so I did so, on my own responsibility. My mother and Miss Vyse are out at a ball, the servants there told me. I sent for Bailey, but the old fool was not to be found. Gone to the ball too, I dare say. But it's just as well to avoid the scandal, for a scandal it is, no doubt, as you will say when you hear it all. I got her this the chemist's, on our way here. It can't do her any harm."

And as he spoke he produced a little bottle, from which he poured a few drops into a glass of water, which Marion fetched him.

"Now Sybil, my pet," he said, as the little girl opened her eyes, and glanced round her with an expression of terror. "Now, dear, you are all right again. You see you are with Miss Freer in her pretty house; and she is going to let you sleep in her own room, and stay with you all night." At which information the poor baby tried to smile, as she stroked Marion's hand, laid on her caressingly.

"Forgive My audacity," he whispered to Marion; "but you will be as good as my word this once, won't you?"

"You know I will," answered Marion, in the same tone.

And then she went to rouse the good-natured Thérèse, and as far as possible "insense" her as to the strange state of things. Between them, poor Sybil was divested of her cloaks and shawls, and comfortably ensconced for the night in a corner of Marion's bed.

Exhausted by all she had gone through, the poor child soon fell asleep. Marion returned for a moment to set Sir Ralph's mind at ease about his little niece, and to bid him good-night. He only detained her to request her *not* to come to the Rue des Lauriers in the morning, as he would explain her absence to Lady Severn. He also promised to call early, to see how Sybil had passed the night, and to explain to Miss Freer what had come to his knowledge as to the cause of the child's terror and consequent illness.

"That Emilie shall leave my mother's service at once," he said "if I am to have any authority at all over my nieces. But by the morning I shall be able to explain the whole affair better. I am not quite clear how much was Emilie's doing, and how much the result of pour Sybil's own nervousness. The poor child tried to tell me all about it, but could hardly manage to do so clearly, in the state she was in."

“You may be sure I shall take good care of her,” said Marion, as he was leaving.

“I know that well,” he replied. “But that reminds me,” he went on, “I have never thanked you for it all. What a boor I am! In the first place your goodness in writing to me, and now for your goodness in taking my poor child in, as you have done. I am so stupid, Miss Freer, at thanking people. But you know what I mean, I am sure you do. Something more I would ask of you. Miss Freer, can you forgive me for having forgotten myself as I did last night?”

The last words he spoke very low, as if he could hardly force himself to utter them. Marion did not speak for a moment, and he went on.

“You must think me mad—mad with presumption and folly, as indeed I think myself. I thought I had mastered myself, Miss Freer, knowing all I do, both to myself, and you. You, I trust, will be very happy in the life you have chosen—much happier than if—ah! I must take care or I shall have to ask you to forgive me again. Can you do so, Miss Freer—Marion?” he added softly, as if in spite of himself.

And Marion looked up in his face, and said the one little word, “Yes.”

He wrung her hand and left her.

And she laid herself down beside the innocent little child *he* had given into her care, and tried to sleep. But in vain! All night long she tossed about, imagining herself kept awake by her anxiety about Sybil, but in reality going over and over to herself his words, his looks, his tones. And wondering why he behaved so strangely, and how it would all end?

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE LAST AFTERNOON ON THE TERRACE

*“O Erd, O Sonne!  
O Glück, O Lust!  
O Lieb. O Liebe!  
So golden Schön  
Wie Morganwolken  
Auf jenen Höhn.”*

GÖTHE.

RALPH called early the next morning, as he had promised. He was relieved to find, by Marion's account, that Sybil was fairly well, and that there appeared no necessity for sending for Dr. Bailey. At Sybil's earnest request her uncle went in to see her, and remained with her some time. When he returned to the drawing-room, he gave Marion and Mrs. Archer, who had just made her appearance two hours earlier than usual, thanks to her curiosity, a full account of the whole mysterious affair, which, with the additional light thrown upon it by Sybil's communications this morning, he said he had now got to the bottom of.

This was what he had to tell.

Immediately on the receipt of Marion's letter (*this part of the story was not revealed to Mrs. Archer*) he prepared to leave Paris. Some delays arose however, in consequence of which it was not till the evening the eighth day after receiving her summons that he found himself again at Altes. He drove straight to the Rue

des Lauriers, where he had to wait some time at the door, without any one coming to open it.

Growing impatient, and rather uneasy, for his mind was full of what Marion had written to him about Sybil, he suddenly bethought himself that, as likely as not, the window-door in the drawing-room, which opened on to the garden, might be unlatched. He left the court-yard, and returned to the street, told the driver of the carriage which had brought himself and his luggage from the coach office, to wait a few minutes; and then made his way to the garden at the top of the hilly street, on which opened the drawing-room. The garden gate was fastened, but he easily climbed over the railings, and hastened to the glass door. The blinds were down, but the light inside was low. Evidently no one in the room to be started by his unceremonious entrance! More and more alarmed, he quickly tried the door, found it, as he expected, unlatched; and in another moment was in the room.

The lamp was burning feebly, the fire all but out. What could be the meaning of it all? Thinking of nothing but Sybil, it rushed into his mind that perhaps the child was very ill, dying it might be, and he too late to save her. Half expecting to find the whole house-hold assembled in mournful vigil round her bed, he made his way softly to her room.

As he passed the chamber occupied by Miss Vyse he noticed that the door was open and a light on the table. He peeped in but there was no one there. But on the pillow lay as mass of golden curls, all but hiding a round, rosy childish thee, which he soon identified as Dotty. Fast asleep, the picture of health and comfort! Somewhat relieved in his mind, but nevertheless surprised at the change in the domestic arrangements which had thus separated the two little sisters, he stepped softly to the other end of the long passage, up from which again a short staircase led to the little vestibule, on to which opened the nursery apartments. All was quiet. There was very little light, only what found its way up from the lamp in the long passage below. The door of the children's bedroom was nearly closed. He entered the room. The first thing that struck him was that the doors of a large hang-press, close to the entrance of the room, stood wide open, disclosing a row of dresses, evidently the property of Mdlle. Emilie; which, in the faint light, bore a startling resemblance to the headless occupants of the far-famed Bluebeard chamber.

Half smiling at his own fancy, Sir Ralph approached the little bed which he

knew to be Sybil's. But the smile quickly faded from his face at what met him there. At first sight he thought there was no one in the bed. But, looking more closely, he distinguished the outlines of a little form, lying perfectly motionless under the coverings. Huddled up together in a sort of heap it seemed to be.

Ah! How thankful he felt that it lay thus, instead of straightened out into that awful length and stiffness under the white sheet which, once seen, is never, never again forgotten!

Still, though, not so bad as *that*, there was cause enough for alarm.

"Sybil," he said, gently, "Sybil, dear, are you asleep? Put down the clothes and look at me. I have got your letter, and have come from Paris as fast as I could."

But there was no answer, no movement. His eyes were growing accustomed to the dim light and he could have distinguished the least quiver in the little figure. He looked round. An unlighted candle and matches stood on the table. He struck a light, and again spoke to the child. But it was no use. So he tenderly removed the clothes and raised the face, which was turned round on to the pillow. It was indeed Sybil, but what a Sybil to greet him on his return! She was perfectly unconscious. In a dead swoon or faint, which for all he knew might already have lasted so long that recovery might be impossible. But he had known her faint before, poor little girl, and was at no loss what remedies to employ. He took her in his arms, chafed her cold hands and feet, bathed her forehead, and tried hard to revive her with strong smelling salts, which he found, after a search, in Miss Vyse's sanctum. He would not, as yet, ring for assistance. He was so sure the child would best recover were she, on regaining her senses, to find herself alone with him.

In a few minutes she began to show signs of returning consciousness. At last she opened her eyes, raised herself in his arms, and looked about her with that dazed look peculiar to people when recovering from a state of insensibility. He was on the alert for this moment.

"Are you awake now, Sybil dear?" he said. "Are you pleased to see me come back?"

She turned to see his face. Oh! what a look of relief and happiness overspread her poor pale drawn features!

“Uncle Ralph,” she whispered; “dear Uncle Ralph, will you send them away?” she went on with, with a thrill of agony in her voice. “Oh, will you send them away?”

“Who, dear? What?” he asked, eagerly.

“Those dreadful people. Those ladies without any heads. They were cut off long ago, down there, in the courtyard, with that dreadful big cutting thing. And they walk about the house at night. And they come to the side of any little girl’s bed if she doesn’t go to sleep quick. And to-night they came again. And, oh! uncle, they’re coming now!” she screamed, as, happening to turn round, she caught sight of the row of headless dresses in the cupboard. And before Ralph could soothe or explain away her terror, the little creature was torn with terrible hysterics, screaming and shaking in a way pitiful to see, till she again subsided into the death-like faint from which he had but just restored her.

Now he was obliged to summon assistance. In five minutes the house was in a ferment. Such servants as had not taken advantage of their mistress’s rare absence to amuse themselves elsewhere (among which was *not* Mdlle. Emilie), were immediately rushing about, some suggesting one thing, some another, till Sir Ralph wished he had managed the child by himself. At last, among them, they succeeded in reviving her. This time her uncle took care to have the cupboard doors shut before she opened her eyes; and he was only too thankful to agree, notwithstanding the amazement of the scandalized servants, to her proposal that he should take her away to Miss Freer’s house, where “those dreadful people could not come.”

This was the history of the previous night’s adventures up to the time when Sir Ralph arrived at Mrs. Archer’s door with Sybil in his arms.

Cissy and Marion listened in silence to his recital, but when, having got so far, he stopped for a moment to take breath, the former had a host of questions ready for him.

“But what in the world did the child mean, Sir Ralph?” she inquired, eagerly. “‘Dreadful people without heads’—‘cut of in the court-yard.’ I can’t make it out in the least. And if, as May here suspects, Emilie, the maid, is at the bottom of it, what could be her motive? What good could it do her to frighten the child to death, as she nearly did? No, I can’t make it out.”

“Nor could I, Mrs. Archer,” replied Sir Ralph, “till I heard what Sybil had to say this morning. During the Revolution it is perfectly true people’s beads were cut off in our court-yard, for there stood the guillotine. This is a fact sure enough, and well known at Altes. And I now perfectly remember it’s being mentioned to us when we first came here. Sybil, it appears, heard it too, and from the first it made a strong impression on her sensitive imagination. She tells me she never could bear to look out on the courtyard after it grew dark at night; for then this wicked Emilie told her the decapitated victims might be seen promenading about. Some, Emilie told her, with a view to heightening the dramatic effect of her story, might be perceived grubbing about among the stones with which the yard is paved for the lost heads supposed there to be buried. Others, again, would be seen marching along triumphantly like St. Denis, with their heads reposing under their arms. It is really too absurd,” he said, laughing, “though hideous enough to the imagination of a nervous little creature of eight years old.”

“But what in the world did Emilie tell her all this for?” asked Marion, speaking for the first time.

“You may well ask,” he replied “but as far as I can make out she did it, in the first place, simply out of a spirit of low mischief; for the pure pleasure of teasing the child, whom she evidently does not like, and amusing herself with her terrors. Before long she must have discovered that she could turn Sybil’s fears to useful account. For some time past it appears Miss Vyse has taken it into her head to have Lotty domiciled in her own room. Before this Sybil was comparatively happy; Lotty’s substantial presence appearing to her a sufficient safeguard against ghostly visitants. But when she was left alone in the room at night, her terrors increased so that she could not go to sleep. She begged my mother to let her have a light in the room till Emilie came to bed, but this request was refused, my mother having a notion that it would be bad for the child’s eyes. To make up for this however, Emilie was ordered to sit by Sybil every evening till the child fell asleep. Not the pleasantest of duties apparently, for Emilie regularly shirked it. Two or three times, on being thus left to herself, Sybil jumped out of bed and ran down stairs to fetch Emilie; conduct which that young person much resented, as it interfered with her more entertaining way of spending the evening, and also very nearly, more than once, brought her into disgrace with the authorities below stairs. So she hit on the ingenious expedient of telling Sybil that the headless spectres were said to have a special predilection for the long passage leading to her room. ‘They come along there every night,’

Sybil informed me, ‘and if they find any little girl awake, they come to the side of her bed and stand in a row.’ Isn’t it really frightful to think of the lonely little creature’s agonies?”

“Horrible!” said Marion, “but what about the dresses hanging up?”

“Oh, that was another clever dodge of Emilie’s, evidently. I asked Sybil how ever she could be frightened at dresses hanging on pegs, but she assured me she did not know there were any dresses there; so I suppose Emilie keeps the cupboard locked in the day-time, and opens it at night to prevent Sybil’s venturing to rush past the dreadful row of spectres at the doorway.”

“But another thing, Sir Ralph,” said Marion, “why was Sybil afraid to tell me?”

“She was afraid to tell *any one*, I think,” answered he, “except me, because, as she expressed it, I was ‘big and strong’ and ‘they’ couldn’t hurt me. One day, it seems, when much provoked by her complaints, Emilie gave a garbled account of the affair to Miss. Vyse; who, Sybil says, for reasons of her own, was very unkind to her, and defended Emilie. Sybil would told you, Miss Freer, but one day when, she was on the point of doing so, Emilie, perceiving, I suppose, that the child’s powers or endurance were all but exhausted, terrified her into not confiding in you, by vague hints of injury that might result to you from her so doing. Sybil is rather misty as to what exactly Emilie said; but it seems to have been to the effect that if Sybil set you against her by complaints of her nightly neglect of her duty, she, Emilie, could easily be revenged on you by certain information about you in her possession, which Sybil says ‘if Grandmamma knew would have made her “chasser” Miss Freer away.’ I am not clear about it myself. I only tell it you to warn you to have nothing to say to the girl, out of pity, or any other kindly motive. *She* shall be ‘*chasséed*,’ and that very quickly. But first I shall make her explain her insolent words,” he added, with a dark frown on his face.

But just then the clock struck eleven. Sir Ralph jumped up.

“I must be going,” he said, “I want particularly to be home before my mother and Miss Vyse are visible. I forbade the servants to say anything to them last night, and this morning I counted on their not being very alert after last night’s dissipation.”



“I was just wondering what Lady Severn would think of it all!” remarked Mrs. Archer.

“I know what she shall think of it all,” replied Sir Ralph, “that is to say at least, if I have any spark of influence left,” he added in a lower tone. “In the meantime, Mrs. Archer, will you be so very kind as to keep Sybil her till I have set things straight again at home?”

“With the greatest pleasure,” she replied heartily. And then he left them. Just as he was outside the room, she exclaimed, “Bye-the-by, Sir Ralph, you must get some one to pack up and send her some clothes.”

But he did not hear her, and Marion ran, after him to repeat the message.

“Very well you thought of it!” he said laughing, and then he stood for a moment if expecting her to say something more.

“Sir Ralph,” she said, “will you do me a favour?”

“What would I not?” he exclaimed.

“Will you be so good as not mention my name at all to that girl, Emilie?” she asked, “never mind if says rude or impertinent things about me. Let them pass. Only don’t set her more against me. I don’t like having enemies.”

“Very well,” she replied, “as you wish it, I will endeavour to do as you ask.” But he looked rather surprised.

“I daresay you think me very silly,” she said, “but”——

“But nothing,” he interrupted, “make your mind quite easy. You are only too good, too gentle.”

“No, indeed, I am not,” she said with a little sigh. “My motive is a selfish one. I cannot afford to have enemies.”

He looked at her searchingly but very kindly, saying however nothing. The thought passed through his mind, “It must be some family disgrace. Something connected with that father. My poor darling, if only I were free! Can she think anything of that sort would influence me? But I am forgetting. She will have

some one else soon to fight her battles. Just as well, perhaps, for her chances of happiness that she will be out in India! As well for her—better in every way. But—for me!”

As Marion returned to the drawing-room she said to Cissy anxiously—

“Do you think it possible that that Emilie has found out about me, Cissy?”

“Found out about you,” repeated Mrs. Archer. “How? What do you mean?”

“That Freer is not my real name, and all about it,” answered Marion.

“Nonsense, child. How could *she* know anything of the sort? Don’t be so silly. Besides, if she did! You speak as if it were a disgrace. I declare, Marion, you provoke me. I wish most sincerely that every one in Altes knew your real name, be the consequences what they might.”

“Oh, Cissy!” said Marion reproachfully; for Cissy had spoken crossly and pettishly. But Cissy was not repentant.

“It’s not good your saying, ‘Oh Cissy’ in that way, Marion. I repeat what I said before. I wish every one in Altes knew the true state of the case.”

Her tone was a trifle sharp and unkind, but her heart was full of anxious affection. Of late certain misgivings had begun to assail her, and she had spoken the truth as to her wish that the whole were known. “That would indeed be carrying it too far,” she said to herself, “risking her life-happiness for the sake or concealing that boy’s misdemeanours. No indeed! Rather than that I would brave anything or anybody.”

But she was too much in awe of Marion to utter any of these thoughts aloud.

When Sir Ralph returned to the Rue des Lauriers morning, a council of state—war, rather—was held in his mother’s drawing-room; at which for once in his life, Ralph Severn distinguished himself by proving beyond dispute that he had a will, and a very strong one too, of his own.

Lady Severn was amazed, indignant, but finally submissive; repentant even, for having, as her son phrased it, “allowed such goings-on without finding them out.”

“Rather an Irish way of putting it certainly,” he said with a laugh, for he could afford to now that he was victorious. He was a man who could fight, and bravely too, for any one in the world but himself!

Miss Vyse escaped scot-free of course; expressing the greatest surprise and disappointment at Emilie’s “shocking behaviour.”

“A girl we all thought so well of,” she said, with an air of most virtuous indignation, “to have deceived us so grossly! To think how, all this time, she has been making our poor darling Sybil suffer! Why if I had only known she grudged sitting beside the dear child in the evenings how gladly I would have done so myself!” (Florence quite thought she was speaking the truth.) “Oh, Sir Ralph,” she continued, “how fortunate it was you returned last night in that unexpected way! More than fortunate indeed; providential, I may call it.”

“Particularly so,” replied Ralph dryly; “also that you and my mother were out at a ball. By the way, how did you enjoy it?”

“Pretty well,” replied Florence, not quite sure if he had been laughing at her or not. “I missed your waltzing, Sir Ralph. Indeed, I don’t think I have enjoyed any of the balls so much as the second one—the one, you remember, before you went away so suddenly. Still I believe last night’s was considered a good one. It was well attended.”

“So I heard,” said Ralph carelessly.

“So you heard!” said Lady Severn; “news travels fast, it appears. It only took place last night, and you have seen no one this morning, except Mrs. Archer, and she wasn’t at it.”

“No,” he replied; “but I met young Nodouroff this morning on my way to inquire about Sybil. By the by, I wonder why Mrs. Archer wasn’t at it.”

“Oh,” said his mother, “she only went for the sake of that girl, Miss Freer.”

“And she, I suppose, didn’t care about going again,” observed Florence; “she only went to the one. Certainly most of the people they know best have left. The Frasers, and Captain Berwick; he has been away for two or three weeks, but his sister said last night that he is coming back in a week or two.”

“Oh indeed!” said Lady Severn, whereupon the conversation dropped.

Emilie was dismissed on the spot. She at first attempted some vindication of her conduct, which, however, Sir Ralph very quickly put a stop to; and further astonished her by some observations on her own behaviour more truthful than agreeable.

“Who would have thought so quiet a gentleman could fly out so like?” observed Taylor, the leading authority below stairs.

Of course, as soon as the culprit was “found out,” and punished, the whole of the servants were down upon her. One had “never liked her ways,” another had “always thought as much.” In short, not one of them, by their own account, but had possessed evidence enough against her to have led to her dismissal months before; and thus saved an innocent child many weeks of agony, ending in imminent risk to her reason, if not to her life.

“So young Berwick has been away! “thought Ralph “and for this reason Miss Freer was supposed not to care about going to the ball. All well, so be it!”

Sybil remained some days at Mrs. Archer’s, by no means to her grandmother’s delight. Indeed, but for Ralph’s unwonted, but none the less strenuous opposition, the child would have been sent for home that same afternoon. He took the whole responsibility, blame if there were any, on himself; religiously refraining from mentioning Miss Freer as having had any share whatever in the affair; though dwelling strongly on the ready kindness and hospitality of Mrs. Archer in the emergency. Yet, notwithstanding all his care, the fact of Sybil’s flight annoyed Lady Severn exceedingly, naturally so perhaps. From that time, also, her growing dislike to the young governess increased rapidly, which Miss Vyse was quick to perceive and to rejoice at.

Its seed was of her own sowing, and had been fostered with the greatest care. It was to be expected, therefore, that the sight of its strength and vigour should fill her with gratification.

The week that Sybil spent with her kind friends was the happiest she had ever known. Lessons at the Rue des Lauriers were suspended for the time; Lotty was allowed, by her uncle’s intercession, to spend some afternoons with her little sister. She was sorry for Sybil, and anxious to make up to her for her roughness and unkindness.

The two little sisters appeared to cling to each other more fondly and closely than had been the case for long; a state of things the good influences about them were not likely to discourage. With much care Marion and Sir Ralph endeavoured to efface from poor Sybil's mind the recollection of her midnight terrors; and to some extent succeeded. Though so vainly nervous and impressionable, the child was also sensible, and by no means deficient in reasoning powers. By the end of the week she perfectly understood and believed that no real grounds for her alarm had existed; though at the same time, she begged that she might not again be asked to sleep in the room where he had passed so many hours of misery. This request was of course acceded to, and her future comfort further ensured by a kindly; and trustworthy young woman, an elder sister of the amiable Thérèse, being engaged in the place of the objectionable Emilie.

During this week Sir Ralph was naturally good deal at Mrs. Archer's house, which, as might have been expected, did not tend to increase his peace of mind. The state of calm equability which, during his absence from Altes, he believed himself to have attained, lasted only till he was again in Marion's presence. After much resistance, many struggles, he gave in; resigning himself to his fate and to the intense enjoyment of the present.

"After all," thought he, "I suppose it's not much worse for me than for other people. I am certainly not likely to go in for this sort of thing twice in my life, and I may as well take the wretched little taste of happiness that has come in my way, for the very short time it can last."

"For happiness it was, though certainly of curious kind. He perfectly believed her to be engaged to marry another man, one too, whom he could quite imagine it possible that she cared for sincerely, though not perhaps to the full extent that a nature such as hers was capable of. He believed, too, that under any circumstances, it would have been impossible for her to care for *him*, the man Ralph Severn, to even this same small extent; besides which his circumstances were such that he considered marriage, at least for many years to come, as all but out of the question for him. He knew all this, he repeated it over to himself a dozen times a day—and yet—and yet—he could not stay away from her; it was happiness even to be in the same room with her. She was so sweet, so gentle; and yet so bright and intelligent! A merely sweet and gentle woman would not have contented Ralph Severn; would not, though her beauty might have ten times exceeded that of Marion Vere, have made him feel, as she did, that here

indeed was one who suited him—yes, “to the innermost fibre of his being.”

So he went on, playing, alas, with edged tools; knowing full well that the day was not far distant when they would cut him, and deeply too. But thinking not, be it remembered in his defence, that there was the slightest danger of their wounding another as well as himself. Another, not perhaps capable of deeper suffering than he, but a gentle, tender creature. One to whom such suffering would be hard and strange; who would not, improbably, sink altogether beneath it. And one, too, whom he loved—this strong, brave man—loved, though as yet he hardly knew it, so entirely, so intensely, that to save her, he would gladly have agreed to bear through life the burden of her sorrow in addition to his own.

But for this little space, he went dreaming on. There was not just yet anything exactly to awaken him. Besides, he thought himself so particularly wide awake! The remembrance of Frank Berwick’s existence was never absent from him. He looked upon it as a sort of charm, a safeguard against any possible imprudence. Every now and then he used to give himself a little prick with it, as a sort of wholesome reminder, as it were. He noticed certainly that the young man was seldom, if ever, named by either Mrs. Archer or Marion; but that, under the circumstances, was not to be wondered at.

The engagement was not as yet a formally announced one, though he had heard it alluded to, two or three times in other quarters. Frank’s absence was probably connected with arrangements he might be making in preparation for his marriage. In short there were a hundred reasons why they should not care to talk about him. No doubt it was decidedly pleasanter for Ralph that they should not do so. He fancied himself quite prepared for it at any time; but, in point of fact, pricking oneself now and then, in a gingerly manner, by way of testing one’s powers of endurance, is a very different thing from the relentless cut of a doctor’s lancet or the deep, piercing stab of an enemy’s poniard!

Still now and then he felt puzzled. Marion herself puzzled him. In some way she was changed from what she had been when he first knew her. She had never seemed robust though perfectly healthy, but now she looked at times strangely fragile. Her spirits were less equable. Her colour went and came in a way he did like to see. She was always sweet and cheerful, never more so than now; but it sometimes seemed to him that it cost her an effort to appear so. Then, again, she would be so unaffectedly bright and merry, so almost childishly gay and light-hearted, that all his misgivings, so far as she was concerned, vanished as if by

magic. And then he found himself back again in his old place, “middle-aged and dull and dried-up,” utterly unsuited to this happy young creature, whom yet, in all her moods, he found so inexpressibly winning and attractive. She liked him—he was sure of that—liked and trusted and *respected* him, he said to himself, with a mental wry face. “I’m not sure but what I would rather she hated me!” he thought more than once.

And then one day came the rude awakening. All the ruder because he did not know he had been dreaming; or, rather, how unconsciously he had come to live in his dreams, to care more for them than for aught that passed in world of realities!

It was one lovely spring afternoon, early in March, a week or two after Sybil had returned home, and everything in the little world of Altes appeared, for the time being, to be jogging on in its usual course.

Sir Ralph had sauntered into Mrs. Archer’s; a not unprecedented occurrence, for her little drawing-room was a pleasant place to spend an hour or two in, these hot afternoons.

Spring, to our northern ears, hardly expresses the warmth and brilliancy of some of these exquisite first tastes of the coming summer in the south of France. The loveliest time, indeed, of all the year thereabouts; while the green below, still fresh and radiant, matches in brilliance the blue above. Later on in the season trees and herbage look sun-dried and scorched, and one turns with relief to the thought of our less intense summers at home.

It was very hot already at Altes. Though every one was prophesying a week or two of rain before the warm weather should finally set in. This afternoon when Ralph came in, he found both Mrs. Archer and her friend on the terrace, under the shade of the large, over-hanging sun-screen, attached to the windows outside. Soon, however, Cissy got tired, and ensconced herself on her favourite sofa in the coolest corner of the drawing-room. Marion, however, stayed outside. She was busy about some piece of work she seemed to be greatly interested in, and Ralph established himself on the ground near her with a book in his hand, which he professed to be reading; now and then favouring his companions with choice bits which struck his fancy. But, in reality, most of his attention was given to Marion. He watched her from behind his book, and thought how pretty her hands looked, glancing in and out of the bright mazes of the many-coloured

wools she was working.

It was a deliciously lazy afternoon! Hot enough to excuse one's not feeling much inclined for exertion; and yet with all the freshness and novelty of spring about it too. They were all very happy. Marion, in her own way, enjoying the present, and Ralph, all his pricks forgotten for the time, in a state of perfect content. He had actually got the length of talking nonsense; he, the learned Sir Ralph Severn, the polyglot, the antiquary, the "everything-fusty-and-musty-in-one," as Cissy was impertinent enough to describe him that day—long ago it seemed now—when his name was heard by Marion Vere for the first.

Suddenly there came a little pause, which was broken by Cissy, whose ideas seldom ran in one direction for five minutes together.

"Marion," she exclaimed from her sofa, "isn't it to-day that Frank Berwick is expected back? I hope it is, for I am most anxious to see how he has executed our commissions."

"*Your* commissions, you mean, Cissy?" said Marion. Something in the tone struck Ralph as unlike the girl's usual voice. Something slightly sharp, ungentle—he hardly knew what. But he did not look at her just then.

"Nonsense, child," persisted Cissy, who, in spite of all her quickness, was sometimes marvellously dull; and who, too, like many otherwise most amiable people, would sometimes, to prove her in the right, talk far from cautiously or advisedly; "nonsense, child. It is ridiculous of you to speak that way. Whether they are actually your commissions or mine you know very well it was to oblige *you*, Frank Berwick offered to execute them. Indeed," she went on recklessly, "if it was any other girl than you, I should call it very affected of you, trying to make out that—"

"Cissy!" said, Marion.

Then Ralph looked at her. From where she sat Mrs. Archer could not see her cousin, but the tone of Marion's voice stopped her in what more she was going to say, and she muttered some half apology, carelessly, and took up a book that lay beside her. So the sudden silence that followed was never explained to, and, indeed, hardly observed by Mrs. Archer.

Ralph looked up at Marion. For an instant her eyes met, but immediately she



turned away. But he had seen enough. She rarely, as a rule, changed colour. The more tell-tale, therefore, appeared to him the flood of crimson which now overspread her face. Not face only. Neck, throat, all of the fair, white skin that was visible changed to deep, burning red. Not a merely passing girlish blush, but a hot over-whelming crimson glow, that, to Ralph, told of deep, heart emotion. He was right. But was it all for Frank Berwick?

“Oh,” thought poor Marion, “What a fool I am! Now, if even never before, he is sure to think it is true; to believe those mischievous reports.”

Ralph’s glance only rested on her for a moment. Then he looked away, looked out beyond the little terrace where was spread before him as lovely a view as mortal eyes could wish to behold. The bright smiling landscape in front, of trees and fields and gardens; here and there dotted with graceful villas or pretty cottages: and far away beyond, the still snow-clad mountains, serene and grand in their dazzling purity, their tops melting away in the few soft grey clouds which there alone, at the horizon, broke the deep even azure of the sky.

Two minutes before, Ralph had been admiring all this intensely. What had come over it now? The brightness seemed to have suddenly gone out of the sunlight, there was a dull grey look over all. What was it that had thus changed the world to him? Ah! what was it?

He knew it now. Knew for the first time fully and clearly, not merely that he loved this girl beside him, but far more than that, knew now in the depth of the agony which it cost him to realize that he must lose her, knew for the first time, *how* he loved her.

For a minute or two no one spoke. Ralph could not have uttered a word had he tried. A curious feeling, almost of suffocation, for a few moments oppressed him. But it gradually passed off. Then he rose, said something of it’s being later than he thought, shook hands with Marion, now busy again with her substantial rainbow, and left the little terrace.

As he passed through the drawing-room there lay Mrs. Archer on her comfortable sofa, fast asleep!

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# CHAPTER I.

## AN EVENTFUL RAMBLE.

*“I did never think to marry.”*

*“What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?”*

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

SIR RALPH did not go to Mrs. Archer's the next day. Nor for several days after that. How he got through them he could not have told; though probably none of those about him saw in him any change, or traces of disturbance of any kind. He heard Florence, speaking to his mother, mention that Captain Berwick had returned, and he fancied there was a hidden meaning in her tone as she said it. But yet it did not somehow interest him. It seemed already a long time ago since that afternoon on the terrace; and he was so utterly absorbed and engrossed by his own feelings just at this time that outward things did not readily come home to him. He felt as if it were already all over. The same moment which revealed the depth of his love for Marion had burnt into him the conviction that she was lost to him. He knew that his staying away for three days, from the house which had of late become an almost daily resort to him, could not but be observed and commented upon; but he did not care. Just now he was suffering too newly and acutely, to be very sensitive to lesser annoyances, and it seemed a matter of small consequence that his behaviour should appear inconsistent or eccentric.

As it happened however, his conduct was not discussed or in any way commented upon by Mrs. Archer and her young friend. Cissy had been ill for two or three days; so ill as to be unable to leave her room, and though all

Marion's time, out of school hours, had been spent in nursing her, they had neither of them felt inclined for much conversation.

Ralph heard of the poor little woman's illness quite accidentally.

At luncheon on the third day since his memorable visit, Sybil asked if she might go round by the market in her walk, to buy some fresh flowers.

"It's too late for fresh flowers to-day," said Miss Vyse.

And "What do you want them for?" asked Lady Severn.

"For the little boy's mamma, Grandmamma," answered Sybil, "she has been ill for two days, and Miss Freer said she was going to get up this afternoon, and she wanted to get some flowers to make the drawing-room pretty, but she hadn't time to go round by the market."

"And so she left orders with you to do so!" said Lady Severn, sarcastically, "Really, I must say Miss Freer's ideas of what is fitting and becoming are peculiar, to say the least. To think of my granddaughters being sent all over the town to execute her commissions!"

"Oh, Grandmamma," exclaimed Sybil, on the point of bursting into tears, "it wasn't that way at all."

"No, indeed," added Lofty, coming to the rescue; "it was Sybil herself thought of it, and I said I would ask, but she said she would, because when we looked at our money, I had only my gold Napoleon and no little money. And she had two half-francs. So we fixed she should be the one to buy them."

"You are very rude to interrupt in that way, Charlotte," said her grandmother severely, "both you and Sybil are by no means changed for the better lately in your manners." At which Lotty looked resentful, but far from penitent.

"If you both get up early to-morrow I'll take you to the market myself before breakfast," said Ralph, "then the flowers are sure to be fresh."

This proposal was received with delight by both children, who scampered off to consult the equally amiable sister of Thérèse as to the best means of ensuring their waking by sunrise.

Then Ralph roused himself and set out for a solitary walk. He went first in the direction of Mrs. Archer's house, intending to enquire at the door if she were better, without going in. But as he entered the street in which it was situated, he met Charlie and Thérèse, from whom he obtained the information that Madame was much better, so much better that Mademoiselle was going to let her get up this afternoon.

Sir Ralph expressed his gratification at the good news.

"Be sure you tell your mamma, Charlie," said he, "that I was coming to ask for her, when I met you. And give her my very kind regards, and say I hope she will soon be quite well."

"I'll remember," said Charlie, "werry kind regards, and hopes she'll soon be well. And what am I so say to Madymuzelle, that's May, you know? What am I to say to her? Best love, that's prettier than kind regards. I always send *my* best love."

"Do you?" said Ralph, "but you see you're a little chap. Best love isn't half so pretty when people are big."

"Isn't it?" said the child dubiously. But Ralph patted his cheek, and walked on.

As he drew near Mrs. Archer's house he saw a gentleman come out of it, and walk on in front of him. It was Captain Berwick. He had only been leaving some books at the door, which his sister had sent to amuse the invalid, but this, of course, Ralph could not know; and, though he thought he had suffered in these two days all that was possible to endure, he found that the sight of his successful rival's quitting the house after enjoying, in all probability, a tête-à-tête with Marion, added a fresh pang to all he had already undergone.

Frank had not seen him, and he might easily have escaped his notice, but a strange impulse urged him forward. He walked rapidly, and overtook him just as he reached the corner of the street. The young man looked surprised, but responded cordially enough to his greeting.

"So you're back again at Altes," said Ralph, for want of anything better to say.

Frank did not deny the fact.

“Yes,” he replied; “the day before yesterday I turned up again. You’ve been away too, I hear?”

“Oh dear, yes; for ever so long. I left before you did. Indeed, I did not know till my return that you had not been here all the time.”

“We seem wonderfully interested in each other’s movements,” observed Frank, as they walked on, with rather an awkward laugh. He evidently, for some reason or other, did not feel particularly comfortable in his present society.

Ralph did not reply, and for a minute or two there was silence. Suddenly the same uncontrollable impulse again seized him, and he did not resist it.

“It’s absurd,” he thought, “going on in this way. It will be a ghastly satisfaction to hear it confirmed by his own lips.”

He turned to Frank.

“Excuse me, Berwick, if I am premature—I have certainly not yet heard it formally announced—but—I am right, am I not, in congratulating you?”

Frank looked confused and exceedingly surprised. A cloud of not small annoyance began to creep up over his handsome face.

“You must excuse *me*, Severn, but I haven’t the remotest idea what you are talking about. ‘Congratulate me.’ On what, pray?”

It was intensely disagreeable for Ralph. The last man on earth to pry into, or gossip about his neighbours’ affairs; who, indeed, carried to such an extreme his sensitive horror of intrusion, his shy avoidance of all matters of personal interest, that, in a general way, his nearest friend might have lost a fortune or gained a wife without his appearing to have heard of the event. He would have given worlds to have made some half apology, to have shuffled out of it with some muttered words of “must have been a mistake,” or “only a piece of the usual Altes gossip, which Captain Berwick must excuse.”

But he was determined to have done with it and drove himself on remorselessly.

“On your marriage,” he said quietly, “or, rather, I should say on your engagement to be married.”

“To whom?” asked Frank, in a constrained voice.

“To Miss Freer,” replied Ralph.

“And who told you?” asked Frank again.

“No one in particular,” answered Ralph, beginning to chafe under all this cross-questioning; “I heard it in several quarters, and you may be sure I felt no doubt of the truth of the report, or I certainly would not have motioned *any* young lady’s name, as I have just now done.”

He spoke stiffly. He could not understand Frank’s behaviour. But his bewilderment changed to utter astonishment, when suddenly Captain Berwick turned round upon him.

“ ‘No one in particular;’ you say Sir Ralph Severn, told you this piece of News. Then perhaps you will be so good as till this friend of yours ‘no one in particular,’ that he or she will do better in future to refrain in the first place from believing, and in the second place from circulating, such idle and mischievous tales, for which there is no foundation whatever in fact. As to whether this piece of advice may not with peculiar propriety be extended to yourself, I leave you to judge.”

So saying he bowed stiffly, his face flushed with excitement and indignation, and turning sharply in an opposite direction, left Ralph to pursue his walk alone.

The whole interview had passed so rapidly that Ralph felt thoroughly confused. Frank had left him no time to reply to his extraordinary outburst, and indeed, had he done so, Ralph would hardly have known what to say. He did not feel angry, and would have been ready enough to apologise for however unintentionally, hurt or annoyed his hot-blooded companion: though really it was difficult to see in what way he had done so! As he walked on slowly his thoughts began gradually to emerge from their bewilderment, and to take the only form by which it appeared to him that the riddle could be explained.

Frank was ashamed of himself! He had gone too far with Miss Freer, and at the last had dishonourably withdrawn. No wonder the mention of this report put

him in a passion. No wonder indeed. Ralph ground his teeth, as for one passing moment he wished he were Marion's brother. This explained it all. Her altered looks, her variable spirits, her painful agitation at the mention of Captain Berwick's return. Poor little governess! This then was the price she had to pay for her womanly self-denial and honest independence of spirit. (For Ralph had gathered from Cissy's remarks that during her stay at Altes there had been no positive necessity for Marion's exertions, but that she had "too great a notion of independence.") It must have been that mother and sisters of his! Looking down upon her because she was a daily governess. Looking down on *her*.

"Oh," thought Ralph to himself, "if only I could set ever thing at defiance and brave the future, even now I feel as if I should like to snatch her away from all those horrid people and devote my life to making her happy. But," and with the 'but' his mood changed, "she doesn't care for *me*. Oh, Frank Berwick, what a weak, contemptible fool you are! For he did care for her—I am sure of that."

But hardly had his reflections reached this point when they were interrupted. Hasty steps behind him which his absorption had prevented his hearing as they drew nearer, and in another moment there stood Frank Berwick beside him. His face still flushed, but more now from eagerness than annoyance, and with a look of resolution about it too.

"Severn," he began abruptly, "I behaved like a fool just now; but I was most intensely annoyed, as you will understand when you hear what I have got to say. I want to tell you something. It's rather a queer thing to do, I know, but it seems to me we have all been playing at cross purposes, and I shall feel better satisfied if I tell you. There is not another man living, I don't think, that I would trust, as I am going to let you see I trust you."

He stopped, rather awkwardly, for Ralph had not by glance or gesture encouraged him to proceed. Now, however, he could hardly avoid saying something.

"If I can be of use to you, Captain Berwick," he said, coldly, "I shall be glad to do what I can. But, remember a stranger can seldom do much good by meddling among relations, if that, as I suspect, is what you want of me."

Frank smiled.

"I see what you're driving at," he said, "and that confirms me in resolving to



set you right; for my own sake, if for no other. You think, Severn, I see plainly, that my very evident admiration—to use no stronger word—for the young lady you mentioned a short time ago, would—nay, *should*— have resulted in what you rather rashly congratulated me upon just now, had it not been for some backwardness on my part. Fear of my people’s opposition, or some such obstacle. You are quite mistaken. I am in no way dependent on my parents. I have a good appointment in India and need consult no one as to whom I marry. Nor, indeed, would my people have opposed me in this. Of that I am quite sure. Did it never strike you, Severn, that there might be another way of accounting for the present state of affairs, which you evidently don’t think satisfactory? You have been blaming me; suppose you find I am more to be pitied than blamed. It’s not a pleasant thing to tell, Severn, but this is the actual state of the case. I *did* offer myself and all that I had in the world to Miss Freer, most distinctly and unmistakably. It certainly was not much to offer, but such as it was it was most honestly laid before her, to take or leave. And she chose the latter.”

“The latter?” repeated Ralph, as if he hardly understood what Frank was saying.

“Yes, the latter. In plain English, Severn, she wouldn’t have me. Refused me out-and-out. Decidedly, unmistakably, but all the same, she did it in such a way that, though rejecting me as a lover, she kept me as a friend. And that’s a feat few women can perform. Her friend, indeed. She has none truer.”

“It does honour not only to her, Berwick,” said Ralph, warmly, “but still more to you. But when did all this happen?” he asked eagerly, adding in the same breath, “forgive me. I have no right to ask such questions.”

“You are perfectly welcome to the whole story,” said Frank, too much in earnest to stand on much ceremony; “in fact, that you should hear the whole story was my object in telling you any. When did it happen? Oh, ages ago! I thought I had begun to get over it a little, till you touched the tender place just now. It was on the night of the second ball. You remember? The day before you went away.”

Did he not remember?

“But now comes the part of the whole I most want to tell you,” went on Frank; “and yet the hardest to, even hint, to you. I fervently hope I am not doing

wrong, but I am sure I can trust you, Severn. Just now when I lost my temper, it was not merely mortification and all that sort of thing; it was indignation against you.”

“But what on earth for?” asked Ralph in amazement.

“Don’t you see? But of course you don’t. If you did, you wouldn’t require me to tell you. I was furious at you, very much in the same way that you were furious at me. I declare, Severn,” he broke out, half smiling, but impatiently, seeing that the look of bewilderment did not in the least clear from Ralph’s face. “I declare you are very dense. I know you’re very learned and clever, but I must say you are uncommonly stupid too. Don’t you see?” he repeated. “You were indignant with me, thinking I had been trifling with the best and sweetest girl in the world. Well, I was angry because I thought the very same thing of you.”

The light began to break on Ralph, but very faintly as yet.

“I understand you to some extent,” he said; “but surely I, so much older and graver than you—surely Altes gossip might leave me alone.”

“That it won’t,” said Frank;” but it isn’t Altes gossip I am talking about. To speak plainly, Severn, for you drive me to it. When Severn she, you know who, refused me, it did not require much penetration to discover she had the best of reasons. She is no coquette, and she is very young. Only one thing had blinded her to my feelings towards her, otherwise she would never have found it in her gentle heart to let them go so far unchecked. And this thing was her own devotion to another. Don’t you see it *now*, Severn? No wonder I blamed you. You, the luckiest man on earth! For I knew she was not the sort of girl to have given her affection unsought. And that night, when you came to tell her you were leaving Altes, in that sudden, cruel way, I could have done I don’t know what to you, Severn. Till to-day, I never doubted you knew it. You see you went there pretty often, and that, for you, said a good deal. Altogether, no one but yourself could have made me believe you were so blind. If I have been mistaken, Severn, in believing that you cared for her, for heaven’s sake do not misuse what I have confided to you, by amusing yourself at her expense. Though, after all, I cannot quite believe I *have* been mistaken he added anxiously.

“You deserve my secret, Berwick,” said Ralph, in a voice that was husky in spite of his efforts. “You are a good fellow, and I see your motive. You shall

have my secret. You were *not* mistaken. There now, remember that, however strange my after conduct may seem to you. I shall, whatever I may be forced to do, think more of *her* happiness than of my own. Goodbye, for the present and thank you," he said, earnestly, as they shook hands hastily, and separated.

Frank sailed for India three days after.

Before he went, however, he took pity on the ill-requited devotion of Dora Bailey; pro-posed to her, and was of course, accepted. Poor Frank! He was not altogether of the stuff of which heroes of romance are made, though one deed of his life had, at least according to the world's standard in such matters, somewhat savoured of the heroic. He made one stipulation, however, with the enraptured Dora: she was to tell no one of the engagement for two months to come; at the end of which time he promised to write to her father, whose consent he did not anticipate much difficulty in obtaining, and to make arrangements for her joining him in India, under suitable escort. It was rather hard upon Dora, but she was too much in awe of him, and too grateful for his immense condescension to dream of opposing him, though she thought to herself, "How *very* nice it would have been to announce my engagement before every one leaves Altes for the summer. Particularly to that Miss Freer, who has done her best to lure him away from me."

She would have had no objection to being married on the spot and setting off with him then and there, which, considering it would have involved the going without a *trousseau* and all its delightful attendants, proves that she was *very* deeply in love!

"She's not a bad little thing in her way," said Frank to himself, "though rather too much of a goose. And certainly a long way better than anything I could have picked up in India. So, on the whole, it's the best thing I can do, for I couldn't stand much more of that horrible bachelor life out there."

But as for marrying her on the spot! No, he was not quite ready for that. Other things as yet were too fresh; though after a time, and a few mouths of unsatisfactory, lonely life in India, he, being domestic in his tastes, hoped to be able to work up to a moderate amount of love for the silly, affectionate baby.

"She's pretty, and any way I know she cares for me, which is always something. And I'm not likely ever to have a hotter chance, if as good."

And when the time came to say goodbye, he really felt more sorry to part with her than he could have believed possible; and he whispered to her that the period of separation should not be a long one, if it was in his power to shorten it.

When Frank left him, Ralph still walked on. Mechanically, for he was quite unaware what direction he was following, or how far he had gone. His whole being was shaken to its centre. He could see clearly along no line of thought. All was confusion. What had he done? What *should* he do? Duty and inclination, prudence and generosity, warred against each other. Worse than this, one duty took up arms against another, and which to consider victorious he could not decide. All his past convictions as to what was right and wise for *him*, firm and sound as he had thought them, were suddenly uprooted and thrown in his face, by the new claims, not merely on his inclination, but on his honour, which Frank's communication had revealed to him. His was one of those morbidly conscientious natures which persist in always erecting barriers between the right and the pleasant. Often, no doubt, barriers are planted there already by higher hands than ours, in which case, all we can do is to submit, and make the best of the thorny road. But Ralph and others like him could not feel content with. He could hardly believe that duty sometimes wears an attractive form; that sometimes it is meet and lawful for us to gather the roses blooming by the way, and to saunter for awhile on the suit and inviting pastures, there to refresh our weary, travel-sore feet.

Had he not known and felt how entirely and intensely he cared for Marion, he could, in one way, have decided more easily, he said to himself; though in so thinking he erred. For had he cared for her less, he could have offered her nothing meet for her acceptance! Of one like him, the fullest, deepest love would alone be worthy of the name at all. But the thought of winning her was so unspeakably tempting that he doubted himself:

“It is all abominable selfishness,” he said to himself, “I have no right to think of it. No man has less right to dream of marriage than I. In all probability I should only be dragging her into a life of struggling anxiety. Far worse to bear than her present dependence; for then she might have others to care for, and for whom she would kill herself with anxiety. She is that sort of woman, I know. If I want a wife I should choose a not over sensitive, managing young woman—from which all the same Heaven preserve me!—one who would be good at living on next to nothing, for to all appearances that is about what I should have to offer her.”

All most reasonable and true, if such indeed were his circumstances.

“But,” whispered a mischievous little voice, “supposing it true that this poor Marion loves you—loves you as you love her—have you any right to condemn her too, to the suffering you yourself, for your manhood, find hard enough to bear?”

“And then the battle all began over again, with small prospect of being quickly or satisfactorily concluded. But there came an interruption. This walk was indeed to be an eventful one to Sir Ralph.

He was hastening on, walking faster than usual, as was his habit when agitated or perplexed; when, turning sharply a corner of the road, he came suddenly upon Mr. Price, sauntering along, an open book in his hand, of which he read a little from time to time. How peaceful and at rest he looked! The picture of a calm, emotionless student, undisturbed by the passions and anxieties by which ordinary mortals are tossed and torn. True, so far, for now in his autumn his life was even and colourless enough; but it had not always been so. There were furrows his brow, deep lines round the sensitive mouth, which told that he too had fought his battles, had loved and sorrowed like his fellows!

“Sir Ralph!” he exclaimed, with a bright look of pleasure, “how delighted I am to have met you. Out on a solitary ramble like myself. Have you any objection to my joining you? What a lovely day, is it not? Not nearly so oppressively hot as it has been. But which way are you going?”

“Any way you like,” said Ralph, “it’s quite the same to me. I am merely taking a constitutional, as you see,” with a forced laugh.

“Well then,” said the tutor, on whose quick ears neither the tone nor the laugh fell disregarded, “since you have no choice, suppose we cross the road and return to Altes by that lane opposite. It’s not much of a round. Three to four miles will bring us home, and it’s pleasanter than the dusty highway.”

“Thank you,” replied Ralph, “that will do very well.”

And they walked on for some little time in silence. Suddenly Ralph remembered himself.

“I am afraid, Mr. Price, you won’t find me very good company to-day. I am

thoroughly out of sorts, mentally, that is to say. I am wretchedly unhappy because I can't see my way before me. I want to do right, and I cannot find out which way before me it lies. I couldn't say as much as this to anyone else, but I know of old how I can trust you. And I don't want you to think my queer behaviour arise from any other cause."

"There is no queer behaviour in your treating me as an old friend, my dear boy," answered Mr. Price. "Do just as you are inclined. If you don't wish to talk, keep silence. It is a pleasure to me to have a quiet hour with you, whether you talk or not. But at the same time, my dear Sir Ralph, I am an older man by many years than you, and my life has not been all smooth sailing. It is just possible I might be able to suggest something—advise you even, being so much older," he added apologetically, "if you should think fit to take me into your confidence as to your present perplexity."

Ralph made no answer. Mr. Price looked penitent.

"I trust you don't think me officious or presumptuous," he began. "Believe me, Sir Ralph—"

"Do one thing to please me, Mr. Price," said his *ci-devant* pupil, "forget all about that 'Sir.' Let me be plain Ralph again for a while, to you at least. It will make it easier for me to confess all my sins to you, as if I were a lad again."

Mr. Price smiled at his fancy.

"If you have any sins to confess, my dear Ralph," he said, "it will *not* be like old times. I shall never have another like you—no, never," he added affectionately.

"Perhaps you won't call it a sin," replied Ralph; "if not, so much the better. All the same, for *me*, if not a sin, it was a piece of inexcusable folly. You would never guess what I have done, Mr. Price."

"Should I not?" asked he drily. "Are you quite sure of that?"

"Quite sure," answered Ralph, "no one would believe it of me. This is what I have done, Mr. Price. I have fallen in love like any unfledged boy; or rather not like that at all, for that would be a passing affair, which, to my sorrow and my joy in one, mine is not. It is very sober earnest with me, Mr. Price. It is indeed.

The whole of everything is changed to me, and what to do, how to act, I cannot for the life of me decide.”

“And the young lady?” put in Mr. Price.

“Yes, the young lady. That’s the worst of it, the worst and the best. I am horribly afraid, horribly afraid—and yet, at the bottom of my selfish heart intensely, unspeakably delighted to think so,—afraid I say, that she, my poor dear child, has been no wiser than I. Is it possible, Mr. Price, do you think it possible, that any sweet, lovely girl could care for *me*? Ugly, stupid and unattractive as I am. I can hardly believe it. And yet—”

It was rather difficult for Mr. Price to help laughing at Ralph’s most original way of making his confession. But in pity to his unmistakable earnestness, he controlled himself, and said gravely,—

“Yes, Ralph, I do think it possible, very possible, that such a girl as you describe may care for you as you deserve to be cared for. And if I am right in what I suppose, I think you a wise and fortunate man. Fortunate in having obtained, wise, in having sought for, the love of that young girl; for she is not one to love lightly. She is a sweet, true girl, and she will be an even sweeter woman! I can’t pity you, Ralph, if your choice, as I suspect, has fallen on Marion Freer.”

“You have guessed rightly,” said Ralph, “though how you came to do so passes my comprehension. But you don’t understand it all yet, Mr. Price. ‘Wise and fortunate,’ you call me. The former I certainly have not been in this matter. To tell the truth I never thought about it, till the mischief was done. Fortunate, most wonderfully so, I should indeed consider myself, were I free to avail myself of this good fortune.

“Free, my dear boy?” exclaimed Mr. Price. “I confess I don’t understand you. Why are you not so? You are of age, your own master to a sufficient extent to marry when and where you choose. It is all very well to think of pleasing your mother, but you and she have not lived so much together as to be in any way dependent on each other in the way that some mothers and sons are. Probably Lady Severn might not consider Miss Freer suitable as to position and all that. But no one can look at her and not see that she is a lady! And beyond that I do not see that Lady Severn is called on to interfere.”

“Nor do I,” said Ralph, “but *she* thinks she is. But don’t mistake me. It is no over regard to my mother’s prejudices that is influencing me. It is sheer necessity. This is the actual state of the case, Mr. Price—I am utterly and entirely dependent upon my mother. Not one shilling, not one farthing of my own do I either possess at present, or have I any certainty of ever possessing. How then can I think myself free to marry; to involve another in such galling dependence on my mother’s caprices? Though, truly speaking, hitherto the dependence has not galled me particularly. It affected no one but myself, and till now it never occurred to me how terribly it might complicate matters.”

Mr. Price stopped and looked at the speaker with an air of extreme bewilderment.

“Even now, my dear Ralph,” he said, “I don’t clearly follow you. In what is your position different from your brother’s? John married to please himself. As far as I remember Lady Severn did not particularly fancy the Bruce connection, but then she was too sensible to oppose it; knowing as she did that in the end all would be his. You mean, I suppose, that the amount of your yearly allowance depends on her goodwill? But if I remember rightly this was settled permanently when John came of age; and I never before doubted that you were now in receipt, as a matter of course, or what had been his. Besides, in any case the whole *must* be yours eventually. It is only a question of a little time! You seem to be forgetting the entail.”

“Forgetting it,” repeated Ralph, “no indeed; though there is little use in remembering what no longer exists. I will explain it all to you. But in the first place as to my allowance. It is altogether an arbitrary affair. John’s was settled as you say—settled in such a way that he was able to marry to please himself, without having to go on his knees for my lady’s permission. But then he was the heir; and my mother’s favourite. Whereas I, as you know, a mistake from the beginning, in childhood and youth barely endured; in manhood still more unfortunate in becoming the possessor of empty honours I never wished for; can hardly expect now for the first time, to find my mother ready to accede to my wishes; to agree in short to what few mothers in her position could consider other than an immense folly and mistake. No, Mr. Price, I have thought it all over calmly and dispassionately. My mother would *never* consent to my marrying a governess. I don’t think she cares about money. To do her justice she is not mercenary. But the thought of my wife having been a governess she could *never* get over.”



“And the entail?” put in Mr. Price, “what about that? You don’t mean to say you consented to its being broken?”

“Yes,” replied Ralph, “I do mean to say so. The entail no longer exists. That part of the affair I have in a sense no one but myself to thank for. This was how it happened. It was soon after John’s death—that horrible time you know, when my mother was really mad with grief, and the whole household shocked and upset by the accident and its dreadful result. I came home just in time to see him die. He was hardly conscious, but he whispered something when they told him I was there. I could not catch the words, but my mother said it was an appeal to me to be good to his children. Very probably it was. Well, after his death, my mother fell ill, and made up her mind that she too was going to die. She was in a frightfully low, nervous state, and her mind preyed on the notion that these children, Lotty and Sybil, were going to be left to my tender mercies, and that, I verily believe, I would turn them out into the streets! Of course they were utterly unprovided for, and as things were could not be made independent. So nothing would satisfy her but the breaking of the entail, to which I, miserable enough at being thus forced into my brother’s place, and at seeing how every one wished *I* had been thrown from my horse instead of him, was only too ready to consent. It was done, and a portion of ten thousand pounds each, was raised for my nieces. Then the estate was resettled, giving back to my mother, of course, her former life-estate according to her marriage-settlement.”

“But only hers for life, Ralph,” interrupted the tutor. “It will all be yours in the end?”

“If I survive her,” said Ralph, “But if not, and if I marry without her approval, what then? Why, my unfortunate widow and yet more unfortunate children would be simply beggars! Not one farthing of all she has, would get to them, save she gave it of free gift. Which thing, Mr. Price, in such a case she would never do. I am not exaggerating the state of the case. I know my mother well—her good points as well as her weak ones—and I am not reckoning without my host. Very lately she has told me her mind on the subject of my possible marriage; told it me plainly enough; and I know what I have to expect. If I marry to please her, she will, I know, act most liberally. If not, all I can look for depends on the contingency of my surviving her. She has not actually threatened to stop my allowance *unless* I marry as she wishes, but she very nearly did so. And I may tell you, Mr. Price,” added Ralph, his dark cheek flushing darker, “that my marrying to please her is utterly and entirely out of the question. She is

bewitched I think, but thank Heaven *I* am not. If had but a certainty, however small, I would marry to-morrow, if my sweet Marion would have me, and leave Florence Vyse to the enjoyment of all she can extract from my poor mother. For that is all she wants. My mother's money, not me; but unfortunately she sees that through me she might best secure it."

"But the Whitelake estate?" asked Mr. Price, "that surely is independent of Lady Severn."

"Yes," replied Ralph, "that was not in my grandfather's power touch, when he made over all the rest to his daughter. It went to my father with the title. But unfortunately between his succeeding to the title and his marrying the heiress several years intervened. Whitelake was not much of a place to begin with—I don't think in its best days it gave more than some fifteen hundred a year; and my father mortgaged it so heavily that now the rents only just cover the mortgage interest. So that is a merely illusory possession, you see, I have nothing, Mr. Price. Nothing whatever and no certainty of ever having anything. And, then, though not idle, I am desultory. At this moment I see before me no means of gaining enough to marry upon, even were I more sure than I am of my own health and strength, and even if I could make up my mind to risk the future. The present even is barred to me."

"But if John had not died, Ralph? If you had remained in your original place as younger son. You are no worse off than you would have been then."

"Yes, I am," said Ralph emphatically, "ten times worse off. Had John lived some small provision would have been secured to me. He often talked of this. And I am worse off in another way. At that time I was getting on fairly well and should soon have risen higher. I had been vice consul at —— for some time, and had a good chance of succeeding Sir Archibald eventually. I liked the East, and it suited me. Climate and everything. I had ample time for the studies I liked best, and in my quiet, stupid way I was contented enough. Looking back on it now I certainly wonder at myself." He went on dreamily. "I have, to my cost, had a shadowy, tantalizing glimpse of something like happiness! But at the time I believed myself to be an exception to the rest of mankind. I thought myself perfectly secure against this sort of thing"—he smiled half bitterly as he spoke. "You see how I am punished for my presumption."

Mr. Price answered by another question.

“Why, then, did you leave the East? I was never quite sure of the reason.”

“Solely and entirely to please my mother. Though she cared little for me personally, she had a regard for me as the head of the family, and thought it unfitting that I should spend my life half buried alive out there. Then the estate, Medhurst, puzzled her. The agent left and she had to choose another. Then, too, she had that fit of thinking she was going to die. Altogether, I seemed to have no choice. So I threw up my appointment, as you know.”

“I think you did wrong, Ralph. Wrong in this way. You should not have cut the ground from under your feet in both directions. You should not have thrown up your only other chance without securing to yourself a competency at home. This you might easily have done at the time the money was raised for John’s children.”

“Yes,” said Ralph penitently. “I see it plainly enough now. But at that time I stood so completely alone. It never occurred to me that I should ever have to be selfish for others!”

“Well, there is no use blaming you now,” said Mr. Price. “The present question is, what can you, what should you do?”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Sir Ralph. “And you see, Price, how horribly complicated it is. Were only I myself concerned I could soon decide, whatever agony it cost me. But if indeed, it be true, as I have great reason to believe (for the life of me I can’t be unselfish enough to say “fear”), that *she* is involved, that she cares for me,”—his voice sank as he uttered the words—“what can I do? How can I condemn another to the suffering that it has taken all my manhood to endure?”

Mr. Price did not reply. They walked on for some time in silence.

Suddenly the elder man turned to his companion, with an apparently irrelevant question.

“Did you see Sir Archibald when you were in town lately?”

“Sir Archibald?” repeated Ralph, with surprise. “Oh, yes, I saw him. He was very gracious and condescended to approve of my notes on the various *patois* about here. Though, of course, Basque is his great hobby; and I have not been

able to collect much new information about that. He is leaving England again next month. He says Cameron has not been so well lately.”

“So I heard,” said Mr. Price; “indeed I had better tell you at once what I am thinking of. I heard from Cameron yesterday. He is returning home. He can’t stand the climate. Now, Ralph, you see your old post will be free again. Supposing Sir Archibald were willing to use his interest for you to get it again, would you take it?”

Ralph did not answer at once. When he did at last speak it was slowly and thoughtfully.

“Yes,” he said, “I think I would. That is to say I should like to have the option of it to fall back upon, if—if I am right in my hope—or fear,” he added with a smile. “Thank you for telling me of it. But what must I do? It is not much use writing to my old chief. It would be much better to see him; don’t you think so?”

“Much better, I should say, from what I know of him. If you take my advice, Ralph, you will go over to London as soon as you can, see Sir Archibald, and, as you say yourself, secure the option of the appointment. There is no such tremendous hurry, as Cameron is not coming home for a month or two. But you should lose no time in obtaining Sir Archibald’s promise to get you the refusal of it. I don’t know the particulars of the thing, I suppose you could live on it, if the worst came to the worst and Lady Severn refused all assistance? But, remember, I am not advising you to anything rash. You must, if possible, be surer of your ground before risking a quarrel with your nearest relation. On the other hand, you have no right to ask for this young girl’s pledge till you are sure of *something* offer her. It is an awkward position, a very awkward position,” he repeated.

“But Price,” said Ralph, eagerly, “do you mean to say that were I obtaining this small certainty for the present, I should be justified in marrying? I—we could certainly live on my pay out there. Comfortably enough, I dare say. But the future. What about that?”

Mr. Price looked very grave.

“I trust I am not advising you badly, my dear boy. I can only tell you what I think. It seems to me that if you and this young lady do really care for each other, as I believe you do—as I and my poor little Margaret cared for each other,

fifteen years ago,” he said, with a gentle smile, “in this case,” he went on, “I think you should, to some extent, brave the future. The probability of your not surviving your mother is small. And I cannot help feeling more sanguine than you appear about the way she would act if she were once convinced your decision was irrevocable. Lady Severn, I have good reason to know, is kind-hearted and conscientious, though, I must allow, prejudiced; and, perhaps, naturally so. You don’t think it would be well to make an appeal to her before doing anything else?”

“No, I don’t,” said Ralph. “At present it could do no good, and might do great harm. If I told her anything I must tell all, and imagine the horrors of *her* name being bandied about and insulted by my mother and Miss Vyse! For that girl hears everything. I have a dreadful idea that her suspicions are already aroused. Besides I should feel myself so much stronger to lay the case before my mother, if I felt I had something else to fall back upon. It would prove to her that I was most thoroughly in earnest. No, my first step must be to see my old chief.”

Just then their roads parted. They separated with a hearty shake of the hand, and a few strong words of thanks from Ralph for his former tutor’s sympathy and advice.

“You will let me know how it all ends, my dear Ralph,” said Mr. Price, as he left him.

“Most certainly. But I shall see you again?”

“It is doubtful,” replied the tutor. Any day now the Countess may decide on leaving Altes. And if you set off for England in a few days, we may be away when you return.”

“I hope not,” said Ralph. And then he walked home quickly, trying to arrange his plans in his mind.

“I should much like to be sure, quite sure, of what Berwick told me,” he thought; “and yet I see no way of satisfying myself without risk of committing her to more than at present I have a right to ask. But I couldn’t endure to go about in an underhand way; prying into her innocent thoughts and feelings. And on the other hand, I can’t endure to think that she may now be suffering, through my apparent coldness. Suffering, my poor little girl—and for *me!*”

At that moment he felt inclined to brave all, and rush off to Mrs. Archer's on the spot.

Thinking threw no light on the difficulty. All he could decide upon was to make immediate preparations for another visit to England; and for the rest to be guided by circumstances, and by his honest determination to think first and most of her happiness.

Notwithstanding, however, all his misgivings and anxieties, the Ralph Severn who ran lightly up the long stone staircase of No. 5, was a very different being from the grave, careworn man who had slowly descended those same steps a few hours previously.

## CHAPTER II.

### MORE THAN HALF WAY

*“Ah me! for aught that ever I could read,  
Could ever hear by tale or history,  
The course of true love never did run smooth.”*

MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.

*“La doute s'introduit dans l'âme qui rêve, la foi  
descend dans l'âme qui souffre.”*

THOSE few days had been dull enough for Marion. The weeks of happiness, unquestioning, if not thoughtless, that had preceded them, had ill prepared her for the sudden change. For that there was a change, that some mysterious influence had come between Ralph and her, she felt convinced. At first she was inclined to ascribe it to Cissy's unlucky allusion to Frank Berwick that afternoon on the terrace. But on further reflection she became convinced that though this might explain part, it did not throw light on the whole. If Ralph's feelings to her were merely, as she had for long believed, those of kindly, almost pitying friendliness, there could be no reason why the suspicion of her attachment to another should interfere with their pleasant intercourse. If, on the other hand, as of late she had half unconsciously begun to hope, his interest in her was of a far deeper nature, why should he have allowed all these weeks of almost daily intercourse to elapse, and then suddenly on the mere shadowy appearance of a possible rival, withdraw without a word of explanation offered or demanded?

No, if Ralph indeed “cared for her,” as she softly worded it to herself, there must be some other obstacle in the way, some more important influence at work than any mistaken dread of the young officer. Marion to some extent misunderstood Ralph. She had no idea of his extreme self contempt, his rooted notion that in all respects he was utterly unattractive, and unlikely to win a girl’s affection. She, in her sweet humility, so looked up to him that she could not realize his complete unconsciousness of the loftiness of the pedestal on which she had placed.

But this obstacle, this hindrance, in what then did it consist? wherein lay its insurmountably? A more worldly-minded or experienced girl would at once have found an answer to this question in the fact of her dependent position; but with respect to Ralph himself, this did not somehow occur to Marion as of much consequence. Yet she was by no means ignorant of the conventional importance of social position, and had indeed been keenly alive to the slights, and still more objectionable condescension, which in her *rôle* of governess she had not failed to meet with. Her unworldliness showed itself rather in her perfect trust, her childlike confidence that were there no other difficulty in the way, Sir Ralph would not refrain from asking her to be his wife because he believed her to be a governess. And indeed, though she knew it not, it was only at times that she realized her present position. It was too new to her, and she was too conscious of its unreality, for it to influence save in a passing way her estimate of herself or others. When with Sir Ralph, she always felt herself to be herself—Marion Vere—his equal in every sense. In every sense, at least, in which a true woman would wish to feel herself the equal of the man she loves. And, in an utterly illogical way, it seemed to her almost as if her knowledge that this was the case, her assurance that not even from the social point of view could she be regarded as other than a fit wife for him, must somehow or other be instinctively recognised by Ralph Severn himself.

In all these ideas, as we have seen, she was partly right and partly wrong.

From her own side, what troubled her most, was the consciousness of the deception she had practised. This indeed, were it known, might give Lady Severn a fair and reasonable excuse for the growing antipathy towards her, of which Marion had for some time felt conscious, while rightly attributing it to the specious influence of Miss Vyse. And far worse than this—for Sir Ralph, she knew well, was not the sort of man to like or dislike at the bidding of another, even though that other were his nearest relation—what might not be the effect on



the young man himself of the revelation of her falsehood, for such in deed, if not in actual word, she felt that it deserved to be called? Would he ever forgive it, ever make allowance for the temptation which had prompted it? It was not like an isolated act, she said to herself in her sharp self-condemnation, it was a long series of deception into which she had been led, or rather allowed herself to fall. All these months she had been living under false colours; his very kindness to her even, seemed to her at times to have the scorch of "coals of fire." Nay, for aught she knew, anything beyond this same kindness was purely the work of her imagination, and the little she was sure of, the gentle, almost fatherly care which he had always shown her, not hers it all, but belonged to Miss Freer, the poor little governess, who had upon him the claim that all weak and dependent beings have upon the strong and prosperous. So she tormented herself, her mind revolving in a circle of ever increasing wretchedness, doubt and self-reproach.

Then again, in those long, dull afternoons when she sat by Cissy's bedside, or longer, duller evenings, when she had nothing at all to do but dream by herself in the little salon, there would come gleams of brightness, beautiful and sudden. A glance round the room, lighting on some book he had opened when last there, or the terrace where they had spent such happy hours, or even on the glass which some few days before had held the flowers he had brought her—any one of these things had power to shed sunshine through her heart. What did they not recall? Words all but spoken—slight, lingering touches of her fluttering hair, the ribbons of her dress, or the bracelet that clasped her round, white wrist—looks and tones more eloquent than words. Ah, how many silly, sweet trifles came crowding into her mind! Each with its own precious message of hope and assurance.

She rose from her seat at last. (It was the evening of the very day on which Ralph had met Frank and Mr. Price.) She rose from her seat, and stood erect in her maidenly dignity.

"I will believe," she said to herself, "I will believe and trust him. I cannot remember his eyes, his voice, and not think him true. It may be he is not his own master; he is perhaps fettered in some way; I do not, and probably never may know. But for all that I believe he loves me. My love has not been given unsought, though it may be he hardly knew he was seeking it. I will no longer yield to this horrible mortification, this doubt of myself and of him. Come what may, Ralph Severn and I have loved each other."

And thereupon Marion found peace. Peace indeed of a somewhat hopeless kind, but nevertheless infinitely better than the miserable state of doubt and unrest which had preceded it.

And as she sat there alone and silent, dreaming, till even the long, light evening was drawing to a close, she gave the reins to her fancy, in her endeavour to picture to herself the nature of this barrier, which, she felt convinced, stood between herself and Ralph.

One theory after another she rejected as untenable; but curiously enough the real obstacle, Ralph's actual want of means, his dependence on his mother, never once occurred to her. She was not after all intimately acquainted with the family history of the Severns, and naturally enough, seeing Ralph the head of a house, whose possessions were generally spoken of as considerable, the idea of associating poverty with one in his position, would have appeared to her absurd.

Suddenly a new solution struck her. Could it be that he was bound in honour, though not in affection (of the latter she was *very* sure), to his beautiful cousin, Florence Vyse? The more she thought of it, the better it seemed to answer the riddle. Not much of the Altes gossip, so far as the Severns were concerned, had reached her. Her position in the family, and her evident dislike to hearing their affairs discussed, had prevented her hearing much of the tittle-tattle which had been freely circulated about them.

Still, now and then, hints had reached her of an "understanding" on the subject, a family arrangement, of which the principals were Sir Ralph and the beautiful Florence. Her own observation had long since discovered that if such were not the state of things, it was from no backwardness on the part of the lady: but hitherto her thoughts had never rested on the possibility of there being any foundation in fact, for the rumours she had heard; for Sir Ralph had been at no to hide his aversion for his so-called cousin, his more than indifference, his absolute dislike to her society. Nor had he spoken of her with any prejudice or exaggeration, which might have been attributed to some other motive. He had simply allowed it to be plainly seen that he did not like, even while he could not but, in a sense, admire her. One expression of his, Marion recalled distinctly. Agreeing with her one day when she happened to allude incidentally to Miss Vyse's great and peculiar beauty, she had heard him whisper, mutter rather, to himself: "Beautiful, yes, no doubt. But there are some kinds of beauty, than which I would rather have positive ugliness."

All this had long ago decided Marion that the reports which had reached her on the subject were mere foundationless gossip; never before this evening had it come home to her girlish heart, with all its fresh belief in “love,” as the necessary precursor of marriage; never before had she realized that the case in question might be a sad exception to her rule—that heart and hand do not *always* go together—that Ralph himself might be bound in honour to marry the beautiful Florence, while his heart had been given to the simple, trusting girl, who long ago had allowed him to steal away hers in exchange.

Her quick imagination, once it had seized the clue, was at no loss to follow out its discovery. “It is all plain to me now,” thought Marion, “clear its daylight. And it is all over.”

But as she lay down to sleep her last thought was:

“I am content with my share. I would rather have his heart. I have got it and,” she added almost fiercely, “I will keep it.”

She had sat up later than usual that evening; and the next morning she was somewhat behind time in making her appearance. The clock struck the half hour after eight as she finished dressing. Just as she was leaving her room she heard the front door bell ring; and curious to see who could be so early a visitor, she passed quickly through the drawing-room on to the terrace, which sideways overlooked the entrance to the house. There to her amazement she descried Sir Ralph Severn! What could he be come about at so unusual an hour? The little mystery however was soon explained. A slight bustle in the room within, and in another moment Lofty and Sybil, laden with lovely, fresh flowers, made their appearance on the terrace.

“Lotty! Sybil!” she exclaimed “where in the world have you got these lovely flowers?”

“From the market,” answered Lotty. “Aren’t they beautiful, Miss Freer? But they are really more from Sybil than from me. She thought of them first.”

“Most from Uncle Ralph, Lotty,” interrupted Sybil, “he wouldn’t let me pay for them. They are Charlie’s mamma, Miss Freer, to make the room look pretty when she gets up in the afternoon. Won’t she be pleased?”

“I sure she will, you dear children answered Marion. “They are lovely. We

have never had such pretty ones before. And Cissy is so fond of flowers. Pray thank Sir Ralph very much for getting them, and let me kiss you, Sybil darling, for having thought of them. You too, dear Lotty. How early you must have got up!”

“Oh, yes, we have been up two hours. We were so afraid of being too late to go to the market with uncle. All these flowers are for Charlie’s mamma, Miss Freer, but this one is for yourself, Uncle Ralph said,” and as Sybil spoke, she took out of a corner of her basket where it had been carefully placed, one perfectly pure white rose.

Marion took it from her, and held it carefully. “Is it not a beauty?” said Lotty, but Miss Freer did not answer.

She turned, and went out again on the terrace. There she stood for a moment, till Ralph, happening to look up, caught sight of her. His face flushed, and a smile came over it when he saw what she held in her hand. But he only bowed, and seemed to have no intention of entering the house. So she went back to the children and thanked them again for their pretty gift, and advised them not to keep their uncle waiting.

When they were gone she sat down to her solitary breakfast, with her heart full of strangely-mingled feelings; while Ralph walked home absent and preoccupied, and answering much at random to the incessant, chattering questions of his merry little nieces.

It is curious how sometimes when we have made up our mind to a certain course of action, the most unexpected outward occurrences seem, as it were, to happen on purpose to confirm us in our resolution.

So it seemed just now to Ralph. The English letters arrived this morning as he sat at breakfast, after his early visit to the market. Among them, to his surprise, he recognized one in the handwriting of his “old chief,” as he called him, Sir Archibald Cunningham.

“Curious,” thought Ralph as he opened it. “Very, that I should hear from him just at this crisis. The last man on earth to write a private letter if he can avoid it.”

Its contents were, in themselves, unimportant enough, merely requesting Sir

Ralph to forward to him by post one or two additional notes on the neighbouring *patois*, which, when in England, he had not thoroughly revised. The gist of the letter, so far as Ralph was concerned, was contained in the postscript.

“I would not have hurried you about these notes,” wrote Sir Archibald, “but I have decided to leave England much sooner than I expected, remaining some weeks in Switzerland on my way east. I start, if possible, next week. I am only delayed by my wish to find out whom I am likely to get instead of Cameron.”

“Next week,” thought Ralph; “that’s quick work. I *must* see him before he leaves town.”

And that day saw a letter written and despatched to Sir Archibald announcing Ralph’s intention of seeing him in London with as little delay as possible, and giving him some idea of the nature of the business he was specially anxious to discuss with him.

Lady Severn was not a little annoyed, when she learnt her son’s intention of starting again for England on the morrow.

“It was very strange,” she said, “that Ralph could not have finished all he had to do in town when he was there before.”

And she did her best to discover the reason of this sudden move. But she obtained little satisfaction on the subject from her son. The remembrance of the last private interview he had had with her, in which a certain delicate, and to him most unpalatable subject, had for the first time been openly discussed between them, did not incline him to be confidential till he was obliged.

“I shall be only too ready to tell you all about this business of mine when there is anything to tell, my dear mother,” he said; “at present I can only assure you such is not the case.”

Miss Vyse did not mend matters by privately confiding to Lady Severn, her belief that Sir Ralph had taken such a dislike to her, that he seized every occasion for absenting himself from the home circle of which she was at present a member.

“I am sure I don’t know why he dislikes me so, dear Aunt,” she said sweetly, with tears in her lustrous eyes. “It is only of late. I can’t help fancying

sometimes”—— but then she stopped.

“What, my dear Florence? Do tell me, I beseech you. I cannot indeed understand my son’s conduct; strange and unaccountable as he often has been, his present behaviour surpasses all. Oh, my dear child, if only John had lived, you would not have been thus unappreciated! He had such taste and such amiability of character; and after his wife’s death, per little thing, he only saw with my eyes. But what is it you fancy?”

“Pray do not blame me for it, dear Aunt. But I cannot help thinking that there has been some outside influence at work to turn Sir Ralph from me—and indeed from you. It is only since his intimacy with Mrs. Archer and her friend that he has changed so to me. And I am sure I don’t know why they should dislike me! But I would rather go home, dear Aunt,” she went on, “truly I would rather go home” (though she was further than ever from thinking of anything of the sort) “than stay here to be the unhappy cause of coldness between my dearest, kindest friend and her son.”

“Go home, my love, go home! Indeed you shall not think of such a thing,” exclaimed Lady Severn. “You, my dear Florence, shall not be allowed to suffer for that foolish boy’s mad infatuation. He forgets, I think, all that is in my power. But you, my dear, must not dream of leaving me till you do so for a home of your own.”

Not so bad for Florence after all! It was the first time she had succeeded in obtaining from Lady Severn a distinct invitation to take up her quarters permanently in her household, and she took care by her vehement expressions of gratitude to clench the proposal, which in a calmer moment the old lady might not have been in quite such a hurry to make.

It was not very cordially that Lady Severn bade adieu to her son that evening as, accompanied by Miss Vyse, she drove off to an elegant entertainment given by Mr. Chepstow in the gardens of his pretty little villa a couple of miles out of Altes.

Sir Ralph was to leave very early the next morning, and therefore thought it expedient to make his farewells overnight. He thought himself very fortunate in that, his farewells not being confined to the ladies of his own household, Mr. Chepstow’s entertainment left him free to spend the rest of the evening as he

chose.

But it was no easy task he had set before him. Far from it, for to tell the truth, he had by no means made up his mind as to what it consisted in. He was as determined as ever, in no way to allow Marion to commit herself to any promise, till he felt that he had a better right to ask such from her. On the other hand, the thought of leaving Altes even for a few days, without some greater assurance (than that of Frank Berwick's communication) of the true state of the young girl's feelings towards him, was unendurable.

Still more repugnant to him was the thought of the strange and unfavourable light in which his own conduct must appear to her, were no sort of explanation to take place between them; the worst of all, he could not bear to go away haunted by the remembrance of her pale face and anxious eyes, telling of suffering and disappointment of which he was both the object and the cause.

He must say something, however little. That was all that he could make up his mind to.

What it should be, or how it should be said, circumstances must decide.

He wondered, as in the cool or the evening he walked to Mrs. Archer's, how he should find them.

Would Marion be alone, her friend not yet well enough to be in the drawing-room? In that case what should he do? Could he ask for Miss Freer? Charlie's "Madymuzelle." He had never yet done so, and he dreaded servants' tongues, even that of the discreet and amiable Thérèse. He felt considerably at a loss, and when he got to the top of the Rue St. Thomas, twice turned back and walked some few yards in the opposite direction while trying to decide on his next step. He might have saved himself the trouble. Just its he was preparing to ring the bell, the door was opened—by Marion herself.

She started slightly when she saw him,

"Oh," said she, "I thought it was Dr. Bailey. I heard steps stop at the door and I ran to open quietly. I wanted to see him alone to ask how he thinks Mrs. Archer really is."

"Is Mrs. Archer worse then?" asked Sir Ralph with interest.

“No, oh no. I think she is better. Almost well again indeed. But still I am not satisfied about her somehow, and Dr. Bailey is one of those people that talks to invalids as if they were babies. I thought perhaps if I saw him alone he would tell me the truth.”

All this time they were standing in the doorway, Marion indeed blocking up the entrance.

“Are you not going to ask me to come in, Miss Freer?” asked Sir Ralph.

Marion looked uncomfortable, but could hardly help smiling as she replied:

“Mrs. Archer has gone to bed.”

“Then I shall not have the pleasure of seeing her. All the same, I think you might have the civility to ask me to come in.”

Whereupon Marion drew back laughing, and allowed him to enter the drawing-room.

“You are expecting Bailey?” he said; “did he say he would call this evening?”

“Yes, at nine o’clock. He wanted to see how Cissy was, after her drive this afternoon.”

“At nine,” said Ralph, consulting his watch. “That’s still a quarter of an hour off. Are you busy, Miss Freer, or may I stay a few minutes?” adding to himself mentally, “I must take care that old gossip Bailey does not catch me here, A nice amount of mischief he would make, if he went chattering to my mother while away.”

“Oh no, I’m not particularly busy,” replied Marion, rather sadly, it seemed to Ralph. “Indeed my evenings have been rather dull lately, but I hope Cissy will soon be all right again.”

“I hope so too,” said Ralph, and then he sat still, utterly at a loss what more to say, and how to say it. Marion seemed calm and subdued. Perfectly free from nervousness or embarrassment, but yet in some subtle way he was conscious of a change in her.



He looked at her as she sat there opposite him, so quiet and pale. Spirit-like, she seemed to his fancy, in her white, thin dress: the faint colourless evening light seeming rather to shadow than illumine her slight girlish figure. A sort of shiver ran through him. She looked so fragile, so gentle and subdued. What if *this* were the beginning of the end? What if he were *thus* to lose her? Lose her, before indeed he could call her his. It was all he could do to control himself, to refrain from gathering this fair, clinging, child-like creature in his arms, and telling her that there she should be held for ever.

But he kept firmly to his resolution. Something of what was in his heart he would say; but not yet the whole.

“Miss Freer,” he began. “I wanted particularly to see you this evening, for to-morrow again I am going away.”

She looked up at him gravely, but hardly seemed surprised.

“Then,” she said with a slight, the very slightest, quiver in her voice— “then you have come to say good-bye.”

“Not for long, I hope,” he answered. “I am very loth to go, but I think it is my best course. In a week or two I hope to be back again, and if I succeed in what I am going to try for, I shall, you may be sure, make no delay in finding my way here again. I cannot explain to you, Miss Freer—Marion. I cannot explain to you at present my strange, inconsistent conduct. But I could not bear to go away without asking you not to think worse of me than you can help—to trust me for a little. Just now I cannot defend myself, but I beseech you to think gently of me. If indeed”—and here in spite of himself his voice grew husky—” indeed, I am not mistaken in thinking you are likely to have me in your thoughts at all. If I am mistaken I can only ask you to forgive my presumption.

“You are not mistaken,” said Marion, gently, but very clearly. “You are not mistaken, and now I am not ashamed to tell you so. I do not altogether understand you, but I do not ask for any explanation till you can give it me. And if that time should never come I will still not blame you, and I will not, even then, feel ashamed of having told you so. I know that in some way you are not your own master, not free to act as you wish. But I would not feel towards you as I do, if I did not believe you cared for one thing more than for me.”

“One thing?” asked Ralph.

“Yes,” she said. “Doing right, I mean.”

“Thank you,” he replied. “Thank you for all you have said. Above all, for trusting me. You are right in what you suspect. I am indeed not free, but it will not be my fault if I do not succeed in becoming so. I *may* fail; in that case I must not ask you to remember me. But, in any ease, Marion, my dear, true-hearted little friend, thank you for all you have been to me; and, above all, for not, misjudging me now.”

He had risen and come nearer her. She too stood up, and did not withdraw the hand he had taken. But suddenly she started back, snatching it away almost violently.

“No, no!” she cried; “I am not as good as you think me. I am not worthy of you. I have deceived you in letting you think me— Oh, what shall I do? Must I tell you? Please, don’t ask me to tell you yet. Some day it may be different, but not just now. You would blame me so.”

“Hush, Marion; hush, my dear child. I don’t understand *you*. We both have mysteries, you see. But don’t distress yourself so. Tell me nothing you would rather not tell. Some day, as you say, when I can explain all my strange behaviour to you, you shall then tell me what you please. Do you think, my poor darling, that I cannot trust you as you trust me? Only tell me this much. It is nothing that need come between us two, if, as I hope, in a week or two from now I can see my way clearly.”

Marion looked relieved, but anxious.

“I don’t know,” she said slowly. “It need not come between us if you still wished it—cared to have me, I mean. It would depend on that, and on my father,” she added. “If he would for once agree to my wishes. I have never opposed him yet; never in anything.”

But at that moment the clock struck nine.

“I must go,” said Ralph, “or Bailey will be here. I don’t think your secret obstacle will be insurmountable from what you say. Probably, you exaggerate its importance. But before long I trust we may be able to talk over together all our difficulties and anxieties, which will be the best way of making an end of them. A fortnight at most will see me back again. Till then we must hope the best and

trust each other. Now I *must* go. Good-bye, my darling. You are not angry with me for calling you so? Good-bye.”

He held her hand for a moment firmly in his, dropped it suddenly, and was gone.

Marion sat down again in her corner, still feeling the strong but gentle pressure on her hand; still hearing the deep, earnest ring of his voice.

It was all very strange! Very strange and bewildering and anxious. Just yet she felt too confused to recall all that had passed. Only the one strong impression remained in her heart. Ralph Severn loved her, and she was very happy.

What was *he* thinking?

“I hope I have done right. I hope and trust I have done right. I could not have said more nor less. It would never have done to tell her beforehand, sensitive as she is, of the sacrifice, as it would be called, that I must make to win her. No, now that I am sure of her I must have everything else settled and done before she hears of it. But then, again, some difficulty she hinted at on her side, connected, I have no doubt, with the family disgrace I suspected some time ago. Her father, she mentioned. Can he have some marriage in view for her? I should not wonder. Mrs. Archer said more than once that she was not always to remain a governess. There is something queer about their affairs I am certain, for even Mrs. Archer, inconsiderate as she generally is, is reserved about them. But there can be nothing that would affect my Marion herself. Nothing, now that I am sure she cares for me. But I wish I were back again! As soon as possible on my return I must see her, and explain to her my position clearly. Then she must decide for herself, if she can venture to be a poor man’s wife. A very poor man by all appearances. But she has a brave spirit of her own! Fortunately, the quarrel with my mother was not owing to her; so she need have no feeling of responsibility about it. If there had been no other woman in the world I would not have married Florence Vyse. Yes, I see what I must do. As soon as I return with the promise I hope for, I shall lay the whole before Marion, and, in return, hear from her the fancied obstacles on her side. Then I will speak to my mother, and give her a last chance of retaining my affection and respect. But not till I have first had a thorough explanation with Marion. And supposing my mission is unsuccessful? Time enough if it is so. I am tired of caution. It *must* succeed.”

And so, full of hope and bright anticipations, he started for England the next morning.

## CHAPTER III.

### “FROM WANDERING ON A FOREIGN STRAND.”

*“So, I will lay one kiss  
Upon thy hand, and looking through the lights  
Of thy soft eyes, whisper the old word  
That runs before all detail and change, ‘farewell.’”*

ORESTES.

IT was now about the middle of March. Many of the human swallows at Altes had already taken flight to more northern latitudes, others were preparing for so doing. The season was an unusually early one. The midday sun was already too powerful to face without great precautions in the way of shady hats and parasols, and people no longer congratulated themselves so triumphantly as a few weeks previously, on being out of “that dreadful English climate.”

Even a little London rain would be acceptable, thought Marion, as she walked home one glaring morning from the Rue des Lauriers. And then her thoughts flew on to a certain familiar figure at that very moment probably enough pacing the grey, dreary pavement of the great city itself.

Hardly a week had a yet elapsed since Ralph left, but already she was “wearying” for his return, her heart alternately dancing with sweetest hopes and trembling with misgivings.

But she would leave it all to him. Who so wise, so brave, so true? What lay

within human possibility to do, he would, she felt sure, set himself to achieve. The exact, nature of the complications about him, the fetters he had himself told her of, she did not just now much trouble her head about. Vaguely, she imagined them to be connected with Florence Vyse, though what, if this were the case, could be the special object of a journey to London, she was at a loss to think. But he had judged it best not at present to tell her, and she was content to wait for his own explanation—to be followed, alas! by what she could not bear to contemplate, the confession of the long deception she had herself practised.

She had left home this morning, as usual, early, before the arrival of the letters, which to-day Cissy was looking for anxiously, the Indian mail being due.

When she entered the little drawing-room, she was surprised at not finding her cousin there. Nor were there about, the room the usual traces of Mrs. Archer's recent presence.

"I hope Cissy is not ill," thought she anxiously, as she hastened to Mrs. Archer's bedroom.

The door was shut, but "come in," in Cissy's voice reassured her.

On entering the room, however, she stood aghast at the sight before her. There was Cissy on her knees before a huge trunk, two or three others of varying dimensions standing with their lids open in a row, while every article of furniture in the room, bed, tables, chairs, and floor itself, were literally heaped with the whole of the little lady's wardrobe. Dresses, cloaks, shawls, bonnets, boots and linen—the whole of Mrs. Archer's possessions seemed suddenly to have been seized with a frenzy of disorder, while she herself in their midst, her small person almost, hidden by the overwhelming portmanteau, looked utterly unable to cope with the chaotic confusion around her. The scene reminded Marion of the old fairy story of the poor little princess, shut up for twenty-four hours in a room of tangled threads, all of which by the expiration of the allotted time, she was ordered, under pain of some tremendous punishment, to wind with perfect regularity in even skeins for the use of her tormentor.

"What are you about, Cissy?" ejaculated her cousin, "Have you lost anything, have you quarrelled with Madame Poulin and determined to leave her house on the spot?"

"Don't laugh, May, don't," said Cissy, beseechingly, looking up as she spoke.

Though the request was unnecessary, as the sight of her tear-stained face quickly divested her cousin of any risible inclination.

“I have had a letter from India—from George. At least part of it is from him; the rest from his doctor, he could not write much himself.”

Here Cissy was interrupted by sobs, and for a moment or two could not control herself sufficiently to go on with her explanation.

“Here is the letter, read it yourself,” she said at last, handing to Marion the precious document, “I am beginning to pack, you see. We must leave this the day after tomorrow. I would have sent to Lady Severn’s to tell you had you been late of returning.”

Marion read the letter in silence. It was, as Mrs. Archer had said, a joint production, begun by her husband, and then gone on with and concluded by the medical man attending him. For he had been very ill, this beloved “George” of poor Cissy’s; very ill indeed, Marion could discover, through the assumedly cheerful tone of the letter. But he was better now; so much better that Dr. Finlayson, an old friend of Cissy’s, assured her he wanted nothing more but her nursing and society. He had got sick leave for six months, and by the end of March hoped to be able to be moved to a healthy neighbourhood, not far from Simla, where by the autumn he had every prospect of obtaining the staff appointment he had long been hoping for. So, as far as climate was concerned, there was nothing to prevent Cissy’s at once rejoining him, provided always her own health was sufficiently re-established, which point, said Dr. Finlayson, Mrs. Archer’s anxiety for her husband must not allow her to overlook, nor must she omit to consult as to this both her physician at Altes, and her former medical adviser in England.

Marion stood staring at the letter without speaking. Was it selfish of her, that even at this moment of warm commiseration for her cousin, the effect this sudden move might have on her own prospects, rushed into her mind? She tried to drive it back, but found it difficult to do so.

“Well, Marion,” said Cissy, peevishly, for, being in no small terror of her cousin’s remonstrance as to so sudden and impulsive a step as the immediate return to England, she was determined, woman-like, to take the bull by the horns by constituting herself the aggrieved party.

“Well, Marion, have you nothing to say? You stand there as if you were asleep, instead of helping me, with all that must be done to let us get away by Thursday.”

“But are you really determined to go at once, Cissy? Do you think you are fit for the journey even to London, or Cheltenham rather? I much doubt it. Have you seen Dr. Bailey? Dearest Cissy, I am so sorry for you, but I fear you are not well enough to rejoin Colonel Archer just yet.”

“I am well enough to go to India to-day, but I am not well enough to bear the anxiety of waiting for another mail’s rows. It would kill me, Marion—kill me, simply,” repeated Cissy, emphatically, “and neither you nor anyone else who wants to keep me alive, will attempt to stop me. As for Bailey, he is an old woman and an old fool to the bargain. All the same, I have sent for him and seen him. He says I am as well able to go now as I am likely to be for the next year or two, if ever. And whether it is so or not, Marion, I must go. What is my health to George’s? What would I care for my life without him? You don’t know what it is to love anyone, child, as I love my husband. Some day you may, and then you will understand. But now, I must ask you, beg of you, to harass me by no remonstrance. I have done all I was told. I have seen Bailey, and will also see Frobisher at Cheltenham.”

Marion felt indeed that any interference on her part would be worse than useless, though a sad foreboding was at her heart, and the tears filled her eyes, as she looked at poor Cissy’s rapidly changing colour, the too great brilliance of her eyes, and the nervous working of her thin, white hands.

“And Charlie?” was all she asked.

“He will go, too. George wishes it, and Simla is so healthy. You have not read the postscript.”

Which accordingly Marion did; and then proceeded to give way to a most silly and ill-timed burst of tears!

“How silly!” stronger-minded young ladies will exclaim. Just so; but then I am telling all about it, as it happened, and I must not make my heroine any stronger or wiser than she was, poor little girl. Cissy should have scolded her, but she didn’t. Instead thereof, she plumped herself down beside her on the floor, and for a good quarter of an hour, they cried and sobbed in each other’s arms.



Then they sat up and wiped their eyes, like sensible young women, as in the main they were, kissed each other, while they ejaculated—"Dearest Cissy," and "darling May," and set to work to think what they must do.

First of all there was Marion's engagement with Lady Severn. This, fortunately, was within a fortnight of expiring, and in answer to a note of explanation which Marion dispatched, came a sufficiently cordial reply from her pupils' grandmother, enclosing a cheque for the fifteen pounds (which had been all the little governess would agree to accept for each quarter) owing to the end of the engagement, expressing thanks for the kindness and attention she had bestowed on her pupils, and begging her on no account to distress herself at having to leave Altes before the quarter had fully expired.

With this came a note for Cissy. It was couched in much heartier language, and the anxiety expressed as to Colonel Archer's state of health was evidently genuine. Lady Severn, in conclusion said she hoped to call to see Mrs. Archer the following afternoon, and that she had forgotten to mention that her granddaughters would be disappointed not to say goodbye to Miss Freer in person. They would be at home all the next morning, if "Mrs. Archer's young friend" could spare a few minutes to come to see them.

"How thoughtless of her to propose it," exclaimed Cissy; "really some ladies deserve to be governesses themselves for a while, to see how they would fancy that sort or thing. As if the children could not come to see you! Oh, May, I am so thankful for you to say goodbye for ever to that odious Miss Freer."

"Are you?" said Marion; "I can't say if I am or not. Sometimes I detest her, and then again I feel very grateful to her. Thanks to her I am now out of debt, any way. This fifteen pounds will come in nicely for the quarter's rent."

"Very nicely," said Cissy; "all the same, I'd like to make you eat that of cat's cheque!"

Marion did spare five minutes the following morning, and the parting with Lotty and Sybil was really a most touching affair. There had been a secret expedition the previous evening from the Rue des Lauriers, under the escort of Thérèse's sister, which resulted in the presentation to Miss Freer or two original, though not strikingly appropriate parting gifts. A mantel-piece ornament from Lotty of the china, pottery rather, of' the district, and from Sybil a gaily-bound

and profusely illustrated story book, more suited to her tender years than to the maturer taste of the young governess.

“All fairy stories, dear Miss Freer,” said the child, trying her best to keep back her tears, and bear the parting bravely. “All fairy stories, and Beauty and the Beast is in I looked for the picture, and Jeannette read me the name, ‘La Belle et la Bête.’ Won’t you like reading it, Miss Freer?”

“Yes, indeed, my darlings,” said poor Marion, kissing them for the twentieth and last time, with a strange wistful questioning in her heart as to whether she should ever again kiss these sweet, fresh, child faces, and if so, where and when! Then she ran away without looking, back, to hide the fast dropping tears that, do what she would, could not she entirely repressed; and carrying with her the presents on which had been expended all the available resources of the little girls. Poor little presents! There came a day when he hid them out of sight, far away in a high cupboard. Not that she lived to forget her little pupils, but sad unendurable memories came to associated with them in her mind, and all she could do was to try to forget.

She hurried home to the Rue St. Thomas, treading for the last time the now familiar streets. Hurried home to find Cissy immersed, and but prostrated, by the terrible business of packing and accounts paying.

“Leave as much as possible to me, Cissy, dear. I have said my goodbyes, and am now free to work. You have to be ready for Lady Severn, you know. The Berwicks, and others, we cannot attempt. You might ask Lady Severn to explain to them and any one else the reason of our sudden flight. One thing, Cissy, will you do to oblige me? Give Lady Severn your address at Cheltenham. It is possible there may be some message to send us through her. I did not like to ask the children to write, but perhaps they may think of it.”

“I don’t suppose any one will help them to do so, poor little things, even if they wish it,” replied Mrs. Archer. “However, I can easily give her the address.”

She did so when Lady Severn and Miss Vyse called to as goodbye. Lady Severn took the card on which it was written, and after glancing at it, handed it to Florence, when they reseated themselves in the carriage.

“You keep it, Florence, dear,” she said; “you have all my addresses. Though, indeed, I shall not forget it. I have a capital head for addresses—23, West

Parade, Leamington. Yes. 23, West Parade.”

And after a week’s bustle crowded into a few hours, the little party set off again on their travels. Just the three, Mrs. Archer, Marion, and Charlie, for poor Thérèse had to be left behind. Mr. Chepstow sent two carriages to convey them to the place from which the diligence started, and was there himself to see them off. He was “really very kind,” they all agreed.

But it was sad, this sudden, hurried departure from the place they had come to know so well. Hardly sad for Cissy, perhaps; her thoughts were far away eastward, and she only lived in the hope of soon following them thither. But for her young cousin! Ah, it was very trying. Just a few short, days before “he” would be back again, when all, she had hoped, would have been explained between them. She had no hope of meeting him in London. In all probability he would have left before their arrival, and even if not, the chances of their meeting were of the most remote. She did not know his address, and he!—he neither knew of her coming, nor, should he even hear it from his mother, would he have the slightest notion where to seek her. No, she must trust that he would write, as she felt satisfied he would be sure to do without delay, if he had anything good to tell. In any case, indeed, she thought, considering the circumstances, he would write. He was so thoughtful and considerate, and must have a fair notion of the suspense she was enduring.

She did what she could before Leaving Altes. Besides the address given at her request to Lady Severn, she left with Mme. Poulin several ready-stamped envelopes, similarly directed by herself to Mrs. Archer’s Cheltenham address, and gave their obliging landlady most particular injunctions to the forwarding immediately of all letters and notes of any kind that might be sent after their departure. How she wished she could have left some directed to her own name and address! The going in the first place to Cheltenham would add to the delay, but she dared not venture to do more, and could only trust that a happy ending might compensate for the present trying suspense.

It was a hurried and uncomfortable journey, and yet poor Marion could hardly wish it over, for it was the last she could hope to see of Cissy for many a long day to come.

They arrived in London very late in the evening of a chilly, rainy March day. For this one night Marion accompanied her cousin to her hotel, for though she

had written from Altes to her father announcing their sudden return to England, she felt more than doubtful of his having received the letter, as he was much addicted to eccentric flights from home of two or three days' duration, and on such occasions did not think it necessary to leave his address.

How strange to be in London again, and oh, how dreary and ugly it looked! How painfully "the national dread of colour" is felt by the traveller returning home from the brightness and freshness across the channel!

"Oh," exclaimed Marion, "how could I ever have grumbled at Altes sunshine and heat! I envy you, Cissy. I declare, I wish I were going, to India with you."

"I wish indeed you were, my darling," quoth Cissy, whose tears in these days were never far to seek. "But if we are to drop you on our way to the station, May, it is truly time to go."

For Mrs. Archer's plans were to go straight on to her mother-in-law's at Cheltenham, the morning after their arrival in London.

So their goodbye had to be said in the cab!

If walls had tongues as well as their proverbial ears, we should want no other story tellers; but what of the romances we might hear from those wretchedest of conveyances, London cabs, were they likewise endued with speech!

Oh, the broken hearts that, have been jogged along the dirty London streets since the days when the first "Hackney" saw the light! Oh, the bright hopes doomed to disappointment, the vows made but to be broken, the agonies of anxiety, the "farewells" of very utmost anguish, of which these grumbling, creaking, four-wheelers, or rattling, springing Hansoms, might tell! For my part I don't think I should much fancy spending a night alone in one of those dilapidated remains of a vehicle, "cast," at last, as no longer possible to use, which we now and then discern in some dingy corner of a cab proprietors yard. I am quite sure I should *not* spend the dark hours alone. Strange shadowy visitors would occupy the other seats, and long forgotten scenes would be re-enacted within the small compass of the four wooden walk! No, assuredly, I should not fancy it at all!

But to return to our special cab, or rather to its occupants.

“You will be sure to write to me, Cissy dear from Cheltenham, and tell me when you really go,” said Marion.”

“Oh yes, dear, of course, I shall,” replied Mrs. Archer; “and you, May,” she continued, “must let me know how you find Uncle Vere, and Harry. For he will be with you soon, won’t, he? It is so easy for him to run up to town now he is at Woolwich.”

“Yes, I hope so,” answered Marion somewhat absently; then she added in a lower voice, while a slight shade of colour came over her face, “Will you, Cissy dear, be careful to send me on at, once any letters that may be forwarded to me—to Miss *Freer*, you know—under cover to Cheltenham?”

“Certainly, I shall. But do you expect?” asked Mrs. Archer with some surprise.

“I don’t know—perhaps,” replied Marion rather confusedly.

Something in her tone made Cissy turn so as to see her better. Then she took the girl’s hand in hers, and said gently, very gently:

“My dearest, is there anything you are anxious about? Once or twice lately I have half suspected something, but you are not like most girls, silly and not to be trusted. Indeed I often fancy you are much wiser than I, and I could not bear to pry into your confidence. But now, darling, we shall not see each other for so long—perhaps indeed—but no, I won’t be gloomy. Won’t you tell me if there is anything? Any special letter you are expecting?”

“I can’t tell you just now, Cissy. Indeed I can hardly say there is anything to tell. When, or if, there is I will write to you at once. I promise you this, dear Cissy.”

“Or if I can help you in any way?” suggested Cissy rather timidly. “Yes, if you could, I would as you to do so sooner than any one.”

“Only one word more, May. You wouldn’t go on screening Harry at the expense of your happiness? You know how I mean, dear. You would not allow this idea of your being only a governess to remain in any one’s mind so as to cause injury to your own prospects? Promise me this, for if not I shall never forgive myself for having given in to this scheme of yours at Altes.”

“Don’t be afraid, Cissy. I have no intention of keeping it up. The very first opportunity I have, I mean to tell the whole truth to —— you know whom, for if I ever see him again, he will have a right to hear it.”

“Thank you for telling me this,” said Cissy, “I only wish he knew it already! In any case, Marion, however things turn out, you will write and tell me?”

“Yes, in any case. I promise you I will,” replied the girl. “But here we are at my home! Oh, how unhomelike it looks, Cissy! Papa must be away, but that I don’t mind. Oh, my dear, my darling Cissy, if only you were not going so far! Whatever shall I do without you, my kind sweet sister?”

And all her composure broken down, poor Marion clung to the only near woman friend she had ever known. She had not thought she would feel this parting so acutely; and when at last she had torn herself away, and stood watching the cab drive off slowly, out of sight round the corner of the square, it seemed indeed to her that she had parted for ever with her dear, sweet friend.

It was a small comfort to remember that the faithful Foster, now transformed into Mrs. Robinson, was to meet poor little Charlie and his mother at the station, and not forsake them till she saw them off on their long journey eastward; for Cissy was already half worn out with fatigue and anxiety, and the parting with Marion had been almost more than she could stand, poor loving little soul that she was.

“How thankful I shall be to hear of her being safe with her husband again! My dear, kind Cissy. But oh, how I shall miss her!” thought Marion as she entered her gloomy home, with no one to welcome her but the startled servants; whose faces however did grow brighter when they saw who it was. Which even, to my thinking, was better than no welcome at all.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE END OF SEPTEMBER.

“He comes, the herald of a noisy world;  
News from all nations lumbering at his back.  
. . . . Messenger of grief  
Perhaps to thousands, and of joy to some:  
To him indifferent whether grief or joy.

THE TASK.

“Art than dead?  
Dead? . . . .  
Could from earth’s ways that figure alight  
Be lost and I not know ‘twas so?  
Of that fresh voice the gay delight  
Fade from earth’s air, and I not know!”

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

IT was not, certainly, a pleasant change from Altes to London, for poor Marion. For a day or two she was perfectly alone, her father, as she had expected, absent; and she herself too anxious and dispirited to care to announce her return to the few friends, so-called, with whom she was on anything like intimate terms.

On the third day Mr. Vere made his appearance. Marion was sitting alone, late in the afternoon, in the same room in which we first saw her, when he

returned. She heard him enter the house, she heard his step on the stair, and rose, half trembling, to greet him. Oh, how she wished she could feel glad to see him! What she had of late gone through had both softened and widened her heart. She was very ready to love this father of hers, if only he would let her, but alas, it was too late in the day for anything of this kind!

He came in. A tall, slightly bent, grizzled man. Looking older, considerably so, than his age, and giving one, somehow, the impression that he must always have appeared so.

He shook hands with his daughter in what he intended for a cordial manner, and then in a jerky sort of way kissed her forehead, as if he were half ashamed of what he was doing.

Still, for him, this was a good deal, and Marion tried her best to respond to it heartily.

“So you’re back again, my dear,” he remarked by way of greeting.

“Yes, Papa,” she replied; “I arrived here on Tuesday morning. Poor Cissy went on to Cheltenham at once to begin her preparations. I have been so happy at Altes, dear Papa, so very happy. I shall always be so grateful to you for having allowed me to go with Cissy. And now that I have come back, I am so anxious to do what I can in return for your kindness. You must let me be of use to you, Papa—more than I have been hitherto.”

“Ah, yes, humph, just so!” half grunted, half muttered Mr. Vere. “Very glad you have enjoyed yourself. I wish I could get a holiday myself. I am more knocked up than I ever remember feeling before.”

This was wonderfully communicative and gracious! “I am so sorry. I thought you were not looking very well,” remarked Marion. But her father didn’t encourage any further expression of filial solicitude. His head already half hidden in a newspaper which he had brought into the room with him, he appeared lost to the world outside its folds.

Suddenly he startled Marion by speaking again.

“What’s all this nonsense about Cecilia Archer setting off to India just now?” he asked; “At this season it’s utter madness! She’ll kill herself before she gets



there. I thought she had more sense.”

“The doctors have given her leave,” replied Marion: “I believe they thought the risk would be greater of detaining her at home, when she is in such anxiety. And besides, she is going to Simla, which is a very healthy place.”

“Anxiety, fiddlesticks!” growled Mr. Vere, “what good did anxiety ever do any one? Simla, humbug! To get there she must pass through the very worst and unhealthiest part of the whole continent—at this season, that’s to say; as you might know if you would speak less thoughtlessly.”

“I am very sorry,” began Marion, but the head had again retired behind the newspaper, and she said no more.

In another moment it appeared again.

“There have been a lot of invitations for you. I did not think it worth while to send them to Altes. You can look them over, and tell me if there are any you wish to accept. What gaiety you wish for, you must be content with early this year, for Lady Barnstaple is going abroad in a few weeks to some German baths, and I don’t care about your going out with any one else.”

“Thank you, Papa,” said Marion, really grateful for the unusual interest he expressed in her concerns, “I shall look over the invitations but I don’t think I care very much about going out this year. A very few times before Lady Barnstaple leaves town, will quite content me. I have a letter from Harry,” she went on, feeling unusually bold, “he wants to know if he may come up from Woolwich for next Saturday and Sunday to see me. It is so long since we have seen each other,” she added deprecatingly, for something in the way the newspaper rustled, frightened away her newly found audacity.

“Harry wants to know if he may come for next Saturday and Sunday, does he?” said Mr. Vere, very slowly, distinctly emphasizing each word of the sentence, “then, you will perhaps be so good as to tell him from me that most certainly he may *not* come here for Saturday, Sunday, or any other day, till I see fit to send for him. Idle young idiot, that he is! I wonder he is not ashamed to propose such a thing. Had he worked as he should have done years ago, he might now have been at the head of the Woolwich academy, instead of being, at seventeen, obliged to cram at a tutor’s to obtain even a Line commission. And now, forsooth, he thinks he is to have it all his own way and run up and down to

town, whenever the fancy seizes him! I tell you, Marion, you mean well, I believe, but if there is to be peace among us, you must be careful what sort of influence you exert over your brother. I give you fair warning of this. See that you attend to it." And so saying, he marched out of the room, newspaper in hand, without giving his daughter time to reply.

It was well he did so, for the fast coming tears would have choked her voice. Though by no means a woman of the lachrymose order, Marion's self-control had of late somewhat deserted her, and she had so longed to see Harry! Not only this, she had come home, though anxious and depressed, thoroughly determined to fulfil to the best of her power, her daughter's duty. The hope that no very long time would elapse, before she might be taken to a more congenial home, naturally encouraged her to the better performance of her present duties, before they should be beyond her power—among the things of the past: and joined to this, was a half superstitious, hardly acknowledged belief, that according to her present earnestness in well-doing, would be the measure of her future happiness.

Was she more of a heathen, poor little soul, for so thinking, than many, in their own opinion, far wiser people? Doing good for good's own sake is a doctrine not often inculcated, even by those who think themselves the most "orthodox" and spiritual-minded.

"Surely, surely," cries the eager, anxious heart, "if I but bear this patiently, and to the best of my poor power perform these hard and uninviting duties, surely I shall at last meet with my reward? The Father above 'is not a man that he should lie,' and has he not promised 'good things' to the patient doer of present duty; 'long days and blessedness to such as honour his commandments?'"

Such is the unexpressed, unacknowledged hope of many an aching, longing heart. A hope which perhaps strengthens to do bravely, and bear uncomplainingly, at times when higher motives might be powerless.

Vain hopes, unwarranted expectations, are they? Nay, not so. The "good things" are no dream, the "blessedness" no delusion, though they may not indeed consist of the one thing craved for by the anguished heart, that one gift, whatever it be, which at such seasons seems to our dark and imperfect vision the only blessing worth having, without which existence itself were no boon!

And now to poor Marion. Full, as I have said, of her ardent resolutions, her

self-administered incentive to exertion, the thought that if she were not a good daughter at home, she would never deserve to be placed in a happier sphere, where duty, become so sweet and attractive, would no longer be a hard taskmaster, but a smiling handmaiden—now, full of all these earnest thoughts and aspirations, it was indeed hard upon her, very hard, to be thus chilled and repelled by her father.

And at first he had seemed so kind, so much gentler and less reserved than usual! There was certainly some change in him, which she could not understand. He was no longer so calm and unbending as he had been—more impulsive in both ways—kinder, and yet so much more irritable than she had ever known him. What could be the meaning of it? He looked ill too, and confessed to not feeling as well as usual. Marion felt anxious and concerned, and almost forgave him the harshness of that last speech, though her eyes filled with tears as she recalled it.

“Oh how sorry Ralph would be for me if he knew it!” she thought. “Oh, if only I could see him and tell him all my troubles, and ask him to take care of me for always!”

And she longed for him so intensely, that had he suddenly entered the room and stood beside her she would not have been surprised!

And had she only known it—ah! it tears me even to write it—after all these years since that dreary March afternoon; and though long since then, these hopes and sorrows of my poor child’s have faded and softened into the faint shadows of the past; all, even now, I can hardly bear to think of it—at that very moment Ralph was in a house on the opposite side of that very square, closeted with Sir Archibald Cunningham, while they discussed the business which had brought the younger man to England, and of which the successful conclusion was sending him back to Altes the next morning hopeful and elated, feeling strong enough to face all the world in general, and his mother in particular, now that no insurmountable obstacle stood between him and the only woman he had ever loved.

But this Marion did not, could not, know.

So she stood by the window in a half dream of vague hope and expectation. Something, she felt sure, was going to happen: a sensation often the result of

over-strained nerves, or excited imagination, but for all that none the less consolatory in its way while it lasts.

What happened was a ring at the bell! It was almost too dark to distinguish the form of the visitor as he ran up the two or three steps that separated the hall door from the pavement; in vain Marion strained her eyes. She could perceive nothing clearly, so she took to listening breathlessly.

The door was opened, but shut quickly.

“No visitor, then,” thought Marion, and her heart sank. But another moment, and it rose again.

“Two letters for you, ma’am,” said the servant entering, but as hastily retreating in search of a light. Letters; ah, yes, good news often comes by the post, so what may not these contain?

One from Harry. A few rough, kindly words, begging her not to take it to heart if her request for his Saturday’s visit was refused by her father.

“He has been so queer lately,” wrote Harry, “so changeable and irritable, I am afraid of putting him out, and almost sorry I suggested it. “Never mind, if he won’t let me come. We are sure to meet before long. It is a comfort to know you are near at hand.”

So much from Harry. The other was from Cissy, but it felt thick—was there, could there be, an enclosure? Yes, sure enough, inside Cissy’s few loving words of last farewell, it lay. A foreign letter, in an unfamiliar hand, addressed to,

MISS FREER, *care of Mrs. Archer,*  
23, *West Parade,*  
*Cheltenham.*

She tore it open. What a disappointment! A large sheet of thin paper covered with the text-hand she knew so well. A child’s letter, from poor little Sybil in fact, folded and directed by the new governess already installed in place of her dear Miss Freer.

That was all! Ralph folded the letters. His own to Miss Fryer he destroyed.

“Miss Brown is very kind,” wrote Sybil, “but I cry for you when I am in bed. Uncle Ralph has not come home, but I think he will be very sorry you have gone away.”

That was all!

There was, however, a certain amount of satisfaction in the fact of the letter come safe to hand. It showed that she need fear no postal delay or miscarriage, owing to the roundabout manner in which her letters must come. For Cissy added in a postscript, “I forward the only letter for Miss Freer that has come, and I am leaving with my mother-in-law (a very careful and methodical person) most particular directions to forward at once to you all letters that may arrive to my care, for that same mysterious young lady.”

Marion would much have liked at once to reply to poor, affectionate, little Sybil; but as things were, she thought it better not.

This, and more important matters, would all be set straight soon—or never. In the latter case it was better for the child to forget her; in the former, a short delay in thanking her little friend would be immaterial.

For the next few weeks the soul of Marion’s day was the post-hour.

How she woke and rose early to be ready to hear the ring she came to know so well.

How she composed herself to sleep by the thought of what *might* be coming in the morning!

But the weeks went on—the weeks, so easy to write of—but each, alas with its appalling list of days, and hours, and minutes! Looking back to the time of her return from Altes, six weeks later, Marion could hardly believe that months, if not years, had not passed since the evening she parted with Ralph. Her life at this time was strangely solitary. She saw little of her father, though she had forgotten none of her good resolutions, and in many hitherto neglected ways, endeavoured to show him her daughterly affection and anxiety for his comfort.

He was, on the whole, kinder in manner to her than had been his wont, but still strangely irritable and uncertain in temper. The change was remarked by others besides herself; and once or twice commented upon by some of the more

intimate of Mr. Vere's friends and allies, who now and then visited at his house.

"He is wearing himself out. Miss Vere," said one of these gentlemen to her, "mind and body. The amount of work he has gone through in the last few years would have killed most men long ago. He is wearing himself out."

Poor Marion thought it only too probable, and more than ever regretted the unnatural isolation from his children, in which her father had chosen to live, which now utterly precluded her from remonstrance or interference of any kind.

As the season advanced she went out a little more, under the chaperonage of her god-mother, Lady Barnstaple. But it was weary work—balls, concerts—whatever it was, weary and unenjoyable. She had not, naturally, enough of what are called "animal spirits" to throw off suffering, even temporarily, under excitement, as many, by no means heartless, women are able to do. Her indifferent, almost absent manner, came to be remarked by the few who knew her well enough to notice her; and more than one desirable "*parti*," who had in former days been struck by the girl's sweet brightness and gentle gaiety, was frightened away by the indefinable change that had come over her.

"Miss Vere looks as if she were going into a decline," was murmured on more than one occasion, when her slender figure and pale, grave face were discerned among the crowd.

"Such a pity, is it not? And she promised to be so pretty last year. Do you remember her mother—oh, no, it was long before your time, of course—Constantia Percy, she was, the Merivale Percies, you know, and such a lovely creature! They do say Mr. Vere bullied her to death. I could believe it of him. Those very clever, ambitious men, my dear, are not the best husbands. Have you heard that a baronetcy is spoken of for him? No? Ah, then it may be mere gossip," and so on.

Not till May did Marion get a glimpse of Harry, and then but a hurried one. Mr. Vere graciously permitted him to come up to town on his sister's birthday, which fell in "the pleasant month."

His visit was really the first bright spot in her life since her return to England. How well and happy he looked! And how sweet it was to be thanked by his own lips for what she had done for him—done, though she knew it not, at a price that had cost her dear!

For she was still as far as ever from guessing the real nature of the difficulty that Ralph had alluded to.

Still she imagined it to be connected with Florence Vyse, and in this found the only reasonable solution of his continued silence—a silence, she now began to fear, never likely to be broken or explained.

A little incident led her to do at last what she had not hitherto felt fit for,—to write to Cissy a full account of the whole from beginning to end, and to ask her advice as to the propriety of disclosing to Sir Ralph the secret of her assumed name and position while at Altes. A disclosure which, were it to be made, could be done by no one so well as by Cissy, and which, were it once clearly explained to Sir Ralph, would satisfy her; even if the result destroyed her last lingering hope that after all some mistake through her change of name *had* occurred, that in some way the mysterious obstacle in the way of his marrying Miss Freer, might be removed by her appearing in her true colours as Marion Vere.

If indeed he could forgive the deception!

It was a few chance words overheard at a dinner party, that led to her taking this step.

She had accompanied her father to one or the rare entertainments he honoured with his presence, and finding herself at dinner very “stupidly” placed—her neighbour on the right being a discontented gourmand, (terrible conjunction! a *good-natured* gourmand being barely endurable), and he on the left a “highest” church curate, a class with whom she could never, unlike most young ladies, succeed in “getting on” as it is called—she gave them both up in despair, and amused herself by listening to the snatches of conversation that reached her ears.

Suddenly a name caught her attention.

“Severn, did you say? Oh yes, I know whom you mean. He was out there before; at A——, I mean. A peculiar person, is he not? A great linguist, or philologist, I should say. So he is going out again, you say?”

“So Sir Archibald told me just before he left. ‘I expect to have my old vice out again in a few months, when Cameron returns,’ was what he said. I take some interest in it, as my son and his wife are thinking of spending next winter

out there, for her health.”

“Oh, indeed!” was the reply in the first voice, and then the conversation diverged to other topics.

It was very strange! What could be the meaning of it? It must be the same “Severn” they spoke of; the description suited, exactly. This did not look like marrying Florence Vyse! Marion thought it over till her brain was weary, looked at it first in one light, then in another; the final result of her cogitations being the letter to Cissy alluded to above. It was now about the middle of June. By the end of the month she was hoping to hear of Cissy’s arrival in India; by the end of September, at latest, she calculated she might receive an answer to her present letter.

This done, she felt more at rest than had been the case with her for many a day. It seemed to her she had acted wisely in allowing no false dignity to stand between her and the man she loved and trusted so entirely, and on the other hand the step she had taken in no way infringed the delicate boundary of her maidenly reserve, in after life need cause her no blush to look back upon.

Harry’s vacation was at hand, and he was looking forward with eager delight to spending it in her society. Marion resolved that he should not be disappointed of his anticipated pleasure. “The end of September,” she set before herself as a sort of goal, till then resolving to the utmost of her power to set aside her personal anxieties, and enjoy the present. Nor were her endeavours vain. Harry and she had never been happier together than during these holidays, and she herself unconsciously regained much of her usual health and elasticity both of mind and body.

A fortnight, by their father’s orders, was spent at Brighton. Here, one day, Altes and its precious associations were suddenly brought to her mind. Harry and she were strolling on the sands, when a voice beside her made her start.

“Could it be, is it then possible that I have the plaisir to look at Mees Feere?” It could be none other than Monsieur de l’Orme. He indeed it was, as large, or rather as small as life, got up in what he considered a perfectly unexceptionable English costume, the details of which can be better imagined than described. Poor little man! He was so inexpressibly delighted with himself and every one else, that his gaiety was infectious.



Marion greeted him cordially.

“For it is just possible,” thought she, “that through him I may hear something, however little, of him who is never really absent from my thoughts.”

But it was not so. The little Frenchman had left Altes soon after Mrs. Archer’s departure, and since then had been wandering to and fro, now at last finding himself at the summit of his desires, a visitor in “le pays charmant d’Angleterre.”

His account of his travels was very amusing, only he was so dreadfully polite about everything.

London he had found “*manifique, tout ce qu’il y a de plus beau,*” but “*triste, voiree triste, surtout le Dimanche.*” “Laysteer Squarr,” had not, he confessed, quite come up to his ideal of the much vaunted *comfort Anglais*, and the cab fares had struck him as slightly exorbitant, not being accustomed in France to pay something extra to the driver over and above the five itself, as he found was always expected by London cabbies.

“But my dear Monsieur,” broke in Harry at this point, “you must have been regularly done. I declare it’s a national disgrace to treat strangers so!”

M. de l’Orme looked puzzled.

“Pardon,” he exclaimed, “I do not quite at all onderstand. Monsieur say, I have been ‘donne.’ Donne? I request tousand forgives. That I am then beast! *Mais ‘donne.’ C’est bien ‘fini,’ ‘achevé,’ que Monsieur veut dire?*”

“Oh, no,” said Harry bluntly, “not that at all. Done means cheated, taken in. You understand now? I meant that the cabbies had been cheating you, in other words ‘doing you,’ and uncommonly brown too,” he added in a lower voice.

“Harry!” said Marion in a tone of remonstrance.

But M. de l’Orme was really too irresistible, and Harry after all only a schoolboy.

They took the little man a walk (Harry worse confounding his confusion by offering to put him in the way of “doing” Brighton), exhibiting to him the

beauties of this London-super-mare, with which kind attention he was so charmed, as to be rather at a loss for sufficiently effusive expressions in English, and obliged consequently to fall back upon his native tongue.

Then Harry took upon himself to invite him to dine with them, a proposal which Marion could not but second; aghast though she was at her brother's audacity; for at no hour of the day, and on no day of the week, were they secure from their father's swooping down upon them. Fortunately, however, M. de l'Orme was obliged to leave Brighton at once, and could not therefore accept their invitation, much to Marion's relief, for besides her fear of Mr. Vere's appearance, she had been every moment in terror of the little Frenchman coming, out with some allusion to her pupils at Altes.

But the Severn family was not mentioned till the last moment, when M. de l'Orme observed casually that several of their Altes acquaintances were spending the summer in Switzerland. The Berwicks, he said, were a Lausanne, and "Miladi Sevère" had taken a *maison de campagne* at Vevey.

"All's well that ends well," and Marion was thankful when their friend had bidden them an overflowing farewell, and taken himself off in an opposite direction.

By the middle of August Harry was off again, for what he trusted would be his last half-year at the Woolwich tutor's; and Marion returned to her lonely life, brightened only by the hope that the end of the following month would bring her an answer from Cissy.

No letter from her cousin had yet reached her; but from the elder Mrs. Archer at Cheltenham she had heard of the traveller's safe arrival at their destination. These few weeks were not so bad as those immediately succeeding her return home. To certain people, weak-minded ones perhaps, in such circumstances, the looking forward to a distinct goal is a great help! But still it was weary work. All sorts of torturing fears would now and then rush into her mind—that Ralph would have left for the East before any communication from Cissy could reach him—that he would never forgive her deception—that he was already married to Miss Vyse; these and a hundred other "thick coming fancies" from time to time came to torment her; above all, in the middle of the night, would they crowd upon her, ten-fold deepened and magnified, by the strange power of the all-surrounding darkness and silence.

It sometimes struck her as curious that she never *dreamt* of Ralph; for naturally she was a great dreamer, and since infancy had been accustomed to live over again in “mid-night fantasy,” the pleasures and sorrows, the hopes and disappointments of the day.

The end of September came at last. The Indian mail was in, but as yet no letters for her. Still she was not disheartened. Not improbably Cissy might have enclosed hers in a budget to her mother-in-law; or even supposing the worst, that her cousin had been prevented writing at once, she must just extend a little further her laboriously acquired patience, and hope for what the next mail might bring.

She rose early on the morning of the 30th, and sat at the dining room window, watching for the postman, as had come to be a habit with her. He came at last. Brown, the discreet, seemed to guess she was eager to hear what he had brought. For before she asked any question, he announced, “No letters for you, ma’am— all for my master.”

She thought she had not expected any, but still ——. In another minute a second ring at the front bell was explained by Brown’s re-appearance, with the *Times*, which she took up, though hardly caring to see it, and amused herself in the listless way people often do, when perhaps their hearts are well-nigh bursting with anxiety, by glancing over the advertisement sheet.

“Births. No, no one that I care about I’m sure. I wonder what people do with all these hosts of children! There are some names—the wife of a somebody James., Esq., Notting Hill; and another, the better half of a Rev. Mr. Watson, in the midland counties, who, I really do believe, make their appearance here at least once a month!

“Marriages. Yes, I may happen to see some I know of. Ah, I declare! Well I need not waste any more pity on *you*, my dear sir.”

“ ‘At Calcutta, on the so-and-so, by the Reverend, &c., Francis Hunter Berwick, Captain 81st Bengal Native Infantry, and Acting Commissioner in Oude, to Dora Isabella, eldest daughter of R. D. Bailey, Esq., M. D.’ Poor little thing! I daresay she’ll be very happy! But how strange it seems. So soon alter. Well, never mind. I’m very glad.”

So Marion soliloquised. Having gone through the marriages, she was on the

point of throwing the paper aside, when it occurred to her to look if among the deaths was announced that of a very old gentleman, their next door neighbour, whose funeral had taken place the previous day. A moment, and the paper fell from her hands, to be clutched at again, and glared at by the stony, unbelieving eyes, which one would hardly have recognised as the sweet, tender Marion's! Then a burst of wild, bitter sobbing—an abandonment of grief, very piteous to see. Poor girl, poor solitary child! This was the first time *it* had come so near her, the first time she had felt that agonising grief—the wild cry of revolt against the awful law of our nature, which, at such seasons, rends us with despair. God be thanked, He Himself hears that terrible cry, “and pitieth.” His poor children! This was what Marion saw in the death column of the *Times*.

“On the 10th of August, at Landour, North West Provinces, suddenly, Cecilia May Vere, aged 28, the beloved wife of Lieut.-Colonel Archer, H.M.'s 101st Regiment, and only daughter of the late Charles Hope-Lacy, Esq. of Wyesham, —shire.”

## CHAPTER V.

### ORPHANED.

“Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it.”

MACBETH.

“L’incertitude est vraiment le pire de tous les maux parcequ’il est le seul qui suspend nécessairement les ressorts de l’âme, et qui ajourue le courage.”

OCTAVE FEUILLET.

MR. VERE breakfasted alone that morning. He was surprised at his daughter’s absence, more particularly as he was considerably later than usual, having had a sleepless night. In spite of himself he was beginning insensibly to feel pleasure in Marion’s society. Of late he had felt strangely weakened and unhinged, and when obliged by utter weariness to rest from his usual occupations, he found it soothing and refreshing to watch his gentle little daughter. She was just the sort of woman one could imagine at home in a sick room. Calm, cheerful, and with immense “tact” of the very best kind—that which springs from no worldly notions of policy or expediency, but from the habit of consideration for others—the quick instinctive sympathy which may be cultivated, but hardly, I think, acquired.

So, as the breakfast was getting cold and no Marion appeared, Mr. Vere fidgeted and fussed, and ended by ringing the bell, and desiring Brown to enquire the reason of Miss Vere’s absence.

The servant soon reappeared.

“Mrs. Evans wished me to say, sir, that Miss Vere is rather upset this morning. Indeed she thinks Miss Vere must have had some bad news, and she would be glad, if so be as you could step up to her room, sir, as before you go out.”

“Bad news!” exclaimed Mr. Vere, “nonsense. If there had been any bad news I should have heard it.”

But his hand shook as he hastily emptied his coffee-cup; and without further delay he hastened up to his daughter’s room. It was the first time for years that he had been in it, and, as he entered, he was struck by its plainness and simplicity. It was the same room she had had as a child, and her innocent girl life might almost have been read in a glance at its arrangements and contents. There were the book-shelves on the wall, the upper ones filled with the child’s treasures she had not liked to set aside; the lower ones with the favourites of her later years. There were the plaster casts she had saved her pence to buy many years ago, now somewhat yellowed and disfigured by London fogs and smoke. The framed photograph of Harry over the mantel-piece, and a little water-colour sketch of the dear old cottage at Brackley, the only pictures on the walls.

Somehow it all came home to the father’s heart, and for almost the first time a strange misgiving seized him. Had he after all done wisely in the life he had marked out for himself? Had he not deliberately put away from him treasures near at hand, which, now that failing health of mind and body was creeping upon him, might have been to him the sweetest of consolations—strength to his weakness, comfort in his need?

Nor were his misgivings merely from this selfish point of view. Something of fatherly yearning towards his child, pity for her loneliness and admiration of the gentle, uncomplaining patience with which, of late especially, she had borne his coldness and irritability, caused him to speak very kindly, and touch her very softly, as he stood beside the bed on which, in her paroxysm of grief, she had thrown herself, her face buried in the pillows.

“Marion, my dear,” he said, “you alarm me. What can be the matter, my poor child? Surely, surely,” he went on hurriedly, as for the first time a dreadful possibility occurred to him, “there can be nothing wrong with Harry?”

She sat up, mechanically pushing back from her temples the hair, usually so neat and smooth, which had fallen loose as she lay. Her father caught her upraised hand, and held it gently in his. But she seemed hardly conscious of the unusual kindness of his manner.

“No, not Harry,” she replied, “but, oh, Papa, look here,” and as she spoke, with her other hand she pointed to those dreadful four lines in the newspaper lying on the pillow beside her, “it is Cissy, my dear Cissy—the only sister I ever had—my own dear, kind Cissy.” And the sobs burst out again as violently as at first. Mr. Vere, hardly understanding what she said, stared at the place she pointed out, but for a minute or two could not decipher the words.

When their meaning at last broke upon him, he staggered and almost fell.

“This is very dreadful,” he said, “very sad and dreadful. So young and bright and happy! My poor little Cissy! It is like her mother over again. Marion, my dearest child, you can hardly feel this more than I do. You don’t know all it brings back to me.”

And Marion, now glancing at her father, saw his face pale with deep emotion, while one or two large tears gathered in his eyes.

It was the best thing to bring her back to herself.

“My poor father,” she thought, “how I have misjudged you!” And with a sudden loving impulse, she threw her arms round his neck, and clung to him as she had hardly, even in her confiding infancy, ever clung to him before. Nor was she repulsed.

In a little while her father spoke to her; kindly and gently, in a way she would hardly have believed it possible for him to speak; he, in general, so cold and satirical, so unbending and severe.

He left her in a short time, promising to write at once to Cheltenham for details of this sad news; and volunteering also to send for Harry for a day or two, that she might feel less solitary in her grief.

This kindness soothed and calmed her, and in an hour or two she crept down stairs, and tried to employ herself as usual. But it would not do. Ever and anon it rushed upon her with overwhelming force, the remembrance of those dreadful

printed words:—

“On the 10th of August, Cecilia Mary Vere.”

“The 10th of August,” that was the time she and Harry were at Brighton, possibly the very day they were talking and laughing with M. de l’Orme!

And then another thought, of aggravating misery, occurred to her. With Cissy had gone the last, the very last link between herself and Ralph! Ralph, whom more than ever in this her time of sorrow, she hungered for; Ralph, whom she *could* not live without.

“If only he were here,” she thought, “merely to sit beside me and hold my hand, even though I knew he was never to be more to me afterwards! Oh, if only, *only*, he knew of my bitter grief, he would, I know, find some way to comfort me. But he will never, never know it, never hear of me again. For most likely my poor Cissy never got my letter at all. Oh, why are things so cruel upon me? Why may I not be happy? Why could not my one, only woman friend have been left me? It is more than I can bear, this losing Ralph again. For I had been counting so on Cissy.

And the sad, weary day went by, followed by others as sad and weary, and Marion thought she had drained sorrow to its dregs. She had only one comfort—her father’s continued kindness and gentleness. She clung to him wonderfully, poor child, in those days; but more was before her that she little thought of. In her absorption she did not observe Mr. Vere’s increasing illness; but when Harry came home on the following Saturday he was much startled by it, and amazed, too, at the strange, unwonted softness and tenderness almost, of his father’s manner to both his sister and himself, though especially to the former.

Before leaving Marion on the Monday the boy debated with himself whether he should confide his misgivings to her. But he decided that it was better not to do so.

“It is not as if she could do any good,” thought he, “and after all I may be exaggerating the change in my father. I think it is as much his unusual kindness as his looking ill that has struck me so. May has trouble enough already.”

Still it was with a strange feeling of anxiety and impending sorrow, that he shook hands with his father and kissed his sister that Monday morning, when he



left them to return to his tutor's.

His presentiments were realized only too correctly. On the following Friday he was telegraphed for, and arrived at home to find his father already *dead*, and Marion sitting by his bedside in speechless, tearless sorrow.

“Just as he was beginning to care for is a little,” she said, in a dull, husky voice, that did not sound the least like her own. “Oh, Harry, I am so lonely, so miserable! I have only you, and soon you will be going away. Except for you I wish I might die.”

It was very pitiful. These two solitary children clinging to each other in their great desolation, as, long ago, they had clung to each other for comfort in their little trifling child!

“It,” Marion whispered to her brother, “had been very sudden, dreadfully sudden.” Mr. Vere had been presiding at a large public meeting the day before that of his death, and had come home late, saying he felt tired.

“But I never thought he was really ill, Harry,” said Marion; “I had no idea of it. At breakfast yesterday morning he seemed very well. He got several letters, and read them while he eat his breakfast.”

“Could there have been anything in his letters to startle or annoy him?” suggested Harry.

“No, I think not. I have them all here. Among them was one from young Mr. Baldwin—Geoffrey Baldwin, you remember, Harry?—saying that he would come to see him, as he wished, ‘to-morrow or Monday.’ Papa seemed pleased at this, and gave me the letter to read. He began to speak about Mr. Baldwin, and told him he had appointed him our guardian, or trustee, in his will. It surprised me a little his talking this way to me. He has generally been so reserved about these sort of things.”

“He must have known he was very ill,” said Harry. “He said something to me about his will last Sunday. He told me that he wished to give a little more attention to his private affairs than he had found time for, for some years past. Indeed, Marion, I may be mistaken, but I have a sort of idea that though every one has seemed to consider my father a rich man, he was not really so. He has spent an immense deal of money on public matters one way and another. That

contested election two years ago, and lots of subscriptions and things always going on. It's always the way with 'public men,' they neglect their own affairs to look after everybody else's. I hope I may be mistaken, but I have my fears that we shall not be rich by any means."

"I don't care," said Marion; "I would be just as miserable if we had millions. I don't care for money. But I wish you would not talk about money, Harry. It seems too horrible—so soon—only yesterday!"

"Don't think me heartless, dear May," said the boy. "For myself I truly don't care. I could go to India. It was only for you. Did my father say nothing more to you?"

"No," replied his sister; "at least only a word or two almost at the last, before he became unconscious. He went up to his room after breakfast, and about half-an-hour after, Brown heard a heavy fall. He ran upstairs and found him, as he told you, in a sort of fit. I don't understand what it was exactly. He lifted him on to his bed and sent for a doctor before telling me. Poor Brown, he was very kind and thoughtful! A little after the doctor came Papa grew slightly better, and asked for me. I was beside him. He signed for me to kiss him, and whispered to me: 'You have been my dear little daughter. It was a great mistake, but you will forgive me. Poor Harry too.' Then he grew uneasy, and muttered something about 'sending for Baldwin, hoping it would be all right for them, poor children.' I bent down and said, 'Yes, clear Papa, it will be all right.' He seemed pleased and smiled at me, but he did not speak again to me. Only I heard him whisper to himself very, very low—no one else heard it—the prayer of the poor publican, Harry: 'Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.' Then he lay quite still, seeming not to suffer at all. I had laid my head down for a minute when the doctor spoke to me. Then I knew, Harry. Oh, poor papa! Poor Papa! We did not think we cared so much for him, did we, Harry?"

"No," said the boy, "nor that he cared for us."

There was no exaggeration about their grief. Mr. Vere had not been an affectionate father, and his death was far from being to them the overwhelming, utterly prostrating blow, that the loss of a parent is felt to be in some happier families. Nevertheless it was, more especially from its suddenness, a very terrible shock, to Marion, in particular, whose life for several months had been one of constant suspense and disappointment, culminating in the great grief of

her cousin's death. And young natures after all, with rare exceptions, are sweet and generous, ready to forgive and forget, not backward to give their love on slight enough encouragement.

Mr. Baldwin came late on Monday evening. Harry received him, but Marion was tired, and begged not to be asked to see him, or any one, till after the funeral was over. Mr. Vere had left directions that this should take place very quietly; in consequence of which only a few of his most intimate friends were present. It was evident that he had for some time past suspected the state of his own health. Only two days before he had called on his lawyer about some slight addition to his will, which however there had not been time to execute; and had left with him a letter of directions; as to the arrangements of his funeral, in case of his death occurring suddenly, as he had been warned might possibly be the case.

So though the papers were full of the sudden death of the great man, each vying with the others as to the extent and accuracy of their biographical notices, the actual mourners were few; and with but little of outward parade or ostentation, the mortal remains of Hartford Vere were carried to the grave.

Ralph Severn, sitting at breakfast that morning in his mother's villa at Vevey, observed casually that the Member for —— was dead.

"A useful man he was a very useful man. His party will miss him exceedingly. There are rumours, I see, that his private affairs are in some confusion. Always the case with these public men. I hope, however, it may not be true."

"Was he a friend of yours, then?" asked Florence.

"O dear, no," replied he, "I have seen him, of course, and heard him speak. But I never spoke to him. I am far too small a person to be hand in glove with the leading politicians of the day. But I should be sorry to think that a man who had spent his life, as he believed, for the good of his country, should leave his family unprovided for."

"Has he left a large family?" asked Lady Severn.

"No," said Ralph, consulting the paper; "a son and a daughter, I think it said somewhere. His wife died many years ago. By the bye, she was one of those beautiful Miss Percies of Merivale, mother. You remember Merivale, of course?"

That queer old place near my Uncle Brackley's. It is sold now, but the last time I was in Brentshire I went to see it. The Veres were Brentshire people, too, were they not?"

"Oh dear, yes, one of the oldest families there," said Lady Severn, who prided herself on her genealogical accuracy, and was supposed to be particularly well up in Brentshire family lore, Lord Brackley, the great man of the county, being her step-brother. "I remember them well long ago. But the present head of the family, this Mr. Vere's uncle or cousin, I forget which, married a great heiress, and emigrated to some other country."

"Ah, indeed!" replied Sir Ralph, for whom these details possessed no peculiar interest, and whose thoughts were just then painfully engrossed by private troubles of his own, complicated of late in an altogether unexpected way. "Ah, indeed!" said he, and straightway forgot all about the death of Mr. Vere, and fell to thinking of very different matters.

To return, however, to our poor little Marion.

On the morning of the funeral she received at last what she had so long been looking for—an Indian letter! Not, alas! in the familiar hand that was wont to cause her such pleasure; for in all the seven years of her married life in the East, Mrs. Archer had seldom allowed a mail to pass without writing to her little cousin—that dear handwriting she would never, never see again. This letter had a deep black border, and the address was written in a firm, large hand, very different from Cissy's characteristic scratch. It was from Colonel Archer.

Some few, sad details, it gave of Cissy's last illness and death (the first Marion had received, for the elder Mrs. Archer had been ill, and unable to reply to Mr. Vere's enquiries), the suddenness of which had been its most distressing feature, for she had suffered little, poor Cissy. Some blunt, strong words of his own agony, at losing, her, which told that poor George Archer's heart was all but broken. And then her last message to Marion, when too nearly gone almost to speak. George had written them down, he said, at once, for fear of possible mistake—the faint, fluttering words of the tender, affectionate heart. "Tell dear May," she had said, "I have done what she wished, and I hope they will be very happy."

That was all—the message, and a little lock of the bright fair hair Marion knew so well, cut off, gently and reverently, from his dead wife’s head, by the husband she had loved so devotedly.

All, but how much! Enough to turn the grey world rosy again, to bathe all around her in golden light, to fill her heart with joy and thankfulness, which she tried in vain to banish by the recollection that today her father was to be buried.

“Oh, am I wicked, am I heartless?” she asked herself. “God forgive me if I am. But I was so broken down, so hopeless, and now all seems so different! By now even, this very day perhaps, Ralph will know it all, will have received Cissy’s letter, explaining away all the trouble, so far, at least, as I was concerned. Sooner even than to-day, for Cissy must have written before her illness began. Yes, sooner, surely. Any day I may look for a letter from him if, as I feel convinced, some mistake or misapprehension has been at the root of his strange silence.”

And in proportion to her previous hopelessness and despair, was her present sanguine belief that all would soon be well.

In the afternoon of that day, when “all was over,” as people say, the will read, and the few guests departed, Harry ran upstairs to beg Marion to come down to see Mr. Baldwin, who was going to remain with them for a day or two. Her presence at the reading of the will had been suggested, but not after all considered advisable; for as Harry, poor boy, had feared, the will itself, and still more Mr. Croke the lawyer’s comments thereupon, had revealed that the state of the dead man’s affairs was the reverse of satisfactory, and it was thought well that Marion should be spared the shock to her feelings of such a disclosure in public.

Some hint of this Harry gave to his sister as they went downstairs together. He was somewhat disappointed that she did not say again, as she had said the other day, “I don’t care about money, Harry, truly I don’t.”

“After all, I fear she does care,” thought her brother. Mr. Baldwin was in the library, Harry said, and thither they went.

When they entered the room he was standing with his back to the door, looking out of the window. A tall, powerful figure, hands in pockets, clad in

tweed and velvet shooting coat, for which, by his young host's permission, he had already exchanged the uncongenial black, in which he had performed his part as second chief mourner in the morning. But he started when Harry's voice reached him; he had not known that the boy had gone to fetch his sister.

"I have persuaded May to come down to make tea for us, Baldwin," said Harry.

Geoffrey Baldwin wheeled round suddenly, and his handsome face flushed.

"Miss Vere," he exclaimed, almost before he saw her; "that's too bad of you, Harry—not to have warned me, I mean. I thought we were to be alone. Miss Vere, you must excuse me, really. I had no business to change my clothes, but I didn't know I should see you to-day."

Even as he finished the words he had begun, a curious expression came over his face, and seemed to affect the tone of his voice. Marion hardly at first understood it.

"Never mind," she said quietly, "I am sure people's clothes have nothing to do with their feelings."

Mr. Baldwin did not reply. He stood staring at her, regularly staring, in a way that in any one else would have been offensive and rude. But he did it so simply, so unconsciously almost, that the only feeling it aroused in Marion was an extreme, almost nervous wish to laugh. Then it flashed upon her.

"I know why you look so amazed, Mr. Baldwin," she exclaimed. "You can't remember where you saw me before. I can tell you. It was at the railway station, nearly a year ago," she added, with an imperceptible sob in her voice.

A look of extreme satisfaction overspread his face.

"Thank you for reminding me. I am so very glad. Yes, it was just then. You had a little boy with you?"

"Yes," she replied, "little Charlie Archer. I was on my way abroad with his mother. Harry!" she turned to him appealingly. It was too fresh yet for her to tell it herself. But he understood her, and in a few words explained to Mr. Baldwin what Marion could not find voice to tell.

The fair face before her was softened by a look of almost womanly commiseration, though all he said was the commonplace phrase,

“I am very sorry to hear it.”

He was wonderfully good-looking, and of a thoroughly manly type of beauty. Tall, as I have said, but firm and compact, the features almost perfect of their kind, and the colouring unusually rich and mellow, if such a word can be applied to a human face. The hair was of that bright, sunny hue, on which, however in the shade, some light always seems to linger; the eyes unmistakeably blue, honest, laughing, what I have heard called “well opened eyes,” set round by thick, soft fringes, curling like a girl’s. A pleasant mouth too, lips closed in repose, though usually open enough to show the clear, even, white teeth within. But nothing in the mouth or lower jaw to spoil the beautiful whole, as is not unfrequently the case in such great physical perfection, by its confession of spiritual weakness, undue preponderance of the lower part of our nature over the higher. No, if Geoffrey Baldwin’s mouth told tales at all, they were of too great sensitiveness, too quick a sympathy, too impulsive a heart, to be altogether well managed and directed by the intellectual powers with which nature had gifted him. For although of average ability and intelligence, he was certainly not a clever man, in the ordinary sense of the word. “An illiterate clod-hopper,” he called himself, but that was far too severe. Feel deeply, very deeply, he could, and often, perhaps on the whole too often, did. But as for thinking deeply! It made his head ache, he said, and after all what was the good of it?

He knew well and thoroughly all required of him in his daily life, which was that of a gentleman farmer, and so long as that was the case, he couldn’t for the life of him see what more learning he wanted.

But honest as the day, brave as a lion, and tender as a lamb, chivalrous, with a chivalry that is fast going out of fashion, generous and unsuspecting to a fault—though he went to sleep over Tennyson, and preferred a ride across country to the most exquisite music ever heard—after all, the world would not be the worse of a few more like you, Geoffrey Baldwin.

Then they talked a little of old days, and Geoffrey blushed more than Marion, when some of their escapades were referred to—their tumbling into the brook and his fishing them out; their “hare and hounds,” when the hare, and she, perched on Geoffrey’s shoulder, the terrible horseman pursuit. And another

remembrance came to Geoffrey's mind, though this he kept to himself. Of a day when, in return for some special act of kindness, little May had clambered on to his knee and kissed and bugged him right honestly, while she promised, voluntarily too, that if only "Jeff" would wait till she was big she would marry him, she would indeed, really and truly, or "in truality," which was her childish mode of asseveration.

"What a little tomboy I must have been," said Marion, and then she added dreamily, "I wonder if I shall ever see that Brackley cottage again!"

"I hope so," said Harry cheerfully, but he looked uncomfortable, and glanced appealingly at Geoffrey, who in turn frowned slightly, and seemed at a loss. So Harry spoke.

"May, dear," he said, "I must go back to Woolwich so soon, and Mr. Baldwin too has little time to spare, that if you don't mind, I think we had better explain to you a little how things are. It won't take long. We need not go into details with you, but you see we shall not have much time to consult together."

"No," said Marion, "we shall not. I am quite ready to listen. I don't understand business matters much, but you won't mind?" she added, half appealingly, to Mr. Baldwin; "I know Papa told me he had asked you to take charge of things for us. I am very glad. It is so much nicer than a stranger."

She spoke quietly, but with a slight sinking at her heart, why, she could hardly have told. Was some fresh trouble before her? Some new obstacle in her path, just as she fancied it was going to be made clear? Supposing she were utterly penniless. What then? She might be obliged to become a governess in reality. How might not this affect her possible relations to Ralph? Would it be right for her, in that case, to think of him, or rather, to allow him to think of her? All this flashed through her mind in a bewildering, perplexing whirl. She had time to think a little, for Mr. Baldwin appeared to hesitate somewhat to begin his statement.

"Please tell me," she said at last. "Never mind how bad it is. I would so much rather know. Have we nothing at all to live on? Is that it?"

"No, no, May!" said Harry, eagerly.

And "Oh, no, Miss Vere! Indeed, no!" exclaimed Mr. Baldwin. But her thus



fearing the worst made it easier to tell the whole.

Of their father's large property, but a comparatively small portion, after all liabilities were cleared off, remained to them. For many years, it was evident that Mr. Vere must have lived beyond his income, though he himself, not improbably, had been unaware of the fact. Then, when this state of things had been suddenly brought before him, how or when, no one knew, it appeared that by hasty, ill-considered speculation, he had endeavoured to retrieve himself. In vain; more and yet more had been sunk, and still he had persisted in more deeply involving himself, till at last all was gone, save some few thousands of ready money, originally intended as a settlement on his wife, but of which the deed had never been executed. So, in all probability, had his life been extended, this would have gone the way of the rest, and his children might have been left beggars.

"I see," said Marion, "but I am sure Papa did it for the best. Don't say any more about it, but just tell me how much there is left. How much we shall have to live on, I mean."

"I can't tell you quite exactly," said Mr. Baldwin, "till we decide what to do with this house, the furniture, &c. There is a long lease to dispose of and the furniture, I suppose, is valuable. But to give you a rough idea," he went on, consulting a note book in his hand. "I should think, after all is cleared, you and Harry will have about—mind I only say about—four hundred a year between you. The ready money is at present in the Mallingford hank, the bank of which my father used to be the head, you know, Miss Vere. If the other trustee, a cousin of your father's, who is at present abroad, wishes to put it anywhere else, I shall have no objection, though for my own part I think it may as well stay where it is. The old bank's as safe as can be. All my own money is there, which shows what I think of it. Still I don't profess to be much of a man of business and I should like to have Mr. Framley Vere's opinion. I am sadly afraid I shall make a very poor trustee! I don't like to say "guardian," to such wards, for I honestly believe you are both much wiser than I. I fear your poor father must have credited me with some of my own father's long-headedness as to money matters, and if so the result will prove he was mistaken. I however can only do my best. Only pray don't ever ask me anything I should not consent to, for I could not possibly refuse you."

He spoke lightly, and as if to both, but his eyes rested on Marion. She was

touched by his frankness and simplicity, his kindness of voice and manner, and, in all innocence and child-like confidence, she held out her hand to him, saying warmly, "Thank you, Mr. Baldwin for explaining it to me so kindly. I am quite sure *I* shall never wish for another guardian any way."

Geoffrey took the little hand, softly, reverently almost, in his own great strong one. A deep flush spread over his face, for though sunburnt, he was naturally so fair that as a boy at school his quickly changing colour had procured for him many undesirable epithets; and there came a grave, earnest look into his eyes, which added to their depth, without diminishing their softness. Without speaking, he pressed gently the hand that lay in his, held it for a moment, as if mentally sealing a vow.

Harry had turned away before this little scene occurred, and all that Marion thought of it was, "How kind and brotherly Mr. Baldwin is! Were it necessary I almost think I could take him into my confidence."

## CHAPTER VI.

### MALLINGFORD AND AUNT TREMLETT.

“Non illum nostri passunt labores,  
Non si frigoribus mediis Hebrumque libamus  
Sithoniasque nives hiemis subeamus aquosæ—  
Omnia vincit amor.”

VIRGIL.

“AND what then do you and Harry think I should do? Where, I should rather say, do you think I should go, for I am sure you have thought of some plan?” asked Marion, later in the evening, as they still sat together talking.

Mr. Baldwin looked at Harry, and Harry at Mr. Baldwin. This was the part of the whole they most dreaded telling her, being, as are all their sex, sad cowards when there was question of breaking bad or disagreeable news.

“No permanent arrangement can be made till we hear from Mr. Framley, Vere,” began Mr. Baldwin, but Marion interrupted him.

“You need not, I assure you, take him into consideration with regard to my movements,” said she: “he is one of those old bachelors that think girls torments, and provided he is not asked to look out for a home for me himself, he will trouble himself very little as to what becomes of me. I daresay Harry may find him a sensible adviser and he may be a good man of business, but beyond that I am sure he won’t interfere.”

“The only plan that appears at all feasible to Harry and me,” resumed Mr. Baldwin, “is one which I fear will be very distasteful to you.” Again he stopped.

“Please tell me what it is,” urged Marion.

Mr. Baldwin looked at Harry beseechingly.

“It’s nothing so very dreadful,” said the boy, “all really for the present it’s the only thing to be done. It’s only Aunt Tremlett and Mallingford, May.” He spoke lightly, but in his heart he dreaded the effect of his announcement.

But to his amazement Marion took it philosophically in the extreme.

“I thought it was that,” she replied, “well, I daresay it will do very fairly, all things considered. Mallingford certainly is dull, and Aunt Tremlett duller; but I don’t mind. I shall get on comfortably enough, and I shall have you Harry, in the holidays. May I not?” she asked, appealing, to Mr. Baldwin.

“Most assuredly,” he answered warmly, “I was thinking of that. And if Miss Tremlett objects to the racket of a young gentleman in her house, Harry can come to me. It’s not two miles from my house to Mallingford, and I can lend you a horse, or two if you like,” he said, turning to Harry.

“That would be capital,” said the boy, “much more to my taste than Aunt Tremlett’s. Though I’ll stay there part of the time if shell have me,” he added quickly, seeing that his sister looked rather disappointed.

And so Marion’s future, for a time at least, was decided.

It all came to pass very soon. So soon, that ten days later she found herself, under the escort of Mrs. Evans and Brown (about to set up a joint establishment, after “keeping company” of many years’ standing), in the railway on her way to Mallingford, hardly able to realize that not yet a month had passed since the day when she saw those sad four lines in the ‘Times’—when for the first time the destroying angel had passed close by her, breaking the small circle of her immediate friends. And now already another place was vacant!

It was rather a long journey to Mallingford. A few years ago, when as children Marion and Harry used to spend the summer in the Brackley cottage, the railway only went about two-thirds of the way, and the last thirty miles were

traversed in the coach. Now it was different. Mallingford had a station of its own, at which some half dozen trains stopped in the day, so the whole of the journey was performed on the railway; at which, had she been in the mood to observe or feel interested in outside things, Marion would have murmured; for long ago the stage coach part of the programme had been the children's great delight: in fine weather at least, when they coaxed their attendants to allow them to mount up to the top of the vehicle, from whence they had a charming view of the country in general, and of the four dashing, smoking horses in particular.

But Marion was sad and listless, and so long as she was left at peace to pursue the wearying circle of her own thoughts, cared little for what might be her surroundings.

She had heard nothing from Ralph, received no sort of explanation of his strange conduct. And her hopes were sinking low. By Cissy's last message she was now perfectly convinced that no sort of mistake was at the bottom of his incomprehensible silence. He must, by the last mail at latest, if not sooner, have received Mrs. Archer's explanation of the whole from Marion's side. That he still refrained from communicating with her must be owing to one of two causes: either his feelings to her were changed by the knowledge of the deception she had practised; or he himself had failed in the object of his visit to England, and was still fettered by the mysterious complications to which he had alluded. Complications in no way removed, as she had now and then begun to fancy might prove to be the case, by the fact of her being the daughter of the distinguished politician Hartford Vere, instead of Marion Freer, the little governess.

"Not that my position would have made any difference to him personally," she always added; "he, I know, cared for Marion Freer as I shall never, never be cared for again. But it might have influenced his mother if the obstacle was in any way connected with her."

Latterly she had said to herself somewhat bitterly, that so far as his advantage was concerned, there was nothing to regret.

"My father dead, and a mere pittance all my portion! And the very little beauty I ever had fading already," she thought, as she looked at herself in her old toilet glass for the last time, the morning she left London.

She was mistaken, however. But her beauty was not of a kind to be materially affected by such causes, and in this respect rose far superior to the more striking, but merely physical, loveliness of such women as Florence Vyse. The “sweet soul” that looked out of Marion Vere’s grey eyes would render them beautiful till old age; the delicate features and sensitive mouth drew their chief attraction from the truth of heart and refinement of mind of their owner. To my mind she was at all times a beautiful woman. Her nature, in spite of adverse circumstances, was sound and healthy, and in a sense, even strong; for after all it is the strongest who suffer the most, that bend only, where weaker ones would break.

As Geoffrey Baldwin handed her on to the little platform at Mallingford station, whither he had driven to meet her, he, at least, would have agreed with me. Likely enough, he would have been at a loss to define his sensations with regard to her. He was not a man who troubled himself much with definitions of any kind certainly, but it is curious to reflect on the peculiar attraction this girl had for him from the first. He had seen plenty of far handsomer women, he had known some few as sweet and good. Intellect he did not care for, did not understand. Yet as he looked at the slight figure in its heavy mourning dress, at the fair face and sad, gentle eyes that glanced up at him with their indescribable expression or mingled womanliness and childlike appeal, there came over his honest manhood the same yearning instinct of love and protection, the same wild longing to fold her then and there in his arms, which, before now, had stirred the innermost depths of Ralph Severn’s heart, had indeed cost him no slight struggle to resist. I make, no secret of it at all. Both these men fell love with her, as it is called, almost from the first. It was very strange. They were so utterly different, alike only in that they were brave and good and true. But as to tastes, shades of character, habits, ideas—all in short that goes to the formation of individuality, you might search high and low, far and wide, before you could find two men so radically dissimilar as the quiet, studious Sir Ralph Severn, and the high-spirited, open-hearted, life enjoying farmer, Geoffrey Baldwin.

Marion felt glad that her young guardian had come to meet her, and she told him so.

“It seems less desolate,” she said, “for I do not expect much of a welcome from Aunt Tremlett.” Which expectation, for all his wish to cheer her, Mr. Baldwin could not find it in his conscience to disagree with.

So in silence he put her and Evans into the fly he had stopped to order at the King's Arms, on his way through Mallingford, he himself following in his dog-cart, "just to shake hands with Miss Tremlett," he said to himself, though in reality to make sure that his charge should have what little additional comfort and support his presence might give her, on her first arrival at the not very cheerful dwelling, which, for some time to come, at least, was to be her home.

There was no mystery about Miss Tremlett. She was simply a narrow-minded hypochondriac, who, never having been accustomed in youth to live for any other object than her precious self, had in old age, naturally enough increased in devotion to this all-engrossing idol. She was what is called a woman of high principles and excellent judgement, meaning, I suppose that when she was young, pretty, and poor, she had refused to marry the only man she cared for because he was a struggling curate, and had done her best to secure a rich husband; failing which she had for years "devoted herself" to an odious old woman, her god-mother, in hopes of succeeding to her fortune, in which, strange to say, she had not been disappointed. And now that she was old (for the fortune did not come to her till she was fifty) she had not been guilty of any enormity, robbing a church, for instance, in consequence of which *and* her large fortune, she was "greatly respected" in Mallingford, and at the various tea-tables always alluded to by the rector in the terms above mentioned.

It was a great feather in her cap, this taking her orphan grand-niece to live with her. Many of her acquaintances, in their secret hearts, wondered at it, especially when it oozed out, as such things always do, that the great Mr. Vere had not left his children "overly well provided for," as Mrs. Jones, of the King's Arms, expressed it to her crony, Miss Green, the milliner. Miss Green was better informed than Mrs. Jones, however, a few days later, for she had been working at "The Cross House," Miss Tremlett's residence, and had it from Mrs. Thomas, the housekeeper that Master and Miss Vere had been left "quite destitoot."

"Not one brass farthing between them, Mrs. Jones, I do assure you," she said, "and his debts, they do say, something awful."

To which communication Mrs. Jones replied by an impressive "In-deed."

Miss Tremlett had been influenced by various motives, when on hearing of her nephew's death, she had authorized Geoffrey Baldwin to offer her house as a temporary home for Marion. For one thing, in her heart, as in most others, there

was a soft spot, and in her way, she had loved and been proud of Hartford Vere. Then again, though to some extent grasping and money-loving, she was not on the whole ungenerous or stingy. There was one thing she loved better than money and that was herself and her own comfort, and it occurred to her that even if Marion should be left very scantily provided for, she would cause but little additional expense in her household, and would be all the more ready to repay her aunt's kindness by making herself a useful and agreeable companion. The effect on her nerves of a cheerful young person about the house would, her medical man informed her, be decidedly beneficial. Any way, it would do no harm to try. She had been rather disagreeably well lately, and felt in want of a little excitement. And if Marion failed in all else, there was one point on which it was quite impossible she should disappoint her. The girl's presence in her house would, at all events, give her something new to grumble about!

So much as to Aunt Tremlett. As to Mallingford itself there is not very much to say. It was (in those days at least, possibly the last few years may have improved it) an intensely stupid little town. Dull, with a dullness that to those fortunate people who have had no personal experience of small provincial town life, altogether baffles description. And worse than dull—spiteful, ill-naturedly gossiping, and conceited, with the utterly hopeless conceit, only seen to perfection in the stupidest or people and societies. Conservative of course, to the back-bone, in everything—the more objectionable and undesirable the object of its conservatism, the more stolidly, bull-doggishly tenacious grew Mallingford. Instance the long resistance to the introduction of gas lamps in the streets and public buildings, the still prevailing cobble stones in the market-place, the stiflingly high pews in the peculiarly hideous church, and, last not least, the universally signed petition against that most noisy and blustering of innovators—the railway.

The only liberals in Mallingford were its numerous young ladies, who, on the subject of the fashions, became positively rabid. Though their admirers of the opposite sex were few, for the census reported but one single gentleman to every eight or ten equally marriageable damsels, there were really few things a Mallingford girl would have hesitated to do, for the sake of being the first to be seen in the High Street with the latest fashion, whatever it might be, coal-scuttle bonnets or pork-pie hat, high-heeled hoots or Paris crinoline!

There were good gentle souls in Mallingford, too, of course, as, Heaven be praised, there are in most places in this wicked world; but the prevailing spirit of



the little town, the placid stupidity, unrelieved, save by occasional snappish outbursts of party-spirit, the ludicrous pretension and would-be exclusiveness of its reigning families, the airs of the half-educated daughters of the same—these things and many other of a similar nature would need a keener pen than mine to do justice to them! Very laughable, very contemptible no doubt, were it not that from so surely passing away, is giving place, not merely to another, but to a better state of things.

It may seem exaggerated to speak so gravely of the foibles and absurdities of county town society as it existed in Mallingford some few years ago, as possibly it still exists in other yet more “conservative” places of the kind. If it appear so I can only say that to me it comes naturally to speak seriously of things I have myself felt strongly—absurdities if you like, but worse than absurdities, for they have sprung from deep rooted error, and their influence, again, has, in its turn, been an evil one. Besides which, it is necessary to a right comprehension of my heroine’s life and character, that the nature of the social atmosphere into which at this critical period of her history she was thrown, should be, to some extent at least, understood and justly appreciated.

Over the cobble stones, in the fly from the King’s Arms, Marion was rattled to her destination. “The Cross House,” as it was called, its name from its vicinity to the old market place (now, wonderful to say, deserted in favour of a more convenient site), in the centre of which, though no longer surrounded by booths and stalls, still stood in respectable decay the pride of Mallingford, the venerable cross. Queer things that ancient monument must have seen in its day; strange sights if all be true that is to be read concerning it, in the “Guide to Mallingford and its neighbourhood,” changes many and marvellous even in this sturdy little stronghold of conservatism! Of its antiquity, there can be no doubt, for it was already aged in 1641, when by some special good luck, or over-sight on the part of the fanatic destroyers, it escaped the fate of its fellow monuments.

To Marion in her childhood it had not been without appalling associations, for besides whispers of a heretic or two burnt to death at its base, there was a more ghastly legend of a modern Sapphira struck dead on the spot by what some good people used to call “a special dispensation of providence,” as an awful warning to succeeding generations. Marion’s nurse told her this pretty little story one day when the perfectly truthful child persisted in refusing to confess to a sin she had not committed; but it had an opposite effect to that anticipated. “If, then, I say I broke the jug, nurse, when I know I did not, God would perhaps kill me

like the woman. Which way of putting it was rather beyond the nurse's logical powers. Fortunately the real delinquent was afterwards discovered, and the little girl came off with flying colours!

As the fly stopped at the door of the Cross House, Geoffrey's bright face appeared. He rang the bell, and notwithstanding the forbidding frowns of the prim, crabbed looking maid-servant, who answered the summons, stood his ground bravely, and carried out his intention of assisting at the first meeting of aunt and niece. They were almost strangers to each other, for the years during which they had not met had changed the girl from a child to a woman, and had nearly effaced from her recollection the personal appearance of her aunt, who had done little to attract or attach her young relative to herself.

Marion and Mr. Baldwin were shown into a room at the back of the house, on the first floor. A pleasant bright room it might have been, had its owner been a pleasant or bright person, for it looked out on an old-fashioned walled-in garden, which too, might easily have been rendered pretty and attractive, instead of formal and bare. An untidy, neglected garden is an unpleasant sight, but hardly less so to my mind is a faultlessly neat one, if stiff, ungraceful and prim—the one might quite as justly as the other be described as “uncared for.” No person who cares for a garden as it should be cared for, would be content with doling out to it the minimum of unlovely, unloving attention, necessary to keeping it merely in order—that particular kind of lifeless, stunted order which is one of the ugliest things I know.

So, as might be expected from the glance at the garden on entering, the room was very dreary, uninviting and colourless. The dingy library in the London house where we first met Marion was charming in comparison, for it, though dull and gloomy, always looked warm and comfortable, which was far from being the case with Miss Tremlett's drawing-room. In the literal sense it was not cold, for winter and summer, spring and autumn, it was kept at an equal temperature by all means of tiresome inventions—patents most of them—self-adjusting ventilators and equalising stoves, pipes with hot air and pipes with cold, on which the credulous lady spent a small fortune in the course of each year. Still it always looked cold. It was so oppressively grey—drab rather. So obtrusively neutral, if such an expression be permissible; that one almost felt as if the most glaring mixture of colours would be preferable! I wonder, by the way, whence has arisen the notion so common to people of very small taste or no taste at all, that so long as they stick to greys and drabs and slate colour, they are

perfectly unimpregnable, however terribly they may mingle the shades, or, which is almost as bad, distress more sensitive organizations by unbroken monotony of dingy gloom.

“I must say I like quiet colours,” you will hear said with a self-satisfied smile by the most hopelessly commonplace and least educated of your acquaintance.

“Quiet colours!” Just as well, my dear Madam, might you be proud of being stone deaf or lame of one leg, as of your incapability of admiring one of the most exquisite of our material gifts, that of colour. A pity truly that you and others of your refined tastes had not a hand in the arrangement of things in general; this world for instance, how very much more tasteful and less “vulgar” it would have been, had it been left to your unexceptionable greys and drabs! Not that greys and drabs are not good in their place, beautiful even, as a background to more vivid hues, a repose to the eye after the luxury of greens and blues and scarlets, which nature has the bad taste to love and cherish so fondly. But only fancy a whole world of greys and drabs! Oh, intensity of blue sky; oh, fields of emerald green; flowers of every conceivable perfection of colour; from deepest, richest, crimson, through golden gleams, to faintest blush of rose; oh, beautiful bright radiant things, what a dreary, ugly world this would be without you! But we, being more refined, in our tastes, some of us, prefer “quiet colours” as we call them. Rather I think, would I endure the agony of Mrs. Butcher’s Sunday bonnet before me in church, a perfect mass of utterly unassorted reds and greens and yellows, but in its way an innocent, “vulgar” barbaric expression of delight, untutored and, spontaneous, in the colour-beauty so profusely bestowed; rather I think this, than the other extreme, of cold, presumptuous scorn of this great gift, which results—In what? In a dungeon of a drawing-room like that of the unlovable Miss Tremlett at Mallingford! From which by-the-by we have wandered an inexcusably long way.

## CHAPTER VII.

### GREY DAYS.

“Here there was but sorry going, for the way was very wearisome.”

PILGRIMS PROGRESS.

THE autumn days were already beginning to draw in, and it was growing late in the afternoon when Marion and her guardian entered Miss Tremlett's presence; so the light was dim; and at first it was difficult to distinguish the owner of the sharp, somewhat querulous voice which greeted them from the opposite corner of the room.

“So you have got here at last, Miss Vere, Marion, I suppose I may still say? Excuse my rising. At this hour I always am obliged to rest the sofa till tea time. How did you get here? Oh,” as she for the first time perceived her niece's companion. “So *you're* there, Geoffrey Baldwin! Quite unnecessary. My niece could perfectly have walked up from the station alone.” And with the last few words the voice increased in acrimony.

Instinctively Marion crept a little closer to the tall form beside her. He felt her shiver slightly and—instinctively too—groped with his great strong hand for the little cold one hidden under her cloak, and gave it a reassuring pressure. She took it quite naturally, and for a moment or so allowed her hand to remain in his grasp. But she could not brace herself up to reply to her aunt's greeting. Geoffrey did so for her, ignoring altogether the latter part of the speech.

“Yes,” he replied cheerfully, “here we are, Miss Tremlett, Miss Vere, I am sure is glad to be at her journey’s end. But it is so dark, I can hardly see. Take care, Miss Vere,” as Marion made a movement in the direction of the sofa, “there’s a footstool in the way. Perhaps Miss Tremlett will allow me to lights?”

“I never have lights between my afternoon luncheon and tea time, Geoffrey Baldwin. I am sure you might know that by now,” replied the old lady snappishly. “My head would never stand it However for once in a way—Oh, Martha is that you? You certainly need not have brought the lamp till I did ring.”

But Martha deposited the lamp and quietly retired. Now, Marion could see her aunt plainly. There was not very much to see. A withered face with some remains of former good looks, but none of the more lasting loveliness of sweet expression; or the rare but unsurpassed beauty of a tender, loving old age. A graceful figure had in her young days been one of Miss Tremlett’s attractions, and this she still imagined that she possessed. In consequence of which somewhat mistaken notion, for the former sylph-like slightness was now rather to be described as scragginess and angularity, she was fussy to a degree about the make and fit of her dresses. A wrinkle drove her frantic, and though her days were principally spent on the sofa, the slightest crease or rumple in her attire altogether upset her never-very-firmly-established equanimity. She wore a light brown “front” surmounted by a cap of marvellous construction, so precise and stiff in its appearance that till you touched it you could hardly believe it to consist of anything so soft and ethereal as lace. Miss Tremlett had one art in perfection altogether peculiar to herself that of lying on a sofa without the slightest appearance of ease or repose: she made you feel somehow as if, all the time instead of reclining on a couch, she was sitting bolt upright on the stiffest of high backed chairs.

As Marion drew near her, she held out her hand, and permitted, rather than invited, her to kiss her cheek. Geoffrey wished he could have bitten her, instead.

“Your cloak is not damp, I hope?” she exclaimed; and as Marion was about to express her thanks for the unexpected anxiety on her behalf, she went on, “if it is the least damp, you had better not stand so near me, I am so sensitive to the slightest damp or cold.” On which Marion timidly suggested that perhaps she had better change it at once, if Miss Tremlett would be so good as tell her which was to be her room.

“Evans, our housekeeper, is with me,” she added, more and more timidly, as she observed the expression of her aunt’s face, “but only for one night. She is going on tomorrow to visit her mother before her marriage.”

“You don’t mean to say that old woman is going to be married!” exclaimed Miss Tremlett, in a less unpleasant tone than Marion had yet heard.

“*Evans* is, not her mother,” replied the girl.

“Of course I never supposed you meant the mother,” said the elder lady snappishly. “The mother is eighty, and paralysed. I call Evans herself an old woman, and a very silly old woman too, by what you tell me. I really don’t know where she can sleep. I had no idea of you bringing any one with you. You must speak to Martha; she will show you your own room. It will be tea time in an hour, till then I must rest. Good evening. Mr. Baldwin,” as Geoffrey showed symptoms of retiring, “I should be so much obliged to you if you would remember to shut the door.”

“Hateful old woman!” thought Geoffrey, as he obeyed, resisting the boyish inclination to slam it loudly, by way of soothing Miss Tremlett’s nerves. He had time for a word to Marion, whom he found outside on the landing, disconsolately eyeing the staircase, and apparently at a loss as to her next proceedings. He began to speak to her jestingly,—something he said in ridicule of her aunt’s fears,—but he stopped suddenly when she turned towards him, and he saw that her eyes were full of tears.

“Oh, Mr. Baldwin,” she exclaimed passionately, don’t leave here. I had no idea my aunt was so utterly selfish and heartless. Not a word about poor Papa, whom she professed to care for! Oh, I *can’t* stay in this dreadful house.”

And in her distress she caught hold of his arm with both her hands. It was rare that Marion so lost her self-control, and therefore the more impressive. Geoffrey was terribly grieved.

“I am so sorry, so very sorry,” he said, “that you feel it so painfully. I would give all I have in the world to spare you an hour in this place, but truly my—truly, Miss Vere, there is at present no help for it. Anything I can do in the way of cheering your stay here, softening its disagreeables, you have only to ask me, and I shall be so pleased, so delighted, to do it.” And half timidly he laid his hand on those still grasping his arm. His touch seemed to recall her to herself.

She drew her hands away gently, and said penitently:

“You are too good to me, Mr. Baldwin, and I am very self and ungrateful. I will try to be sensible and make the best of things so long as I stay here.”

“Which shall not be an hour longer than *I* can prevent, you may be very sure,” said Geoffrey fervently.

“Thank you,” she replied sadly, “but I am afraid there is not much in your power, dear Mr. Baldwin; you could not help me in the—the only way,”—and then she stopped suddenly. Geoffrey had not caught her last words clearly. Had he done so, ten to one, she might have been led on to say more, and to yield to the impulse which came over her to take her young guardian into her confidence, to trust him, at this time almost her only friend, with the sad little story of her life. A good impulse it was, a good and wise one. Ah, Marion, why did you not yield to it? Why, my heart’s darling, if not for your own, then for the sake of honest, chivalrous Geoffrey? What might it not have saved him—him and you, and yet another! If only the child had been a little more conceited, a trifle more like other women, she would have seen the dangers before her, the sharpness of the tools with which, in all innocence, she was playing. What a strange thing it is that of the many times in their lives in which conscientious people refrain from yielding to an impulse, so large a proportion would, viewed in the light of after events, have been wise and expedient! Whereas, if ever such persons *do* act upon the moment’s inclination, they are almost sure hereafter to repent it! It is everywhere the same—in trifles as in important matters, nothing but the old rule of contrary; which rule, nevertheless, may some day be seen to contain more things, by a great many, than are at present dreamt of in our philosophy.

So unfortunately it came to pass that Geoffrey did not hear Marion’s half-whispered words.

Satisfied, so far, with seeing her calm and gentle as usual, he bade her good night and left her, promising to look in in the course of a day or two, to see how she got on with “the old cat,” as he mentally apostrophised her.

Marion succeeded in finding Martha, whom she was glad to discover much more hospitably inclined than her mistress. So Evans was comfortably entertained for the one night she spent at the Cross House, and I doubt not spent a much more agreeable evening below stairs, than did Marion in the drab

drawing-room with her aunt. It really was terribly hard work. Miss Tremlett evidently expected to be entertained, a state of mind always liable to exert a peculiarly depressing influence on the second member of a tête-à-tête, even when there are no saddening or dulling thoughts and anxieties already at work on heart and brain. For the life of her, Marion could not rouse herself to make small talk for the tiresome old lady; nor could she bring herself to express the profound interest evidently expected of her, in the painfully minute account of all her aunt's maladies, with which in the course of the evening she was favoured. At last Miss Tremlett lost patience, and waxed very cross indeed.

“Are you always so stupid and sulky, Marion?” she inquired. “If so, the sooner you make some other arrangement for yourself, the better. I am not strong enough to support the depressing effect of a companion in low spirits. Nor can I understand why you should look so gloomy. It is not as if your poor father had been so much attached to you, or you to him, when he was alive. In that case it would be very different indeed. But all the world knows he cared very little for his children, though, all things considered, I don't blame him.”

“What do you mean, Aunt Tremlett?” said Marion, fiercely almost, for she felt roused to sudden passion. “What do you mean by speaking so of my dear father? He *did* love us, more than anybody knows, and no one has any right to say he did not.”

“A pity he did not leave you some more substantial proof of his affection,” said Miss Tremlett, sneeringly. “I am not blaming him, however. Considering all, as I said, it is no wonder he took but little interest in you.”

“What do you mean by that?” repeated Marion, in the same fierce tone. (Miss Tremlett rather enjoyed her excitement. She had roused her at last.) “Considering all what? I am not a child now, Aunt Tremlett, and I will allow no one, not even you, to say, or infer, anything disrespectful to the memory of either of my parents.”

“ ‘Will not allow.’ Indeed! Very pretty language for a young lady. Upon my word I little knew what I was about when I invited you to my house, Marion Vere. Though for all your grand heroics, I see you have some notion of what I refer to. ‘Either’ of your parents, you said. So, then, you do allow it is possible there might be something to be said against one of them after all! On the whole, I think, with your permission or course, Miss Vere, after what I have seen of



your very amiable tempo, it will be as well to drop the subject. In plain words, I will not tell you what I mean; and you will oblige me by leaving me for the night and retiring to your own room. You have upset me quite enough for one evening. It will be days before I recover from the nervous prostration always brought on by excitement. Go; and if you wish to remain my guest, learn to behave like a reasonable being instead of making such an exhibition of temper without any provocation whatever.”

Miss Tremlett always took the injured innocent tone when she had succeeded in goading any one else to fury.

Without a word Marion left the room. Her self-control only lasted till she was safely ensconced in her own little bedroom, and then, poor child, after her usual fashion when in sore distress, she threw herself on the bed and hid her face on the pillows, sobbing with excitement and weeping the hot, quick rushing tears that came more from anger than grief.

She felt very much ashamed of herself. This was, indeed, a sad beginning of her Mallingford experiences. How foolish she had been to take fire at the old lady's sneers! She knew of old that there had been bitter feud between her silly, pretty young mother and her father's family, and it was worse than foolish to rake up these old sores. Now, when the two principals in the melancholy story of mistake and disappointment were laid to rest, passed away into the silent land where to us, at least, it is not given to judge them, how much better to let the whole fade gently out of mind! Her aunt was old, and old age should be sacred. *She* had no right to resent her crabbedness of temper, her self-absorption, her ungenial asperity, and small snappishness.

A loveless life, with few exceptions, had been Miss Tremlett's. "Heaven only knows," thought poor Marion, "if in similar circumstances my nature would prove any more amiable! Certainly, I am not at present going the way to make it so."

And with a sore heart, sore, but gentle and humble, the orphan fell asleep, in the strange, unloving home, which was the only shelter at present open to her.

Morning, somehow, made things look brighter. For one thing, there was the tantalising post-hour to watch for; Marion not having yet given up hopes of "some day" bringing the long-looked-for explanation of Ralph's mysterious

silence. The whole affair changed its aspect to her constantly, according to the mood she was in. She had taken good care that there should be no miscarriage of letters owing to her change of residence, and so here at Mallingford, as in London, the arrival of the letters became the great interest of her day. Truly, there was little else to distract or occupy her! She determined, however, from this first morning to profit by her disagreeable experience of the preceding evening, and, at all costs, avoid any sort of word-warfare with her aunt. Miss Tremlett, at the bottom of her heart, was not a little disappointed when, on her making her appearance for the day, in the drawing-room about noon, her niece, instead of receiving her with sulky silence or indignant remonstrance, greeted her with a few gentle words of apology for her want of self-control the previous night, and offers of her ready services in any way the old lady might wish to make her useful.

“Would you like me to read aloud sometimes, Aunt?” said she. “I think I can do so pleasantly. Or is there any work I can do for you?”

“I am glad, Marion, to see that you have come back to your senses this morning,” was all the thanks she got. But she did not care. All she asked was peace and quiet; in which to muse over her own secret hopes and fears, to perplex herself endlessly with vain guesses to what was beyond her power to fathom. And for some little time she felt almost contented. The perfect monotony of her life did not pall upon her just at first. It seemed rather a sort of rest to her after the violent excitement through which she had lately passed. But it was not a healthy state of things.

Her days were very like each other. The morning hours were the pleasantest, for Miss Tremlett always breakfasted in her bedroom, and till noon Marion was her own mistress. After that her aunt expected her to be in attendance upon her till the hour of her after noon siesta, which came to be the girl’s favourite time for a stroll. Even in the dull autumn days she felt it a relief to get out into the open air by herself and ramble along the country roads leading out of Mallingford—thinking of what? Of “this time last year.” How much is told by those few commonplace words!

Now and then her aunt had visitors. Very uninteresting people they seemed to Marion. Mostly elderly, still, and formal, of her aunt’s own standing. Not many of the younger denizens of the little town found their way to the Cross House. Had they done so, I question if they would have been much to my heroine’s

taste! Her deep mourning, of course, put her partaking in any Mallingford festivities quite out of the question at present. They were not of an attractive kind, and even had she been in perfect health and spirits she would have cared little about them.

Still, after a time, there came a sort of reaction. A protest of youth against the unnatural torpidity of her present life. Her only friend, Geoffrey Baldwin, she saw but once during the first two months of her Mallingford life, for, much to his regret, within a week of Miss Vere's arrival in the neighbourhood, he was called away on business connected with his own affairs—the disposal of a small property of his father's in a distant county—and it was late in November before he found himself free to return home.

It was very provoking! Just when he had hoped to be of some use to her, to cheer her a little in her present gloomy life. Geoffrey had never before in his life thought so much, or so continuously, on any subject, as during the dull autumn weeks he thought of his poor little ward at the Cross House. He wrote to her once or twice, though he was by no means a great hand at letter writing; and was immensely delighted with the answers he duly received. At last, by the beginning of December, he found himself on his way home; much to his satisfaction, for not only was he anxious to see Marion again, but was also in a great state of fidget about his hunters. The season had opened most favourably, no signs of frost to speak of, and already he had missed some capital days. It was really too provoking, thought Geoffrey to himself, as comfortably ensconced in the railway carriage, he lit his last pipe before entering Mallingford station.

The next day he rode over to see Marion. Being well acquainted with the Cross House hours, he took care to be there early, and the great clock in the Market Place was only just striking eleven as he stood on the door steps. Miss Tremlett was not yet visible, he was informed by the sour-faced Martha (who, however, as we have seen, was more amiable than she looked), Miss Vere was up-stairs, but if Mr. Baldwin would step into the drawing-room, the young lady should be told he was there.

So into the grim drawing-room Geoffrey stepped. Grimmer than ever it looked at this season; when truly it takes an extra amount of bright colours and cheerful faces inside, to balance the dismalness of all things out-of-doors. And this winter was what they called an open season. Damp and dank and foggy. Above all—for a flat unpicturesque county like Brentshire, whose only beauty

consisted in the freshness and luxuriance of its vegetation, this “grim December” was not the time to see it to advantage.

Geoffrey shivered slightly as he entered the uninviting room. From physical causes only; he was not particularly sensitive to more recondite influences. The fire was only just lighted and was smouldering and sputtering with that irritating air of feeling offended at having been lighted at all, peculiar to inartistically built fires on a damp winter’s morning. Mr. Baldwin strolled to the window and stood biting the end of his riding whip, staring out on the ugly, dreary plot of ground misnamed a garden.

“It’s not a pleasant place for her to be in, certainly,” thought he, “My little breakfast-room at the Manor Farm, notwithstanding all the litter of guns and fishing-rods and pipes, is a much more inviting room than this. To my mind at least—I wonder if she would think so!” And then he fell to wondering which of his horses would carry him best to cover on the morrow, considering the direction which was likely to be taken, the nature of the ground &c. “By-the-bye,” he thought suddenly, “I wonder if Miss Vere has ever been at a meet. I’ll ask her. Bessie, I’m certain, would carry a lady, only then who would be with her? If Harry were here it would be all right. There are those Copley girls, they are very good-natured, and might ask her to join them. I’ll see if I can’t manage it.”

But his further reflections were interrupted by the opening of the door, and the entrance of Marion herself. She knew who was there, and her pale face was slightly flushed with pleasure as she came in; but for all that, Geoffrey was not a little startled by her appearance. She looked painfully fragile. The cold weather and her black dress increased the extreme delicacy of her complexion, and the almost attenuated look of her slight, tall figure. Strangely enough, at that moment there thrilled through Geoffrey the same foreboding, the same acute misgiving as had tortured the heart of Ralph Severn that last evening at Altes. And in the present instance it acted to some extent as a revelation. As his gaze rested on Marion, a tremor seized the strong man. Horses, hunting, all he had been thinking of with so much interest but a moment before, faded from his mind, and in perfect silence he touched the hand so cordially extended to him, and mechanically drew nearer the fire a chair on which Marion seated herself. She did not observe his agitation, and began to talk brightly and heartily.

“I am so glad, so very glad, to see you again, Mr. Baldwin,” she said, “I

really began to think you were never coming back. And I wanted to tell you that I have, really and truly, been doing my very best to be good and patient—but really, Mr. Baldwin, it is drearily, inexpressibly dull here.”

Geoffrey’s only answer was a glance of sympathy, enough however to encourage her to proceed.

“It did not seem so bad at first,” she went on, “it was more like a rest to me; but now it is getting very bad. There are days on which I can hardly bear the terrible monotony and loneliness. I have not told Harry so for fear of disturbing him; but I have wished very much to see you and tell you, Mr. Baldwin. I really would rather be a servant,” (a governess she was going to have said, but the association was too painful), “or anything in the world than live on here like this always. You are not angry with me for saying this, Mr. Baldwin? I know it seems childish and selfish, but today I was feeling so—I don’t know what to call it—homesick expresses it best; and I thought it would be such a relief to tell you about it; but I hope you are not vexed with me?” she repeated, looking up at his face beseechingly.

“Vexed with you! My dear Miss Vere,” exclaimed Geoffrey. “How can you use such expressions? As if, even if I had a right to be vexed with you, which I have not, anything you could by any possibility say or do, could ever seem to me anything—I am stupid—I can’t make pretty speeches, least of all when I most mean them. Only don’t ever speak as if I could be vexed with you. I am sorry, terribly sorry to see you looking so pale and thin, and to hear how this wretched life is trying you. But what is to be done? There is the difficulty. As I said to you before, I see present no help for it, unless——.” But here he stopped abruptly, his fair face suddenly flushing crimson.

“Unless what Mr. Baldwin,” said Marion innocently. “Don’t be afraid to tell me the alternative, however disagreeable. Is there any fresh trouble about our money matters?”

“Oh dear no,” replied the young man, thankful that he had not, on the impulse of the moment, wrecked all by a premature betrayal of his hardly-as-yet-to-himself-acknowledged hopes, and eager to distract her attention. “Oh dear no, don’t get anything of that sort into your head. It is true I fear some little time must pass before your affairs are thoroughly settled; but by the spring, at latest, I hope we may hit on some better arrangement.”

“By the spring,” repeated Marion, dolefully; “ah, well, it does not much matter. After all, I daresay a good deal of the dullness is in myself. But tell me, Mr. Baldwin, what were you going to say? ‘Unless,’ you began,—unless what?”

“Nothing, Miss Vere—nothing, truly,” replied Geoffrey, rather awkwardly; “it was only an idea that struck me, but at present impossible to carry out. Please don’t speak about it.”

“Very well,” answered Marion, looking rather puzzled; “I won’t ask you about it if you would rather I did not. I am afraid the truth is I am very difficult to please. I fear in my present mood I should not be happy anywhere, except—”

“Except where, Miss Vere?” said Geoffrey, lightly; but Marion looked painfully embarrassed and made no reply. A curious misgiving shot through Mr. Baldwin’s heart; but he did not persist in his inquiry, and turned it off with a jest.

“We have both our secrets, you see,” he said, laughingly; my ‘unless,’ and your ‘except.’ Well, supposing we put both aside for the present, and consider things as they are. Can nothing be done to make your stay here pleasanter, so long as it lasts?”

“Nothing,” said Marion, sadly. “Don’t trouble yourself so much about me, Mr. Baldwin; it is only a fit of low spirits. I shall be better again in a day or two. It is an immense comfort to me to grumble a little. I can’t tell you how much good it does me.”

“But you are not looking well,” he persisted, “and you know it is my duty to look after you. This life is killing you. Have you made no acquaintances here at all, Miss Vere?”

“None whatever. My aunt’s friends are all old, like herself; and somehow I don’t fancy I should get on very well with other girls, Mr. Baldwin. I have grown so dull and stupid; and from what I have seen of the Mallingford girls at church, and some few who call here with their mothers, I am sure they would not take to me, nor I to them. No, just leave me alone. I shall do very well. There is only one thing I wanted to ask you: can you ask leave for me to go to see Miss Veronica Temple? She is the only one of my friends that I remember as a child, still here, and I should so like to see her, particularly as she can’t come to see me. I spoke of it to my aunt one day, but to my surprise she got into such a rage I was glad to change the subject. Why does she dislike Miss Temple so, Mr.

Baldwin?"

"Some old quarrel—what, I can't exactly say—with Mrs. Temple," replied Geoffrey. "Of late years, you know, Miss Tremlett has taken it into her head to become very Low Church, and she insulted the widow, Mrs. Temple, very much one day, by drawing a comparison between the state of Church matters in her husband's day, when his daughters played the organ and dressed up the altar—did just as they, chose, in fact, for he was the easiest of good old easy-going parsons—and the present condition of things under that very vigorous and vulgar Irishman, Mr. Magee, who toadies Miss Tremlett tremendously, as you may have seen for yourself."

"Yes, indeed," replied Marion; "horrid man he is, *I* think! And I am sure the Temples were the best and most charitable of people. How long has Miss Veronica been crippled, Mr. Baldwin? I remember running up and down that steep stair leading to the organ loft with Harry in her arms when we were quite little children. Such a bright, active creature, I always imagined her. It seems so sad to come back to find her so changed."

"But bright and active still, though she never leaves her sofa," said Geoffrey; "she is one of the sweetest women I ever knew. You must certainly go to see her. She will be delighted, I know. I shall call and ask her about it on my way home."

"Thank you very much," said Marion, earnestly. "I should like to see her again," she added softly. And then she sat, leaning her cheek on her hand, gazing silently into the fire.

It was burning more cheerfully by this time, and the flickering light danced fitfully on Marion's pale face; for it was a very gloomy day outside, and the dingy room was in a sort of twilight. Geoffrey looked at her anxiously. Suddenly he spoke again:

"Do you ride, Miss Vere" he asked.

She started; for her thoughts had been far away, and he had to repeat the words before she caught their sense. When she did so, she answered carelessly:

"A little. That is to say, I have ridden, and I am not nervous. I liked it very much."

Geoffrey's face brightened.

"I have a mare that I'm certain would carry you beautifully," he said, "I'll have her tried. I was thinking, if you were to make acquaintance with some of the girls about here who ride, you might come to a meet now and then. There are the Copleys of Copley Wood. They're really not bad girls, and I know they would be delighted to make friends with you."

But Marion laid her hand on his arm.

"I should like to ride with you Mr. Baldwin, very much, if you will be troubled with me. But I don't want to make any new acquaintances. I know it seems very fanciful and unreasonable, but I don't feel as if I had spirits for it. Let me ride alone with you, please."

"You shall if you like, Miss Vere," he replied, "but you couldn't very well come to a meet unless you knew some of the other ladies. It wouldn't be comfortable for you. I'll tell you how we'll do. I'll have Bessie tried for you, and you shall have a few rides quietly me first, and then, if you like it, I'll arrange for the Copley girls to ask you to join their party to the next meet at a convenient distance. You won't object to this? Riding will do you good, I know, and if you ride I shall not be satisfied unless you come to see the meets. What do you say to this?"

"That you are too good to me, Mr. Baldwin, and I should be shamefully ungrateful if I did not do whatever you wish. I shall look out my habit today. I expect it will be much too big for me, I have got so thin," she said lightly. Geoffrey looked at the hand she had laid in his. It was indeed white and wasted.

"My darling!" he whispered under his breath, so low that she had no suspicion of the inaudible words.

Then he dropped it gently, and looking up, said cheerfully,

"All right then. You may expect to see me some day with Bessie all ready for you. Goodbye, and do try to get some more colour in your cheeks by the next time I see you. Guardians are allowed to make rude remarks, you know," he added, laughingly; "it's it all for their wards' good."

And with another shake of her hand he left her.



“How very kind he is,” thought Marion. “I wonder—I wonder, if it could possibly do any good for me to tell him all about it. But no,” she decided, on thinking it over. She had done as much as seemed to her right and fitting. More would be undignified and unmaidenly. And then she was so utterly in the dark. What might not have occurred since she left Altes? Ralph could not be *dead*; of that she was certain. He *could* not have died without her knowing it. But a worse thing might have come to pass. At this very moment, for all she knew to the contrary, he might be already the husband of another woman.

“Though not in heart,” she said to herself. “He was not the man to love twice. Not at least so quickly. And never while he lives will he love another as he loved me. In this at least he is mine.”

Thus she felt in certain moods. There were others, however, in which her faith was less undoubting, in which she almost questioned if she had not exaggerated what he had said; whether after all it had not been with Ralph a much less serious affair than, to her cost, it had been with her? Then again she seemed drawn the other way. His was no slight or shallow nature. Were his depth and earnestness to be doubted, in what could she ever allow herself to believe? And so the poor child was tossed and torn. Still, it came to pass, thanks to Geoffrey Baldwin, that a little more brightness and enjoyment were at this time infused into her daily life. The riding proved a success, and, as her young guardian observed with self-congratulation, “really did bring some colour to her cheeks.”

The Copley girls came up to Mr. Baldwin’s favourable account of them, and did their best in the way of showing kindness to “that pretty, pale Miss Vere, that Geoffrey Baldwin is so taken up about.” They were hearty, healthy girls, and both engaged to be married to the most satisfactory *partis*. Possibly this last had something to say to their cordial reception of their old friend’s interesting ward.

The renewal of her acquaintance with the invalid Miss Temple, was also in a different way a source of great pleasure to Marion. Trifling incidents both—her introduction to the Copley girls, and her meeting again with the kind Veronica—but they both influenced her indirectly in the great decision of her life, towards which, though she knew it not, the tide of affairs was rapidly drawing her.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### AND RALPH?

“Learn by a mortal yearning to ascend  
Seeking a higher object.”— L AODAMIA.

“For love and beauty and delight  
There is no death nor change; their might  
Exceeds our organs, which endure  
No light, being themselves obscure.”

THE SENSITIVE PLANT.

AH, yes! What of Ralph? Through all these months, to Marion so weary with suspense and ever-recurring disappointment, what had he been about? How came it that he, whom we have heard vowing to himself that *her* happiness should be his first consideration, had allowed her thus to suffer, when, as we know, a word from him at any moment would have set all right, would have made the world rosy again, and filled with sunlight even the grim old house at Mallingford?

To explain it all, to show what a strange chain of commonplace mistakes and cross-purposes had, coupled with one small act of deliberate malice, effected all the mischief, tortured with doubt and misgiving two true hearts, and altogether changed the course of two, if not three, lives—to make all this clear, we must step back some way: to the very time, indeed, we last heard of Ralph. Heard of him, only, incidentally, as having been successful in obtaining the promise of Sir

Archibald, or rather, through his influence, that of the powers that be in such matters, with respect to the expected consular vacancy at A—.

That was the last, I think, that we know of him thus far, excepting, by-the-by, an instant's peep of him more recently in his mother's Swiss *maison de campagne*, where the Severns were domesticated for the summer. To return, however, to the day in March, on which, hopeful and elated, as I think I said, Ralph set out again for Altes, having succeeded in the mission which had brought him across the water.

The journey back was a much more cheerful affair than had been that to England.

Ralph was not naturally by any means given to over-anxiety about money matters—in fact his actual experience of limited means had been but small, for he had always had enough for moderate requirements. But he was a thoroughly conscientious man. Many would say morbidly so, and I daresay there might be nothing exaggerated or unreasonable in such an opinion.

Very quiet and reserved people are apt to become morbid on some point. They get hold of a notion, and turn it round and round in their minds, till a sort of mental dizziness, very adverse to clear judgement, results. It is a grand thing now and then to get a fresh, outside opinion on matters about which we are deeply interested. Nor is the soundness of that opinion of as much moment as might be imagined. Its freshness is the great thing; for assuredly, though *directly* it may not influence our eventual decision, our own powers of judgement will, by its breezy rush through our cobwebbed brain, become marvellously invigorated, and braced for the work, which, after all, to be well done, must be their own, and no one else's!

Such had been on Ralph the effect of his rare confidence in another—that other, as will be remembered, having been the sensible, middle-aged, but nevertheless quite sufficiently “romantic,” Mr. Price. From the date of his long talk with his odd tutor, the young man's bewilderments, fors and againsts, conflicting duties and inclinations, ranged themselves with wonderful order and celerity. It was all nonsense, “morbid humbug,” he soon learnt to call it, about his being different from other men, cut off by peculiar circumstances from what, after all, in plain, honest English is *every man's birthright*—liberty to please himself in the choice of the helpmeet, without which Providence certainly never

intended him, or any other able-bodied young man, to go through life! Provided, of course, the prospective helpmeet saw things in the same way as he; of which, Heaven be thanked, he had no reasonable grounds to doubt.

What he could do, without too much going out of his way, or any approach to unmanly subservience, to conciliate his mother, he would. But beyond a certain point he now saw clearly it was not his duty to defer to her. Should she show herself inclined to be reasonable, which state of things, however, he at present felt far from sanguine about: he would be only too ready to meet her at any point on the friendly road, he would, in any case, swallow his pride, to the extent of accepting from her whatever amount of pecuniary assistance she saw fit to afford him. Pride, indeed, was hardly the word for it, for in a sense the property was his own, though at present, unfortunately, not to be obtained but by her good-will. And if she took it into her head to stand out and refuse him anything? Well, then, he had the appointment at A—— to fall back upon, the securing of which, his practical good sense and Mr. Price's advice, had shown him to be the one distinct duty before him; without which as a certainty, however small, he had no right to allow the fortunes of another to be joined to his.

What he had said to Marion, before leaving Altes, had not been on impulse. Each word, each look and gesture, that last evening when she had shown him in her innocence, the whole depths of her pure, loving heart, and tempted him sorely to say but one word more, to press her if but for an instant to his breast—each word and glance that evening he had rigidly controlled, and acted throughout implicitly as he believed to be for the best. From the light of after results, we now may question if he did wisely; if, after all, it had not been better to have gone further, or not so far? From the top of the hill it requires no great wisdom to look back and say which would have been the best road up: but this is not how we are meant to travel our life-journey. Slowly and toilfully, with but little light, and what there is often dazzling and deceptive, with bleeding feet and trembling limbs we creep along—one step beyond, often the limit of our darkened view. This is how the Allwise sees fit to train us. Doubt not and judge not. When at last we climb beyond the mists and fogs, though that time may be still a far way off, we shall see that it was for the best.

But no misgiving of this kind came to torment Ralph on his way back, as he thought, to the woman, from whom no reasonable barrier now divided him.

“For to put it in its very worst light,” said he to himself (a feat by-the-bye

your very conscientious people are strangely fond of performing), “even if my health gives way and I have to throw up the A—— appointment, my mother is not so utterly devoid of natural affection as to let us starve while she is rolling in wealth. And even if I were to die and leave my darling alone, why, we should have had our little hit of happiness, which surely is better than to have had none at all. And if my Marion had a child, or children,” he murmured to himself softly, “it would force my mother to take an interest in her for the old name’s sake. It would not seem quite so bad to leave her if she had boys and girls about her! She seems so very lonely, poor child, except for Mrs. Archer, who after all is only a friend. Though I really don’t know why I should think myself likely to die. I am perfectly healthy, though not very robust. John’s death, I think, put it into my head that I should not live to be old.”

And then in thought he wandered off to picturing to himself where and when he could best manage to see Marion alone.

“I wonder if she thought me cold,” he said to himself; “I must have seemed so. But still I am sure she understood me. She has a wonderfully quick and delicate sympathy. Yes, I am certain she understood me or she would not have trusted me so. The only unsatisfactory remembrance I have of our conversation is of her sudden distress when she bethought herself of what she hinted at as a barrier on her side. What could it be? Some disgrace in her family. Something connected with her father. But that will soon be explained and set straight. Nothing not actually affecting herself could come between us.”

So he whiled away the many hours of his journey, tedious only in so far as the days seemed long till he could see her again, hear repeated by her own lips the sweet assurance, which, had he been a vainer or more conventional man, he would have read many a time ere now; in her changing colour, the varying tones of her voice, the childlike trust and appeal in her innocent eyes when she raised them to his.

I don’t know that ever Ralph Severn was happier than during this journey back to Altes. Truly, this falling in love of his had done great things for him: sunnied his whole nature, and for the first time revealed to him the marvellous beauty there is in this life of ours; the light and joy which underlie it, our intense powers of happiness no less than of suffering. All which things being real and true, whatever be the dark mysteries for the present on the other side; it was, I doubt not, well for him to have had a glimpse of them, an actual personal

experience of happiness, however short-lived. We speak fluently of the discipline of suffering? Is nothing to be learnt from its twin sister, joy? Or is she sent but to mock us? I cannot think so. Her visits may be short and rare, but some good gift of enduring kind she surely leaves behind, if only, blinded by the tears we shed at her departure, we did not fail to see it.

Such, however, it seems to me, is not the case with the highest and deepest natures. To them, I think, all life experience is but as fresh and precious soil in a garden where all is turned to good account sooner or later. There may be ugly and unsightly things about; the flowers, when withered, may seem to pollute the air and cumber the ground; but only to our ignorance does it appear so. Under the great Master-hand all is arranged, nothing overlooked. Every shower of rain, every ray of sunshine, has its peculiar mission. All influences tend to the one great end in view, the ultimate perfection of the work. If only the gardener be humble and willing, patient, and, withal, earnest to learn. Then even from his mistakes he shall gain precious and lasting fruit.

Ralph Severn's character was no shallow one. His love for Marion was, as I have said, the one great affection of his life. And something his nature gained from its present happiness that it never afterwards lost. Something indefinite and subtle. But an influence for good.

It was late in the evening when he reached Altes. His mother and Miss Vyse, ignorant of the precise hour at which his arrival might be expected, were just about leaving the drawing-room for the night. The children, of course, were in bed; but, in the fulness of his happy heart, Ralph went and kissed little Sybil as she lay asleep.

How forcibly it reminded him of his last return to the Rue des Lauriers!

He only saw Lady Severn and his cousin-by-courtesy for a very few minutes; but even in that time his quick perception revealed to him some slight change in the manner of both. In Florence it was the most marked. Her tone seemed to him more natural because more unrestrained. A sort of contemptuous indifference to him, united to something of triumph and secret satisfaction, peeped out in her carelessly good-natured, rather condescending greeting. She was looking very well too, exceedingly radiant and handsome. Her white skin appeared positively dazzling, her clear black eyebrows in their faultless curve, relieving what might otherwise have been too marble-like for attractive living beauty; her glorious

hair, in which nestled a cluster of crimson roses (of a peculiar and carefully-selected shade, by contrast *browning* the surface they lay on) shone a mass of burnished gold; for by candlelight the tinge of red only intensified its lustre and richness. She stood thus for a moment, under the full glare of the lamp—a rash thing for any but a perfectly beautiful woman to do; but Florence knew herself to be one of the few whose charms are immensely increased by such an ordeal—her eyes cast down—fortunately so, if she were challenging the young man’s admiration, for wonderfully fine as they were Ralph never could succeed in admiring them, nor her, when he felt them fixed on his face. She was dressed in black, something soft and sweeping, but yet intensely black; and from out of its midst curved her round white arms, rose her beautiful, dazzling neck and throat, on which lay some heavy coils of dull, red gold chain, or beads. A golden rope was the appearance they presented at a little distance, or “rather,” thought Ralph, as in his moment’s glance he saw the coils heave slightly as she breathed, “are they like some magical snake she has bewitched to serve her purpose?”

It was a silly fancy, but it dispelled the momentary impression of her great beauty; which, not to have been struck by, one must needs have been less or more than human.

“What can she be after now?” thought Ralph, with some misgiving. “All this very effective get-up must have been done with a purpose. And her uncommonly cool tone! Rather a change from the oily manner she used to favour me with, though upon my word I think it’s an improvement. Can she be intending to try to pique me? No, she would never be so silly. Besides, they did not know I was coming to-night. I declare I believe she has got hold of some one else. How I pity the poor devil! All the same, from personal motives, I can’t refrain from wishing her success.” And half puzzled, half amused, he turned to his mother.

“How well you are looking, Ralph!” broke from her involuntarily. And it was very true. For all that he was tired and travel-stained, for he had come in to see his mother before changing his clothes, the young man certainly looked his very best. There was a healthy brown flush under his somewhat sallow skin, which improved him vastly, and showed to advantage the dark, rather too deep set eyes, whose colour I never could succeed in defining. His figure, always lithe and sinewy, seemed to have gained in vigour and erectness. He looked both taller and stronger; his whole carriage told of greater heartiness and elasticity, a quicker and healthier flow of the life-blood in his veins.

He looked pleased at the gratification involuntarily displayed in his mother's tone, for till then her manner had chilled and perplexed him. She was more cordial than when he had left her, but she looked uneasy and depressed, and received him with the manner of one almost against her convictions, allowing to return to favour a but half-penitent culprit. Her "So you are back again, Ah, well!" had something rather piteous in its tone of reproach and resignation, but was, at the same time, exceedingly irritating. "Let bygones be bygones," it seemed to say. "You have been an undutiful son, but *I* am the most magnanimous and long-suffering of mothers." Underlying all this, however, was a different feeling, an evident anxiety as to his well-being, evinced by the heartiness of her exclamation as to his satisfactory looks. And besides this, he felt convinced she was concealing something which she believed would distress him; for, with all her worldly-mindedness and class prejudice, Lady Severn was the most transparent and honest-intentioned of women. He could not make it out, nor ask to have it explained; for, joined to his constitutional reserve, his mother and he were not, never had been, on such terms as to allow him frankly to beg her to confide to him the cause of her evident uneasiness. So they separated for the night. He, happy man, to forget all mysteries and misgivings in the thought of tomorrow's meeting with Marion. Poor Ralph!

The morning came only too soon to dispel his dream. He did not see the children at breakfast as usual, and on expressing his surprise was told by his mother that they now breakfasted separately, as otherwise it made them too late for their lessons.

"Then does Miss Freer come earlier now?" was on his tongue to ask, but something in the air of satisfaction with which Florence was sipping her coffee, stopped his intention.

"I shall not mention my darling's name before *her*," he said to himself.

A few minutes later Lotty and Sybil ran in "just for one moment, Grandmamma," clamorous in their welcome of their truant uncle. While they were still busy hugging Sir Ralph, the bell rang.

"Oh come, Lotty, do," said Sybil the virtuous, "that will be Miss Brown."

"Miss Brown," quoth Ralph, in haste, "who the—who on earth is she?"

"Our governess, since Miss Freer left," replied Lotty, (Sybil was as yet



incapable of approaching the subject of Miss Freer's departure without tears, and therefore was wise enough to leave the explanation to Lotty's less sensitive tongue). "Didn't you know, Uncle Ralph, that Miss Freer had left? She went away with Mrs. Archer, but she would have left off teaching us at any rate. Grandmamma thought she was not 'inexperienced' enough for us now we are getting so big. Not instructed enough, though she was very kind. Miss Brown plays far grander on the piano. You can hear her quite across the street. Just like the band on the Place. And she——."

"Lotty," said her grandmother sharply, "you talk much too fast. It is not for little girls like you to discuss their elders. Go now, both of you, at once, to Miss Brown, and be good girls."

Lotty disappeared instantly. Sybil lingered one little short moment to kiss her uncle softly once more, and then followed her sister. What had the child-heart read of the sorrow, the sudden, sharp pang of bitter disappointment that thrilled through the strong man, in whom her innocence, she instinctively wished to comfort?

For once in his life Ralph felt thankful for Lotty's tongue. Its chatter gave him an instant in which to recover himself, to rally his scattered forces and decide on his present course. Perfect silence! He was not in the habit of betraying his feelings, and certainly his powers of self-control must not fail him now, for the gratification of the heartless beauty at his mother's board.

His first impulse had been to rise in the strength of his wrath and indignation, to have done, for once in a way, with conventional restrictions, and to hurl bitter, biting words at her, who in his inmost heart he believed to be the author of all this. It was well he did not do so. Florence was prepared for it, would have enjoyed it immensely, and would certainly have remained mistress of the field. His heroics would have been altogether out of place, as a very few minutes sufficed to show him, and would but have exposed himself and another to ridicule and derision. For what would Florence have answered? She had the words all ready.

"My dear Ralph, what *do* you mean? My dearest aunt, has your son gone out of his mind? How can I, of all people, be responsible for Mrs. Archer's having been called to India to nurse her husband, or to the movements of the young lady visiting her? Truly, Sir Ralph, you must excuse me, but just ask yourself—why

should I be supposed to take so extraordinary an interest in every young lady my aunt sees it to engage to teach your nieces? And still more, what possible reason could I have for supposing this particular young lady to be an object of interest to *you*? It is not usual, to say the least, for the gentleman of the house, to have an understanding with the governess?"

Which memorable speech however was never destined to be uttered.

Ralph thought better of it, and decided to nurse his wrath and keep his own counsel.

There is a great deal of nonsense spoken and written about truth, and truth tellers. The most exalted characters in a certain of class fiction can never bring themselves without a tremendous fuss, either to utter or act a falsehood, and if they ever attempt either, they are sure to bungle it: spite of themselves "their ingenuous nature betrays itself," "their lips scorn to descend to the meanness," &c. &c. It is not so in real life. I know of no persons who, when they are put to it, can tell a falsehood better, or act it more cleverly, than essentially truthful, because truth-loving natures. The reason, I fancy, lies somewhere in this direction. It takes some strength, some resolution, to do something they thoroughly dislike, and so they, having "gone for it," feeling the necessity of the disagreeable action, do it to the best of their ability, set their shoulder to the wheel and go through with it with a will. This is how, to my experience, really thorough people tell stories!

Ralph did his bit of falsity very neatly. All the same, alas, Florence saw through it! He did not over-act it. He looked up with a sufficiently concerned expression, saying to his mother:

"Dear me! I am sorry to hear Mrs. Archer has left. And Miss Freer too! It must have been a sudden movement."

"Very sudden indeed," replied his moving, most completely taken in, and evidently not a little relieved and delighted, "Mrs. Archer was in dreadful distress. She is to sail almost immediately. She would have gone straight to Marseilles from this, but she had some business she was obliged to attend to personally in England."

"But," said Ralph, "I don't understand. What is all the dreadful distress about?"

“Oh,” exclaimed his mother, “I thought you knew. Had you not heard of poor George. Archer’s illness?” Launched on which topic, she sailed away calmly for some minutes.

“And did she take the child with her?” asked Ralph, “the little boy—and the young lady, Miss Freer, did she go too? Are they going to India together?”

“I really don’t know,” said Lady Severn, “I forget, I’m sure, if little Charlie is to go. And as to Miss Freer, I know still less. She was a peculiar young woman, never even mentioned where her home was in England.”

“I always understood,” began Florence, but on Lady Severn’s pressing her to tell *what* she had “always understood,” she, to use a very charming schoolboy phrase “shut up,” and could not be prevailed on to say more. Murmuring something about “not liking to repeat gossip,” she rose gracefully from table, and the little party separated.

Later in the morning Ralph sauntered into the drawing-room where the two ladies were sitting.

“It is rather tiresome,” he said, “Mrs. Archer’s having left before I returned. I had something to send to her husband. I think my best way will be write to her at once and ask directions for sending it to her. Do you, happen to know her address?”

“Oh yes,” said his mother, unsuspectingly, “she gave it to me the last day I saw her. I gave it to you, Florence, my dear, but I remember it. I have a good head for addresses. It is—

Mrs. George Archer,  
Care of Mrs. Archer, sen.,  
23, West Parade,

Leamington.

That is it, I know. I am right, Florence, my dear, am I not?”

Miss Vyse did not answer for a moment. Then she said slowly, sulkily, it

seemed to Ralph, which confirmed him in his opinion that the address was correct, "Yes, Aunt, you are quite right. But I have the address upstairs; if you wish I can run up and refer to it."

"No, thank you," said Ralph, "I am quite satisfied."

23, West Parade,  
Leamington.

I shall not forget it,"

"A good thing," he thought to himself, "that my mother really has a correct memory for addresses. Even if that girl showed me an address in Mrs. Archer's own writing I should not believe it was correct if it had passed through her hands."

The greater part of that day he spent in writing to Marion. It was all he could do, and he did it thoroughly; entering without reserve into all his hopes and plans, only passing by, rather more slightly, the probable opposition, his marriage might meet with from his mother, and inferring that any mischief to be apprehended on this score was already done by his having, months before, refused to marry as she wished. He impressed upon Marion that he was far from rich, that indeed for many years to come their life might be a struggling one, and told her the object and success of his visit to London.

He begged her to reply at once, and to confide to him the "imaginary" (he called it) obstacle on her side, the remembrance of which had so distressed her. That it was imaginary only, he told her he felt assured, for nothing not affecting her personally would he allow to come between them. Whatever it was, he begged her to tell it to him. Lastly, he entreated her to send him word where and when he might see her. At any moment, he wrote, he would hold himself in readiness to set off for England, to see her in her own home, or wherever else she might appoint.

One possibility only he did not allude to, for as yet it had not seriously occurred to him, that of her perhaps having determined on accompanying Mrs. Archer to India. Later, he wondered at its not having struck him.

So he wrote his letter, and enclosed it to the care of Mrs. George Archer, to be by her forwarded, or delivered immediately. And having posted it with his

own hand, he felt rather lighter of heart than had been the case with him since his grievous disappointment of the morning. He tried to reason himself out of his excessive depression. "After all," thought he, "it is nothing to be so miserable about. It is merely a question of a week or two's delay. And now I can console myself by counting the days till her answer can come." But it was not much use. From the first moment that he had heard her departure carelessly alluded to, he had somehow lost hope, felt an irresistible conviction that she was altogether and for ever gone from him. "It was very childish," he said to himself, "childish and unreasonable." But he could not help it. Still he did not allow his depression to paralyse or weaken his efforts to obviate the harm, too likely, in one form or another, to have been caused by Marion's sudden and unlooked-for departure.

More he would gladly have done; for once his letter was written and despatched, the forced inaction and miserable suspense tried him terribly. Many times in the course of the next few days he was on the point of starting off again for England, but on reflection he always discarded the idea. He was so utterly without knowledge of Marion's past history and present circumstances. What, where, or who her friends were, he had no idea. Of everything in fact, save herself, her own sweet personality, he was entirely ignorant. Were he to find his way to her by means of his only clue, the address of the senior Mrs. Archer, it might do more harm than good, might injure his cause irretrievably. The father, to whom she had all alluded with more dread than affection, concerning whom there was evidently some sad or shameful page in her young history, what might he not be? How might not Ralph's unlooked-for appearance irritate or exasperate him, how might it not pain or distress her, whose peace and well-being were truly, as he had said, his first consideration? There was no question of it, he decided, calmly and dispassionately; he had done well to write to her in the first place, and till he received her answer, he must take no more open or decisive steps. *It might be*, though hardly to himself would he own the dreadful doubt, yet *it might be* that on her side the obstacles would prove stubborn, even altogether insurmountable. In that case, with the terrible possibility before him, he would do well, for her sake, far more than for his own, to guard his secret, to save her name from even a breath of coarse innuendo or reproach, which, once under the acknowledged shelter of his love and protection, would fall harmless; but might, should it attack her without such defence, wound and sting her through all her pure, guileless innocence of thought and deed. To know that she was spoken of as "that Miss Freer who tried her best to catch Sir Ralph Severn, but who found it no use, as Lady Severn discovered that so-and-so, or such-and-such was the case," would be too horrible! From this at least he could save her.

Sometimes it struck him as hard that she had left no message for him, no farewell greeting or word of remembrance. But then again, when he recalled the particulars of their last conversation, the extreme reserve and guardedness with which purposefully he had referred to his plans and intentions, the fears he had expressed that his efforts might be in vain—all this, to which he judged it right to confine himself, so that in case of adverse results she might in no wise consider herself bound to him—he could not find it in his heart to blame her. No girl, in her place, could have been expected to do more. Few, very few, would have trusted him as she had done.

So he waited, to outward appearance patiently enough, for the coming of the earliest day on which he might reasonably expect an answer to his letter.

During these days the mystery of Miss Vyse's altered manner, and continued succession of gorgeous "gets-up" was to some extent explained.

She had really succeeded in attaching another string, and that other by no means a despicable one, to her bow!

The first day of his return they dined, as usual, alone. Florence complained of being tired, and left the drawing-room early. The following morning Lady Severn informed her son that dinner was to be half-an-hour later, that day, as she expected a guest.

"A gentleman," she added, as if she wished Ralph to enquire further. But he was too profoundly indifferent to do so; and forgot all about the matter till just before dinner-time, when, to his amazement, on entering the drawing-room, he descried, seated side by side, on a sofa, in very suspicious proximity, Florence the magnificent, and our old friend the substantial and inconsolable widower, Mr. Chepstow!

"So he is the poor devil I was pitying in anticipation," thought Ralph, "On the whole I think the sentiment is uncalled-for. His back is broad enough, and his susceptibilities not too acute. Besides which, he is the kind of man that must be ruled, and perhaps when he is incorporated as a part of her precious self, Florence may not treat him badly. She will have no more need for plotting and planning on pecuniary grounds, anyhow."

Mr. Chepstow was all beaming with the effulgence of prosperity and good-humour, delighted to see Sir Ralph again, hoped he had enjoyed his visit to

England, etc., etc.

Ralph felt rather at a loss how to demean himself. The thing was so very palpable, he wondered if he was expected to congratulate the happy pair forthwith. But as there had been no announcement made to him, he decided that it was better to be on the safe side, and risk no premature good wishes.

It was a very tiresome evening. Mr. Chepstow bored him inexpressibly; the more so, that being his mother's guest, he felt bound to be civil to the good-natured millionaire. After dinner he was doomed to a very exhausting tête-à-tête, in the course of which the stout widower unbosomed himself, described in glowing terms his admiration for Miss Vyse, and ended by expressing his hopes that Sir Ralph would look favourably on the proposed alliance.

"I am very happy to hear of it, I assure you, Mr. Chepstow," replied Ralph. "But you are mistaken in thinking my approval has anything to say to the matter. Miss Vyse is very distantly related to me, and though she has been staying with my mother for some time, I am very slightly acquainted with her. She is, I believe, quite her own mistress. It think her fortunate in the prospect of a kind husband; and you, on your side, I need not tell you, will have an exceedingly handsome wife. May I ask when the—what do you call it?—happy event, isn't that the proper expression, is to take place?"

Mr. Chepstow's rosy completion visibly deepened in hue.

"We have not exactly fixed. In fact, my dear Sir Ralph, Miss Vyse is a young lady of such exceedingly delicate feeling—I had wished her to name an early day, but she rather objects to our marriage taking place till the anniversary of the late Mrs. Chepstow's death has passed.

"Oh indeed!" said the younger man; "then that anniversary falls about this season, I suppose. Ah well, a few weeks' delay will give you time to know each other better! I forget by-the-bye how many years you have been a widower."

Mr. Chepstow looked still more uncomfortable.

"My late wife, Mrs. Chepstow," he said, "died in June. I thought I mentioned that Miss Vyse wished to postpone matters till after the anniversary was passed."

"Your late wife only died last June then?" exclaimed Sir Ralph, feeling

considerably disgusted. "Then I certainly agree with Miss Vyse as to the propriety of deferring the present affair a little longer."

This was rather a damper even to the obtuse Mr. Chepstow. He looked rather ashamed of himself, and appeared glad to agree to his host's proposal that they should return to the drawing-room.

"I wonder what sort of a person the first Mrs Chepstow was?" thought Ralph somewhat cynically, as he observed the devotion of the fat lover, the cool affectation and airs *de grande dame* of the beautiful fiancée. It was amusing to watch the change in her manner already. She had altogether thrown aside her gentle deference and fawning amiability, and seemed to go out of her way to seek for opportunities of covertly sneering at Sir Ralph, or annoying him with ingeniously impertinent innuendoes, and his real, unaffected indifference to it all galled her not a little.

"How can it be," thought he, "that two women can exist, so utterly, so radically different as this girl and my Marion?" And as the thought passed through his mind, he glanced at Florence. She was looking at him, with a strangely mingled expression on her face. Regret, remorse, even a shade of pity, seemed to cross her beautiful features. But for a moment, and then she hastily turned aside and began chattering nonsense to Mr. Chepstow. But a new direction had been given to Ralph's meditations.

"Why does she look at me in that way?" he asked himself: "she has doubtless discovered my secret. Can it be that after all she is possessed of something in the shape of a heart that is capable of pitying my bitter disappointment? It is possible, I suppose. Moralists say there is a spark of good in the worst of us."

Florence, by-the-bye, scolded Mr. Chepstow furiously when she discovered that he had confessed to Sir Ralph that the first anniversary of her predecessor's death was not yet past!

Henceforth there was nothing but Chepstow. Morning, noon, and night it seemed to Ralph he never entered his mother's drawing-room without coming upon that worthy there ensconced. He grew very tired of it; but finding at last that the millionaire never took offence at anything, came to treat him somewhat unceremoniously, and found it rather convenient to shuffle on to his broad shoulders some of the gentleman-of-the-house duties so unspeakably irksome to



his unsociable self.

The day came on which an answer to his letter was to be expected. It passed, bringing him nothing. Likewise its successors, one, two, and three, and Ralph began to be very miserable. He waited a few days longer, then thought of writing again; but to what purpose? Why should a second letter fare better than its predecessor? Suddenly a new idea struck him. He was walking near the Rue St. Thomas at the time, and acted at once on the notion.

Hitherto he had avoided passing Mrs. Archer's house. He dreaded the sight of it, and especially of the little terrace; a corner of which was visible from the street.

As he stood now at the door after ringing the bell, he heard merry voices above. He stepped back a little and looked up. On the terrace he saw the figure of a young girl about Marion's height, playing and laughing with some children. They were utter strangers to him; happy, innocent creatures, but at that moment he felt as if he hated them.

He was recalled to himself by the voice of Mme. Poulin at the door. She recognized him, and enquired civilly how she could serve him.

"Do you happen to know Mrs. Archer's address?" he asked. "Did she leave it with you before she went? I have some letters of importance to forward to her."

"But yes, certainly," replied the brisk old woman; "Monsieur shall have it at once. It is mademoiselle that gave it to me. Already have I sent letters, a little bill by example, that madam, in her distress, failed to pay. And I have received the answer with an order for the money. '*Ces dames étaient gentilles, mais bien gentilles. Cette pauvre Thérèse a bien pleuré leur départ! Eh le petit, ah qu'il était mignon.*'"

"But the address," reminded Ralph.

"Ah yes, the address! I go to seek it."

And she disappeared, in another moment returning with two or three ready directed and stamped envelopes in her band, on each of which was written in a clear girlish hand—

“Mrs. George Archer,  
23, West Parade,  
Cheltenham.”

“Cheltenham!” exclaimed Ralph, “by Jove, and I put Leamington. My mother’s mistake, evidently, and that snake of a girl suspected my secret and encouraged my mistake. Heaven forgive her, for *I* can’t. And now—

Mme. Poulin saw that something was wrong.

“Monsieur fears then that this address will not reach ‘*ces dames.*’ It is true, they were soon to depart *pour les Indes. Mais il faut espérer—*”

“*Pour les Indes,*” interrupted Ralph, eagerly, “were then both the ladies going there? The young lady, too?”

Mme. Poulin looked puzzled.

“*Mais oui,*” she said, “that is to say at least, I have always thought so.” Evidently the contrary had never occurred to her. But a bright idea struck her. “I go to ask Thérèse,” she said; “she spoke much with Mademoiselle. Without doubt Mademoiselle will have told her if it were not so.”

And the old woman disappeared for the second time. In a few minutes she returned, bringing her daughter to assist at the consultation. Ralph heard their voices chattering shrilly along the passage, and a few words reached him. “*Aux Indes,*” “*la petite demoiselle,*” “*Mais non, ma mère, assurément,*” and so on. Those few moments seemed hours to him!

Thérèse’s opinion to some extent relieved him of this new terror. Though on close cross-examination she did not appear to have very certain grounds for her belief, yet the impression she had received while the little family was with them, was evidently that the young lady was *not* going to India, was not, in fact, a permanent member of Mrs. Archer’s household.

“That I am aware of,” said Ralph; “all I want to know is, did she ever allude in any way to India, or to her perhaps going there?”

But Thérèse could not remember that she had ever done so. So with this negative satisfaction, Ralph was forced to be content, and thanking the mother

and daughter for their good-nature, went his way, the precious envelope in his hand, to think over what next to do.

After all he decided, there was nothing for it but to write again. This time, of course, to the right address. The same objections remained in full force against his going to England and trying there to find Marion for himself. So he wrote at once. Two letters. One to Mrs. Archer, enclosing, as before, another to Marion. Then, unfortunately, he changed his mind, and sent them separately. That to Miss Freer, to the care of Mrs. Archer, &c. That to Cissy, merely a few words, begging her at once to send him Miss Freer's address, or if by any possibility she were actually accompanying Mrs. Archer to India, to let him know whence and how they were going. If from Marseilles, he would start at a moment's notice to meet them there on their way.

This letter reached Cheltenham a few days after Cissy had left. It lay for some time in the senior Mrs. Archer's house, that lady being ill or away from home, and was then sent on to India, where Cissy received it by the same mail as another letter from Ralph sent to India direct, which we shall hear about presently.

The other letter, that directed to Miss Freer, never reached its destination, never, at least, as we have seen, came to Marion's hands. Its history was never known. Probably enough it arrived at Mrs. Archer's house, and some stupid or officious servant, seeing the unfamiliar name, may have said, after the manner of her kind, it was "not for us," and sent the poor letter adrift again.

## CHAPTER IX.

### RALPH (*continued.*)

“Which when his mother saw, she in her mind  
Was troubled sore, ne wist well what to weene;  
Ne could by search nor any means out find  
The secret cause and nature of his teene.

\* \* \* \* \*

Unto himself she tame and him besought,  
If aught lay hidden in his grieved thought,  
It to reveal: who still her answered there was nought.

FAIRY QUEEN, CANTO XII.

By this time April was pretty far advanced.

Suddenly, after an interval of some weeks' temperate weather succeeding the usual spring rains, Altes grew intolerably hot, and every one began to desert the poor little town as if it we plague stricken.

Some weeks previously, Lady Severn had engaged for the six months' summer, a villa at Vevey, and thither she now decided on removing herself and her rather cumbrous household. Much to Ralph's disappointment. He was heartily sick of living abroad in this unhomelike fashion, and had been for long hoping that the approaching summer would see Medhurst once more inhabited. But to this wish of his, his mother was as yet unwilling to agree. She still shrank from returning to the place where the light of her eyes, her eldest son, had met

his death, and succeeded in persuading herself that on every account, Sybil's especially, it was better for them all to remain on the continent for another year.

So they left Altes at the end of April.

Sufficient time, however, had elapsed to Ralph to have received an answer to his second letter, but none arrived.

He came at last to a new determination. At all risks, he resolved, after seeing his mother and her party safely established at Vevey, to go to England, and with the help of the Cheltenham address in his possession, seek to discover his lost Marion, and learn the reason of her strange silence.

Mrs. Archer's not having replied to his enquiries did not surprise him. He began to feel sure that she must have set out on her long journey eastward before his letter had arrived at her mother-in-law's house. The fear that Marion might have accompanied her to India, he resolutely determined for the present to set aside. Time enough to think of it when he discovered it to be actually the case.

As ill-luck would have it, some considerable time elapsed before he found himself free to turn northwards. Half way on their journey to Switzerland Sybil fell ill—grievously ill, poor little dove—and he could not find it in his heart to leave her, even had he thought it right to do so. It was a very miserable state of things. Their resting-place was a small provincial town near the French frontier, where, as may be imagined, the accommodation was far from luxurious. They succeeded in securing the best rooms in the best hotel, which sounds gorgeous enough, but practically speaking was the very reverse.

The little inn was built round a small courtyard, on to which opened the windows of all the rooms. Considering that in this courtyard were performed all the unsightly, though doubtless unavoidable household duties, such as scouring of pans, washing of cabbages, and killing of chickens; that herein also took place all the gossiping, bargaining, and scolding of the neighbourhood; and that, to crown all, the weather was stiflingly hot, and cleanliness, but a pleasing recollection of the past, it may easily be imagined that it was hardly the spot one would choose to be ill in. The poor child suffered terribly. Her constant cry was for "Uncle Ralph," in whose arms, at all hours of the day and night, she seemed alone to find ease or repose. And for a whole fortnight they knew not what to think or hope.

Lady Severn was wretched. She, too, in her suffering and anxiety clung closely to her son. It drew them very near together—this time of dread and watching—and did not a little to reveal to the poor lady the true character of her quondam favourite, Florence Vyse. The beauty, as might have been expected, behaved with utter heartlessness and selfish disregard of every one's comfort but her own; grumbling fretfully whenever she thought Lady Severn could not hear her, at the hardship of being detained in this "odious hole," and all but saying openly that if only they could get away from this "horrible place," she cared little whether the child lived or died.

But sweet Sybil's life-battle was not yet to end. She recovered, and, as is the way with children once they "get the turn," as it is called, amazed them all by the speediness of her convalescence.

Spite of all the disadvantages of her surroundings, by the latter half of May she was able to be moved, and the end of the month saw them all comfortably established in the pretty Swiss "maison de campagne." Then at last Ralph began to think of executing his project. But before he had had time to enter into any of its details, the whole scheme was unexpectedly knocked on the head.

The first morning after their arrival in Vevey, he was passing along the principal street on his way to look up the doctor in whose care they had been advised to place Sybil, when, some way in front, he saw a familiar figure advancing towards him.

An Englishwoman evidently, as he could have told by her walk, even had he not known her. Middle-sized and broadset, ruddy-complexioned and reddish haired, coming along with that peculiar swing of mingled hauteur and nonchalance, affected by one type of that curious genus, the fast young lady; there was no mistaking our old acquaintance Sophy Berwick.

Ralph, looked about him nervously for a chance of escape, but on neither side was there any. He was not quite capable of turning round and actually running for it, though he felt not a little inclined to do so.

In another moment she saw him, and he was in for it. Almost before she was within hearing she began to speak, as fast as ever. At the present time his appearance was a perfect godsend to her; she was burdened with the weight of a whole budget of uncommunicated Altes gossip.

“So you are here, Sir Ralph!” was her greeting. “Upon my word, wonders will never cease! The last person I expected to see. I thought you had gone back to England for good. I am very glad to see you though. Fancy what a piece of news we have just heard. Frank is going to be married! You will never guess who the lady is. For my part, I can’t imagine what he could see in her. Little milk-and-water idiot in my opinion. Do guess now who it is.”

It was useless for Ralph to protest his incapacity for ever guessing anything, especially the present puzzle. Sophy had, metaphorically speaking, button-holed him. There was no escape.

“It’s not Miss Freer,” proceeded Sophy; “I wish it were. She had more sense. It’s that doll, Dora Bailey! And, just imagine, it was all settled before Frank left, only they agreed to keep it a secret for three months for reasons best known to themselves. Now confess, *aren’t* you surprised?”

Knowing all he did of Frank Berwick’s private history, Ralph could honestly say he was. Having listened to a few more comments from Miss Sophy on this subject, he began to hope he might be allowed to pursue his way, but such was far from the young lady’s intention.

“Don’t be in such a hurry,” said she; “I’ve lots more to tell you and ask about. Is it true that your cousin is going to marry that jolly old Chepstow? That, too, I heard the other day.”

“It is true, certainly,” said Ralph, “that Mr. Chepstow and Miss Vyse are engaged to be married. But whoever told you the young lady was my cousin made a mistake. However, that does not signify.”

“Oh, and about that pretty Mrs. Archer,” pursued the relentless Sophy, “she went off in such a hurry—to nurse her husband, was it not? I heard of her from some friends of mine who knew her, and were going out at the same time. About the middle of April they set off—she and Miss Freer. They will be near their journey’s end now. Only, by-the-by, they were going up to the hills, I believe—somewhere near Simla. I was just thinking how queer it would be if Frank and Marion Freer came across each other again out there, when I heard of his engagement to that stupid Dora. Though I daresay it’s just as well. There’s no doubt Frank was tremendously smitten by her—Marion, I mean—but then she was already disposed of. And I don’t think she was the sort of girl to break off an

engagement, even though her heart was not in it. Do you, Sir Ralph?"

From sheer want of breath the girl at last came to a stop. All too soon, however, for her auditor; who, though tortured with anxiety to hear more of the dreadful things the thoughtless rattle alluded to so carelessly, yet could not, for a moment or two, find voice to utter the inquiry on his lips. Fortunately, at this juncture, Sophy's attention was attracted by something passing in the street. When she turned round again he had perfectly recovered himself.

"It is not pleasant standing here, Miss Berwick," he said. "I am in no hurry; suppose you allow me to walk so far on your way with you, and we can compare notes about all our old acquaintances."

"By all means," replied Sophy, delighted with his unusual urbanity, which confirmed her in her often expressed opinion that 'Ralph Severn only wanted shaking to be a good fun as any one.'

"What were we talking about?" added she.

"Miss Freer," he said, carelessly. "I think so at least. You were saying she had gone out to India, were you not? I did not know she lived permanently with Mrs. Archer?"

"She didn't," said Sophy. "At Altes she was only visiting her. But she was going out to India to be married. Mrs. Archer told me so herself one day, and Marion was very angry. She wanted it kept a secret. Her husband-to-be is enormously rich, much older than she, I believe. I am almost sure she did not like the idea. Her manner was so queer when it was referred to. I expect she had been forced into it. She was so poor, you know."

"You don't happen to know the gentleman's name, do you?" in a voice that would have sounded startling in a strangeness to any one less obtuse than his companion.

"No," she said, consideringly. "I did not hear it. Mrs. Archer was just going to tell it me, but Marion got so angry she stopped. She was to be married as soon as she got there. Why, she will almost be married now—in another month any way! Doesn't it seem funny?"

She looked up in Sir Ralph's face as she spoke—her bright, good-humoured



eyes fixed on his face in all good faith and unconcern. She *thought* she was speaking the truth. Ralph looked at her, and saw that she meant what she said.

He accepted it.

Something in his glance struck even Sophy as peculiar. Whispers had once or twice reached her at Altes that he too, the unimpressionable baronet, had at last been “attracted”—if not more. And by whom, of all people in the world, but by that quiet, pale girl, the Miss Freer, who gave daily lessons to his nieces! It was very strange, the Altes magpies said to each other, what there was about that girl that gentlemen found so charming. Very strange and incomprehensible; above all, that Sir Ralph Severn, who might marry “any one,” should think of her. He was odd, certainly, but then there was his mother. *She* would never hear of such a thing! So, as no further material was provided for the growth of the report, it died a natural death, and was quickly succeeded by other and more exciting topics.

Like a dream, the hints she had heard returned to Sophy’s memory. “Could it have been true?” she asked herself, and again she glanced at her companion. He was walking along quietly, his eyes fixed on the ground. In another moment he spoke.

“And what more news have you for me, Miss Berwick?” he said lightly. “Let me see, we have done a good deal of business in the last few minutes. Assisted at three prospective marriages, and made our comments thereupon. The last we discussed seems to me the least satisfactory. That poor girl, Miss Freer, I pity her if she is forced into a mercenary marriage.”

“Yes,” replied Sophy, “I suppose she is to be pitied. “But provided she does not care for anyone else, she will get along well enough with her husband, I dare say. Particularly if he is so rich. It is much easier to keep good friends when there is plenty of money.”

“Do you think so?” said Ralph, indifferently. How the girl’s words stung him! “Provided she cares for no one else.” But he answered so carelessly and naturally that the Sophy was quite deceived, and dismissed as groundless the idea that had occurred to her. They walked on together some little distance; Ralph skilfully drawing her out, but to no purpose. She had evidently told him, and apparently without exaggeration, all she knew on the subject.

He went home. What he thought and felt and suffered, those who have marvelled at themselves for living through similar bitterness and disappointment, will know without my attempting the impossible task of describing it. Those, on the other hand, who have not hitherto passed through such anguish, *may* yet have to bear it. And to many, even the feeble words I might vainly employ, would appear exaggerated and unnatural.

The result of that day's meeting with Sophy Berwick was the following letter to Mrs. Archer, containing an enclosure for Miss Freer. He wrote both letters at once. He could not rest till he had done so; though, by the rule of contrary again, he found when they were written, that he had missed the mail by two or three days only. So they did not go till the following month. And it was July ere Cissy received them, additional delay resulting from their going round by the headquarters of Colonel Archer's regiment in the first place; the only address which Ralph felt confidence in after his late disastrous experience. This was what he wrote to Cissy:—

“CHATEAU MORNIER

“VEVEY

“JUNE 3rd, 18—

“MY DEAR MRS. ARCHER,

“Before this you may have received a letter I sent to your Cheltenham address, trusting it might reach you before you left. As, however, I have received no answer to it, I suppose it must have been too late. It will, therefore, probably be sent after you. It consisted merely of a few lines, begging you at once to send me the address of your friend, Miss Freer, to whom, on the chance of her being there, even had you left, I wrote at the same time. To that letter neither have I received any answer. Only to-day have I learned the reason—that she accompanied you to India last April. This news was a great shock to me. Still greater the information that accompanied it—that Miss Freer went out to India the betrothed wife of a gentleman to whom she was to be married very shortly after her arrival! The person who told me this, mentioned having heard it directly from yourself at Altes, some months ago. I may as well tell you that my informant was Sophy Berwick. She had no reason for telling me. She did incidentally. Nor can I see that it is likely she was mistaken. Certain words and allusions of Marion's own confirm me in believing it. Still there is a chance—a mere chance—that it may not be so; and on this I now write to you, begging you as speedily as possible to tell me the truth. At the time Marion, under pressure of strong excitement, let fall the hints I refer to, she evidently did not consider herself irrevocably bound. She alluded to some concealment concerning herself, some obstacle connected with her father's wishes. Had I only then dared to

speak more openly of my own hopes and intentions all might have been well. But I thought it right not to do so; and since I have been free to speak, a series of cross-purposes, beginning with your sudden flight from Altes, and ending with my last letters missing you (previous ones having shared the same fate through an incorrect address), has, I fear, separated us—for ever. It is very terrible to me to realise that it probably is so. As to *her*, I must try to be unselfish enough to hope that all this may have fallen more lightly on her younger and more elastic nature. I do not know if you ever guessed this secret of mine? I almost wish now that I had confided it to you. The enclosed letter contains a full explanation of all in my conduct, that to my poor darling must have seemed mysterious and inexplicable. If, when you receive this, she be yet by any blessed chance *free*, give it to her. All then will, I feel assured, be well. If, on the other hand, as is more probable, she be already bound to another, even perhaps by this time married, *return it to me as it is; and never, I beseech you, mention my name to her*. Better far she should forget me, despise me even; than that, by learning that I, alas, have not ceased, never can cease to care for her, her married life with another should be embittered by vain regret. And in no case, mind you, do I blame her. I am ignorant of the circumstances which must have compelled her to agree to a marriage, into which she could not enter with her heart. Whatever they may have been, she, I am sure, is to be excused. Her youth and unselfishness of disposition would render her easy to persuade to such a sacrifice. I have said more than I intended. Selfishly too I have omitted to express my hopes that you found Colonel Archer in a fair way to complete recovery. I do not send any message to him, as I must beg you, on every account, to consider this letter and all it contains as strictly private. I shall be very grateful to you if you will answer this as soon as possible. Believe me,

“Yours faithfully,

“RALPH M. SEVERN.

“P.S. I am forgetting to mention that if the letter I sent to Cheltenham to Miss Freer, has, with yours, been forwarded to India, it is not either way of much consequence. Fearing it might not reach her directly, I purposely made it short and formal. Merely expressing my regret at not having seen her again, and asking for her address that I might send her some books, &c. This (and everything else) is fully explained in the enclosed.”

“The enclosed” was three times the length of the foregoing. It contained, as Ralph said, a full explanation of all that had occurred since the last evening at Altes, when they parted, as they thought, for the fortnight merely of Ralph’s visit to England.

Now began again for Ralph a period of weary waiting, till the answer, or answers, to his letters might be expected. It was a long time to wait—four months or thereabouts! He grew sick of the summer, the constant sunshine and brightness, and longed for the time when he should see the leaves beginning to turn, when among the trees he should perceive the first whisper of autumn. “For by then,” he thought, “this suspense at least will be over. And at the worst I shall

be free to begin to live down my disappointment.”

So it came to pass that at the very same time both Marion and he were waiting with anxious hearts for news from the far-off East. Whereas, had they only known it, but a few days' journey and a few words of explanation, would have sufficed again, and for life, to unite them.

What, for two or three weeks, Ralph thought was to be his only answer, came to him, as to Marion, in the advertisement sheet of the “Times;” where one morning early in October, he saw the announcement of poor Cissy's death. It shocked him greatly.

For a week or two he knew not what to think or do. Then one morning, as he was all but losing hope of any further or more satisfactory reply, he received an Indian letter. A bulky letter with a deep black border round the envelope, and addressed in an unfamiliar hand. He turned it about, as people always do when particularly anxious to learn the contents of a letter, stared at the address, the stamps, and the black seal, as if they could reveal the secret of the inside!

At last he opened it, and drew out a second envelope likewise addressed to himself, but in a different hand, and with no black edge. This again he opened, and out fell, on to the floor at his feet, a letter that was no stranger to him. His own letter to Miss Freer, somewhat crushed and worn-looking from its much travelling, but otherwise exactly as it had left him, the seal unbroken, the whole evidently untampered with. And his own words to Cissy recurred to him,—“If on the other hand she be already bound to another, even perhaps by this time married, *return it to me as it is, and never, I beseech you, mention my name to her.*

He understood it. Poor Cissy had obeyed him, and no fear that now she would betray his confidence. But looking again at the black-bordered outside envelope, he saw that it still contained something. A short letter only, written almost immediately after his wife's death by George Archer, whose was the writing which Ralph, not having seen for many years, had failed to recognize. It ran thus,

“LANDOUR, N.W. PROVINCES.

“AUGUST 20TH, 18—

“MY DEAR SEVERN,—

“Already you may have chanced to hear of my great loss. Considering all the

aggravations; our long separation; her hastening out to nurse me at risk to herself; my inexcusable selfishness in having suggesting it; I think you will not despise me for confessing to you that I am perfectly prostrated, utterly heart-broken; even though yet at times unable to realize it. One of her last requests to me was that I would, without delay, forward to you a letter which would find in her desk—‘written,’ she said, and ‘ready to be addressed.’ She was very ill at the time and must have been confused in what she said, for the enclosed I found as I send it, all ready, save the stamps, to be posted. I need hardly tell you that I am in entire ignorance of its contents, and perfectly satisfied to remain so always. My poor child told me it related to some private matters of your own, as to which you had consulted her. She was evidently anxious about the matter, so whatever it be, I trust it may end well. You will forgive my not writing more just now. Remember me to Lady Severn, and thank her for the kindness she showed to my wife and child last winter.

“Yours most truly,  
“GEORGE ARCHER.”

That was all! Ralph folded the letters. His own to Miss Fryer he destroyed.

“And so,” he said to himself, “my story is ended.”

He wrote at once to Sir Archibald, declining the appointment at A——, which till now, his old chief had with some trouble kept open for him.

He remained at the Château Mornier with his mother till in the autumn she left it for a more genial climate. And one day soon after receiving Colonel Archer’s letter, he read, in the newspaper, of the death of the well-known and distinguished Member for ——, Hartford Vere, and bestowed a moment’s passing pity on the scantily provided for orphan children of the great man!

The Severns did not winter at Altes. That was spared him. He persuaded his mother to try Italy for a change. Yet more, he obtained from her a promise that should all be well, the following spring should see the family re-established at Medhurst. Once there, he felt he should be more free to leave them; and travel by himself where the fancy seized him, or rather, wherever he saw the most encouraging prospect for the furtherance of the special studies which he was now determined to resume in earnest, and in which he hoped to find sufficient interest to prevent his life from becoming altogether a blank. His mother was ready enough now-a-days to agree to his wishes, even, when possible, to forestall them. Since Sybil’s illness at Lusac, there had been a great change in Lady Severn. She had learned to cling much to her hitherto little valued son. And something had reached her, in some subtle, impalpable way, of the sorrow, of the bitterness of disappointment through which this summer had seen him pass. She knew no particulars, her private suspicions even, were wide of the mark; but

she could see that he had aged strangely of late. Always grave, he had grown more so, and it was long since any of the bright, sudden flashes of humour had been heard, which of old relieved by their sparkle, his usual quiet seriousness.

Something of her anxiety about him, she one day endeavoured to express to him; but she never tried it again. With perfect gentleness, but irresistible firmness, he put her aside; and in her inmost heart she felt she deserved it.

He could forgive, even, in a sense, forget. But as to taking into his confidence, accepting the sympathy of the mother, whose previous indifference, narrow-minded prejudice, and love of power, had greatly been to blame for the great sorrow of his life—it was asking too much.

Still, though too late for confidence, there was perfect peace between mother and son; undisturbed even by the continued presence of through the winter of Florence Vyse, who had taken it into her head that the *éclat* of her marriage would be much increased by Medhurst being the scene of the interesting ceremony; in consequence of which the ardent Chepstow had to agree to its being deferred till the spring. Florence found it rather good fun being “engaged.” She kept her stout admirer trotting backwards and forwards between England and Italy all the winter; which was rather a profitable arrangement so far as she was concerned, as on each occasion of arrival and departure she was presented with a new and gorgeous “souvenir” of the about-to-be absent Chepstow, or token of his remembrance of her when in distant lands. His devotion was really “sweetly touching,” as ladies’ maids say; and paid well, too, for long before she became Mrs. Chepstow, the beauty had accumulated a very fair show of jewellery and such-like feminine treasures, not a few of which, in justice to her be it recorded, found their way to the humble little house standing in a “genteel” row, in one of the northern suburbs of London, where dwelt the mother and sisters on whom what she possessed of a heart was bestowed. She was more genuinely amiable and good-tempered this winter than she had yet shown herself. To Ralph in particular her manner had become gentle, almost humble. Prosperity suited her, and she could afford, now that the cause of her jealous irritation was removed, almost to *pity* the man, in every respect so immeasurably her superior, whose happiness she had yet, in a moment of pique and mean spitefulness, deliberately endeavoured to destroy. She too, before leaving Altes, had heard and believed Sophy Berwick’s romance; and had seized with delight the opportunity of delaying, till too late, all communication between Sir Ralph and the girl who, she fancied, had usurped her place with him.

Yet now, when she looked at him sometimes, and, despite all his proud self-control and impenetrable reserve, descried symptoms of a grief it was not in her self-absorbed nature to understand—now, when all was smiling on her, and she had begun to think herself decidedly better off with the manageable Mr. Chepstow, than she would have been as the wife of the incomprehensible Ralph, there were moments in which she wished she had not done that ugly thing, not said those two or three words, which even her easy conscience told her were neither more nor less than that which we prefer to call by any other name but its own—a cold-blooded, malicious *lie*.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

“Un mensonge qui flatte ou blesse le cœur trouve plus facilement créatrice qu’une vérité indéferent.”

OCTAVEFEUILLET.

“———Thank God  
the gift of a good man’s love.”

ANOLDSTORY.

MALLINGFORD again! And not looking more cheerful than when we last saw it. Then it was late autumn, now, except for the name of the thing, a scarcely more genial season, early spring.

“More genial,” indeed, impresses a comparison strictly speaking, impossible to draw—in Brentshire at least—between either November and February, or February and November; unless we subscribe to the logic of that celebrated individual, the March hare, who tells his bewildered guest, “Alice in Wonderland,” “that it is very easy to have more than, nothing.”

Geniality, truly, of any kind, outside or inside, our poor Marion had not met with, through all those cheerless, dreary months at the Cross House. Excepting always the occasional breaks in the cloudy monotony of her life, contrived for her by the watchful thoughtfulness of Geoffrey Baldwin. Not the least of these had been the pleasure of Harry’s company during the Christmas holidays (the



last, in all probability, the young man would spend in England for years to come), for which Geoffrey alone was to be thanked. Miss Tremlett would have fainted at the bare idea of having that “dreadful boy” as even a few weeks’ guest. She “tipped” him, however, handsomely, with which proof of her affection Harry was amply content; finding his quarters at the Manor Farm infinitely more to his taste than a residence in the Cross House. Though two miles distant, he managed to see a great deal of his sister; his host being no unwilling coadjutor in this respect. They had plenty of rides together, to which this open winter, in other respects so disagreeable, was favourable; and at times, when braced by the fresh air and exhilarated by the exercise, Marion for a brief space felt almost happy.

But only for a brief space. Her life was very repulsive to her, and although she made the best of it to Harry, he saw enough to make him feel for her greatly. Nor did his pity end with the sentiment. In all seriousness the brother offered, rather than condemn her to such an existence, to give up his cherished and chosen intention of entering the army, for which by this time he was fully prepared; and remain near her, with the hopes of in time being able to set up a modest little establishment of their own. He would try for a clerkship in the Mallingford Bank, or take to farming, under Geoffrey Baldwin’s guidance. To neither of which proposals, however, would Marion hear of consenting.

“You don’t think so poorly of me, Harry, as to imagine that my life would be any the happier for knowing I had been the means of spoiling yours? Though I love you for offering this, and I will try to be incited by the remembrance of it to more cheerfulness.”

Her one woman-friend, the gentle, but brave-spirited Veronica, warmly applauded her unselfish resolution. So, in his heart, for more reasons than one, did Geoffrey Baldwin, though he said nothing.

With a face smiling through its tears the poor girl bid her brother farewell.

“Only to midsummer, you know, May,” said the boy, “whatever regiment I may get my commission in, I’m sure of some weeks at home first. That’s to say with Baldwin,” he added, for “home,” alas, was a mere memory of the past to the two orphans. “He is so very kind, May. I really don’t know how we are ever to thank him for it.”

“He is indeed,” said Marion warmly, so warmly that Harry, who had but small experience of that queer thing, a woman’s heart, smiled to himself, and went away considerably happier in mind about his sister for this corroboration, as he thought it, of a very pleasant suspicion which had lately entered his imagination.

“It would suit so capitally,” he thought to himself. “In every way he’s a thorough good fellow. Not so clever as May, certainly, but they’d get on just as well for all that.” Perhaps so, Harry. It is a question, and a not easily answered one, as to how far congeniality of mind is necessary to a happy marriage.

But certainly, to give two such different natures as those of Geoffrey Baldwin and Marion Vere, a chance of assimilating in the long run, one element is indispensable, a good foundation of mutual love. Not friendship, however sincere, not esteem, however great—but love—of which the former are but a part. “And not necessarily even that,” say some, from whom nevertheless I differ in opinion.

After Harry had gone, it was the old monotonous story again. It was impossible for her to ride so much as while her brother was with them, for the Copley girls were not always to be got hold of, and Mr. Baldwin, as Marion observed with some surprise, rather fought shy of tête-à-tête excursions.

“Who would have thought he was so prudish,” she said to herself. “It’s rather misplaced, for I’m sure everybody knows he is just like a sort of uncle or brother to me.”

“Everybody” however, in Brentshire, is not in the habit of thinking anything so natural and innocent, and Geoffrey was wise in his generation. Though in this instance really, the Mrs. Grundys of the neighbourhood might have been excused for remarking the very palpable and undeniable fact, that Mr. Baldwin was a remarkably handsome bachelor of only seven or eight and twenty, and Miss Vere “a pretty pale girl” of little more than nineteen. “The sort of girl too that manages to get herself admired by gentlemen, though why I really can’t see,” remarked one of the sister-hood to her confidante for the time. Who in reply observed that “no more could she.” Adding, moreover, that, “Everyone knows what that sort of story-book affair is sure to end in. Young guardian and interesting ward! The girl knew well enough what she was about. Evidently she had not taken up her quarters with that odious Miss Tremlett for nothing. Had

her father lived, or left her better off, she might have looked higher. But as things were she had done wisely not to quarrel with her bread-and-butter.”

Marion’s visits to Miss Temple, though by reason of her aunt’s unreasonable prejudice, they had to be managed with extreme discretion and not made too frequently, were at this time of great benefit to the girl. The influence of the thoroughly sound and sweet Veronica softened while it strengthened her; and did much to weaken, if not altogether eradicate, a certain root of bitterness, which, not unnaturally, began to show itself in her disposition. She was not given to bosom friendships or confidantes. Though frank and ingenuous, she had, like all strong natures, a great power of reserve. Even to Cissy Archer, the most intimate friend she had ever had, she by no means, as we have seen, thought it necessary to confide all her innermost feelings.

Through the circumstances of her life and education, her principle acquaintances, not to say friends, had been of the opposite sex—and to tell the truth she preferred that they should be such—though from no unwomanliness in herself, from no shadow of approach to “fastness,” had she come to like the society of men more than that of women. Rather I think from the very opposite cause—her extreme, though veiled, timidity and self-distrust; which instinctively turned to the larger and more generous nature for encouragement and shelter. It never cost her a moment’s shrinking or hesitation to preside at one of her father’s “gentlemen” dinner parties, where the sight of her bright, *interested* face and the sound of her sweet, eager voice, were a pleasant refreshment to the brain-weary, overworked men who surrounded the table. Yet in a ball-room, or worse still, in a laughing, chattering party of fashionable girls, Marion, though to outward appearance perfectly at ease—a little graver and quieter perhaps than her companions—at heart was shy and self-conscious to a painful degree.

After all, however, it is well for a woman to have one or more good, true-hearted friends of her own sex. And this Marion acknowledged to herself, as she came to know more intimately how true and beautiful a nature was contained in the poor and crippled form of the invalid. Veronica was, I daresay, an exceptional character; not so much as to her patience and cheerful resignation—these, to the honour of our nature be it said, are no rare qualities among the “incurables” of all classes—as in respect of her wonderful unselfishness, power of going out of and beyond herself to sympathise in the joy as well as the sorrow of others, and her unusual wide-mindedness. A better or healthier friend Marion Vere could not have met with. That some personal sorrow, something much

nearer to her than the death of her father or the losses it entailed, had clouded the life of her young friend, Veronica was not slow to discover. But she did not press for a confidence, which it was evidently foreign, to the girl's feelings to bestow. She only did in her quiet way, what little she could, insensibly almost, towards assisting Marion to turn to the best account in her life training this and all other experiences that had befallen her.

How different from Geoffrey! Ever so long ago he, honest fellow, had poured out all his story to the friend who had for many years stood him in place of both mother and sister; and by her advice he had acted, in refraining from risking all, by a premature avowal to Marion of his manly, love and devotion.

Veronica, poor soul, was sorely exercised in spirit about these two. She loved them both so much, and yet she could not but see how utterly, radically unlike they were to each other. Geoffrey, some few years her junior, had from infancy seemed like a younger brother of her own; and since her illness in particular the gentle kindness, the never-failing attention he had shown her, had endeared him to her greatly. What, on his side, of his real manliness, his simple love of the good and pure, and hatred of the wrong, he owed to this poor crippled woman, is one of the things that little suspected now, shall one day be fully seen. Yet for all this, for all her love for, and pride in him, Veronica made no hero of the young man. She saw plainly that in all but his simple goodness he was inferior to Marion. And seeing this, and coming to love the girl and admire her many gifts as she did poor Veronica, as I have said, was sorely perplexed. She temporized in the first place; till she saw that it was absolutely necessary to do so, she had not the heart to crush poor Geoffrey's hopes.

"Wait," she said to him, "wait yet awhile. She has had much to try her of late, and there is no time lost. Think how young she is. If you startled her you might ruin all. Wait at least, till the spring."

So Geoffrey bit the end of his riding-whip rather ruefully, thanked Miss Veronica, and much against his will—waited.

"It may be," thought Veronica, "that this is to be one of those unequal marriages, that after all turn out quite as happily, or more so, than those where the balance is more even. Marion, as yet, is hardly conscious of her own powers. Should she marry Geoffrey the probability is she will never become so. Never, at least, in the present state of things. And after all, much power is doomed for ever

in *this* world to remain latent! But, on the other hand—I wish it could be! I do, indeed wish it so much, that I doubt my own clear-sightedness. *She* will, assuredly, be well able to decide for herself when the question comes before her, as I suppose in time it must. It is Geoffrey I am so troubled about. Should I do better to crush his hopes altogether? I *could* do so. But then, again, if it should turn out unnecessary! Ah, no! All I can do is to watch and wait. If only he does not ruin his own cause by anything premature.”

“If only!” But, alas, there came a day on which, riding back to Mallingford, Geoffrey seeing Marion home after parting with the Misses Copley at the gate a their father’s park, the following conversation took place.

It was late in February, a rank, dank, chilly afternoon, such as there had been plenty of this winter. Foggy, too; daylight already growing dim, an hour or more before it had any right to do so.

Marion shivered, though not altogether from the cold.

“Isn’t it a *horrible* day, Mr. Baldwin?” she asked; “a perfectly wretched day. Enough to make one wonder that people can be found willing to stay in such an ugly, disagreeable world. And yet there’s something fascinating about it too. I wonder how that is! Let me see; what is it it reminds me of? Oh, I know. It’s that song of Tennyson’s. ‘A spirit haunts the year’s last hours,’ it begins.

‘My very heart faints and my whole soul grieves  
At the moist rich smell of the rotting leaves.  
And the breath  
Of the fading edges of box beneath.’

That’s the sort of smell there is to-day, though it’s so chilly. Though that song is for the autumn. But it’s more like autumn than spring just now, isn’t it, Mr. Baldwin? There isn’t the slightest feeling of spring anywhere. No freshness, no life. Everything seems to be decaying.”

“I don’t know,” said Geoffrey doubtfully, sniffing the air as he spoke. “Things ain’t looking bad on the whole. You’ll see it will all take a start soon, once the sprouts get their heads above ground. And then just think what a hunting season we’ve had! I declare my horses haven’t had so much taken out of them for I don’t know the time.”

“Yes,” said Marion, half amused at her companion’s way of putting things.

“To you, I daresay it has seemed a very bright winter, and a cheerful, promising spring. After all, I believe the seasons are as much *in* us as outside us. Long ago I remember days on which I was so happy, that looking back, I fancy they were in the very brightest and loveliest of the summer, though in reality they were in dreary mid-winter. It is like time, which seems so short when we are happy, so long—so terribly long—when we are in sorrow. And yet in reality it is always the same. I wonder what is reality? Sometimes I think there is no outside at all.”

Having arrived at which satisfactory explanation of the mystery of the sensible world, Marion remembered her companion, long ago left behind her, having, as he would have phrased it, had he been in the habit of defining his situations, “come to grief at the very first fence, on leaving the lanes.”

“I wish I weren’t so stupid,” he thought to himself. “I wonder if all girls say the same queer, puzzling, pretty sort of things she does.”

Not that Marion favoured many people with all the fanciful, dreamy talk—a good deal of it great nonsense, but not commonplace, as she said it, for all that—with which patient Geoffrey was honoured. But she had got into the way of saying to him—before him rather—whatever came into her head, not troubling herself as to whether he understood it or not. Rather a tame-cat way of treating him! But as he was far from resenting it, there is no occasion for us to fight his battles.

To the last observation he made no reply. For some minutes they rode along the lane in silence; the horses apparently somewhat depressed in spirit, not being, like Miss Vere, dubious of the reality of an outside world, and a very foggy and disagreeable one to boot. Their feet sank, with each step, into the soft yielding mud, in great measure composed of the all but unrecognizable remains of last year’s leaves, not yet buried decently out of sight, as should have been done by this time. Nature was in a lazy mood that year. There was no sound except the thud, a ruddy, slushy sound, of the tired animals’ slow jogtrot steps.

Suddenly Marion spoke again. This time in a different tone. With something of appeal, something of child-like deprecation, she turned to her companion.

“Mr. Baldwin,” she said shyly, “you said just now it was almost spring. Don’t you remember promising me that by the spring you would try to do something for me?”

“What, Miss Vere?” said Geoffrey, rather shortly. He knew what was coming. He had a presentiment he was going to be sorely tried between the promptings of his heart and the sound advice of his friend Veronica, to which in his inmost mind he subscribed as wise and expedient. So he answered coldly, and hated himself for so doing, while his heart was already throbbing considerably faster than usual.

“Oh, don’t be vexed, with me,” she said; “I have not spoken of it for ever so long. Don’t you remember? I am sure you do. It was about trying to arrange for me to live somewhere else than with Aunt Tremlett. Could I not go somewhere as a sort of boarder perhaps? I am sure I should not be difficult to please if they were quiet, kind sort of people, and if I could have a couple of rooms, and be more independent than I am now. The worst of living at the Cross House is that I am never free, except when my aunt is asleep. She is always sending for me or wanting me to do something or other for her, and yet with it all I *never* can please her. Have you no friends, Mr. Baldwin, who would be willing to let me live with them as a sort of boarder? You see I am quiet and different from other girls. I care very little for gaiety of any kind, and I feel so much older than I am.”

Geoffrey rode on in perfect silence, his head turned away from Marion as she made this rather long speech, all in the same tone, half of appeal and half of deprecation. At last she grew surprised at his not replying, and spoke again.

“Do answer me, Mr. Baldwin. If you are vexed with me, and think me troublesome and unreasonable, please say so. Only I am so miserable at the Cross House, and you are the only person I can ask to help me.”

The last words sounded broken and quivering, as if the poor little speaker’s contemplation of her own desolate condition was too much for her self-control.

Geoffrey turned round suddenly, his fair face flushed with the depth of his emotion, his voice sounding hoarse and yet clear from very earnestness. He laid his hand on the crutch of Marion’s saddle, and leaned forward so as to face her almost as he spoke.

“Miserable you say you are at the Cross House?—then possibly you will forgive me if hearing this compels me to lay before you the only alternative I have to offer you. I had not meant to speak of this so soon, but you have tried me too far. I cannot be silent when I hear you speak of being miserable. Marion,

there is one home open to you, whose owner would gladly spend himself, his whole life and long, to make you happy. I know I am not good enough for you. I know in every sense I am unworthy of you. Only I love you so deeply, so truly; *surely* I could make you happy. Oh, Marion! what can I say to convince you of my earnestness? For God's don't answer hastily! Don't you think you *could* be happy as my wife—happier at least than you are?"

Till he left off speaking, Marion felt too utterly amazed and surprised—stunned as it were—to attempt to interrupt him. But when his voice ceased, she came to herself. In a sense at least. Not to her best self by any means, for there was ungentle haste in the movement with which she pushed away poor Geoffrey's hand, and a tone of extreme irritation, petulance almost, in her voice, as she replied to his little expected proposition.

"How can you be so foolish, Mr. Baldwin, so very foolish as to talk to me in that way. Are you really so blind as not to see that to you are more like another Harry than—than—anything of that sort? Oh! what a pity you have done this—said this to me! The only friend I had. And now you have put a stop to it all. I can never again feel comfortable with you. You have spoilt it all. It is very, very unkind of you!" And she ended her strange, incoherent speech by bursting into tears.

Poor Geoffrey already, its soon as the words were uttered, aware of his egregious mistake and penitent to the last degree, forthwith set himself down as a monster of inconsiderateness and cruelty. Her tears altogether for the moment put out of sight his own exceeding disappointment. He only thought how best to console her.

"Oh, Miss Vere," he said, "forgive me! It indeed inexcusable of me to have so startled and distressed you. I had no right so to take advantage of my position with you. I am a rough boor, I know, but I entreat you to forgive me, and forget all this. Only—only—after as time perhaps—could you *never* get accustomed to the idea? Must I never again allude to this? I would wait—years, if you wished it. But *never*?" and his voice, which he had striven to make gentle and calm, grew hoarse again in spite of his efforts.

(He was not of the order of suitors, you see, who think a "no" in the first place far from discouraging. For though by no means "faint-hearted," he was far too chivalrous to persist, and too genuinely humble-minded not to be easily



repulsed.)

“Never, Mr. Baldwin!” said Marion, decisively and remorselessly, with but, to tell the truth, little thought for the time, of the suffering her words were inflicting on an honest, manly heart. She was not her best self just then. Trouble and weary suspense had made her querulous sometimes, and temporarily developed in her the selfishness which, alter all, is to some extent inherent in the best of us. “Never!” she repeated. “How could you have mistaken me so? Can’t you see that I mean what I say about being different from other girls? All *that* sort of thing is done with for me, altogether and entirely. So please, understand, Mr. Baldwin, that what you were speaking of can *never* be.”

“If so, then, ‘*that* sort of thing’ as you call it, Miss Vere, is likewise altogether and entirely over for *me*,” said Geoffrey, with, for the first time, a shade of bitterness in his voice. “You will not punish me for my wretched presumption by withdrawing from me the amount of friendship, or regard, with which you have hitherto honoured me? It would complicate our relations most uncomfortably were you to do so, for unfortunately we have no choice as to remaining in the position of ward and guardian. Can’t you forgive me, Miss Vere, and forget it, and think of me again as a sort of second Harry? Some day—perhaps before long—you may choose another guardian for yourself, but till then, till the day when that fortunate person takes out of my hands the very little I can do for you, will you not try to feel towards me as you did before I so deplorably forgot myself?”

“The day you speak of will never come,” said Marion; and the words, notwithstanding his soreness of heart, fell pleasantly on Geoffrey’s ears. “I tell you I am not like other girls. I am like an old woman, and my heart, if not dead, is dying. There now, I have told you more than I ever told anyone. I will try to forget that you were so silly. Some day *you* will find some one far nicer than I to make you happy, and I shall be great friends with her. So let us forget all this. Now good-bye”—for by this time they were nearly at the Cross House—“good-bye. Don’t think me unkind.”

Geoffrey smiled kindly—forced himself to do so—as he parted from her. Something in the smile sent a little pang through the girl’s heart, for it was after all a very tender one.

“*Have* I been unkind?” she asked herself. “Is there more depth in him than I

have given him credit for? Can he really be feeling this very much?"

And the misgiving did her good; recalled her a little from the self-absorption in which at this season it appeared as if her nature were about to be swamped.

She could not help thinking a good deal about Geoffrey that evening as she sat with her aunt, busy in repairing for that lady some fine old lace, Miss Tremlett having discovered that the girl's young eyes and neat hands were skilful at such work. It was a very tiresome occupation, and her head ached long before the task was completed. But she had leisure to think while she worked, a luxury she had learnt to esteem highly of late; for Miss Tremlett was engrossed this evening with a new and most interesting three-volumer fresh from the circulating library behind the post office. And while the elder lady was absorbed by the loves and adventures of imaginary heroes and heroines, the younger one was picturing to herself for the thousandth time the happiness that might have been hers but for the mysterious obstacles that had intervened; from time to time, too, thinking sadly of the new cloud that had overshadowed her life, in the bitter disappointment she, on her side, had been the means of inflicting on another. The reflection took her a little out of herself. Her cry this evening was not merely as it had been for long, "Poor Marion!" It contained also a more unselfish refrain. "Poor Geoffrey!" she said to herself, "I cannot forgive myself for having made him unhappy. As unhappy, perhaps, as Ralph's strange, cruel silence has made me."

Some days passed without anything being seen or heard of Mr. Baldwin at the Cross House. Marion began to wonder if really their pleasant friendship was to be at an end, and to reproach herself not a little, not for what she had done—concerning that she not the shadow of a misgiving—but for the way in which she had done it.

These days Geoffrey spent at home in no very happy state of mind. He was furious not with Marion!—but with himself for his own suicidal haste, which truly, as Veronica had warned him, had "spoilt all." He was more thoroughly miserable than one could have believed possible for so sunny a nature. He dared not even go with the burden of his woes and misdeeds to his sympathising friend and adviser: for would she not truly be more than human did she not turn upon him with the cry more exasperating to bear than were to the "patient man" the many words of his three friends, the reproach we are all so ready to utter, so unwilling to hear—"I told you so."

But in some respects Miss Veronica was more than human, and when Geoffrey at last mustered sufficient courage to make his grievous confession, she, instead of irritating or depressing him further by undeniably truthful but nevertheless useless reproaches, set to work like a sensible woman as he was, to help the poor fellow to make the best of the affair he had so greatly mismanaged. Possibly, in her inmost heart she was not sorry to be relieved to some extent of the responsibility she had found so weighty; for, though most earnest in her anxiety for Geoffrey's success she yet, as I have said, felt uncertain as to the precise extent to which she was called upon to work for it.

He told her the whole story, for he was not given to half confidences. What he had said, and how Marion had answered. In the girl's replies Veronica discerned something deeper Geoffrey had discovered. They told of more than mere disinclination to think of her young guardian in any more tender relation. Girls of nineteen do not speak so bitterly as Marion had spoken to Geoffrey unless they have had, or fancied they have had, some very disappointing, heart trying experience reverse side of the picture of "that sort of thing," as Miss Vere called it. These suspicions however were not new to Miss Temple, and she wisely kept them to herself. She confined her advice to Geoffrey to impressing upon him the extreme expediency of not allowing this unfortunate disclosure of his to make any difference in the relations hitherto existing between his ward and himself.

"It is not only expedient," she said, "it is most distinctly your *duty* to let the poor child see that you were most thoroughly in earnest when you asked her, as you did, to forget all this, and think of you again 'as a sort of another Harry.' Think only of her very desolate position! Save for you and her young brother actually friendless in the world. You, Geoffrey, of all men, are the last to wish another to suffer for your inconsiderate conduct, as assuredly she would, if you allowed this to affect your friendship."

To which Geoffrey replied that it was his most earnest wish that, at whatever cost to himself, Miss Vere should learn again to trust and rely on him, as she had done hitherto.

"I only fear," he added, "that it will be impossible for her to do so. She *said* she should never feel comfortable with me again."

"Oh, yes," replied Veronica, "but when she said that she was startled and

distressed. There is no fear but what she will soon be quite happy and at ease with you—learn probably to esteem you more highly than before, for she is the sort of girl thoroughly to appreciate manly generosity of the kind—if only you do not allow time for the unavoidable feeling of awkwardness at first, to stiffen into lasting coldness and constraint. Do not put off seeing her. If you can arrange with Margaret and Georgie Copley to ride to-morrow, I will ask them here to luncheon in the first place, so that you can avoid the embarrassment of a tête-à-tête just at the very first.”

Geoffrey thanked Veronica warmly and promised for the future implicitly to follow her advice.

So it came to pass that the following day, somewhat to her surprise, Marion received a note from Mr. Baldwin, saying that at the usual hour the Misses Copley escorted by himself would call for her at the Cross House; as they had arranged to have a good long ride out past Brackley village in the direction of the Old Abbey.

“I am glad he has made up his mind to be *sensible*, was Marion’s reflection. “Really he is very good, and I hope he will soon fall in love with somebody much nicer and prettier than I.”

When they met, Geoffrey look just the same as usual.

“In better spirits than ever,” the Copley girls pronounced him. Even Marion *hardly* detected the forcedness in his merriment, the want of ring in his usually irresistibly hearty laugh. He did his very utmost in his unselfish anxiety to set her thoroughly at ease. Only he could not help the crimson flush that *would* overspread his fair, boyish face when she addressed him specially, or when, once or twice, their hands came in contact as he arranged her reins or helped her in mounting and descending from the rather imposing attitude of Bessy’s back. Marion heartily wished the bay mare were a pony that day; for in a perverse spirit of independence she chose to attempt to mount by herself; which endeavour, as under the circumstances might have been predicted, resulted in utter failure, and an ignominious descent into—of all places in the world—Geoffrey Baldwin’s arms! Oh, how angry Marion was!

She did not feel much inclined for talking. Nor was she much called upon to do so. Her companions, all three, chattered incessantly. She hardly heard what

they were saying, when a question from Margaret Copley recalled her to herself. They were passing near the ruined abbey at Brackley, two or three miles distant from the present residence of its owners.

“Have you have seen the New Abbey, Miss Vere?” asked Margaret. “It is only called New, you know, in contradistinction to the ruin, for in reality it is a couple of hundred years old itself.”

“No, I have never seen it,” replied Marion, “is it worth seeing?”

“Not in itself. The house is nothing, but the pictures are good. It has been shut up for ever so long—five or six years at least. Lord Brackley fancies it does not suit him, so he lives almost always near his son, who is married and has a beautiful place belonging to his wife. Some day you must come with us and see Brackley Abbey. You are fond of pictures, I know.”

“And understands a good deal more about them than either you or I, Margaret,” said Georgie good-humouredly. “To tell the truth, what I go to the Abbey for is to gossip with the fanny old housekeeper. We were there the other day, and I declare I thought I should never get away from her. She told me the history of every family in the county.”

“Yes, indeed,” resumed Margaret, “she is a wonderful old body. By-the-by, Miss Vere, she had heard of *your* advent in the neighbourhood, and was very curious to hear all about you. She remembered your mother, she said.”

“And I am sure she asked you if I was a beauty like my mother,” said Marion, laughing, “now didn’t she, Miss Copley? Only you didn’t like to say so, for you could not with any truth have said I was! Don’t you really think, Mr. Baldwin, it is rather a misfortune to have had a great beauty for one’s mother?”

“As bad as being the son of a remarkably clever man of business?” suggested Geoffrey.

“Very nearly, but not quite. For only think what terrible things have been entailed on you by your being your father’s son,” said Marion maliciously.

Geoffrey was pleased to see her sufficiently at ease to be mischievous, and replied to her remark by a kindly glance. Then Georgie Copley took up the strain.

“Old Mrs. What’s-her-name—what is her name, I always forget it—the housekeeper, I mean, was full of a marriage that was to be in the family shortly. That is to say not in the family exactly but a near connection, Sir Ralph Severn, Lord Brackley’s step nephew. By-the-by, I dare say you know him, Geoffrey? He used to come here sometimes several years ago, before the Abbey was shut up. We were in the schoolroom, but I remember seeing him. It was long before he got the title.”

“I never met him,” said Mr. Baldwin. “Whom is he going to marry?”

“A sort of cousin of his own,” replied Georgie, “a Miss Vyse. A very beautiful girl, Mrs. Hutton—that’s her name—said. The old body made quite a romance out of it. This girl’s father, it appears, was in old days the lover of the present Lady Severn. But she was not allowed to marry him as she was an heiress. She used to be here a good deal with her step-brother when she was a girl, that is how Mrs. Hutton knows all about her. It sounds quite like a story-book, does it not? The children of the two poor things marrying, all these years after.”

“Very romantic, indeed,” said Geoffrey. “Particularly as the lady is beautiful.”

“Exceedingly beautiful,” said Miss Copley. “She has been living with Lady Severn for some time, for she has no home of her own. Every one has been surprised at the marriage not being announced sooner, Mrs. Hutton said. She had only just heard of it in some round-about way, and she was quite full of it.”

Then they talked about other things, and did not observe Marion’s increased silence, which lasted till they said goodbye to her at the door of the Cross House. A few days previously, when she had said to Geoffrey decisively that “all *that* sort of thing” was done with for her, “altogether and entirely,” she had meant what she said and believed her own assertion.

Now, when she hurried upstairs to her own bedroom in the dingy Mallingford House, and sat down on the hard floor in her muddy riding-habit, with but one wish in her mind—to be alone, out of the reach of curious, unsympathetic eyes—Now, I say, when at last she felt free to think over, to realize what she had heard, she knew that it was not true what she had said. Far from being “done with for her,” on the secret, unacknowledged hope that for her a happy day was

yet to dawn when all the mystery would be explained, all the suffering more than compensated for by the blessedness of the present—on this hope she had in truth been living, through all these weary months. And now that it was rudely thus snatched away, that all was indeed for ever, *over*, what was there left for her to do, poor weary, heartbroken wanderer in a very strange and desolate land—but to lie down and die?

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER XI.

### VERONICA'S COUNSEL.

“But all did leaven the air  
With a less bitter leaven of sure despair,  
Than these words—‘I loved once.’ ”

MRS. BROWNING.

SHE did not die, however. Young lives do not end so easily, and young hearts do not so quickly break as their inexperienced owners would imagine. She was very, very ill. For many weeks she lay in a state hardly to be described as either life or death, so faint was the line between the two, so many times we thought we had lost sight of her altogether in the shadows of the strange land that is ever near us while yet a very far way off. It was at this time I first knew her, who ever after was very dear to me. It happened accidentally. I was visiting some friends at Mallingford just then, and happened to be calling at the Cross House the day the poor child was taken ill—the very day after the ride to Brackley that I have described—and I naturally did what I could in the way of nursing, as no nearer friend appeared to be at hand. Miss Tremlett was at first frightened, then cross; in which state she continued during the whole of Marion's illness. Low fever, the doctors called it, but that is a vague and convenient name for an illness somewhat difficult to define.

During these weeks Geoffrey Baldwin was very miserable. He suffered not merely from his overwhelming anxiety, but also from self reproach and remorse; for, despite all Veronica's assurances to the contrary, the poor fellow could not



rid himself of an utterly irrational notion that in some way or other the annoyance he had caused her had had to do with this sudden and alarming illness. It was not really sudden though. The tension on her nervous system throughout this winter had been great, quite sufficient to account for her present state; the real wonder being that she had held out so long.

When at last she began to get better, Geoffrey's delight was almost piteous. Marion was greatly touched by it—as indeed no woman but must have been—the first time she saw him again. His pleasure at her recovery was purely unselfish, in the ordinary sense at least, for he had altogether renounced the hope of ever winning her for his own.

“I only wonder,” he said to Veronica, “that she could forgive my presumption as she did. Since her illness it seems to me she has become more beautiful than ever. I feel myself like a great cart-horse when I am beside her. My only thought is, how I can make up to her for all I have caused her. For indeed her coming to this place at all was greatly owing to me. Even if I did not love her as intensely as I do, Veronica, I could not but reproach myself when I think of my selfishness.”

It was useless for his friend to contradict him. It pleased him far more when she set to work to carry out a plan for Marion's gratification, which at first sight seemed hopeless enough. But between them the two achieved it, and actually obtained Miss Tremlett's consent to their proposal that, now that she was sufficiently recovered to be moved, Marion Clifford could complete her cure by spending some weeks in Miss Temple's pretty little house.

Miss Tremlett was, in her heart, not sorry to be rid of so troublesome a guest as a *bona-fide* invalid; though her consent was, of course, bestowed as ungraciously as possible.

The relief to Marion, of quitting for a season the ugly, uncomfortable room in which for five weary weeks she had been immured, was unspeakable; and once she was established in the pretty little chamber so carefully prepared for her, she astonished herself and everyone else by the rapidity of her recovery.

The long dream was over at last. Ralph was hers no longer, but belonged to another. She wished to hear no particulars; she was satisfied to know the bare fact. She had torn him out of her heart and life, and henceforth would seek to

forget she had ever known him. God had been good to her, had given her true and kind friends, whose affection she would do her best to repay, and endeavour to turn to better profit the life so lately restored to her; for it seemed to her, in truth, that in her long illness she had, in a sense, died, and been again raised to life.

Thus she spoke to herself in the many quiet hours she spent in Veronica's little drawing-room, and a sort of dreamy peace and subdued happiness seemed gradually to descend upon her. She was very sweet and winning in those days. To Veronica she grew daily dearer and more precious. And to poor Geoffrey? Ah! it was hard upon him, for all his humility and unselfishness! And she, silly little soul, said to herself that she only meant to be gentle and sisterly, to make up to this kind, generous friend, for her former petulance and roughness. Partly this, at least. In some measure she began instinctively to turn to him, out of a sort of reaction from her former bitter experience. He might not be very clever or original, this Geoffrey Baldwin; he was certainly wanting in that extraordinary, inexpressible *something*—sympathy, perfect congeniality of heart or mind, or both, which from the first had, as if by magic, drawn and attracted her to Ralph; but at least, he was tried and true, honest and devoted to the very heart's core. And, oh! to the poor little heart, smarting yet, under its sore disappointment—what attraction, what soothing was there not in the thought that he, at least, *loved* her! Loved her with a love which she felt she could never give to him; and yet, though no coquette, she no longer felt inclined to discourage him. For, after all, she was a thorough woman. And I am afraid she was, in some respects, incapable of such a love of Ralph's for her; for, through it all, as we have seen, he never doubted, never for an instant mistrusted her.

Whereas she, naturally enough, had come gradually to lose her trust in him, to doubt even, sometimes, if indeed he had *ever* cared for her as she for him.

And already she was beginning to say to herself, "I loved him once."

Veronica watched the two, earnestly and anxiously. There was no mystery about Geoffrey. It was only too evident that more than ever he was heart and soul devoted to his ward; in his eyes more beautiful than ever, from the yet remaining traces of her severe illness; her thin white hands, her pale cheeks, and hair far removed from its former luxuriance.

"Have I not grown ugly, Mr. Baldwin," she said one day, half in earnest, half

in joke, and greatly from a sort of instinctive wish to test her power over him. "Look at my hair! It is hardly long enough to twist up at all, and it used to come down below my waist."

His only answer was to pass his hand softly, nay, almost reverently, over the little head, still fair and graceful, though "the pretty brown hair," poor Ralph had long ago admired, was sadly decreased in thickness and richness. Marion did not shrink away from Geoffrey's hand. They happened at the moment to be alone. She looked up in his face, and saw there the words all but uttered on his lips. Though in a sense she had brought it on herself, yet now she shrank from it, felt that as yet, at least, she could not bear it. With some half excuse she turned away quickly, and left the room. But what she had seen in Geoffrey's face that afternoon decided her that something must be done, some resolution arrived at in her own mind, as it was easy to see that the present state of things could not long continue.

It was now the beginning of May. Fully two months had elapsed since the ride to Brackley, and the commencement of her long illness. Spring was coming on apace, and the outside world looked very bright and sweet that evening, as Marion sat by Veronica's couch in the bow-window of the little drawing-room. There was a half-formed resolution in the girl's mind for once to break through her rule of reserve, and seek the advice of the true and wise friend beside her. For some minutes they had been silent: suddenly Marion spoke.

"Do you know, Miss Veronica, that I have been here nearly three weeks? Soon I must be thinking of the Cross House again."

Miss Temple laid her hand caressingly on Marion's. "My poor child!" she said. "But surely there is no hurry. I wish I could keep you here always; but with the prospect of my sister's coming to me for the winter, I cannot do so. I hoped, however, that Harry would have had a day or two to spend with you, before you return to Miss Tremlett's. Is there no chance of it? He must be so anxious to see you since your illness."

"There is not a chance of his coming till June," said Marion; "and then it will be a real goodbye! He is sure to go abroad immediately. No, dear Miss Veronica, it is very horrible, but I must be thinking of going. That dreadful life at my aunt's! So you know, rather than go on with it, I sometimes wish I had died last month."

Miss Veronica made no reply. Then she said, very softly and timidly:

“My darling Marion, forgive me if I appear officious or intrusive. But, I am sure that, *you* know there is another home open to you, whose owner would think himself blessed beyond measure to welcome you to it. He has told me of his disappointment. Are you quite sure, my dear child, that there can never be any hope for him, that you can never bring yourself to think favourably of this?”

Marion looked up into her companion’s face (she was sitting on the ground at Veronica’s side), with a slight smile. She appeared perfectly composed, her colour did not vary in the least. Miss Temple was far more embarrassed than she.

“I am glad you have spoken of this, Miss Veronica,” said the girl, “for I wish very much to talk to you about it. I am in a great puzzle. The truth of it is, I have already, in a sense, come to think favourably of it; and yet, I fear, not so favourably—not, in short, in the *way* that it—that he—deserves to be thought of. I like him most thoroughly, and I like to know that he cares for me. I am weary, very weary of having no home, no nest of my own; and if I yielded to my inclination, I would run to Geoffrey and ask him to take care of me, and be good to me. And I believe I could be a good wife to him. But, dear Miss Veronica, is this enough? Is it not selfish of me so to take advantage of this good man’s great love for me, when I know, ah, how surely, that never can I give him the same in return? For,”—and here, at last, her pale face flushed and her voice sank,—“for I have known what it is to give the whole love of one’s being, one’s self, utterly and entirely to another. And this I could never do again.”

Veronica sighed again.

“My poor child!” was all she said.

But Marion urged her to say more.

“Tell me a little more, in the first place,” was her reply. “This other, whoever he may be, I do not wish to know, but tell me is it altogether and for ever over between you?”

“Altogether and for ever,” answered Marion firmly. “By this time he is the husband of another woman.”

“But you, you care for him still?” persisted Veronica, her own tender heart

quivering at the thought of the pain this necessary probing of hers must be inflicting on Marion.

The girl for a moment sat perfectly silent, her eyes gazing out on the pretty garden, of which nevertheless they saw nothing. Then she said slowly, but distinctly, and without hesitation—

“No, as I know myself I do not care for him now. He has tried me too cruelly, brought me in sight of the very gates of death, and when there, I tore him, him the husband of that girl, out of my heart, for ever! I forgive him, but I do not love him any more. And Geoffrey is so good and kind, and I am so lonely. Dear Miss Veronica, may I not give myself the only pleasure left me, that of making another person happy? I would, I do love him, in a perfectly different way. More as I love Harry. But it might grow to be a love more worthy of his, for I would indeed try to be a good wife to him. And I *can't* go back to the Cross House and to my utter loneliness. Oh, do tell me what to do.”

Veronica was sorely troubled.

“I cannot tell you, my dearest. I dare not even advise you,” she said. Suddenly an idea occurred to her, “How would you like the idea of laying it all before the chief person concerned, Geoffrey himself? He is not usually very thoughtful or deliberate, and in the present case it seems too much to expect that he should be so. But he is *very* honest and conscientious, and I believe, though the question is one of vital interest for himself, he is capable of looking at it from your side too. However it may be, I see no other course before you. Tell him what you feel you *can* give him, and leave it to him to decide.”

“Yes,” said Marion, thoughtfully, “I think I will do as you say.”

And then they were silent for a time, and when they talked again it was of perfectly different things.

The next morning when Geoffrey came, as was now his daily habit, to spend an hour in two with his friends, he found Marion alone; Miss Temple being later than usual in taking her place for the day on the invalid couch where her life was spent.

Mr. Baldwin looked round nervously; he was pleased and yet half alarmed at finding himself alone with his ward; for the first time almost, since the

memorable February afternoon when he had broken his promise to Veronica.

Marion was sitting working, as calmly as possible. She was in no hurry to hasten the inevitable explanation. Now that she had made up her mind what to do, she was perfectly content to leave in Mr. Baldwin's hands, the when and where of the dénouement. So she stitched away composedly. Geoffrey sat down and looked at her for a few minutes, made, after the manner of people in such circumstances, some particularly stupid remark the weather, and then began to fidget.

At last he plunged in, head foremost.

"Miss Vere," he said, "would you mind putting down your work for a few minutes and listening to something I have got to say?" Miss Vere did as she was requested, and Geoffrey continued. "I did not think that day that—that you were angry with me, I did not think then that I could ever bring myself to risk your anger again. But it is no use. It is worse than ever with me—this wretchedness of being near you and yet to know it is all hopeless. What I want to say to you is that I cannot stand it. Your illness was so terrible to me; it showed me even more clearly than before how insane I am about it. I *can't* stay near you in this way, Marion. Humbugging about friendship and all that, when I know that twenty million friendships would not express a particle of my utter devotion to you. I can't, say it, well. I am abominably stupid and boorish. Only I want to tell you that I *must* go away. I shall look after your interests to very best of my power; only have some mercy on me, and don't try me in this terrible way by asking me to stay near you."

He rose in his earnestness and came nearer her. His tall, strong figure shaken with emotion, his handsome face quivering with the strength of his conflicting feelings. Marion was far too tender of heart to tantalize or try him unnecessarily. She too rose and stood beside him. What a slight, fragile creature she seemed, and yet probably the stronger of the two in much that constitutes real strength of nature!

She spoke very quietly and calmly.

"Dear Mr. Baldwin," she said, "I am more grieved, more deeply pained than I can possibly put in words, to know that I have caused you suffering. I was rough and hasty that day, but I have changed since then. I will not ask you to stay near

me if it is painful to you. But you must decide for yourself after hearing what I want to tell you.”

Then in a few simple words, she sketched for him the history of her life and its great disappointment. She entered into no particulars. At the end of her narration Geoffrey was perfectly ignorant as to when and where all this had happened. Nor did he in the least care to know. He was conscious only of the one great central fact. Marion, his Marion, for whom he would have died, *had* loved some one else as he loved her. It was a great blow to him, for it was altogether unexpected. The words in which she had before repulsed him, had not to him, as to Veronica’s quicker perception, told of anything of this sort. In his simplicity he had understood them only as referring, with the exaggeration of youth, to her father’s death and the many troubles consequent upon it. He had intended no special allusion when he said something about at the probability of her before long choosing another guardian. He had perfectly understood that she did not care for him in any but a friendly way; but it had never struck him that already her affections had been elsewhere bestowed. She was so young! And Harry had all but told him how cordially he approved of the idea, and had tacitly encouraged him in his suit.

For some minutes Geoffrey made no reply. He stood leaning on the chair from which Marion had lately risen, thinking deeply, doing his honest best to see light through this matter. Then the same question rose to his lips as had occurred to Miss Veronica.

“Forgive me,” he said, “but tell me one thing. This man whom you have spoken of to me—do you *still* love him, Marion? I do not ask or expect you to say you could *ever* care for me as you have done for him. That, I understand would be impossible. Only to some extent I must know my own chance. So tell me, my poor darling, do you *still* love him?”

And Marion the second time made the answer, “As I know myself I do *not* love him now.”

Then said Geoffrey—

“If so, my darling, I am not afraid. If the whole devotion of my being can win you to love me, if ever so little, I shall be well repaid. And at least I can make your life a degree less lonely; in time even this sorrow of the past may, to some

measure, fade away? Your brave truthfulness has only made me love you more. And at least, my Marion, you do not *dislike* me?

And the girl looked up at him through the tears that were fast filling her sweet eyes, and answered softly, "Dislike you, Geoffrey? The gentlest, truest friend that ever a woman had? Heaven help me to be worthy of you."

Geoffrey took her in his arms and kissed her fervently, on brow and eyes and mouth. Then as he let her go, he asked her if she were angry with him for being so bold. He need not have done so. She was perfectly at ease and as little unembarrassed as if her lover had been Harry.

"Angry?" she said, "oh no. Why should you think so?" Yet she was timid and sensitive enough. Though now her heart beat as steadily and softly as usual, though there was no gush on her cheek, no quiver on her lips, it had not always been thus with her. Ralph Severn, who had never kissed her, hardly ever ventured to press her hand, had yet had strange power to affect her. His step on the stair, the slightest touch of his hand, his very presence in the room had brought light to her eyes, colour to her cheeks, glad throbbing to her heart. But Geoffrey's embrace she took with gentle calmness, perfect absence of emotion of any kind.

Was it indeed true that, as she had said her haste, her heart was, in a sense, dead?

She thought so. Therein lay her excuse.

And thus it came to pass that Marion Vere, a woman of strong affections, dear perceptions, and earnest in her endeavour to choose the right and reject the wrong, committed the grievous error, to call it by no harsher name, of marrying a man whom she knew, and owned to knowing—that she did not love.

END OF VOL. II.



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## CHAPTER I.

### THE GARDEN AT THE "PEACOCK."

"Ich ginge im Waldo

So für mich him,  
Und nichts zu suchen  
Das war mein Sinn

Im Schotten sah ich  
Ein Blümchen stehn  
Wie Sterne leuchtend  
Wie Äüglein schön.

Ich wollt'es brechen  
Da sagt'es fein,  
Soll ich zum Welken  
Gebrochen sein?"—

GÖTHE.

THEY were married in the end of June, after all engagement of six weeks only. There were no reasons for delay, and several which made expedition expedient. Harry spent his last fortnight in England with them, and the marriage took place at its close. It was a very quiet affair, of which Marion's recent illness and continued mourning for her father were patent and satisfactory explanations, even to the double-motive-loving gossips of Mallingford.

A sorrowful farewell to Harry, whose whispered words of relief and satisfaction at leaving his sister in such good hands, were the most grateful to her ears of the congratulations forthcoming on this, as on all such occasions; a fervent blessing from Veronica; a snappish adieu from Miss Tremlett, and the bride and bridegroom were gone—started on their own account on the life journey which, up hill and down dale, through fair weather and foul, they had chosen to travel together.

They did not spend their honeymoon abroad.

Geoffrey proposed that they should do so, but Marion negatived it, and decided in favour of a certain county which I need not particularize save by saying that its scenery is picturesque, its wayside inns charming, and its fishing the best of its kind. Geoffrey was very fond of fishing, and Marion was well content to spend the quiet, sleepy midsummer days, book in hand, lounging on the grassy banks at his side. She was not very strong yet, and travelling tired her; so after a week or two's rambling, they settled down in one of the sweetest nooks they had come upon, and took up their temporary abode at the very prettiest of the wayside inns I alluded to, by name and sign "The Peacock."

The neighbourhood was not much frequented save by anglers and artists, of both of whom there were plenty. But it was before the railway days in this pretty county, and tourists of the more objectionable kinds were unknown. So everything as to outer surroundings was charming, and the two made a very satisfactory newly-married pair. He so handsome, she so sweet. Both to all appearance perfectly happy in themselves and each other. Which, to a great extent, was the case. Geoffrey was happy beyond all he had ever dreamt of as possible; his only misgiving the fear that he was all unworthy of so sweet a bride, his only anxiety lest the wind should blow on her too rudely, or the slightest roughness be in her path. Beyond this absorbing dread of not succeeding in making her happy, the impression on his sunny, hopeful nature, left by the girl's sad little history of her "first love," had already begun to fade. He revered and trusted her so deeply that the slight melancholy still clinging to her seemed to him to render her only the more beautiful, the more tender and precious, and worthy of all devotion. Doubt, suspicion, jealousy, or even the shadows of such unlovely visitants, were utterly foreign to his being. She had told him it was "all over" —that sad page in her history. He believed her, and loved her the more for the suffering she had endured. She had stirred up in him by her recital no feeling of anger or irritation towards his unknown rival. She

had blamed no one for what had happened. All, she told him, had been the result of unpropitious circumstances; in saying which she had done wisely. It made it the easier for him to forget what there was little use in his remembering.

And she herself? Was she too, happy? After all the storms and wearing suspense through which she had passed, had she in truth found a haven of rest and security. She thought so. "I am content," she said to herself, "content and at peace, which is more than many can say."

True; but not what one likes to hear of as the nearest approach to happiness to be hoped for by a girl over whose head twenty summers have barely passed.

At the sign of the Peacock for a time we must leave them, while we hear a little more as to what in these last few months had happened to Ralph.

He remained in Italy with his mother and her household through the winter which Marion had passed at Mallingford. The month of May saw them all at last re-established at Medhurst, but not for very long. The place had been to some extent neglected during the two or three years of the family's absence; the house looked dingy and smelt fusty. Before they could take up their quarters therein "for good," before Florence's marriage could be celebrated with fitting magnificence, the mansion must be thoroughly "done up"—"beautified," I believe, is the correct technical expression. So for a season Medhurst was delivered over to the tender mercies of painters and paper-hangers, upholsterers and decorators, and "the family," *par excellence*, of the neighbourhood, flitted north-wards for the time, to a favourite and pleasant little watering-place, in the same county where Geoffrey and his wife were spending their honeymoon, but a few hours' drive from the very inn which for some days past they had made their head-quarters.

Sir Ralph was still with his mother. She had "made a point" of his remaining with her for the first few months of her return home, and he, having no pressing interests of his own was willing enough to agree to her wishes. Florence was no longer with them. The few weeks intervening between their arrival in England and the time fixed for her marriage, she had preferred to spend in the "genteel" terrace with her mother and sisters. Nor did this decision call for any great exercise of self-denial on her part, for besides the real pleasure of being with her relations and showing off the honours present and prospective, attendant on the bride of Chepstow the golden, her mother's modest dwelling was conveniently

situated for expending to the best advantage in the purchase of a *trousseau*, the very liberal parting gift of her “dearest aunt and second mother.” Then in the future glittered Medhurst and the gorgeous preparations for the nuptials of the beauty and the millionaire. Truly Florence’s cup of happiness was full!

And plainly speaking, she was not missed by her late entertainers. Lady Severn and her son got on much better without her.

Sir Ralph was therefore at the little watering-place of Friars’ Springs, when, one day about the middle of July, a strange thing happened to him.

He received one morning, forwarded from Medhurst, an Indian letter, addressed to him in the same handwriting as the black-bordered envelope which last year had brought back to him his own letter to Miss Freer, a silent message from poor Cissy’s tomb, telling that his last hope was gone.

He was alone when he received this unexpected letter. Fortunately so, for not all his practised self-control could have concealed from other eyes the overwhelming intensity of emotion caused by the perusal of its extraordinary contents.

First he read the letter from Colonel Archer, which he discovered speedily was but an explanation, to a certain extent, of a second which it enclosed, in a blank envelope, but carefully sealed with black wax, evidently by Colonel Archer’s own hands, as it bore his crest. George Archer was not given to prolixity of style in his written communications; His letter, therefore, may be given verbatim:

“LANDOUR,  
“APRIL 30TH, 18——.

“MY DEAR SEVERN—

“You will remember my writing to you a few days after my wife’s death, enclosing to you a letter which she desired me to send to you as quickly as possible, and which she directed me to find in a certain place. Do you remember also my saying to you that though I had followed her directions exactly, the state in which I found the letter did not altogether correspond with her description? She said I should find it all written and signed, but *not* folded or addressed. On the contrary, the letter I sent you I found *folded and addressed*, all ready in short, save the stamps, to be posted. I am terribly afraid, my dear Severn, that I have made some dreadful mistake. Evidently there were two letters to be forwarded to you, of which the one I did send, and which I much fear was the least important, had escaped my poor wife’s memory. Only yesterday, being obliged to search among my wife’s papers for a missing document of some importance, I came upon the enclosed letter in one of the leaves of her

blotting-book, written and signed, as she said, and lying there evidently waiting to be by her folded and addressed. Not improbably she had intended to enclose it to you in the same envelope as contained the one I sent. I now recollect that I felt surprised at finding it unsealed. As little as possible of the enclosed has been read by me. In my first astonishment at my discovery I read some lines of the first page; enough to explain to me that without doubt it was the letter Cissy referred to. The name of my wife's young cousin, Marion Vere, caught my eye. Also that of a Miss Freer, with whom I am wholly unacquainted. Marion Vere spent the winter at Altes with my wife. It is probable you there met her. Beyond this the whole affair is a mystery to me. Nor do I ever wish to have it explained unless agreeable to you to do so. I earnestly trust my culpable, but not altogether inexcusable, negligence, may have done no harm. It will be an immense relief to me to hear this. I write in haste to catch the mail, so believe me, my dear Severn,

“Yours most truly,  
“GEORGE ARCHER.”

Ralph read through this letter carefully, and felt after doing so as if he were dreaming. What could it mean? “Marion Vere,” who could she be? “Miss Freer,” a total stranger to Colonel Archer! Not for some moments did it occur to him to turn for explanation to the sealed enclosure.

Here indeed he met with it in full! With feelings of the utmost astonishment and bewilderment, succeeded, as gradually the mists cleared away, by a revulsion of almost intoxicating intensity of delight, gratitude, returning hope and reviving anticipation, did his mind at last take in the meaning of the strange solution of all past mystery. *This* then had been the poor child's secret, *this* the reason of all the mistakes and cross-purposes! His Marion after all was no poor little struggling governess, on whom though *he* would have been proud to wed her, his narrow prejudiced world might have looked askance; but the daughter of one of the leading men of the day, come of a stock with which even Lady Severn herself could have no fault to find. And she had dreaded his blaming her innocent deceit, Cissy told him; had feared it might lower her irretrievably in his eyes! Truly as the daughter of an ancient house he could love her no more fervently, than as the despised little governess, sprang from no one knew where, with even the shadow of a suspected disgrace on her family; but yet in a very different sense, this revelation did increase his devotion, for it showed him yet more the unselfishness of her character and its rare union of strength and gentleness; and made him the more anxious to compensate to her by a life of happiness, of perfect mutual love and trust, for all he now well understood she must have so uncomplainingly suffered. It had not been a *wise* proceeding, this little comedy of hers—assumed names and positions are edged tools in the hands of inexperienced girls of nineteen—so much even Ralph's partial judgment of all that Marion had done, could all but allow. But all the same he could not but lore

and admire her the more for the sisterly devotion which prompted the scheme, the bravery and patience which had enabled her to carry it out.

Some hours' reflection decided him that no time must be lost in tracing, by the light of Cissy's communication, the girl whom he had little expected ever to see again. It all straight sailing enough now; the daughter of so well-known a man as Hartford Vere would be easy to find. He remembered hearing that the orphans of the late Mr. Vere had been left but scantily provided for; in all probability, therefore, their town house had been given up and the young people themselves received into the families of relatives, for he remembered too that Marion had told him more than once that she had no mother. Still he decided that London itself was the proper place in which to make enquiry, and thither he resolved as speedily as possible to betake himself.

One preliminary step only he felt it advisable to take. He must come to some understanding with his mother on the subject of his probable marriage. Not that he now anticipated much difficulty in this quarter, for things were very different between Lady Severn and her son from what they had been during the reign of Florence's irritating influence.

The mother's instinct had divined the change that had passed over her son; and now that she had come to know him better and love him more, there were few things she would not have agreed to, to give him pleasure. Often when he little suspected it, her heart ached for him, when the outward signs of the secret sorrow that had so changed him, came before her notice. The many grey hairs mingled with his black, the new furrows round eyes and mouth, the general air of depression and hopelessness, only too plainly visible even in one who had never been other than quiet and grave. She would have given worlds to have obtained his confidence; but she felt instinctively that she had neglected till too late to seek what now she would have prized so highly.

It was with no little gratification therefore that she this morning acceded to Sir Ralph's request that she would spare him a little time to talk over some matters of importance connected with his private affairs.

"But no bad news, I trust?" she said, as a new idea struck her. "You do not look as if it were, but I do trust you are not going to tell me you are thinking of leaving me?"

"Not for long certainly," he replied cordially. "A week or two at most will be the extent of my absence at present. No, my dear mother. What I have to say to you is more likely to lead to my settling near you permanently. A year or two ago I displeased you very much by not falling in with certain matrimonial schemes of yours on my behalf. I want to know if you have forgiven me?"

"Quite," said Lady Severn. "I meant it for the best, Ralph, but I now think you were wiser than I. It would not have been a desirable arrangement. I am quite satisfied that Florence should not be more nearly connected with us."

"But I want more than that, mother," pursued Ralph, "I want you to do more than forgive me for not marrying to please you. I want your cordial, entire consent to my you to give you marrying to please myself."

Lady Severn's eyes filled with tears. A moment or two she hesitated; then said slowly and distinctly, "You shall have it, Ralph. Whomever you choose as your wife I shall cordially receive as my daughter. You have suffered, my poor boy, long and deeply. I thank God if things are looking brighter with you. Only—only one thing I must say, and if it pains you, forgive me. I don't care about money. We have plenty, and whenever you marry, what John had shall be yours. His daughters are provided for. I have not forgotten how well you behaved at that time, Ralph, and as to herself personally, I feel no uneasiness about my future daughter. But, Ralph, you have queer notions about some things. Tell me, is she a *lady*? I would like the good old stock to be kept up. As I have promised so I will do: whoever she be I will receive her cordially. But it would be an immense relief to my mind to know that she really was one of our own class."

Ralph smiled slightly, but there was no bitterness in his smile. He could afford now to be lenient towards what he considered his mother's little foibles.

"Then that relief I can give you, mother," he said. "She *is* a lady even in the



very narrowest and most conventional sense of the word, as well in the wider and far more beautiful one. She comes of a stock as good 'or better' than your own. Better at least, in so far as I think I have heard there is no family of more ancient standing in the county they belong to. And well-conducted people too they have been on the whole, which, though, of course, a much less important consideration, is satisfactory to know." (Lady Severn had no idea her son was "chaffing" her.) "She is not rich, but that I know you don't care about. As to herself I would rather not tell you more just yet. Her name too I should prefer not mentioning, unless you particularly wish to hear it."

"Oh, no, thank you," said his mother, "I am quite content to wait till you feel ready to tell it me" (which by-the-way was a great story). "I am so thankful to know what you have told me, for you know, Ralph," she went on apologetically, "you *were* rather peculiar in your ideas about social position and all that. There was that young girl at Altes, you remember, Miss Freer, whom Florence took such a dislike to. At one time—it was very absurd of me—but at one time I really had a fear of you in that quarter. She was a very sweet creature, I must say. I took quite an interest in her at first, till Florence told me how underhand and designing she was. Not that I altogether believed it. Florence was apt to be prejudiced—but there certainly was something strangely reserved about her for so young a person. But it may have been family troubles, poor thing! I often wish we had her back again, for certainly the children were better with her than they have been since."

Ralph did not reply to this long speech, at which, however, his mother was not surprised; for she had rather a habit of maundering on in a thinking aloud fashion, once she got hold of a subject, without expecting any special notice to be taken of what she was saying. Nor had she the slightest suspicion that there was any connection between this long ago discarded dread of hers, and her son's unexpected announcement of his matrimonial intentions.

She felt not a little curious as to who her daughter-in-law elect could possibly be!

Ralph was so renowned a misogynist, that where and how he had come to fall in love she was quite at a loss to conceive. His acquaintances were few, his friends fewer. Of the small number of eligible young ladies she ever remembered his speaking to more than once, not one she felt intuitively certain could be the mysterious lady of his thoughts.

“Thank heaven she *is* a lady,” thought Ralph’s mother. “I have no fears on any other score, for though so peculiar, he is thoroughly to be depended on as to essentials. And his taste is refined. She is sure to be pretty and pleasing, if no more. Most probably he has met her at the house of some of his learned friends. Sir Archibald Cunningham by-the-by! Ralph spent a week there last spring, just before the time he grew so quiet and depressed. How stupid of me not to have thought of it before! To be sure, Sir Archibald is a bachelor, so it can’t be a daughter—but he is sure to have nieces or cousins. And good family too. Yes, the Cunninghams may quite pass muster. Scotch too. Poor and proud no doubt. Oh, yes, the thing is as clear as daylight. Only I wonder why it has been so long coming to anything. He can’t have been afraid of my disapproval: I am sure I have always shown myself ready to agree to anything in reason! Ah, yes; a niece of Sir Archibald’s. I am glad I have satisfied myself about it.”

And “Sir Archibald’s niece” became henceforth an institution in the good lady’s mind. At present she regarded her with feelings of prospective motherly affection, and began to consider which of the Severn jewels would be the most appropriate to offer to the young lady in token of welcome into that august family.

“Something simple would be more suitable in the first place. Of course once she is married she will have her proper share of all, as the wife of the head of the family.”

So Lady Severn amused herself: feeling most amiably disposed to the imaginary Miss Cunningham, whom before long she came to think of with very different feelings! But both her goodwill and resentment were kept to herself, poor lady, as Ralph exacted from her a promise that the little she knew of his mysteriously unfortunate love affairs should be kept to herself: and as he never became more communicative on the subject, Sir Archibald’s niece was anathematized in the private recesses of Lady Severn’s heart only. But this is anticipating.

Sir Ralph left for London the morning after his conversation with his mother. He had to drive some distance cross-country before meeting the railway, which, as I said, had not yet penetrated into the pretty little county where the family had taken up their quarters for the summer.

So he hired a post-chaise and got through the first twenty miles briskly

enough. Then it became necessary to change horses, the roads being hilly, and expedition indispensable to his catching the Scotch express at the nearest point on its way south.

Fresh horses, however, could not be provided in less than an hour's time, quoth mine host of the "Peacock," the wayside inn at which Ralph's charioteer had thought proper to make the enquiry.

The gentleman demurred.

"I am obliged to catch the south express at Bexley Junction at four," he said doubtfully.

"Time enough and plenty for that, sir," said landlord and ostler in a breath, "even if you don't start from here till half-past two; and it's now only on the stroke of twelve."

"There's the grey and the bay, Tom," added the landlord, "would think nothing of taking a trap like this that far in a hour and a quarter. It'll give the gentleman time to lunch and look about him a bit," he continued, as Ralph, on hearing his assurance, prepared to alight. "It's thought worth coming a good bit to see, sir, is the Peacock. We've kep' it among us, father and son, with now an' then brothers and nephews to help like in the way of ostlers and bootses, we've kep' it nigh on eighty years; and never without a bed to make up, sir—winter and summer alike, sir. Those as finds their way to the Peacock onst, generally finds it twice, not to say three times and fower. There's a gentleman here, sir, at present, a real gentleman, not a artist, as comes for the fishin,' says, sir, there'll be few summers and far between as won't see him and his lady at the Peacock. (Newly-married couple," he inter-ejected.) "By reason of which it is that one of the pair has had to be shod this morning, sir——"

"The lady or the gentleman?" asked Ralph, but the landlord did not catch his words.

"Mr. Baldwin," he continued, "took them a longish drive yesterday to show his lady some of the sights of the neighbourhood. He's off again this morning to fetch the letters from Bexley village. A active gentleman, very. The young lady's a trifle delicate in health, I fancy. She's sittin' reading in the arbour this morning. They've been a week and more at the Peacock, and there's no word of them going as vet."

“By-the-by,” said Ralph, who being in the possession of pleasant hopes, could listen with patience to the worthy landlord’s communications, even to his mention of the young couple who found the Peacock so charming. “By-the-by, what is the meaning of the name of your place? The Peacock you call it, but on the sign-board I saw something which looked more like a tree or bush as I glanced at it.”

They were by this time inside the house.

“Right enough, sir,” replied the man. “The Peacock is a bush, sir. One of the old-fashioned kind, sir, you know; cut for to look like a peacock. It stands in the middle of the grass plot at the side of the house, near the arbour. You can’t miss it if you take a turn that way. It’s all complete, standin’ somewhat to the right of the plot, sir, tail and all. It takes some trouble the cuttin’ and keepin’ it in shape. But it’s quite a cur’osity. Will you take a turn, sir, while we’re getting ready a little something in the way of lunch. Chops, veal cutlets, roast chicken—which you please, sir?”

Ralph was just the sort of man who could not for the life of him order his own dinner. He always, when put to it, as in the present instance, fell back, upon “a chop.” This the landlord undertook to have speedily prepared. It was ready a good while before Ralph returned to eat it!

As his host suggested, he sauntered out into the garden. A real garden of the good old-fashioned sort. Seen, too, to the greatest perfection on this hot, sweet, sunny day. What air there was, came laden with breath of roses and clover-pinks, mignonette, and wall-flower; all of which, with their less fragrant, but not less lovely companions—heart’s-ease, sweet-William, and all the dear old friends we see so seldom now-a-days, flourished in rare beauty and abundance in the neat little borders with their trim box edges, round all sides of the smooth, close-cut lawn, or grass plot, as its landlord had been content to call it.

More than once Ralph stopped in his stroll to bury his face in some peculiarly tempting rose, or to pass his hand caressingly over the rich, soft velvet of an appealing pansy at his feet.

“What a sweet place,” he thought to himself “and what a perfect day! Just the place to make love in.”

So, too, thought his only companion in the garden, a young girl, half lying,

half sitting in the arbour, whom as yet he had not observed served. Nor had he, so far, been perceived by her.

Marion, for she it was, had been spending the morning in a very idle fashion. With a book in her hand, but not reading, in a half dream of sweet summer fancies, subdued to pensiveness if not to melancholy, as was all about her, by the shadows of the past; but tinged and brightened, nevertheless, by the gentle sunshine of peace and affection which was gradually stealing into her life.

She was growing happier, there was no doubt. As she sat in the arbour that morning in dreamy restfulness, she acknowledged this to herself.

It might be to some extent the sweet summer influences about her—the flowers and the sunshine, and that loveliest of summer sounds, the soft, musical, mysterious hum—above, around, close-at-hand, and yet far off—of the myriads of busy, happy insects, rejoicing in their life; it might, to some extent, come from these outer-world influences, for her nature was intensely, exquisitely sensitive and impressionable. But however this may have been, the result was the same. The thoughts in her heart were full of gratitude and gentle gladness, as she murmured to herself softly, “I thank God that I am growing happier. The past has not crushed me so utterly as I thought. My youth has not altogether left me. I have suffered, God knows how I have suffered, but I thank Him that the memory of it is beginning to fade in the light of the peaceful present.”

“Happiness” to some natures means more than to others. There are plants that *cannot* live without sunshine. Marion was one of these. Happiness to her meant capability of well-doing—life, strength, and heart to fill her place in the world and do her work.

There are some few—the grandest of us all—to whom it is given bravely to endure to the end, with *no* hope on this side the grave; to do their task thoroughly, though it is all working in the dark with no prospect of light, save the far-off, fitful gleam that but seldom reaches the wearied eyes from across the depths of the dark river itself. But my poor child was not of these. She was strong, in a sense, stronger and deeper than most of her sex. But without some sunshine she must have withered and died.

She felt instinctively that so it was with her; and there was more, far more, than the selfish cry of relief from pain, in her deep thankfulness for the light

beginning again, as she thought, however feebly, to glimmer on her path.

But as she was thinking thus, gazing out on the brightness and beauty around her, a shadow came between her and the sun, and the warmth and light flooding in through the narrow door of the rustic, close-thatched arbour, were suddenly intercepted.

A dark figure stood before her. Her eyes were somewhat dazzled by the sunshine, and she did not for a moment see distinctly. The person—she could see it was a man—stood with his back to her. It was Ralph, of course. He was amusing himself with trying, from different points of view, to discover the fancied resemblance of the old yew in the centre of the green to a peacock with outspread tail. From where he now stood some weird resemblance of the kind was perceptible. The arbour was deep, and from the outside looked dark and cavernous. Utterly forgetful of the landlord's mention of the young lady's occupancy of it, he stood at the doorway unceremoniously blocking out the light: and when at last he turned and glanced inwards, he did not for an instant perceive that it was not tenantless. Then the flutter of a light dress revealed the presence of its owner. With a hasty exclamation of apology for his intrusion, Ralph was turning away, when a sound—what was it?—he could never tell—a cry of distress, an appeal to him by name, or only an inarticulate murmur—arrested him.

The lady in the arbour stood up and approached him, gazing at him fixedly, shading her eyes with her hand from the glare of light surrounding him, as he hastily stepped forward to meet her. Something in her figure first struck him as familiar, something slight and indescribable, before he had time to look again at her face—to see the hand drop powerlessly by her side—and to recognize her he was on his way to seek—his lost love, Marion Vere!

In his glad surprise all else faded from his mind. “Am I dreaming?” he exclaimed. “Is it you, your very self? Marion, my darling, speak to me.” And he seemed as if he were about to seize her hand and draw her towards him. But she turned coldly; in an instant regaining her self-control, which in the first moments of amazement had deserted her.

“Sir Ralph,” she said, “I cannot understand how it is you are here; but I do not want to see or speak to you. Go away, I beg of you, and do not ask me to answer you again.”

But almost before she had finished the few cold, strange words, he interrupted her.

“I don’t wonder you are indignant with me. Heaven only knows what I must have seemed to deserve you to think of me. But, listen to my explanation. You must, Marion, you *shall!*” he exclaimed, vehemently, as she was endeavouring to pass him. And mechanically she obeyed. She was not frightened, but the old influence was at work already. She could not resist his determination that he should be heard.

She sank on the seat beside her, and he stood there in the doorway, the sunlight pouring in round him, while with earnest voice, and the quick-coming words of a full heart, he told his tale.

Rapidly and unhesitatingly he went over all we have heard already. The reason of his former hesitation, the success of his journey to England, the bitter disappointment awaiting him on his return to Altes, the long string of mistakes and cross-purposes, up to the last extraordinary revelation contained in Cissy’s overlooked letter. She did not interrupt him by word or gesture. So he went on to tell of his delight, of the revulsion to joy from the depths of utter hopelessness the increased love and devotion wrought in him by the knowledge of all she had done and suffered; above all, by the explanation of her poor little innocent secret, which she, his poor darling, as he called her again, had dreaded his knowing. Then he stopped for a second time, but still she did not answer.

“All is right now,” he said, while yet his heart throbbed faster, from some strange, unacknowledged misgiving—“all is right now,” he repeated. “My mother waiting eagerly to receive you as a daughter. Marion, my dearest, have I startled you? You look paler and thinner than you were. I am a brute not to have thought of it; you have been ill. Forgive my roughness, I implore you; but do not punish me in this dreadful way by refusing to look up or answer me. Speak to me, my darling, I beseech you.”

Then at last she spoke, but in a dull, dead voice, and without raising her eyes from the sanded floor of the little summer-house, on which she was gazing, as if she would print it on her brain. She only said, without the slightest expression or inflection in her tone—

“I thought you were married. I thought you were married to Florence Vyse.”

He almost laughed in the momentary relief.

“Thought I was married—and to Florence Vyse! Whoever told you so? and how could you have believed it? It must have been some absurd confusion of the news of her marriage, which is to take place shortly, true enough; but the bridegroom elect is Mr. Chepstow, not me. Oh, Marion, you didn’t really believe it?”

“Yes, I did,” she replied, still in the same dead tone. “I did believe it thoroughly, so thoroughly that it nearly killed me.”

“Ah, my darling!” he groaned, “then I am right. You have been very ill. I feared it. But now it is all right. Now, if indeed my whole life’s devotion can do so, I will make up to you for all the miserable past. Why, why did you doubt me, my love, my darling? You knew at least if I could not marry *you*, I should choose no other woman. But it is cruel to reproach you—cruel and useless, for it is all right now.”

And again he made as if he would draw her to his arms. But she put out her hands before her, as if in appeal.

“Stop!” she said; “stop, Ralph! You have not heard all yet. Remember it is a year since that letter was written. Truly it is useless to reproach me or anyone now, for—ah! how shall I tell him?—you have not heard all, Ralph! It is not all right, but fearfully, unchangeably wrong. Ralph, I am married!”

A sound as of a great, gasping sob of despair.

Then a voice she would not have known for him, said, “When?”

“Yesterday fortnight,” she replied, as if she were repeating a lesson learnt by rote; “yesterday fortnight. I was counting how long it was as I was sitting here before you came, and I remember I said to myself, ‘It was yesterday fortnight,’ otherwise I could not remember now. This is Thursday, and *it* was on a Wednesday. I am not Marion Vere now. *His* name is Baldwin—Geoffrey Baldwin—and he is my husband, and I promised to love him! Oh, God, forgive me! What is this thing that I have done? What is this awful punishment that has come upon me?”

And she crouched lower down on the rough bench on which she was sitting,



and buried her face in her hands.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE BITTERNESS OF DEATH.

“Could Love part thus? was it not well to speak?  
To have spoken once? It could not but be well.

\* \* \* \* \*

O then like those, who clench their nerves to rush  
Upon their dissolution, we two rose,  
There—closing like an individual life—  
In one blind cry of passion and of pain,  
Like bitter accusation ev’n to death,  
Caught up the whole of love and utter’d it,  
And bade adieu for ever.”

LOVE AND DUTY.

THERE was a terrible silence in the little arbour.

Outside, in the garden, the sun and the flowers, the birds and the insects, went on with their song of rejoicing as before, but it reached no longer the ears of the two human beings who but now had re-echoed it in their hearts.

Was it hours or only minutes that it lasted —this silence as of death.

At last Ralph spoke, quietly—so very quietly, that though Marion could not see his face, his voice made her start with a strange, unknown terror.

“And who did this thing?” he asked. “Who forced you into this hideous

mockery of a marriage?”

“No one,” she replied; “no one did it but myself. You can’t understand. Ralph;” and the anguish of appeal and remorse in her voice made it sound like a wailing cry. “You can never know all I have endured. I was so wretched, so very wretched; so utterly, utterly desolate and alone. And then I heard that of you, and I lost my trust, and it nearly killed me. Your own words had warned me not to build too securely on what might be beyond your power to achieve.” Ralph ground his teeth, but she went on: “I thought I was going to die, and I was glad. But I did not die, and he was kind and gentle to me, and I was alone. And I thought—oh! I thought, Ralph, till this very morning, that I had torn you out of my heart. The scar, I knew, would be always there, but the love itself, I thought it was dead and buried; and only just now I sat here thinking to myself in my blindness and folly, that I could even see the grass be ginning to grow on the grave.”

“And your husband?” Ralph asked, in the same dead, hard, feelingless tone. “Your husband—I forget the name you told me—do you then care for him? Do you love him?”

“Love him!” she exclaimed. “Oh, Ralph, have mercy! I did not mean to deceive him! I told him I could not give him what he gave me; for he, I know, loves me. He is good and true, and very kind to me. And he urged it very much, and said he was not afraid; he would be content with what I said, what I thought I *could* give him. For remember, Ralph, that other I thought was dead—dead and buried for ever. I care for him too much to have yielded had I known it was not so. But ‘love him!’ When I think of the days when first I learnt what that word means, when you taught it me, Ralph—you, and no other! And now you ask me, calmly, if I love *him*! You of all!” She stopped suddenly, as if horrified at herself; and then, her excitement changed to bitter shame and self-reproach, she cried in an anguish, “Oh! what am I saying? Why has it all come back when I thought it was gone? You are making me wicked to Geoffrey. Ralph! Ralph! why do you mock me with these cruel questions? Have mercy! Have a little mercy!”

“Mercy!” said Ralph, turning from the door-post on which he had been leaning, and rising to his full height as he spoke. Standing right in front of her, and with a strange change in his voice. “ ‘Mercy!’ you ask? Yes child, I will have mercy. Mercy on you and on myself, who have done nothing, either of us,

deserving of this hideous torment. You are 'married' you tell me—married to another man—but I tell you, *you are not*. That was a blasphemous mockery of a marriage! I am your husband, I, and no other! You are mine, Marion, and no one else's! My wife! my own! Come away with me, child, now, this very moment, and have done at once and for ever with this horrible night-mare that is killing me. For I cannot lose you again! Oh, my God! I cannot!" And as he spoke, he tried to draw her towards him, not gently, but roughly, violently almost, in sore passion of anguish which was enraging him.

Hitherto, since he had begun to speak, Marion had allowed him to hold her clasped hand in his. But now, as she felt the hold of his fingers tighten, and as the full meaning of his wild, mad words broke upon her, with a sudden movement she rose from the bench on which she was sitting, and tore herself from his grasp, growing at the same moment as if by magic, perfectly, icily calm.

But only for an instant did her instinct of indignation against him last. One glance at the dark, passionate, storm-tossed face beside her—so changed, so terribly, sadly changed in its expression from its usual calm, gentle kindness—and her mood softened. She laid her hand trustingly on his arm.

"Ralph," she said, "poor Ralph, hush! If you are for a moment weak, I must be strong for both. This is terrible that has come upon us—so terrible that just now I do not see that I can bear it and live. For you know all my heart, and you can judge if it is not to the full as terrible for me as for you." (This she said in her innocent instinct of appealing to his pity for her.) "You at least are alone—are bound by no vows to another, and that other, alas, so good and kind. I had rather, ten thousand times rather, he were hard and unloving and cruel! But though just now I can see nothing else, this one thing I see plainly—you must go Ralph, you must leave me now at once, and we must never, never see each other again. There is just one little glimpse of light left in the thought that hitherto we have neither of us done anything to forfeit the other's respect—unless indeed that deceit of mine?—but no," she added, glancing at his face, "I know you have not thought worse of me for that. Do not let us destroy this poor little rag of comfort left us, Ralph. Let me still think of you as good and brave—yes, as the best and bravest. And do not tempt me, Ralph, to say at this terrible moment what in calmer times might cause me shame and remorse to remember." And she raised her face to his with a very agony of appeal in the grey eyes he loved so fervently.

“Child,” he said, still with the hard look on his face, “child, are you an angel or a stone? Have you a heart or have you none? If after all you are just like other women; utterly incapable of entering into the depths a man’s one love; at least you should pity what you cannot understand, instead of maddening me with that conventional humbug about mutual respect and so on. Who but a woman would talk so at such a time? But I will do as you wish,” he went on, lashing himself into fury against her, “I will not stay here longer to tempt you by my evil presence to outrage your delicate sense of propriety, or to say one word which hereafter you might consider it had not been perfectly ‘correct’ or ‘ladylike’ to utter. Good God! what a fool I have been! I had imagined you somewhat different from other women, but I see my mistake. It shall be as you wish. Good bye. You shall not again be distressed by the sight of me. Truly you do well to despise me.”

And with a bitter sneer in his voice, he turned away. It was at last too much. The girl threw herself down recklessly on the rough garden-seat. She shed no tears, she was not the sort of woman to weep in such dire extremity of anguish. She shook and quivered as she lay there, but that was all.

But soon the thought came over her “was it not better so?” Better that Ralph should thus cruelly misjudge her, for in the end it might help him to forget her. Forget her—yes. This was what she must now pray for, if her love for him were worthy of the name.

“Ah but he might have said good-bye gently,” broke forth again from the over-charged heart. “He might have spoken kindly when it was for the last, last time.”

As the wish crossed her thoughts, and she half unconsciously murmured it in words, she felt that some one was beside her. An arm raised her gently and replaced her on the seat. It was Ralph again. Something in his touch soothed and quieted her. She did not this time shrink from him in alarm, but for a moment leant her throbbing head restfully on his shoulder.

“Marion, my poor child. Marion, my lost darling, forgive me.”

“Forgive you, Ralph? Yes, a thousand times, yes,” she replied. “But do not so grievously misjudge me. It is no conventional humbug, as you call it. It is the old plain question of right and wrong.”

As she said the words there flashed across her mind—or was it some mocking imp that whispered it?—the remembrance of some other scene, when this same phrase, “a plain question of right and wrong,” had been used by herself or another. When was it? Ah yes! Long, long ago, the first morning in the little house at Altes. She recalled it all perfectly. The room in which they sat, the position of their chairs. And she heard Cissy’s voice saying, timidly, “I don’t pretend to be as wise as you, May, but are you quite sure there is not a plain question of right and wrong in the matter?” And, to add to her misery, the thought darted into her mind—what if she had then allowed herself to see it thus? If instead of acting as she had done to screen him, she had encouraged Harry bravely to appeal to her father, how different might all have been? This terrible complication avoided, her life and Ralph’s saved from this irremediable agony? Could it indeed be that this terrible punishment had come upon her for this?

Well for us is it, truly, that our sins and mistakes are not judged as in such times of morbid misery and exaggerated self reproach we are apt to imagine!

The remembrance of that bygone scene at Altes flashed through Marion’s mind in an instant, but not too quickly to add its sting to her suffering. And, half mechanically, she repeated:

“Yes, the old plain question of right and wrong.”

“I know it is,” said Ralph, “and I knew it in my heart when you just now said it. I was mad, I think, doubly mad. First, to torture you with my wild, wicked words, and then to turn upon you with my sneers. So I have come back to you for a moment, just for one little last moment, child, to ask you to forgive me and say goodbye. Look up at me, dear, and let me see that you forgive me.”

She looked up at him; looked with her true, clear eyes into his, while he gazed down on her—oh, with what an agony of earnestness, as if he would burn her face into his brain for ever!

For a moment neither spoke.

Then he said:

“It is as if one of us were dying, Marion, though that I think would be easy to bear compared with this. ‘The bitterness of death’ they talk of! All, they little

know! Good-bye, my own true darling. My one love, my life's love—goodbye.” And as he said the words he stooped and kissed her—gently, but long and fervently, on the forehead.

Poor Ralph! It was the first time.

Was it wrong of her to allow it? Those who think so may judge her, and I for one shall not argue it with them.

She stood with bent head, motionless, staring at the ground, but seeing nothing. Then she looked up hastily, with eyes for the first time blinded with burning, slow-coming tears. Tears that bring no relief, wrung from the sore agony of a bleeding heart.

But he was gone!

And so “the old, old story” was over for ever for these two; as for how many others, whose suffering is never suspected!

Ralph walked back slowly to the inn, along the very garden path which half-an-hour before, half a lifetime it seemed to him, he had paced so light-heartedly. The same little stiff box-edging he had noticed before, the same scent from the roses and honeysuckle, the same sun and sky and air. Then, he remembered he had said to himself, it was all sweet and bright and fair. Could he have said so? Was the change in himself only? “Could it indeed be,” he asked, as we all do at these awful times, beating our poor bruised wings against the bars of the inexorable “*it is*”—“*could* it be that nature should remain thus unmoved and indifferent when human beings were riven in agony?”

And a feeling of intensest disgust, amounting almost to rage, seized him at the sight of the hateful, heartless, beautiful world! But when he found this mood coming over him he checked it violently.

“I shall go mad,” he thought, “if I yield to this just now. I must not think of my part of it yet. Time enough for that soon— Time enough, surely, in the desolation of the long years stretching away before me.” And he writhed at the thought. “What can I do?” he asked himself, “what can I do to lighten it to her, or to strengthen her to bear it? Oh, my darling, my darling. I that would have sheltered you from sorrow as never yet woman was sheltered. And to think that of all living beings on this earth, I am the one who must ever to you be less than

nothing! But I am maddening myself again.”

A sudden idea struck him.

“Yes,” he thought. “I should like to see him. One glance at his face would give me a better notion of him than anything I could gather by hearsay. And it will be a sort of satisfaction to know in whose hands my poor child’s future lies.”

But on thinking it over he remembered that actually he had heard and asked nothing about this same “him.” In the absorbing personal interest of his interview with Marion he had forgotten all but themselves.

Whom she had married, what his station, where they had met—was utterly unknown to him. Nor, indeed, if she had attempted to tell would he have cared to listen. All, in that first bitter, bewildering agony, was to him comprised in the fact that she did in truth belong to another.

He walked on slowly through the garden, the hot sun beating on his head, trying as he went to recall the name which he half fancied had been once mentioned by Marion. But in vain. When he got to the house he was seized upon by the landlord and obliged to listen to a long string of apologies for the overdone state of the unfortunate chop. Various emissaries had been despatched, it appeared, to inform him that his “something in the way of lunch” was ready, but had all failed in their mission. “Not expectin’, sir, as you would have strolled beyond the garden, which as being so you must please excuse.”

“Certainly,” replied poor Ralph, feeling that indeed his cup had not been full if he were now to be called upon to partake of this wretched chop in the presence of landlord, waiters, and stable boys, as appeared to be their intention. But he succeeded in dismissing them; and, thankful for silence and solitude, sat down to his semblance of a meal in the little parlour opening out of the hall.

While eating, or making a pretence of so doing, he kept his mind directed to the consideration of his present object; a sight for himself of the “him,” the husband who possessed for him so strange an interest. After a time he rang the bell, intending to enter into conversation with the waiter, and to gather from him indirectly the information he sought. In the meantime, however, a new arrival had distracted the attention of the household of the Peacock, and his summons was not at once obeyed. While waiting he turned to the window and stared out



vacantly, as we so often do when utterly indifferent to all passing around us. But Ralph's indifference was not of long duration. A carriage drove into the little court-yard, drew up at the door, and a gentleman alighted—jumped out in a light-hearted, boyish fashion, hardly waiting till the horse had stopped. He was smoking, and had several letters in his hand, one of which he appeared to be in the act of reading. He stood still for a moment, then sauntered leisurely into the porch and remained there while he finished the perusal of his letter. It was Geoffrey.

From where Ralph stood at the parlour window, he had an excellent view of the young man, whom he no sooner caught sight of than he felt an intuitive conviction that here before him was Marion's husband.

Geoffrey for a wonder was in a thoughtful mood, or looked so at least, as he stood there reading his letter under the shade of the honeysuckle and clematis climbing over the porch, the sunlight between the branches falling softly on his bright brown hair. A pleasant picture truly; and so Ralph owned to himself as he looked at him. The tall, manly figure, the fair, almost boyish face, made an attractive whole. It was a strange position. The two men, as to years nearly of an age, but in all else so marvellously dissimilar. And yet though utter strangers to each other, with the one absorbing interest in common. Ralph, from his concealment, gazed at the young man, standing in perfect unconsciousness full in his view, as if he would read every smallest characteristic, every hidden feeling of his heart. Never did anxious mother scan more narrowly the man to whom she was asked to confide her darling's happiness, than did Ralph the countenance of his unconscious rival, the being who had robbed him of all that made life worth having.

Just then some one from within came to the door and spoke to Geoffrey. It was only a servant with some trivial message, but Ralph, still watching earnestly, noticed the gentle courtesy, the smile sunning over the clear, honest eyes and mouth, the frank, bright readiness with which the young man looked up and answered. Then refolding the letter he had been reading, replaced it in his pocket, and sauntered away in an opposite direction.

"Yes," thought Ralph, "I am satisfied she spoke truly. He *is* 'good and true and kind.' And attractive too, personally, very. Most women would not find it difficult to love that man. But then, alas, my poor child is not like most women! Come what may however, I don't think that man will ever be unkind to her.

Heaven knows I am not vain, but it would be nonsense to pretend to myself that I think she will ever come to feel for him, good fellow though I don't doubt he is, what I know she has felt for me. But yet, in time and when totally separated from all associations connected with me, I trust a sort of moonlight happiness may yet be in store for her."

Here Ralph's reflections were interrupted by the tardy entrance of the servant, who waited to receive his orders.

"How soon will the horses be ready?" asked he.

"Whenever you please, Sir," replied the man. "In a quarter of an hour at most your carriage can be round."

"Very well," said Ralph, "you can order it to come round in twenty minutes from now. In the meantime, bring me pens and ink and paper, as I have a letter to write," adding as the man was leaving the room, "By-the-by, who is the gentleman that drove in just now?"

"Mr. Baldwin, Sir. Comes from Brentshire, I believe. Least-ways the lady's maid does. Mrs. Baldwin is here too, Sir. A walkin' in the garden she is, I believe. Were you wishing to speak to Mr. Baldwin, Sir? He has just stepped round to look at a horse which the ostler was thinking might carry the lady while here, but I can run after him if so be you wish to see him, Sir."

"I; oh dear no, not at all," replied Ralph, who began to think a more appropriate sign for the little inn would have been "The Magpie." "Only be so good as bring in the writing materials at once."

When they were brought, he sat down and wrote; quickly and unhesitatingly, as if perfectly prepared with what he had to say. His letter folded and directed, he sauntered out into the garden again.

"There's just a chance," he thought, "that I may get it unobserved into her own hands, otherwise I must post it, which, however, I would much prefer not to risk."

Looking about he spied a small boy busy weeding. He called the child to him and led him, to the top of the long narrow path, at the end of which was the green with the peacock bush in the centre, and the old arbour at the side. He felt

no doubt that Marion was still there, her husband fortunately having gone to the stables.

“Now, my boy,” said he, “run as fast as you can to the summer-house down there and give this letter to the lady you’ll see there. If she is gone bring it back to me. Be as quick as you can and I’ll have a shilling ready for you when you come back.”

The child was soon back again.

“Was the lady still there?” asked Ralph.

“Yes, Sir,” said the little messenger, glowing with delight at the thought of a day’s wages so easily earned. “Yes, Sir, the young lady were there, and she said, ‘Thank you, and would I give this to the gentleman,’ ” holding out a little turquoise ring, as he spoke. A simple, common little ring enough. She had had it from childhood. He had often seen it on her little finger. He seized it eagerly, and turned away. Then recollecting himself, he gave the boy the promised reward, thanked him quietly, and returned to the house.

At the door the post-chaise stood waiting, and in another minute he was gone, thankful at last to feel free to think over, as he phrased it, *his* part of the day’s tragedy. Think of it! Did he ever *not* think of it during that weary day and night, and many a weary day and night to come? Women say men do not know what it is to be broken-hearted! That little turquoise ring might have told a different tale.

“I wonder,” thought Ralph as he drove along on his solitary hopeless journey. “I wonder what she will think it right to do. She said her part was the worse to bear. I fear it is. She is stronger and more unselfish than most women, but, on the other hand, she is truthful and ingenuous. Will she be strong enough for *his* sake to leave things as they are, to let him think that at least she is giving him no *less* than she promised? Or will it be impossible for her to live with him without to some extent confiding in him, even though by so doing she wrecks, for the time at least, his happiness, poor fellow, and what chance she has of any herself? I see no distinct right or wrong in the case, but I wonder what she will do. Oh, if I could have saved her this! Suffering for myself I can bear. If only I could have borne it all, my burden would have seemed lighter!”

He caught the express at Bexley and went on in it to London. For no reason, with no object, save that he felt it would be a relief to him to escape the

unendurable cross-questioning which would certainly have awaited him, had he returned straight to Friar's Springs.

Late in the evening, as he travelled on through the twilight into the intense darkness of a moon-less midsummer night, a strange feeling came over him, bringing with it a faint, slight breath of consolation.

"She said truly," he thought, "that I was more fortunate than she in that I am free and unfettered, bound by no uncongenial ties to another. For me at least it is no sin to love her still, for I know it is not in my nature ever to replace her by any other woman. And who knows but what some day in the far future, though I may never see her again, I may in some way be able to serve her, to lighten the lot it is so bitter to me to think I have been the means of darkening." And somehow there came into his mind the remembrance of a well-known, simple little German ballad, that years and years ago, as a mere boy, he had liked and been struck by. For he had been peculiar as a boy—dreamy, morbid and sentimental. The two last verses rang in his ears that night, over and over again he heard them. And ever after they were associated with what this bitter day had brought to pass. And the face of the dead maiden on the bier grew to him like that of his own lost love.

These were the words that thus haunted him—

"Der dritte hub ihn wieder sogleich  
Und kusste sie an den Mund so bleich."

"Dich liebt' ich immer, dich lieb ich noch heut,  
Und werde dich lieben in Ewigkeit."

From London a day or two later he wrote to his mother, telling her simply, and in as few words as possible, that the hopes he had confided to her, were utterly and for ever at an end. He begged her to spare him the pain of entering into useless particulars, and enjoined her never, if she valued his peace and comfort, to allude to the affair directly or indirectly to him or anyone else.

Lady Severn obeyed him implicitly, and only in the recesses of her own heart, as I said, abused "Sir Archibald's niece" for the sorrow she had brought upon her son.

Late in the autumn, after seeing his mother and nieces comfortably re-established at Medhurst, and assisting at the gorgeous nuptials of Florence Vyse

and Mr. Chepstow, Sir Ralph left England for an indefinite time: to travel in strange and distant lands, in search—not of happiness—but of interest and occupation sufficient to make life endurable.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE END OF THE HONEYMOON.

“O death, death, death, thou ever floating cloud,  
There are enough unhappy on this earth,  
Pass by the happy souls that love to live:  
I pray thee pass before my light of life  
And shadow all my soul that I may die.  
Thou weighest heavy on the heart within,  
Weigh heavy on my eyelids: let me die.”

GENONE.

THIS was the letter the little boy gave to the young lady in the arbour, and which without moving from her seat she opened and read. It was addressed outside correctly enough to “Mrs. Baldwin.” It was the first letter she had ever received from Ralph! She read it slowly, though it was short enough, dwelling on each phrase, each word, with the sort of hungry eagerness with which we strain our ears to catch each last precious whisper from loved lips which we know shall soon, very soon, be silent for ever.

“Marion,” it began, “my dearest, for I may call you that in the only letter I shall ever write to you. I said just now it was as if one of us were dying—will you try to receive what I am going to say to you as if indeed it were a dying man’s request? It may seem cruel and heartless to ask it just now, but it is my last chance; and afterwards, though you may reject it just now, my earnest entreaty may come back to your mind. What I would ask of you, my poor child, is to try to be happy. For the sake of the love you have had for me, for the sake of the love you

well know I have for you, let me leave you trusting that some day you may again be at least as happy, as you were today when I so rudely destroyed the poor little fabric you had begun to build up.

You are so young, my child, so young and sweet-natured, and your husband you tell me is good and kind. I have seen him, and I believe he is so. Happiness cannot but to some extent return to you, if only you do not repel it by dwelling on the past or by undeserved self-reproach. Let me trust you will not do this; let me urge on you with more earnestness than I know how to put in words not to refuse or shut out from you the sunshine which will still come into your life. To know that you are happy is the one remaining great wish of my life.

For me it is very different. I am not young and I have been accustomed to live alone. You are the only being I ever took into my life; and I must now return to the old loneliness, only a little drearier and darker than before, for having known one short blessed glimpse of light.

God bless you, my dearest, and lighten to you the terrible trial it has been my bitter fate to bring upon you. Leave me the hope that some day you may be able to think of me without suffering. Forget all about me except that you had never a truer friend, or one who would more gladly sacrifice himself to ensure your well-being, than

“RALPH SEVERN.”

She read it slowly and quietly. No one observing her would have guessed from the expression of her face that its contents were of more than ordinary interest. In point of fact she hardly as yet understood it. She was still stunned and bewildered: otherwise it is probable that her first sensation on reading Ralph's letter would have been of indignation, bitter anger at him for daring to speak to her of such a mockery as “happiness,” for thinking it possible that a human being could bear such torture as hers and live.

But as yet no such reflection occurred to her, no definite thought of any kind was at present possible for her. The short-lived strength which had enabled her to think and decide rightly both for herself and Ralph, had already deserted her. She was literally crushed; unable even to realize what had taken place; in a dull stupor of suffering, which to natures like hers comes instead of the physical unconsciousness, in weaker organisations succeeding to extremity of nervous tension and over-excitement.

After a time she grew chilly, and the sensation roused her somewhat to a consciousness of the outer world.

She wondered why she shivered and trembled with cold, for the sun was still shining outside, and all looked bright and warm. Then the thought occurred to her that soon Geoffrey would be returning from Bexley, and she wished she could reach her room unobserved by him or her maid. Once there, it would be easy to say she felt ill, and thus obtain some hours' quiet and solitude in which to brace herself for what lay before her. For what lay before her, she repeated to herself. Words easy to say, but in her case what did they mean? She could not tell, could not even attempt to consider.

She rose from her seat, first folding and concealing the precious letter, and began slowly to walk towards the house. Her steps at first tottered a little, but gradually became steadier. There was no one about the door as she approached it, so she took courage, and succeeded in gaining her own room without meeting any one but a stupid, unobservant servant or two, who noticed nothing unusual in her appearance.

She looked at her face in the queer, old-fashioned toilet glass. It was pale as death, and her lips looked blue. So she drank some water, and drew down the blinds, and then in her old childish fashion threw herself down on the side of the bed, hiding her face in the pillow.

"Now," she said to herself, "I will begin to think. What must I do? How can I meet Geoffrey? What ought I to tell him?"

Hopeless questions; unanswerable at least by the poor child in the state she was in. She thought it all over, again and again, that strange scene in the garden. There was a terrible fascination about it. She reminded herself of every word he had uttered, every glance and gesture through the whole of the interview. She could not force herself to think of anything else. Geoffrey, her future life, everything but this one remembrance seemed of little consequence.

Gradually she found herself thinking of it all as if it had happened to some one else and not to her; as if she had seen it acted on the stage, or read it in a book; and then she seemed to have known it always. It was nothing new—the arbour, and the flowers, and the sunshine, the dark figure in the doorway, their mutual amazement, the mingled anguish and joy of their meeting, the agony of



their farewell—all seemed to have been a part of her whole life; she had never been separate from it; she would evermore exist in the thought of it.

Then the images became confused. She was no longer herself, but some one else, who, she could not decide. Ralph, still standing in the doorway, grew strangely like Geoffrey. Again a change—the whole was a dream. She was back at Altes, with Cissy and Ralph on the terrace, and Ralph was smiling on her lovingly while she recounted to him the terrible dream that had visited her. She was asleep! From very exhaustion, both mental and physical, from extremity of suffering, though compressed into the short space of a few hours, she was for the time laid to rest in the peaceful unconsciousness, which, though the waking therefrom may be bitter, is yet, at such times, an unspeakable mercy. I am not learned in medical matters, but I believe this sleep saved her from a brain fever or worse.

Geoffrey came in from his visit to the stables, which had been prolonged beyond his intentions. Not finding his wife in the little sitting-room appropriated to their use, he came along the passage to seek her in her bedroom. He was not a light stepper, and his boots creaked loudly as he approached the room. But the sound did not disturb her, nor did his tap on the door. He repeated it, but with no effect. Then, imagining she must be in the garden, he opened the door, merely to glance in and satisfy himself as to her absence. The room was very dark, all the blinds drawn down, and a general air of sombreness and desertedness. No, there was her hat on the floor, and a glance at the bed revealed herself. In no very comfortable attitude, just as she had flung herself down, but fast asleep, breathing soft and regularly as an infant, and, as he looked more closely, with a sweet smile on her lips, though her face looked paler than its wont.

“My poor darling,” murmured Geoffrey to himself, “she has been tired with her long morning alone. I must not leave her again for so long. She looks pale too. I trust she has not been ill.”

And very gently he drew the bed-curtains so as to shade her still more from the light, closed the door with noiseless hand, and softly crept back along the passage to occupy himself as best he could without her, till she awoke.

Already he had grown very dependent upon her. Indoors especially. He never felt quite in his element in the house, his life for many years past having literally been almost altogether spent in the open air.

But now it was very different. Indoors meant Marion and cheerful talk, flowers and work, and books even in moderation now and then; a sweet face, and a graceful flitting figure, and tea at all hours of the day, and pipes only on sufferance! It was all so new to him, so wonderfully pretty and delicate, this atmosphere of womanhood for the first time really brought home to him, great rough clod-hopper as he called himself. And if so unspeakably charming here, in a strange, unhomelike house, what would it not be at the Manor Farm, where this sweet presence was to take root and bloom for evermore? "Till death u do part!" came into Geoffrey's mind that afternoon, as he fidgeted about, not knowing what to do with himself, wishing she would wake, and yet afraid to go near her for fear of disturbing her. "Till death us do part!" he thought to himself. "A queer sort of life it would be without her!" After an hour or two's patience he crept back again to her room to see if she were awake. But she was still asleep. He stood beside her for a minute or two. Just as he was turning away she awoke: awoke from her dream that the real was a dream; awoke from her sweet vision of Ralph's dark eyes gazing down on her tenderly, to find herself back in the hateful world of facts, and Geoffrey Baldwin, her husband whom she did not love, standing at her side with a happy smile on his honest face. She glanced at him for an instant, then with a recoil of something very like actual aversion, turned from him, and closed her eyes again, as if she wished to shut out him and all beside from her sight.

Geoffrey did not read correctly the expression of her face, fortunately for him. He fancied only she was wearied, or in pain, and his voice sounded anxious as he spoke to her.

"Have I disturbed you, Marion dear? I was in the room more than an hour ago, but went away for fear of waking you. You don't look well, but I hoped this sleep would have refreshed you. You are not in pain, my darling, are you?"

"Yes," she said, without moving, or opening her eyes.

Considerably alarmed, Geoffrey asked eagerly "Where? How? What was the matter? Was it her head? Had she been out in the sun? Where was the pain?"

"Everywhere," she replied, in the same tone.

Awful visions of rheumatic fever, neuralgia, every sort of illness of which, his experience being of the smallest, his horror was correspondingly great—

flitted before poor Geoffrey's vision. He carefully covered Marion with the shawl she had tossed aside, and, without speaking, turned to leave the room.

His step across the floor roused her.

"Where are you going, Geoffrey?" she asked, in a sharp, impatient tone, so unlike her own, that it increased his alarm.

"To call Bentley, in the first place," he answered, hesitatingly; "and then—"

"Well, what then?" she persisted.

"To go or send for a doctor," he replied.

"A doctor!" she repeated, contemptuously, muttering to herself; "a clever doctor, truly, he would be who could cure me. A doctor!" she repeated aloud. "How can you be so foolish, Geoffrey? I don't interfere with you, why should you interfere with me? Am I not to have liberty to rest for an hour or two, without you making yourself and me absurd by talking of doctors?"

"But you said you were in pain remonstrated her husband, considerably relieved, and yet not a little amazed by this sudden and uncalled-for ebullition of petulance.

"Well, and if I did?" she replied, wearily, but more gently. "Surely, Geoffrey, you can understand there are pains and pains! I am weary and exhausted, but I want no doctor. Leave me, I beg of you, leave me alone. I want to go to sleep—and to dream," she added, to herself.

Geoffrey left her, without saying more.

Then, when she heard his steps receding down the passage, there visited her the first of a long chain of tormentors, who from that day became no strangers to her. A pang of self-reproach darted through her, for having so cruelly wounded the heart whose only fault was its devotion to her.

"I have vexed him," she thought, "vexed and hurt him for the first time since, since—that terrible mistake of ours! It is all a part of the wretched whole." And then the ungenerous thought occurred to her—"It is his own fault. He has brought it on himself by persisting as he did. Save for that—." And she hardened

her heart against him.

But not for long. She had wronged him, wronged him cruelly, in thinking those few petulant words of hers would have had power, even temporarily, to chill or alienate him.

In five minutes he was back again, with a fragrant cup of tea and a delicate slice of bread and butter, which (forgive me, romantic readers) Marion was in her heart not sorry to see. She had eaten nothing since early morning, and violent emotion consumes the physical “tissue” no less surely than it exhausts the mental powers.

She drank the tea eagerly, for her throat felt parched and dry. Then with a sudden revulsion of deep pity for the man whom she began to see she had so grievously deceived, she said timidly, glancing up at him with a world of conflicting feelings in her eyes—

“Thank you, Geoffrey. You are very good. Are you vexed with me for being so cross?”

“Vexed with you, my darling!” he replied, as he had done once before; “vexed with you! No, never fancy anything so impossible.” And he stooped and kissed her *on the forehead*.

That was more than she had expected. She shrank back, half raising her hand, as if to repel him. Geoffrey looked surprised and concerned, but not hurt. The change in her would take a long time to come home to his unsuspecting heart.

“I did not mean to tease you,” he said. “Is your head aching? I fear, my poor dear, you are suffering very much.”

“Yes,” she said, “I am suffering very much. But don’t begin again about a doctor, Geoffrey,” she went on, growing excited. “I won’t see a doctor. There is nothing the matter with me that a doctor is needed for. I shall be well again by the morning, you’ll see. I *won’t* see a doctor.”

“Very well,” he said, “you know best, I suppose. What will you do? Won’t you get up a little and come into the other room? You can be quite quiet there, and I should be horribly dull by myself,” he added, wistfully, half smiling at himself as he spoke.

But no answering smile broke on Marion's face. She moved impatiently, and answered coldly—

“I don't know if I shall get up or not. Leave me, any way, for the present and go and smoke or something. Perhaps I will get up in a while; but oh, *do go*.”

So he went. And then, when alone, she cried with remorse for her unkindness.

“But I can't help it,” she said—“I can't help it. I don't want to be wicked, but I am forced into it. I shall grow worse and worse, till I die. Oh, if only I might die now!”

There was something consolatory in the idea, and it did not seem wicked to wish for her own death! It seemed an escape from the unbearable present, and in the thought she found a strange sort of calm. She felt sure she was going to be very ill. After all, Geoffrey would not be troubled with her long. In the meantime she need not grudge what pleasure it was in her power to afford him. So after a while she got up, rang the bell for her maid, who was full of sympathy for her mistress's bad headache, and smoothed her hair and arranged her dress; so that when she rejoined Geoffrey in the sitting-room, he delightedly congratulated her on looking “all right again.”

She did her best to be patient that evening, to *endure* her husband's tender words and caresses. But it was hard work; and, oh, she was thankful when night fell, and she could again, for a time at least, forget the agony which she hoped was killing her. But in the morning, greatly to her surprise, she was better. She felt terribly disappointed that it was so; she had counted so surely on a return of the so-called low fever, of which she felt pretty certain a second attack would prove fatal. But she did not understand her own constitution. No sudden, short-lived emotion, however violent, would have power to prostrate one naturally so healthy; what rather was to be dreaded for her was a long course of suspense or suffering, such as already she had under-tone. Discontent, anxiety, uncongenial surroundings might gradually undermine the springs of her life; but she was too young and, physically, too elastic, to give way at a sudden, sharp assault.

Nevertheless, yesterday's events had left their mark on her. Besides the suffering woven with many threads which henceforth must envelop her life, the actual, temporary excitement had been too violent not to affect her for some time to come. She was irritable and nervous to a miserable extent. Geoffrey's

creaking boots, the hasty closing of a door, even his voice, not always modulated to a nicety, nearly drove her frantic. Then sharp words were followed by bitter self-reproach and abasement. It was so undignified, so lowering, she said to herself, thus to bear her trial. If she had been called upon to do something great or heroic—to throw herself into fire or water to save the husband she did not love, it would have been easy. But to feel herself tied to him in this matter-of-fact way, to know that it was her duty to listen with patience, if not interest, to his commonplace conversation, his stupid talk of weather and crops or his anticipations of the coming season's hunting—oh, this indeed was martyrdom, all but unendurable. For in these days she was far, very far from doing justice to the real character of the man she had married.

They did not stay long at the Peacock. The place grew hateful to her. At first there was a sort of fascination about the old arbour in the garden; she had a childish unreasoning fancy that some day Ralph would appear there again; that finding his life unendurable without her he would return in very recklessness of misery to see her again, if but for a moment. But he never came, and she learnt to loathe the place associated with such ever-recurring disappointment. There were times when she blamed herself bitterly for her behaviour to him during that last interview. She had been cold, repellent; she had belied herself in concealing from him, as she fancied she had, the depth, the intensity of her devotion, the anguish of parting from him forever. He had gone away, she thought, suffering in himself, terribly no doubt, but with no conception of the awfulness of the misery which he was leaving her to bear alone. Had he realised it *would* he have left her?—would he not, he was wise and far-seeing, have devised *some* means of freeing her from this terrible bondage, of even now joining her life to his, where alone it would be worthy of the name?

She had told him once she could not love him so entirely did she not know there was one thing he cared for more than her. "Doing right" she had called it in her silly childish ignorance and inexperience. But *what* was right? Could this, the life she was leading of misery to herself and sooner or later to her husband also, utter stagnation intellectually, and certain deterioration morally, could *this* be right? Was not her case altogether exceptional; were there not, *must* there not, be instances where the so-called right and wrong of other, more happily commonplace lives, changed places—in which it was worse than obstinate folly, actual suicide, to bow to the laws formed but with reference to every-day circumstances and individuals? These suggestions tormented her at her very worst times. In such moments I think, truly, the tempter himself had her.

Geoffrey, who remained sturdily convinced that physical suffering alone was to be blamed for her strange moodiness and irritability, agreed gladly to trying the effect of change of scene. For some weeks they never rested, hardly arrived at one place before Mrs. Baldwin took a dislike to it, and insisted on rushing off to another, with equally unsatisfactory results. In one thing, however, Geoffrey had his way. Marion found herself obliged to give in to consulting a doctor. A kindly and sensible man happened to be the one they lit upon, and what little was in his power he did for her. That something beyond his reach was at fault he suspected, though he wisely kept his ideas on the subject to himself. The young husband's anxiety he was able, with perfect honesty, to relieve. Mrs. Baldwin was suffering physically from nothing but a certain amount of nervous prostration, consequent, in all probability, upon the long illness some months previously, of which Geoffrey told him. Time and care would alone set her "*quite* right." To Marion herself he spoke more plainly. He judged that she could bear his doing so, and be, probably, "none the worse of it."

"You are not really ill at present, my dear madam," he said, "but you are fast going the way to make yourself so. Not seriously, not dangerously, at least," he added hastily, misinterpreting the start with which Marion looked up at his words, "fretting and repining don't kill. At least they take a good while about it, and an uncommonly disagreeable process it is. But what I wish to warn you of is, that continued yielding to mental depression or discomfort, such as I can see you are at present suffering from, ends, in nine cases out of ten, in chronic ill-health. A worse trial, my dear young lady, than you at your age and with your evidently small experience of sickness, can have any notion of. You have had your share of trouble in your short life—perhaps more than your share—but let me beseech you not to add to it, as you are too surely doing. Trouble is hard to bear at the best of times; but none the easier, I assure you, when our physical strength has failed us."

"No one can understand other people's troubles," said Marion coldly, sullenly almost, if so ugly a word can be applied to such gentle tones. "You can prescribe for bodily illness, I have no doubt; but you can't *order* a patient to get well. Neither can any one make himself happy at command."

"Certainly not," replied the kind old man; "but, unfortunately, it is in your power, as in mine, and every one else's, to make ourselves more *unhappy*."

Marion did not reply, and he went on.

“I am not prying into your sorrows, my dear young lady. I can quite believe that, notwithstanding the blessings you possess, your troubles have been very great. The more earnest, therefore, must be the effort to live them down in the best sense. But I have been talking more like a clergyman than a doctor—you must forgive me. Can I see your husband for a moment? I am anxious to tell him that so far there is nothing much amiss. He, I think, is inclined to err on the side of spoiling you, is he not? Must I give him a hint that a little scolding now and then would do you no harm?”

“I wish you would,” she replied; “he is far too good and patient, and I am very bad.” She looked up as she spoke with a half smile, but her eyes were full of tears; and something in the tone of her voice haunted the good doctor for many a day to come.

His word, however, more than his medicine, acted upon her to some extent as a tonic. Her health improved, her nervousness and irritability decreased. Geoffrey was enchanted with the success of his first exertion of marital authority.

“You are looking ever so much better, my darling,” he exclaimed joyfully, “that old fellow was a regular brick. By Jove, I wish I had doubled his fee! You won’t be looking ill after all when I take you home next week. How thankful I am! What would the world be to me without you, my dearest?” And his voice grew husky as he looked at her and tenderly raised her face to his.

But she could not return his gaze of loving, devotion, could not meet his honest eyes, bright with pleasure at her improved and spirits. For, with returning strength, and powers of self-control, a new misery had come upon her—the growing consciousness of how grievously, though unintentionally, she had deceived Geoffrey Baldwin when she told him that at least what heart was left her was free to give to him, that the old love was dead, “dead and buried for ever.” In the first selfishness of her overpowering wretchedness this feeling had somewhat fallen into the background: now that her powers were regaining their balance it revived with redoubled force. It was agony to her to receive Geoffrey’s constant expressions of trusting, almost reverential love. A hundred times she had it on her lips to confess to him, not the whole, but so much of her secret as she felt it due to him to own. Only the thought of what this knowledge would be to him, of his happiness wrecked as well as her own, withheld her.



But she felt that before long it must come. Whatever misery it might entail, it must be done; for she could not live with him feeling that systematically and deliberately she was deceiving him. She grew strangely silent, and absent in manner. Geoffrey feared she was growing ill again, and hastened their return home.

“Once in our own house, dear, with all home comforts about you, you’ll feel so different,” he said; “this constant travelling is really very tiring. No wonder you’re done up. How delightful it will be to see you at the old farm I shall then feel quite sure that you really belong to me, my dearest.”

She did not answer. He drew round her averted face. To his amazement she was in tears.

“Marion,” he exclaimed in astonishment, “my dearest, what *is* the matter?”

She seized his hand convulsively and held it fast. Then restraining with difficulty the hysterical weeping which she felt coming upon her, she spoke, fast and excitedly, to her bewildered listener.

“Geoffrey,” she said, “I cannot bear it. All these weeks you have borne with me—with all my strange fancies and wayward tempers. You have been very good to me, for truly I have been very trying. You must have thought me strangely unlike what you fancied me. I *am* strangely unlike what I was, sadly changed from my old self, for I used to be gentle and sweet tempered, Geoffrey. I must tell you the truth, cost what it may, for otherwise I cannot live beside you. Geoffrey, poor Geoffrey, it is dreadful for me to say, and dreadful for you to hear. I told you a falsehood that day—the day I promised to marry you. I said at least you had now no rival. I told you I no longer loved that other whom I *had* loved so intensely. It was no intentional falsehood. I believed it myself; but for all that it was not true. I did still love him, Geoffrey, then when I said I did not. I did love him even then, with all the love of my nature. And, oh, Geoffrey, I love him *now*. Forgive me, for I am most miserable —pity me, for I cannot forgive myself.”

There was not the slightest sound. The hand she still held tightly clasped was not withdrawn, but Geoffrey spoke not a word.

Marion went on. “I will tell you all about it. All at least that you ought to

know. How I found it out I mean. It was a fortnight after we were married. That day, do you remember, at the Peacock when you thought I was ill? I—”

“Hush!” said her husband, “you need not tell me. I have no need to hear what it must cost you much to tell. You saw him, I suppose, saw him, or heard from him—it does not matter which. There had been some mistake, I suppose. He was not married as you had been told?”

“Yes,” she said, repeating his very words mechanically, “there had been a mistake. He was not married.”

“Ah!” muttered Geoffrey. It sounded like a groan.

“I will tell you”—she began again, but he stopped her again.

“No,” he said, “do not tell me. Do not treat me as if I were a judge and you a culprit at the bar. Heaven knows, I have heard enough. And God knows, I trust you, Marion, trust you utterly and entirely. Were you less worthy of my trust this might be easier to bear. I can’t quite see it yet. I can’t get it plain to myself. But that will come, I suppose. Only do not ever tell me any more. It need never again be mentioned between us. I think—I think I should thank you for telling me. It was right, I suppose, but I can’t quite see it yet. For my part in it all, for what I did wrong—the persisting in trying to win you, I mean—I ask you to forgive me.”

“Forgive you?” she exclaimed; “oh, Geoffrey, your asking it crushes me.”

“I do not wish to pain you,” he said, gently but resolutely withdrawing the hand she still held.

“But you must remember it is rather hard on me—all this. I cannot just yet get accustomed to it. So if in any way I pain you, you must forgive me.”

Then he got up and strolled to the window. It was a beautiful summer evening—a picture of peace and calm loveliness.

“It is hard upon me,” he murmured to him-self, “very hard upon me. But, good God, how she must have suffered! How she must suffer still, tied to a rough boor like me! That other, I don’t want to know who he is, I should pity him too, I suppose, but I’m not quite good enough for that; for I can’t see that his

case is as bad as mine. Heaven knows, though he may be a hundred times my superior in every-thing else he can't love her better. And to think —! My darling, how you must have suffered!"

If only Geoffrey could have uttered his thoughts, his generous, unselfish thoughts aloud, who knows what even then might have been the result?

But he could not. A strange reserve had fallen upon this naturally open and outspoken being. Gentle and attentive as ever to Marion, she was yet utterly changed. He avoided most pointedly the slightest demonstration of the affection with which his very heart was bursting; not a word of endearment, not a gesture of fondness did he allow himself. It was what Marion had been wishing for, and yet it pained her. But gradually she grew accustomed to it; and slowly but surely began that lamentable drifting apart so sad to see in two lives which should be as one. Henceforth she felt free to live yet more entirely in the past and in herself; for she was no longer fettered by the necessity of maintaining a semblance of affection. Geoffrey, she fancied, had felt it much less than she had feared. He would soon be absorbed and happy in his home-life and country pursuits.

So she did not trouble herself very much about him. "He was not after all," she decided, "a man of very deep feeling. His dogs and horses would soon make up to him for any disappointment he might have experienced in a wife."

Yet being a woman, with all a woman's illogical "contrariness," the reflection was not without a certain amount of bitterness.

## CHAPTER IV.

### “AT HOME.”

“The little bird now to salute the morn  
Upon the naked branches sets her foot,  
The leaves still lying at the mossy root;  
And there a silly chirruping cloth keep  
As if she fain would sing, yet fain would weep.  
Praising fair summer that too soon is gone,  
And sad for winter too soon coming on.”

DRAYTON.

“Perhaps the wind  
Waits so in winter for the summers dead,  
And all sad sounds are nature’s funeral cries,  
For what has been and is not?”

THE SPANISH GYPSY.

TO-MORROW then, I suppose, will see us at the Manor Farm,” said Geoffrey the last evening of their travels.

Marion noticed he did not speak of his dwelling as “home,” and she looked up quickly, for she fancied there was a slight, a very slight quiver in his voice. But no, it must have been only fancy. He sat at the table arranging his fishing book, apparently engrossed in its contents.

“I suppose so,” she replied indifferently.

“I wanted to tell you,” he said, “that you will not find the house in particularly good order. That is to say it has not been ‘done up’ for ages. I meant to have had some of the rooms refurnished, but there was so little time before,” here he dropped a fly, and had to stoop down to look for it on the carpet, “before we were married,” he went on with a change in his voice, “that I deferred doing so, thinking you might like to choose the furniture yourself. So as soon as we are settled I hope you will order whatever you like for the rooms in which you will take an interest. The drawing-room and dining-room. There is a nice little room up stairs too which I think you might like as a sort of boudoir, or whatever it is called. It opens out of the pleasantest of the bedrooms, the one which I think you will probably choose for your own. I am very anxious that you should arrange all just as you wish, and of course I shall not in the least interfere with any of your plans. I shall keep my own old rooms just as they were; they will do very well without doing up. Indeed my old den would never be comfortable again if it were meddled with.”

This was a long speech for the present Geoffrey to make, for he had grown very silent of late. When alone with his wife, that is to say: outsiders would probably have perceived no change in him.

“Thank you,” said Marion in a tone that was meant to be cordial. “I am sure it will all be very nice. The house is very old, is it not?” she went on, wishing to show some interest in the subject.

“Yes,” he replied, “very old, some parts of it in particular. I wish it were my own—at least,” he went on, “I used to wish it. Now I don’t know that I care much to own it.”

“I always thought it was your own,” said Marion with some surprise. “I thought your father bought it long ago.”

“No,” answered Geoffrey, “he only got it on a long lease. It will be out in a few years now. I got a hint once that Lord Brackley would not object to selling it when the lease is out, but I don’t know that I should care to buy it. As likely as not I shall leave no—,” but the rest of his words were too low for Marion to catch.

“Then you have no land in Brentshire?” she enquired.

“Not a rood,” he replied, “nor anywhere else. The old place that belonged to my grandfather, for I *had* a grandfather, though Miss Tremlett would probably tell you I hadn’t, was over at the other side of the country but neither my father nor I cared about it—it was ugly and unproductive—and before he died my father advised me to accept the first good offer I got for it. So I sold it last year very advantageously indeed. The purchase money is still in the old bank. I should invest it somehow I suppose, for it’s too large a sum to leave in a country bank. But all I have is there, and I really don’t know what else to do with it. I have always had a sort of idea I should buy another place. The bank is as safe as can be of course—I am actually a sleeping partner in it still. But I believe they don’t want to keep me. That new man they took in lately has such heaps of money, they say, and he’s making all sorts of changes.”

“Your father would not have liked that,” said Marion.

“No indeed,” replied Geoffrey. “Any sort of change, he always thought, *must* be for the worse.” He was talking more naturally and heartily than had been the case for some time, in the interest of the conversation, appearing temporarily to forget the sad change that had come over their relations. But suddenly he recollected himself. With an entire alteration of manner he went on. “I am forgetting that these personal matters can have no interest for you. I beg your pardon for troubling you with them. Still perhaps,” he added thoughtfully, “it is as well for you to understand these things, however uninteresting, they may be.”

Marion looked and felt hurt.

“Geoffrey,” she said reproachfully, “you go too far.”

He turned sharply and looked at her. But her face was bent over her book, and she did not see the wistful entreaty in his gaze. He said nothing aloud: but to himself he murmured. “Too far Ah, no! No more half gifts for me, which in the end are worse than none. But she did not mean it, poor child! Even now she understands me less than ever. As if her kindness, her pity, were not far harder to bear than her scorn.”

The next day they returned Brentshire.

Geoffrey as thankful when it was over; and they had settled down into a sort of commonplace routine, and to a great extent independence of each other in their daily lives. It was grievously hard upon him—this broken-spirited, heartless

“coming home.” Harder to bear, I think, than if his joyous anticipations had been cut short by death itself. For had it been a dead bride he was thus bringing home, he would not have felt so far, so utterly separated from her, in all that constitutes the real bitterness of disunion, as he felt himself now from his living, unloving wife—the pale, cold Marion, whose terrible words still rang in his ears. “I did love him even then with all the love of my nature, and, oh, Geoffrey, I love him now.”

They both, though they did not allude to it, dreaded intensely the first visit to Miss Veronica. By tacit agreement they did not pay it together, by tacit agreement too, they decided that the secret of their fatal “mistake,” should, if possible, be concealed from the affectionate and unselfish friend, who, to some extent, was responsible for their having committed it. But they reckoned without their host! Veronica’s perceptions, naturally acute, and rendered still more so by her reflective life and in her present case by her loving anxiety, were not so easily to be deceived. Though no word of misgiving escaped her, she yet saw too clearly that Geoffrey’s gaiety was forced—that Marion’s expressions of content and satisfaction wore not genuine—that neither of the two confided in her as of old. She was the last person in the world to take offence or be hurt by their silence. That its motive was to spare her pain she divined by instinct. Still on the whole, I think it was a mistake. Poor Veronica suffered, I believe, more acutely from the mystery surrounding her friends’ evident alienation from each other, than would have been the case had they taken her into their confidence and related to her the whole of the strange and exceptional history. On their side both Geoffrey and Marion paid no light price for the reserve they thought it their duty to maintain. For the first time since childhood Geoffrey felt himself forced to shun the society of the friend to whom he had carried every grief and perplexity, every interest, every joy of his life. And to Marion likewise, it was no small trial to be deprived at this critical time, of the wisest woman friend she had ever known; of the gentle sympathy which during the many dreary months of her Mallingford life, had never failed her.

The Manor Farm was one of those rather anomalous habitations, half farm, half gentleman’s house, of which in some of the agricultural counties one sees so many. With no special characteristics of its own, save perhaps that it was somewhat quaint, and decidedly old fashioned: hardly picturesque and not exactly ugly; it was the sort of house that takes its colouring mainly from the lives of its inhabitants. All dwellings are not of this description: there are venerable walls which we cannot but associate with gloom and solemnity,

however merry may have been the voices, however ringing the laughter which there we may have heard resound; there are “rose-clad” cottages, which our memory refuses to depict save as smiling in the sunshine, though our sojourn therein may have been of the most sorrowful, and the brightness without seemed but to mock the aching hearts and tear-laden eyes within. But the Manor Farm was by no means an impressive abode. It was comfortable already, and with a little trouble might have been made pretty: but alas, at this time there was no grace or sweetness in the heart of the young girl who came with reluctant steps to be its mistress, whose youth and brightness had been swamped in the deep waters through which she had passed.

Unconsciously she was entering on a new phase in her experience. The first effect of her again meeting with Ralph had been to revive in her the consciousness of his irresistibly strong personal influence. For a time she felt very near to him; as if indeed she only lived in the immaterial union with him which she had before imagined was at an end. This did not surprise her. It seemed to her that the bar on her side of a loveless marriage was in point of fact no bar at all: whereas so long as she had believed in his union to another, she had felt herself more utterly divided from him than by death itself. Woman’s indefensible logic, no doubt, but so she felt, and so she expressed it to herself. She was wrong—mistaken to a great extent—she *had* been drifting away from Ralph. Only his actual presence, his personal influence had recalled her: of which he himself was conscious when he deliberately resolved utterly to sever himself from her life; by no species of intercourse or communication, however apparently innocent or irreproachable, to keep alive in her the consciousness of an influence so fatal to her prospects of peace as the wife of another man.

I hardly think this *first* phase of her suffering, though acute almost to agony, was after all the worst. There is a great compensatory power in strong excitement—the after days of grey depression are to my thinking the most to be dreaded. On these she was now entering; for though she knew it not, the full strength of his immediate influence was already beginning to fade. The entering on a new life, the return to scenes with which he was in no wise associated, had much to do with this. Still, at times the first sharp agony returned to her; but generally when roused by some external agency. The sight of any silly trifling thing associated with him—a book out of which he had read to her, hand-writing resembling his, even little details of dress recalling him—all had power to stab her. Ah, yes! Even to the day of her death she felt that the scent of honeysuckle would be to her unendurable, for that fatal day in his excitement Ralph had



plucked a spray off the luxuriant branches overhanging the old arbour, and ruthlessly crushing it in his hands, the strong, almost too sweet perfume had reached her as she sat before him.

But these acute sensations gradually grew to be of rarer occurrence; very possibly, had her new life at the Manor Farm been fuller and more congenial, had Geoffrey been more experienced, less humble, and perhaps less unselfish, at this crisis things might have mend. By allowing her to see that, notwithstanding all that had passed he yet loved her as fervently as before, that yet she was to him a very necessity of his being; the husband might gradually have drawn her out of herself and eventually led her at once to cling to and support, the man who truly, as he had once said, found “life without her” a very mockery of the word.

But Geoffrey could not do this. He pitied her too much; he hated himself for what he had brought upon her. He went to the extreme of fancying himself actually repulsive to her. He guarded himself from the slightest word or sign of familiarity or affection, imagining that the revulsion these would engender would drive them yet further and more hopelessly apart.

“At least,” he thought, “she shall live in peace. All I can now do to please her is to keep out of her way and not disgust her by constantly reminding her of her bondage.” So, though his whole existence was full of her, though her slightest wish was immediately, though unobtrusively, attended to, he yet left her to herself, maintaining an appearance of such indifference to her and absorption in his independent pursuits, that the girl was almost to be excused for imagining that Geoffrey was “more of a farmer than a man,” incapable of very refined or long-lived affection, and that, after all, so far as he was concerned, what had happened did not so much matter. “He would have been pretty sure to get tired of me before long in any case,” was the reflection with which she threw off all sense of responsibility with respect to him, and stifled for the time the pangs of reproach for the blight which through her had fallen on his sunny life.

There was little society of any desirable kind in the neighbourhood of the Manor Farm. The other side of the county was much more sociable, but about Brackley there were few resident county families—the great man of the place a permanent absentee. Besides which the Baldwins’ position had been a somewhat anomalous one, lying rather on the border lands, for the father’s status as banker in Mallingford naturally connected him with the little town, while at the same time it induced a species of acquaintance with the out-lying districts. Geoffrey’s

rooted aversion from earliest childhood to anything in the shape of office or desk, or indeed to indoor occupation of any kind, had led to the removal to the Manor Farm some time before the old man's death. Hunting, shooting, and so on, with the sons of the few squires in the neighbourhood, had brought about the sort of bachelor friendliness between him and these families which was pleasant enough so far as it went, but committed the other side to nothing in respect of the future Mrs. Baldwin. Had he married quite in his own sphere, or slightly beneath him, he would have sunk, as a Benedick, into peaceful obscurity. But when it was known that his bride, though poor, was a daughter of the well-known Hartford Vere, himself a cadet of one of the "best" Brentshire families, mammas began to think they must really call at the Farm, and "show a little attention to her, poor young thing!" To which disinterested amiability on the part of their spouses, papas, being in general more liberal-minded in such matters, made, of course, no objection.

So Marion received some visitors, of whom the Copleys of the Wood were the only ones in whom she felt the slightest interest. A moderate amount of invitations to dreary dinner-parties, or still more trying "candle visits," followed. Geoffrey thought it right to accept them, so, feeling that to her, change of scene was but the replacing of one kind of dulness by another, Marion agreed to his decision, and they went.

It was really not lively work, but the dreariness no doubt lay chiefly in herself. For after all there were sensible, kindly people among their entertainers, and though the world "is not all champagne, table-beer is not to be despised." Not certainly when we are young and fresh, and vigorous; inclined, as youth *should* be, to the use of rose-coloured spectacles, and to mistaking electro-plate for the genuine article. But young Mrs. Baldwin was censorious because unhappy, difficult to please because dissatisfied with herself. People were kindly inclined to her. They knew she had long been motherless, and of late fatherless as well, her only brother separated from her by half the world, her present position, though the wife of "as fine a fellow as ever breathed," far lower, socially speaking, than originally she might have aspired to. Altogether a good deal of kindness, really genuine so far as it went, might have been received by her, had she encouraged it. But she did not, "could not," she told herself. So her new acquaintances felt repelled, naturally enough, and she, sensitive to a fault, felt she was not liked, and drew back still further into her shell of cold reserve. "Pride," of course, it was called. And "what has she to be proud of?" next came to be asked, when the poor girl's name was brought on the *tapis*.

After one of these visits she was invariably more depressed than before. She was not hardened to feeling herself disliked, nor callous to the womanly mortification of knowing she had not been seen to advantage. She fancied she was growing ugly; she knew she had grown unamiable, and she was angry with herself, while yet she was bitter at others. Geoffrey above all. When in company, he looked so well and in such good spirits, that at times Marion thought she almost hated him. Truly she was hard to please! Had he allowed himself to appear depressed, or in any way different from his former well-known joyous self, she would in her heart have accused him of indelicacy, of obtruding upon her regardless of her feelings, the pain she had brought upon him, the wreck she had made of his life.

And the season too was against her. Autumn again, nature's dying hour, when all around was but too much in harmony with her desolate life, but too apt to foster the morbid unhealthiness which was fast enveloping her whole existence.

The jog-trot dullness of her daily life came to have a strange fascination for her. Its regularity seemed to be beating time to some approaching change, some crisis in her fate. For that some such was at hand, she felt convinced. The present was *too* unendurable, too essentially unnatural to be long, continuance.

So, in the intervals of her irritation at her husband, she lived, to all appearance, contentedly enough, in the death-in-life monotony so fatal to all growth and healthy development. Geoffrey had no idea *how* bad things were with her. He thought he was giving her all she would accept, undisturbed peace and perfect independence. Yet his very heart bled for her, often, very often when she little suspected it. He made one grand mistake; he gave her no responsibilities, no necessary duties. Her time was her own; the housekeeping was all attended to by a confidential and efficient servant, whose accounts even were overlooked by the master instead of by the mistress of the establishment.

Money Marion had in plenty, more than she knew what to do with; for she had never been "*fanatica*" on the subject of dress, and even her old love of books and music seemed to be deserting her. She would not ride. The horse destined for her use stood idle in the stable; and more than once Geoffrey so nearly lost heart that he was on the point of selling it. He had one great advantage over Marion. He was the possessor of that mysterious, and to mere spectators, somewhat irritating gift, known as "animal spirits." There were times when, in spite of all, his unspeakable disappointment, his bitter self-reproach, the young

man could not help feeling happy. An exciting run, a bracing frosty morning in his fields, filled him for the time with his old joyousness, the exhilaration of life in itself, apart from all modifying circumstances. Poor fellow! She need not have grudged him, what afterwards on looking back through a clearer atmosphere, she believed to have been the only compensatory influence in the lonely, unsympathised-with existence, to one so frank and affectionate, more trying even than she, with her greater powers of reserve and self-reliance, could altogether realize.

Now and then, though rarely, the cloudy gloom of mutual reserve and apparent indifference, into which day by day they were drifting further, was broken, painfully enough, by stormy flashes of outspoken recrimination and wounding reproach. Naturally, they were both sweet-tempered, but this wretched state of things was fast souring them. Scenes miserable to witness, had any friend been by, lowering in the extreme to reflect upon in calmer moments, from time to time occurred. In these it is but justice to Geoffrey to say that he was rarely, if ever, the aggressor.

One dull, foggy morning, a “by-day,” unfortunately, for Marion, yielding to atmospheric influences, was in a mood at once captious and gloomy, little disposed to take interest in anything—least of all in her husband’s stable—on this uninviting morning, she was sitting, discontented and unoccupied, in the little boudoir she had not yet found heart to re-furnish, when the door opened suddenly and Geoffrey appeared. He burst in, looking eager and happy. Like his old self, for the time at least.

“Oh, Marion,” he exclaimed, “do put on your hat and come round with me for a moment to the stables. That new mare I bought last week has just come. She is such a perfect beauty. Do come.”

But Marion did not move, but sat there, her face turned from him, affecting to warm her hands at the fire. Then she glanced at the door which Geoffrey had left open, and said peevishly:

“I wish you would remember that other people feel the cold if you don’t. The draught along the passage makes this room almost uninhabitable.

Geoffrey closed the door gently, with a ready apology for his carelessness. Then he returned to the charge.

“You will come out though, won’t you? I am really so anxious to show you my new purchase. She is rather young to do much work this year, but by another, she will be all I could wish. I really never saw a more beautiful creature.”

“I am glad you are pleased,” said Marion, coldly, “but you must excuse my joining in the chorus of admiration which I have no doubt is going on in the stable-yard. I should I only disappoint you, for I really could not get up the proper amount of ecstasy.”

Geoffrey’s face fell.

“You used to take some interest in my horses, Marion,” he said, deprecatingly.

“Very possibly,” she replied, in a somewhat sneering tone. “Barley-sugar isn’t a bad thing in its place. But as for living on it altogether, that’s a different matter. Long ago I could afford to be amused by your stable ‘*fureur*,’ now and then. But it never seem to occur to you that it’s possible to have too much even of the charms of bay mares and such-like! You must excuse my bad taste.”

“I don’t understand you,” replied Geoffrey. “I cannot feel that I deserve to be taunted with having bored you with anything that interested me.”

“I don’t suppose you do understand me,” she answered, in the same contemptuous manner. “You made one grand mistake, for which we are both suffering—that of imagining you ever *could* do so. Go back to your hones, with whom, I can assure you, you have more in common than you could ever have with me. Only do not, I beg of you, delude yourself with the idea that a being who has the misfortune to possess something in the way of mind and soul, is the right person to apply to for sympathy in the only interests *you* seem capable of.”

The extreme contempt, the insulting scorn of her words and manner stung him to the quick. With a muttered expression of some kind, of which she could not catch the words, he turned from her sharply, and for once in his life slammed the door behind him violently, as, half mad with misery, he rushed away from the sound of her cold, mocking words.

When he had gone, Marion rose from her seat and sauntered to the window. She stood there gazing out at the dreary garden, desolate and bare, save for the leaves thickly strewing the paths and beds. Already her heart was reproaching

her for her cruelty; already her conscience was bitterly accusing her. She had done very wrong; she knew, she owned it to herself. But she could not feel responsible, even for her own misdeeds.

“They are all a part of the whole,” she cried, “all a part of the wretched, miserable whole.”

She “could not help it!” “It was not in her nature to be good when she was miserable.” “And I am no more to blame,” she thought, defiantly, “for being wicked than a flower for not blooming without sunshine.”

But does the poor flower resolutely turn from the light? Does it not rather welcome eagerly each narrow ray that penetrates to its dark dwelling, and with humble gratitude make the most of the sunshine vouchsafed to it?

Half-an-hour later Marion heard a clatter in the direction of the stables, voices eager and excited—more clatter, the dogs barking. Then the sound of a horse’s feet gradually sobering down into a steady pace, as they were lost in the distance. Geoffrey had gone out riding. And on the new mare, the footman told her, when she rang for coals, and made some indirect enquiry.

“Very handsome she is, ma’am,” added he, “but very awkward at starting. My master had some trouble to get her out of the yard. She took fright at a heap of bricks lying there for repairs. Perhaps you heard the noise, ma’am?”

“Yes,” said Marion, indifferently, “I thought I heard the dogs barking.”

In her heart she felt rather uneasy. She wished she had gone out with her husband to admire his favourite; she wished they had not separated with such angry feelings; she wished he had not chosen to-day for trying the new mare!

She put on her hat, and, with a book in her hand, ensconced herself in a sheltered nook, which after some difficulty she succeeded in finding. Out of doors it felt less chilly than in the house, and gradually she grew soothed and calm. She thought to herself she would stay out there for some hours; the day was, after all, mild and pleasant, and the perfect quiet would do her good. But her anticipations were doomed to be disappointed. In less than an hour she heard from her retreat the sound of approaching carriage-wheels, then ladies’ voices at the hall door; and in a few minutes James appeared, breathless in hunting for her in all her usual haunts.

“The Misses Copley, if you please ma’am, in the drawing-room.”

“Very well,” she replied, half provoked, and yet not altogether sorry for the interruption, “I will be with them directly. The young ladies, you said?”

“Yes, ma’am, Miss Copley and Miss Georgie.”

They were about the only people she ever cared to see. Really amiable and affectionate; happy-hearted, and yet gentle, and perfectly unacquainted with her previous history; with them she felt on safe ground. They liked, and in a measure understood her. Their perceptions were not of the quickest; they had no idea that all was not satisfactory between her and Geoffrey, and her quiet manner did not to appear either cold or proud, for they had known her since her first coming to Mallingford, when there had been reason enough for her depression—and so, as it were, they had grown accustomed to what struck strangers as chilling and repellent. Besides, she liked them, and felt really grateful for their consistent kindness. So of course they saw her to advantage.

This morning they were the bearers of an invitation—“We want you and Geoffrey to come and dine with us to-day, and stay over to-morrow,” began Georgie, eagerly; and then Margaret took up the strain—

“Yes, you must come. I’ll tell you the great reason. Georgie’s ‘young man’ is coming tonight, and we do so want you to see him. He has not been here for some months; not since the time you were so ill. Then, too, Papa has some draining on hand he wants Geoffrey’s opinion about. You will come, won’t you?”

“I should like it exceedingly,” said Marion, cordially; but as to Geoffrey, I can’t say. He has gone out, and I don’t know when he will be in.”

“Of course,” exclaimed Georgie, stupid of us not to have told you. We met him on our way—(by-the-by, what a beautiful mare that is he has got, but what a vixen!)— and he said he would certainly come if you would. I was to ask you to order his man to put up what clothes he will want, as he said he would not return here, unless he hears at the Wood that you are not coming. So it’s all right, isn’t it? Bring your habit, do; it’s an age since we’ve had a ride together.”

“I have not ridden for months,” said Marion. “Hardly since I was ill. I don’t think I care about it, and I don’t think the horse Geoffrey intended for me is in

riding condition.”

“You could ride one of ours,” suggested Margaret. But, “No, thank you,” said Marion, resolutely.

She agreed, however, to all the rest of their proposals, and in an hour or two’s time found herself with her friends in their comfortable carriage, bowling briskly along the high-road to Copley Wood, in far better spirits than early that morning she would have believed she could possibly attain to.

Geoffrey met them at the hall door, and handed them out of the carriage. Marion fancied he looked pale; though he began talking to her young friends as brightly as usual. She felt grateful for their presence, as otherwise their meeting after the scene in the morning could not but have been uncomfortable for both. As it was, however, it was easy to avoid any approach to a tête-à-tête.

“I am glad you have come,” he said, rather stiffly. This was the only approach to a reconciliation that took place between them.

Then followed a hearty welcome from kindly, cheery Lady Anne and the old Squire. It was impossible to resist altogether the genial influence of the whole family, the pleasant atmosphere of goodwill and cordiality pervading the dwelling. Yet even with this, there was mingled for Marion much bitterness.

“Why can’t I be happy and comfortable, like these kind, good people?” she asked herself, as she stood by the bright fire in the pretty morning-room, and, glancing round, took in all the details of the pleasant, home-like scene. The old portraits on the walls, the bookcases with their tempting contents, the furniture with a general air of warmth and colour about it, though sobered down by time and use to the quiet hue which in dull houses looks dingy, in cheerful ones comfortable. The bits of work and newspapers lying about, the fresh, brightly-tinted flowers on the table—the two pretty girls flitting about—all made an attractive picture. Geoffrey seemed to enjoy the pleasant influence: he lay back lazily in his chair, looking up laughingly in Georgie’s face as she passed him, his gold-brown hair and contrasting charm-blue “well-opened” eyes, contrasting charmingly with the little brunette’s darker locks, and quick, sparkling glances. She was *only* a pretty girl, little Georgie Copley, a merry, robin redbreast sort of a creature, who by no imagination could be idealised into a beautiful or stately woman; yet for one little moment Marion felt a passing pang of jealousy of the



happy child.

“Why didn’t he marry *her*?” she thought to herself; “she would have suited him, and in their commonplace way they would have been happy. I am too old for him, as well as too everything else.”

And with a slight shiver she turned round to the fire. She felt herself like a skeleton at the feast, as her eyes caught the reflection of her face in the mirror above the mantelpiece. Thin and pale and shadowy she looked to herself, with large, unhappy-looking eyes, from which all the lustre and richness seemed to have departed, closely bound round the small, drooping head. “Showy,” in her best days, she never had been; nor had she ever been inclined to do justice to her own personal charms. “I am not ugly,” she had said to herself as a young girl, “but that is about all there is to be said.” Now she would have hesitated to say even as much.

Some one else was watching her just then, as she stood quiet and apart by the fire. Someone who she little thought was thinking of her at all. Some one who, as he chattered merrily to Georgie, was hardly conscious of any other presence than that of the slight, drooping figure at the other end of the room, whose bitter sneering words of the morning were already forgiven, and, if not forgotten, remembered only to add intensity to his yearning tenderness of pity, his deep, enduring, ill-requited love.

Then came the announcement of luncheon, and a general move to the well-covered table in the dining-room.

During the meal, plans for the disposal of the remainder of the day were discussed.

“Captain Ferndale can’t be here much before dinner-time, Georgie,” said her sister. “You don’t intend to stay in all the afternoon, I hope?”

“Oh dear no,” replied the sensible little woman, “I intend to ride with you and Geoffrey. Unless Mrs. Baldwin will change her mind, and ride my horse instead of me. Will you, Marion?” And “Oh do,” added Margaret; “I’m quite sure it would do you good. Do help us to persuade her, Geoffrey. I am sure I have a habit that will fit you.”

But Geoffrey only glanced at his wife, and, seeing the slight annoyance in her

face, said nothing.

“Now, girls, don’t tease,” said Lady Anne, as notwithstanding Marion’s evident disinclination to make one of the riding party, her young friends still attempted to persuade her to change her mind. “You really must let Mrs. Baldwin decide for herself.” And with these words she rose and led the way back to the morning-room. Reluctantly Margaret and Georgie gave up the endeavour and went to dress for riding. Geoffrey strolled to the stables to give some directions respecting the saddling of his beautiful “Coquette,” whose behaviour in the morning had decided him that she would be none the worse for a little more exercise.

“You’ll have some trouble to get her sobered down a bit, Sir,” said the old coachman. “I’m a little afraid Miss Georgie’s ‘Prince’ will set her off. Prince is fidgety like now and then, though he never does no mischief when Miss Georgie’s riding him. But it wouldn’t take much to upset this ’ere mare, Sir. She’s young and flighty, though handsome as a pictur’.”

“I’ll be careful, Jackson, no fear but what I’ll take it out of her,” said Geoffrey. “If she’s tiresome beside the young ladies, I’ll give her a gallop across country to settle her down.”

Evidently some sedative of the kind was likely to be required! Coquette showed the greatest reluctance to start in a becoming and ladylike manner. True to her name she eyed Georgie’s Prince with evidently mischievous intentions, and the very eccentric manner in which the little party set out on their expedition was such as slightly to upset even Lady Anne’s well seasoned nerves.

Marion watched the departure from the window. She had not yet exchanged a word with her husband since the painful scene of the morning; and very unreasonably she felt inclined to be angry with *him*, for having, as she thought, given her no opportunity of showing that she regretted the unkindly and undignified temper to which she had given way.

She felt somewhat uneasy as she watched the peculiar behaviour of the new mare; but this feeling too she disguised from herself by turning it in the direction of annoyance at Geoffrey.

“It is exceedingly inconsiderate, indelicate almost of him,” she said to herself, “to parade in this way his complete independence of any sort of wifely anxiety. I

believe he chooses these vicious creatures on purpose. And of course if I made the slightest remonstrance he would turn on me with taunts that *I* had no right to interfere, that to me his personal safety must be a matter of utter indifference. Evidently he now despises what, if he had acted differently, might still have been his—my friendship and regard. But he really need not go out of his way to exhibit to strangers the state of things between us.” And with a hard look on her face, she turned to Lady Anne, who now entered the room.

## CHAPTER V.

### A WIFELY WELCOME.

“Where love is great, the littlest doubts are fear,  
Where little fears grow great, great love grows there.”

SHAKESPEARE.

“I DON'T much like that horse your husband is riding to-day, my dear,” said Lady Anne, as she sat down to her knitting beside the fire-place. “It's all very well young men riding these high-spirited animals, breaking them in and so on, but Geoffrey is no longer a young man in that sense of the word. His neck is no longer his own property. He has you to think of and—and—I think you must scold him a little and make him be more cautious.”

“I fear I could do little good, my dear Lady Anne,” said Marion, as lightly as she could. “You see bachelor habits are not so easily broken through! It will take some time to teach Geoffrey the double value attached to his neck.”

“Ah well,” said the elder lady. “I suppose it *would* be rather hard on a man to give up what has always been his great amusement. You may be thankful, my dear, that rash riding is the worst ‘bachelor habit’ that you will ever discover in *your* husband. Except perhaps smoking. Geoffrey does smoke rather too much, I think. Don't think me impertinent—though I have no boys at home now, I take a great interest in young men, and for years Geoffrey has been like one of our own. As to riding yourself you are very wise to have given it up, my dear. The girls don't understand, you see. Of course, poor dears, it would not occur to

them, or they would not have teased you so. But you are very wise, my dear, very wise indeed to run no risk—not that it might not *perhaps* do no harm, but it is better not, much better,” she repeated, with sundry grandmotherly nods expressive of the utmost sagacity.

Marion looked up with extreme mystification.

“I don’t quite understand you, Lady Anne,” she said. “I am not the least nervous about riding, or afraid of its doing me harm in any way. Last year it did me a great deal of good. It is only that just lately I haven’t felt quite in spirits for it.”

“Of course not, my dear. It is quite natural you should not feel so. You must not mind me, my dear, but look upon me in the light of a mother. If I can be of use to you in any way you must not hesitate to ask me. It will be quite a pleasure in a year or two to see little people trotting about the Manor Farm—it will brighten up the old place, and Geoffrey is so fond of children.”

Marion’s face flushed. Now she understood the good lady’s mysterious allusions. Considerably annoyed, and yet anxious to conceal that she felt so, she replied rather stiffly: “You are very kind, Lady Anne, but I assure you you are quite mistaken. There is no reason of the kind for my giving up riding.”

Lady Anne looked incredulous, and before Marion felt sure that she had succeeded in convincing her of the truth of what she had said, their tête-à-tête was interrupted.

But it had given a new turn to Marion’s thoughts. Never before in the few unhappy months of her married life had it occurred to her to think of the possibility of her at some future time occupying a new relation, the sweetest, the tenderest of all—that of a mother. And to Geoffrey’s children! Poor Geoffrey, he was “so fond of children,” Lady Anne said. The few simple words softened her to him marvellously. She began to wonder if such a tie might perhaps draw them together, if little arms and innocent baby lips might have power to achieve what at present seemed a hopeless task. Or was it already too late? She did not blame him; in her gentle, womanly mood she blamed no one but herself. It was her own doing; if indeed, as she feared, it was the case, that her husband no longer loved her. These reflections engrossed her during the quiet afternoon, which otherwise she might have found dull and wearisome. She felt surprised when the servant

appeared with afternoon tea, and Lady Anne, waking from her peaceful slumber in her arm-chair, began to remark how suddenly it had got dark, and to wonder why the riding party had not yet returned.

“Captain Ferndale will be arriving immediately,” she said, “and it will look so awkward if Georgie is not at home.”

Marion looked out. Dark, as yet, it was hardly, but dusk decidedly. Much such an afternoon as the one on which, now more than a year ago, Geoffrey had first ventured to tell her of his feelings towards her, which confession she had so ungraciously received.

“Why did I not keep to what I said then?” she asked herself. “How much better for both of us had I done so! Poor Geoffrey, he thought me cruel then, how much more reason has he to reproach me now!”

She was recalled to the present by Lady Anne’s voice.

“Do you see anything of them, my dear?” she asked.

“No,” said Marion, listeningly. But almost as she spoke the faint, far-off clatter of approaching horses’ feet became audible. “There they are,” she exclaimed, and a certain feeling of welcome stole into her heart. Somehow she felt anxious to be “good” to Geoffrey; to make up to him, for the morning’s hard, sneering words. With which wish she ran out into the hall to receive her husband and the two girls. They were dismounting as she reached the door. Outside it looked foggy and chilly. She could not clearly distinguish either horses or riders.

“You are rather late,” she exclaimed. “Isn’t it very cold? How has Coquette been behaving?”

It was Georgie’s voice that replied.

“Oh, is that you, Marion? We’ve had such a gallop home. The fog came on so suddenly. Geoffrey is back, of course?”

“Geoffrey!” said Marion in surprise. “Why should he be back before you? No, he has not come. I was asking you how his new purchase had been behaving.”

“She’s a vixen,” replied Georgie; if I were a gentleman I would call her something worse. Prince and she teased each other so, that we separated. Geoffrey said he would come home by the fields and take it out of her. We came home by the road; but it is ever so long ago since we separated, and he said he would be home long before us. What can he be about?”

A strange sensation crept over Marion. Hardly anxiety, hardly apprehension. Rather a sort of standing still of her whole being with sudden awe, sudden terror of what for the first time darted into her imagination as the possible end of the whole, the solution of the problem of her life-mistake. Like a picture she saw it all before her as if by magic. There been an accident; Geoffrey was killed! She, his wife no longer, but freed by this awful cutting of the knot from the bonds which had galled her so sorely, against which she had murmured so ceaselessly. But was it a feeling of relief which accompanied the vision, which for the moment she believed to be prophetic? Was it not rather a sensation compared to which all her past sufferings seemed trivial and childish—a draught of that bitterest of cups of which it is given to us poor mortals to drink, unavailing, “too late,” self-reproach? If Geoffrey were dead, it seemed to her, his wife, standing there and remembering all, that she and she alone, had killed him. She said not a word. In perfect silence she watched Margaret and Georgie gather up their long muddy skirts and hasten across the hall, peeping in as they passed the open door of the morning-room to reassure their mother’s anxiety. She followed them mechanically; heard, as if in a dream, Lady Anne’s exclamations of concern on hearing that Mr. Baldwin was not with them; and while the good lady trotted off to share her motherly uneasiness with the Squire, at this time of day always ensconced in his private den, Marion crept upstairs to the room in which but a few hours before she had carelessly thrown off her hat and hurried below to risk no chance of a tête-à-tête with her husband! Her evening dress lay on the bed—through the open door into the dressing-room she saw by the firelight Geoffrey’s as yet unopened portmanteau. She shuddered as it caught her eye. Would he ever open it again? Would she ever again hear his voice, see his stalwart figure and fair sunny face? Or how might she *not* see him? Would they bring him home pale and stiff, stretched out in that *long*, dreadful way she had once or twice in her London life seen a something that had been a man, carried by to the hospital after some fatal accident? Or, worse still, would his fair hair perhaps be dabbled with blood, his blue eyes distorted with agony, his beautiful face all crushed and disfigured?

Ah! It was too horrible.

“Forgive me, dear Geoffrey, forgive me,” she said in her remorse, as if her words could reach him. “Oh, God, forgive me for my wickedness, and do not punish me so fearfully. For how can I live, how endure the light of day with the remembrance of what I have done?”

Crouched by the fire, she remained thus for some time. Then hearing a slight bustle down-stairs in the hall, she rose and went out into the vestibule, looking over the staircase to see what was taking place below. It was an arrival, but not Geoffrey. Captain Ferndale evidently. She saw little Georgie fly across the hall, followed more deliberately by Margaret and her mother.

How happy they all seemed! Had they forgotten all about her, and Geoffrey, out in the fog, alive or dead, nobody seemed to care! But she wronged them. Captain Ferndale was hardly welcomed, before they all began telling him of their anxiety.

“Papa has sent out men in all directions,” said Georgie, “I am perfectly certain something must have happened. The horse he was on is a most vicious creature. I was frightened out of my wits when he was riding beside me, though of course I didn’t say so to poor Marion, Mrs. Baldwin, you know, Fred. By-the-by, Maggie, where is she?”

“In her room, I think,” said Margaret. “I’ll go and see. We have put back dinner half-an-hour in hopes Geoffrey may come back safe and sound by then. But I confess I am very uneasy.”

Marion stole back to her room, and was sitting there quietly when in a minute or two Margaret joined her.

“Geoffrey has not come in yet,” said the girl cheerfully as she entered, “but we are not surprised. It is so foggy, Fred. Ferndale says he had hard work to get here from the station.”

Marion did not answer. Margaret put her arm round her affectionately; but Marion shrank back, and Margaret felt a little chilled.

“You are not uneasy, Mrs. Baldwin?” she said kindly, but a little more stiffly than her wont. “You know your husband is so perfectly to be depended on as a rider. He is sure to be all right.”



Marion looked up at her appealingly.

“Don’t think me cross or cold, Margaret, and don’t call me Mrs. Baldwin. I am *very* unhappy.”

The expression was a curious one. “Very uneasy;” “dreadfully alarmed,” or some such phrase, would have seemed more suited to the circumstances. Margaret Copley felt puzzled. After all there was something very peculiar about Marion Baldwin; she could not make her out. There she sat staring into the fire, pale but perfectly calm. Not a tear, not a symptom of nervousness; only saying in that quiet, deliberate way that she was “very unhappy.” Margaret was too young, too inexperienced, and too practically ignorant of sorrow to detect the undertone of anguish, of bitter, remorseful misery in the few cold words—“I am very unhappy.”

Marion said no more, and Margaret did not disturb her. At last the dinner gong sounded. Marion started: she had not changed her dress.

“Never mind,” said Margaret, “come down as you are. Unless you would prefer staying up here.”

“Oh, no,” said Marion, “I shall dress very quickly. I shall be ready in five minutes.”

She had a morbid horror of appearing affected or exaggerated; and an instinctive determination to keep her feelings to herself. Naturally, she made the mistake of overdoing her part.

She dressed quickly, went downstairs and sat through the long, weary dinner; to all appearance the calmest and least uneasy of the party. One after another of the grooms and gardeners, despatched with lanterns in various directions to seek the truant, returned after a fruitless search.

The Squire grew more and more fidgety. Lady Anne was all but in tears—Margaret and Georgie unable to eat any dinner. Marion seemed to herself to be standing on the edge of a fearful precipice, down which she dared not look; but she said nothing, and no stranger entering the company would have imagined that she, of all the party, was the one most chiefly concerned in the fate of Geoffrey Baldwin.

Dinner over, the ladies mechanically adjourned as usual to the drawing-room. Lady Anne and Margaret sat together by the fire, talking in a low voice. Marion stayed near them for a moment, but Lady Anne's sort of sick-room tone and half-pitying glances in her direction, irritated her. So she got a book, and seated herself by a little reading-table in the further corner of the room. Georgie ran in and out: every five minutes braving the cold and fog at the hall-door to peep out to see, or hear rather, "if any one was coming," like sister Anne in the grim old story.

For more than half-an-hour they sat thus in almost unbroken silence. The Squire and Captain Ferndale, with the usual manly horror of an impending "scene," lingered longer than usual in the dining-room.

Suddenly Georgie darting back from one of her voyages of discovery to the hall-door, flew into the drawing-room exclaiming excitedly.

"Mamma, Maggie, I hear a horse!"

In an instant they all jumped up, and followed her into the hall. The door was wide open, the horse's feet were heard plainly, steadily approaching, nearer and nearer.

Marion remained in the drawing-room, only creeping close to the doorway, whence she could both hear and see all that took place.

"I do hope it is all right," said Lady Anne, earnestly. "Girls, Fred," (for by this time the gentlemen had joined them,) "do you think it is he?"

How could they tell, poor people? They only strained their eyes, vainly endeavouring to pierce the darkness, thick enough, as the country folks say, to be cut with a knife. A few servants' heads appeared at the doors leading to the back regions; without which, of course, no domestic event can take place with correct decorum. The scene was really an effective one! The horse's feet coming nearer and, nearer, the little group in the old oak-wainscoted hall, the pale face of the poor girl peeping out from the drawing-room doorway, thinking and feeling so much that none of those about her had the slightest conception of! What was to be the end of it? What was she about to hear? Five minutes more suspense, it seemed to her she could not have endured.

There is but a step, according to a well-known adage, between the sublime

and the ridiculous. Thus almost could Marion have expressed her feelings, when, as at last the horse drew near enough, for the rider to distinguish the anxious faces at the door, a voice out of the darkness reached them. It was Geoffrey's. Loud and cheery it sounded.

"Here I am, safe and sound! A nice adventure I've had. Imagine me, Brentshire born and bred, having lost my way in this horrible fog."

"Oh, I am so glad you're all right," cried Georgie, clapping her hands.

And "We've been so frightened about you," chimed in Margaret and her mother.

The Squire too, and Captain Ferndale were most hearty in their congratulations. Likewise several members of the servants' hall, and a few grooms and stable-boys who started up as if by magic, to lead away the naughty Coquette who stood there in the fog humble and subdued enough, with but small traces of the mischievous spirit which had distinguished her departure some seven hours previously.

For the moment Mr. Baldwin was made quite a hero of, as he stood in the midst of the group, damp and muddy, but his fair face flushed and eager, as he related all that had fallen him and the beauty that had led him such a dance. Everyone was intensely relieved at the comfortably commonplace end to the adventure which had caused so much anxiety: everyone was most sincere and hearty in their congratulations. All but one. The voice which alone he cared to hear was silent. He looked round eagerly and enquiringly.

"My wife, Marion," he said, "is still here? I had better go to tell her I am all right."

"Oh, yes," said Margaret, rather awkwardly, "I will go and tell her; but we have not let her know how uneasy we have been. She has not therefore been alarmed."

"Thank you," said Geoffrey. But on his heart the girl's words fell with a strange chill. "She had not been alarmed," this wife of his. It had been then so easy to prevent her feeling anxiety about him, that even this girl, a stranger almost to her, felt instinctively that the extreme coolness of the young wife at such a time, called loudly for some sort of excuse, some palliation of what to

those about her had evidently looked very like utter heartlessness and indifference to his fate.

“If only they knew the whole,” he said to himself, “they would not wonder at her unnatural behaviour. ‘Alarmed’ about me! No indeed! The saddest sight that can meet her eyes will be my returning alive and well.” And with this bitterness in his heart, he followed Margaret to the drawing-room in quest of Marion.

What evil spirit of pride and unlovely perversity had been whispering to her? And why, oh! why had she listened to its voice, wilfully stifling the pleadings of her gentle woman’s heart, and deliberately destroying what might have been the happy, softening influences of the day’s occurrences? Much doubtless of the miserable state of things between these two, bound together by the closest, most sacred of ties, they—she—was not to be blamed for. “Circumstances”—the only name we, in our ignorance, can find for the mysterious combinations which destroy the lives of so many—“circumstances” in great part, were the scape-goat in the case of the great mistake of Marion’s life. She had meant to do right, poor child, and had tried her best to execute her intention. Terrible *mistakes* we are all apt to make, the wisest of us perhaps more than the humbler and less confident. But for such, though the temporal punishment is often disproportionately heavy, in higher tribunals we are leniently judged. Not so with deliberate acts of cruelty and unkindness to each other, such as Marion Baldwin was this evening guilty of.

She knew what she was about; she knew, though possibly she would not have owned it to herself, that she *wished* to wound Geoffrey, deliberately meant and intended to punish for some offence towards herself which she would have found it difficult to define, the heart whose only blame, if blame it were, was its too great devotion to her.

She was angry with herself for having been frightened about him, mortified, though yet her relief was real, at the matter-of-fact conclusion of what she had been picturing to herself as a crisis in her fate. So, after the manner of people when angry with themselves, she did her best to make another as unhappy as herself.

When Geoffrey entered the drawing-room, and Margaret Copley with instinctive delicacy withdrew, he did not at first perceive that his wife was present. In another moment, however, he caught sight of her, seated at the little

table in the furthest corner of the room, apparently engrossed in a book. His heart throbbed with disappointment, wounded feeling, and even some mixture of indignation; but he controlled himself, and determined to give her a chance.

“Marion,” he said, “I am going to take off my wet things, but I have just looked in to tell you I am all right. You heard me come just now, I suppose? Lady Anne and all the others were at the door to meet me. I’m afraid I have given you all a very uncomfortable evening, but it was Coquette’s fault, not mine. However, all’s well that ends well, and I flatter myself the beauty has had a lesson that she won’t forget in a hurry.”

He went on speaking in a half nervous manner, for Marion did not appear at first to hear him. When he left off she raised her eyes from her book, and said, in the provokingly indifferent, half-awake tone of a person still engrossed in the pages from which the attention is hardly withdrawn:

“I beg your pardon, Geoffrey. I did not hear you come into the room. Was it I you were speaking to? Yes, I heard your horse come up to the door. What a fuss Lady Anne gets into for nothing at all! Hadn’t you better go and change your things?”

And without giving him time to reply, her eyes were again bent on her book. Geoffrey looked at her for a moment without speaking. She felt his gaze fixed on her, she felt, though he could not see, the expression of his face. Almost she felt inclined to spring up and run towards him to ask his forgiveness, to tell him of the anxiety she had endured, the genuine relief she had experienced when she heard of his safe return.

“But he would not believe you,” whispered the evil spirit she had been listening to. “Why lower yourself thus unnecessarily to one who no longer cares for you?”

And Marion gave heed to the specious suggestion, and the opportunity faded away into the mournful crowd of things that might have been—good deeds never done, loving words never spoken.

The remainder of their visit at Copley Wood passed quietly and uneventfully, but Marion was glad when it came to an end. She felt that she had fallen back in her friends’ good opinion; evidently they too thought her heartless and disagreeable, cold and selfish, reserved to an unwomanly degree.

All these epithets she piled on herself. In reality, the Copleys, Margaret especially, thought of her much more kindly than she imagined. They did not, could not, indeed, understand her; few things are more hopeless than any approach to mutual comprehension between the happy and the miserable. The happy, that is to say in the sense in which these inexperienced girls may be called so, happy in utter unconsciousness of the reverse of the picture, thoughtless in the innocent war in which birds and lambs and flowers are thoughtless. But still they were gentle judging, and what in Marion's character and behaviour they could not understand, they pitied and treated tenderly.

The depth of feeling in the few words Geoffrey's wife had addressed to Margaret that evening by the fire, "I am *very* unhappy," rang in the young girl's ears, and emboldened her to speak kindly in her defence, when, as was often the case (for in country society people *must* talk about their neighbours or else be altogether silent), young Mrs. Baldwin's peculiarities were discussed, and that, not in the most amiable of terms.

From this time Geoffrey and his wife lived yet more independently of each other than before. One improvement took place in their relations; though after all I hardly know that it merits to be thus described. There was an end henceforth of all stormy scenes between them. So much Marion had resolved upon; coldness and mutual indifference were evidently to be the order of their lives. Let it be so, she decided, it was to the full as much Geoffrey's doing as hers. But at least she would show herself his equal in the tacit compact: she would not again lower herself by losing her temper and condescending to such aggressive weapons as sarcasm or recrimination. To the letter of the law, she determined in her pride, she would do her duty by him, so that in after days come what might, she need never reproach herself with any short-coming on *her* side; and Geoffrey for his part, if she should be so fortunate as die and leave him free to choose a more congenial help-meet, might at least remember her with respect, if with no warmer feeling. Foolish, presumptuous child! In the terrible "too late" days—of which the slight experience she had had the evening of Geoffrey's misadventure in the fog had profited her so little—in those days "the letter of the law," fulfilled as no fallible mortal yet fulfilled it, would bring with its remembrance sorry comfort. Very "husks that the swine do eat," nay worse, mocking, gibbering fiends to torment us, are in those days the memories of "duties," proudly and perfectly but unlovingly performed; acts of obedience, submission, self-denial even, however outwardly flaw-less, without the *spirit* which alone gives them value.

Doubtless we all fall short in our relations taken to each other. Never yet was the coffin lid closed on the dead face of a human being, but what in the hearts of those who had taken their last look, pressed their last kiss on the pale forehead—it might be the smooth, fair brow of a child, it might be the withered, furrowed face of a world-weary man or woman—there rose reproachful, sad-eyed ghosts of things they might have done for the dead, or, more grievous still, others they would now give much to have left undone.

But it is not at such times the thought of sharp, hasty words repented of as soon as spoken, or of unkind deeds done in the heat of passion and in saner moments atoned for with all the earnestness we can command; it is not the recollection of such things as these that stings us the most deeply. Far more terrible and overwhelming, when we gaze on the dead face in its silent reproach, is the memory of deliberate unkindness—the long course of studied, repellent coldness; wrongs fancied or real, cherished and brooded over instead of forgiven and forgotten; duties even, performed, while yet love was withheld.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A CRISIS.

“I will be quiet and talk with you,  
And reason why you are wrong:  
You wanted my love—is that much true?  
And no I did love, so I do:  
What has come of it all along.”

R. BROWNING.

So time went on, as it always does, through weal and woe, bright days and dull. But this winter was weary work to Marion Baldwin. Worse, far worse to bear, she constantly said to herself, than the previous one, spent Mallingford at the Cross House. Then at least, though she had much to endure, she had been free from the reproaches of her conscience, which now, for all her endeavours to silence it, would yet at times insist on being heard. Geoffrey, though she saw him but seldom in the day, constantly haunted her thoughts. She fancied she perceived a change in him. His manner was the same—perfectly gentle: but never more. But the sorrow of his life was beginning to tell on him physically. He was fast losing heart altogether, as day by day he became more convinced of the hopelessness of ever attempting to win back the wife, who indeed had never been his! Yet she was gentler, more cordial even than she had been to him; always ready to agree to his wishes, much less irritable, anxious evidently to do her “duty” by him. She thought sincerely enough, that he was wearied of her, that it was too late to convince him that in her loneliness she was fast learning to prize the love and devotion which when hers, she had so rudely repulsed. For she



was truly very desolate at this time. She was pining for affection, yearning for companionship.

The remembrance of Ralph was growing to be to her as the memory of the dead, soft and chastened; shrined about with a sacredness of its own, but no longer agonizing and acute. She had grown so thoroughly to realize that she should never see him again, that he was utterly and for ever cut out of her life, that the inward strife and rebellion were at an end. She bowed her head in submission, standing by the grave of her lost love, and in heart said a last, voluntary farewell to the beautiful dream of her girlhood. She could never *forget* him, or in any sense replace him by another. He was still, and for ever must remain, a part of herself, of her whole existence. An impalpable, an indefinable and wholly immaterial bond yet, at times, seemed to rivet her spirit to his; and never was she so at peace as when she felt most conscious of this still existing sympathy. A consciousness altogether superior to the limitations of time or space—which the tidings of his death would in no wise have affected—a certainty that the noblest part of their natures was still and ever would be united, that, in the purest and most exquisite sense, he still loved her, still cared for her well being.

It was to her precisely as if he had long been dead; his own words had foreshadowed this, “as if one of us were dying, Marion.”

To some extent he had foreseen how it would be with her—that to her sensitive, imaginative nature, his thus dying to her, fading softly out of her life, was the gentlest form in which the stroke could come. For she was not the sort of woman, “strong-minded, “philosophical,” call it what you will, who could ever have come to look upon him personally as *only* a friend, to have associated with him in a comfortable “let bygones-be-bygones” fashion, possibly to have attained to a sisterly regard for his wife, in no wise diminished by the gratifying reflection that “though really she is a nice creature, my dear, Lady Severn was not Sir Ralph’s *first* love.”

Ralph had foreseen more. Her nature, though well-balanced and far from weakly, was too clinging, too love-demanding, not, in time, to turn in its outward loneliness and desolation, to the shelter and support (if, indeed, Geoffrey’s countenance did not belie his character) only too ready to welcome it. So much Ralph had read, and correctly enough, of the probable future; and, therefore, as we have seen, even amidst his own supremest suffering, had ventured to predict “a moonlight happiness” for his darling.

But he had not foreseen—how could he have done so?—the side influences, the disturbing elements in the way. Marion's physical prostration at the time, which had rendered it much harder for her to act with her usual unselfishness and self-control; her monotonous, uninteresting, unoccupied life at the Manor Farm, where, partly through circumstances, partly through Geoffrey's mistaken kindness in sparing her every species of care or responsibility, all tended to foster her morbid clinging to the past, nothing drew her to healthy interest in the present. Above all, Ralph had by no means taken sufficiently into account Geoffrey's personal share in the whole. He had thought of him as a fine, honest fellow, devoted in his way to his wife; ready, as she herself had said in other words, to do anything for her happiness. True, he had had misgivings as to the effect of Marion's extending her confidence to her husband, he had thought it was only too probable that her doing so might, for a time at least, have unhappy results. But he had by no means felt certain that she would feel it her duty to tell *more* than she had already, before her marriage, confided to him. And even in the event of her doing so, he had not realized the manner in which it would act on the young man's nature. Few, indeed, even of those most intimately acquainted with Geoffrey Baldwin could have done so. These sunny, gleeful natures are often to the full as grievously misunderstood as their less attractive, graver and apparently more reserved neighbours. Oh what fools we are in our superficial, presumptuous judgments of each other! May not the sunlight dance on the surface of the stream without our forthwith pronouncing its waters shallow? Is there not latent in the blackest, coldest iron a vast power of heat and light?

Miss Veronica was absent from Mallingford the greater part of this winter. Her general health had been less satisfactory of late, and, after much consideration, it had been decided that the coldest months must be spent by her in a milder climate. In a sense, her absence was a relief to both her friends. It was becoming hard work to attempt to deceive her as to the true state of things at the Manor Farm: her loving scrutiny was more painful to Marion than the cold formality of the generality of her acquaintances; more unendurable the thought of her distress and anxiety than even the consciousness of the gossiping curiosity with which the young wife felt instinctively she was elsewhere discussed.

Yet she murmured, sometimes, not a little at this separation from the only friend she could really rely on: but then, in these days, Marion Baldwin murmured, inwardly at least, at everything in her life. There were times when she felt so desperate with ennui and heart-sick at what she believed to be her

husband's ever-growing indifference to her, that she said to herself, if only Veronica were attainable she would break through her reserve and tell her *all*. Most probably, had the resolution been possible to execute, she would have changed her mind before she was half way to Miss Temple's cottage!

One day at luncheon Geoffrey, to her surprise, told her a gentleman was coming to dinner. She felt considerably amazed and a little indignant. It was not often any guest joined them—"entertaining," to any extent, not being expected of a young couple in the first months of their married life, and the couple in question being only too ready to avail themselves of the conventional excuse as long as they could with decency do so—and the few times on which their tête-à-tête meal had been interrupted, Geoffrey had given her plenty of notice, had even seemed to make a favour on her side of her receiving any friend of his. To-day, however, he did nothing of the sort. Hence her indignation at what she imagined to be a new proof of neglect and indifference.

In a somewhat abrupt manner he made his unexpected announcement. True to her determination, that on *her* side there should be no shortcoming, she answered quietly enough though at heart by no means as unmoved as she appeared:

"Very well. I suppose you have told Mrs. Parker. Do you wish me to be at dinner?"

He looked up, slightly surprised. Then answered rather shortly, as had of late become a habit with him. "Of course. Why not? I never thought of your not being at dinner."

"Very well," she replied again; but added, rather stiffly—"In this case, perhaps you will tell me the gentleman's name. It might be awkward for me not to have heard it."

All this time Geoffrey's attention had been greatly engrossed by several letters, printed reports, &c., which he had been reading as he eat his luncheon. For a minute or two he made no reply, seemed not to have heard her question; a trifling neglect, which Marion in her present frame of mind found peculiarly irritating. She sat perfectly still, but no answer being apparently forthcoming, she, having finished her luncheon, rose quietly to leave the room, and had the door-handle in her hand before Geoffrey noticed that she had left the table. The noise of the door opening roused him.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, hastily starting up. “You spoke to me. It was very rude of me, but I did not pay attention to what you said. Please tell me what it was.”

“It was of no consequence, thank you,” replied Marion, coldly, as she swept past him and crossed the hall to the drawing-room.

This was how, silly child, she performed her wifely part to the very letter of the law!

But Geoffrey followed her, after delaying a few moments to collect the papers in which he had been so absorbed, and carry them for safety to his private den. This was at the other side of the house, so two or three minutes passed before he gently opened the drawing-room door, intending to apologise still more earnestly to his wife for his inattention. Marion was sitting on the rug before the fire; for, though it was now early spring, it was very chilly; her face he could not at first see, it was hidden by her hands. But the slight noise he made on coming in disturbed her. She looked up hastily, with rather an angry light in her eyes, imagining it was the servant entering, with the everlasting excuse of “looking at the fire,” and feeling annoyed at the intrusion. But when she saw it was her husband her expression changed, and without speaking she quickly turned her face aside. Not so quickly, though, but what Geoffrey perceived what she wished to conceal--she was crying. It was the first time since their marriage he had seen her shed tears. (What different tales that simple little sentence may tell!) It smote him to the heart. With da sudden impulse he approached her, and stooped down, gently laying his hand on her shoulder: “My poor child,” he said, with all the tenderness in his voice that the words could contain, “forgive me. You have enough to bear without my boorishness wounding you so unnecessarily.”

Her tears fell faster, but she did not shrink from his touch. She felt ashamed of her petulance and childishness. “It is not that,” she said at last, trying to repress her sobs.

“Not my rudeness that has vexed you so?” asked Geoffrey, gently, but feeling already a slight, premonitory chill.

“No, you must not think me so silly,” she replied. “It is” —and she hesitated.

“What?” he persisted.

“Oh, I don’t know—I can’t tell you,” she exclaimed, passionately. “It is not any one thing. It is just everything.”

“Oh,” said Geoffrey, with a whole world of mingled feeling in his voice. “Ah! I feared so. Poor child,” he said again, but with more of bitterness than tenderness this time. “Even my pity I suppose would be odious to you otherwise I might be fool enough to show you how genuine it is. But it is better not.” And he was turning away, when her voice recalled him.

“No, no,” she cried, “Geoffrey, don’t be so hard. Think how very lonely I am, how friendless! However I may have tried you, however you may think I have deceived you, surely my utter loneliness and wretchedness should soften you to me. I don’t want your *pity*. I want what now it is too late to ask for—I know it is too late. I know that you would hate me, only you are good, and so you don’t. But I can’t bear you to speak so hardly and bitterly.”

Her sobs broke out more wildly. Every word she had uttered was a fresh stab to Geoffrey, interpreted by him as it was. But he controlled his own feelings and spoke very gently to the poor child in her sore distress.

“Forgive me if what I said sounded hard and hitter, Marion. Heaven knows I am far from ever intending to hurt you. It is, as you say, too late to undo what is done; but do not make things worse by fancying I would ever intentionally add by even a word to all you suffer. Do me justice at least. So much, I think, I have a right to expect.”

His words were gentle but cold. Marion’s sobs grew quiet and her tears ceased. She was hurt, but her pride forbade her to show it except by silence.

In a moment Geoffrey spoke again, in a different tone.

“You were asking me, I think,” he said, “the name of the gentleman who is coming to dine here. I should have told you before, but I did not know it myself till an hour or two ago when I met him accidentally in Mallingford. It is Mr. Wrexham, my father’s successor in the bank. You remember my telling you about him, perhaps? Very wealthy they say he is. What he cares to be a banker for passes my comprehension.”

“He has never been here before?” asked Marion.

“In this house? No; and I would not have asked him now, for I don’t like the man, but that I want to have some talk with him. I have called a dozen times at the bank in the last week or two, but have never found him in. So when I met him to-day and he began apologising, I cut him short by asking him to dinner, and saying we could talk over our business after. It seemed to me he did not want to come, but he had no excuse ready. I can’t make him out.”

“But you are no longer a partner in the bank, are you?” asked Marion.

“In a sort of a way I am still,” said Geoffrey, “that is just what I want to see Mr. Wrexham about. Through your other guardian, Mr. Framley Vere, I have heard of a very good investment, both for your money—yours and Harry’s, I mean—and part of my own. So I want to see about withdrawing some of my capital from the old bank. I have a right to do so at any time, with proper notice and so on. Last year Wrexham urged my doing so very much. Just then it was not very convenient, but now that I wish to do it, there seems some difficulty which I can’t make out. I have never got hold of Wrexham himself, so you understand why I am anxious to see him. To all intents and purposes he is the head of the concern now.”

“Why don’t you like him?” said Marion.

“I don’t know,” said Geoffrey. “My reasons for disliking him would sound very silly if I put them in words, and yet to myself they don’t seem so. He is oily, and too ready, *too* business-like.”

Marion half laughed.

“Surely that is a queer fault to find with a business man,” she said.

“Yes, I know it is,” said Geoffrey, “but—”

The sentence was never completed. A ring at the bell made Mrs. Baldwin take flight in terror lest it should be the announcement of visitors, whom, with the evident traces of recent tears on her face, she felt anything but prepared to meet. She need not, have been afraid. It was only Squire Copley who had walked over to discuss drains with Geoffrey, so she was left undisturbed for the rest of the afternoon.

She felt brighter and happier. The little conversation with Geoffrey, confined

thought it had been almost entirely to business matters, had yet done her good, taken her a little out of herself, given her a not unpleasant feeling that notwithstanding all that had occurred to separate them, they had yet, *must* have, husband and wife as they were, some interest in common, some ground on which from time to time they were likely to meet.

“And any,” thought she, “is better than none, even though it be only the unromantic one of money matters.”

Geoffrey’s tone at the commencement of their conversation had somewhat puzzled her. Transparent as she imagined him, she was beginning to find him sometimes difficult to read. If he were tired of her, worn out by her coldness and moodiness, as she had begun to fancy, could he, would he not be more than human to address her with the intense tenderness which this afternoon had breathed through his whole words and manner? On the other hand, was it not more than could be expected of any man, save an exceptionally deep and adhesive character (“Such as Ralph’s, for instance,” she said to herself,) that through all that had happened, all the bitter disappointment and mortification, he should yet continue to care for, to *love* such a wife, or rather no wife, as she been to him? He had echoed, without, she fancied, fully comprehending her own words, “it is too late.” Was it too late? Or could it be that even yet, even now, in what she felt to be in a figurative sense, the autumn of her life, there was rising before her a possibility such as she had been indignant with brave, unselfish Ralph for predicting, nay, urging on her, a possibility of happiness, chastened and tempered, but none the less real on this account, for herself and for the man to whom she was bound by the closest and most sacred of ties? And of better than happiness—of harmony and meaning in her life, of living rather than mere enduring of existence, of duties to do and suffering to bear, both sanctified and rendered beautiful by love. Could it be that such things were yet in store for her? She could hardly believe it. Yet as she remembered Geoffrey’s look and voice, her heart yearned within her, and the tears again welled up to her eyes, but softly, and without bitterness or burning. All that afternoon till it grew dark she sat by the fire in her room—thinking and hoping as she had not been able to do for long.

Though pale and wearied looking, there was a gentle light and brightness about her that evening very pleasant for Geoffrey to see. It reminded him of the days when he first knew her—still more of the first days of their married life. And though the remembrance brought with it a sigh, it too was less bitter than

tender; and his voice was very gentle that evening when he had occasion to speak to his young wife.

Mr. Wrexham duly made his appearance. Marion's first impression of him was unfavourable. She felt quite ready to echo Geoffrey's indefinite expressions of dislike. But later in the evening she somewhat modified her first opinion. He was so clever and amusing, so thoroughly "up" in all the subjects of the day, from the last novel to yesterday's debate, that she felt really interested and refreshed by his conversation. It was more the sort of talk she had been accustomed to in her father's house, and which, as far as her experience went, was by no means indigenous to Brentshire, where the men's ideas seldom extended beyond fox-hunting and "birds," varied occasionally by a dip into drains and such like farmers' interests; and where the still narrower minds of the women rotated among servants and babies, descriptions at second or third hand of the probable fashions, and gossip not unfrequently verging on something very like downright scandal.

Mr. Wrexham seemed at home on every subject and in every direction. Certainly his personal appearance was against him, and the fact that in five minutes' time it ceased to impress his companions disagreeably, in itself says a good deal for his cleverness and tact. He was middle-sized and fat—not stout, fat—loose, and somewhat flabby. A large head, with a bare, bald forehead such as many people take as a guarantee of brains and benevolence, small twinkling eyes, a preponderance of jaw and mouth, and a pair of fat, white, and yet determined looking hands—all these do not make up an attractive whole. But he talked away his own ugliness, and talked himself, with that round, full voice of his, into his young hostess's good graces in a really wonderful way. He did not flatter her; he was far too clever to make such a mistake. He appealed to her knowledge of the subjects they were conversing about in a matter-of-course way far more insidiously gratifying to a sensible and intellectual woman. Once or twice, as if inadvertently, he alluded to her father, the loss the country had sustained in his premature death, the immense veneration he, Mr. Wrexham, had always felt for him, though not personally acquainted with the great man, and so on, so delicately and judiciously, that Marion's dislike was perfectly overcome, and she mentally resolved never again to trust to first impressions. After dinner, as she expected, the gentlemen sat long in the dining-room. She was growing tired and sleepy when they joined her. Geoffrey's face, she was glad to see, looked brighter and less anxious than it had appeared during dinner. Mr. Wrexham had evidently the faculty of talking business as pleasantly as



everything else, for his host's manner to him had decidedly increased in cordiality.

"We were just talking of Miss Temple in the other room," began Mr. Wrexham. "I am delighted to find how intimate a friend of yours she is, Mrs. Baldwin. A charming, *really* charming person she must be. By-the-by, how terribly abused that word often is! I have not the pleasure of knowing her personally, but her books make one feel as if she were a personal friend."

"Her books!" repeated Marion, in surprise. "Miss Temple's books! I never knew she had written any. Did you, Geoffrey?"

"Oh yes," said he, "it was ever so long ago she wrote them. I believe they're out of print now."

"How could you be so stupid as never to tell me before?" said Marion, playfully. Geoffrey looked pleased.

"I'm not much of a novel reader," he said; "to tell the truth I'm not sure that I did read them. Very few people knew anything about them."

"What are they called?" asked Marion. But Geoffrey was quite at fault. Mr. Wrexham as usual came to the rescue. Not only with the names, but with slight but appreciative and well worded sketches of the two novels in question.

Marion was delighted, and still more so when their ever ready guest volunteered to procure for her copies of the books, though now, as Geoffrey had said, out of print.

Shortly after, Mr. Wrexham took his leave. Geoffrey undertook to put him on his road, as he expressed his intention of walking home. Marion was tired and went to bed, so it was not till the next morning at breakfast time that they compared notes on the subject of their guest.

"You liked him better when you came to talk more to him, did you not, Geoffrey?" asked Marion.

"I did and I didn't," he replied. "I have still that queer sort of feeling of not making him out. But it may be my fancy only. I daresay he's straightforward enough."

“He is unusually clever and well-informed,” said Marion.

“So I should think,” said Geoffrey, “though not going in for that sort of thing myself, I can admire it in others. Clever! oh dear yes! I only hope he’s not too clever.”

“Did you talk over your business matters satisfactorily?” enquired Mrs. Baldwin.

“Ye—es, I think so,” replied her husband. “All he said seemed right enough. I can draw out your money of course any day, my own too in part. The man *can* have no motive, as far as I can see. He doesn’t w my money, but still it seems queer.”

“What?” asked Marion.

“Oh! I forgot I hadn’t told you. Wrexham has such a poor opinion of the investment your cousin, Mr. Framley Vere, so strongly recommended. I really don’t know what to do. Mr. Framley Vere is considered a very good man of business, and he, you know, is your other trustee. In fact I have hardly any right to delay doing as he advised—with respect to your money and Harry’s I mean. He wrote about it three weeks ago and wished it done at once, only I have never succeeded in getting hold of Wrexham. And I can’t but be to some extent impressed by what he said. If I wait a month or two he says he can put me in the way of something much better—more secure, that’s to say. But I don’t like seeming to oppose Mr. Framley Vere. Indeed I’ve no right to do so. If he were at home I would go and see him. But he’s on the continent.”

“You might write to him,” suggested Marion; “his letters are sure to be forwarded.”

“So I might, certainly,” replied her husband. “I don’t know but what it will be the best plan. I will write and tell him all Wrexham told me. It was in confidence, but that of course does not exclude my co-trustee. I can ask him to reply at once. Yes, that will be the best plan. Thank you for suggesting it. You see I hate writing so, it’s the last expedient that ever enters my head.”

And with considerable relief at the solution of his perplexity, Mr. Baldwin left the breakfast-table.

Two days later Marion fell ill. Her complaint was only a very bad cold, but so bad that for a fortnight she was confined to her room. Geoffrey was unhappy enough about her, though he said little. Marion herself was comparatively cheerful. The enforced rest of body, and to a great extent of mind also, was soothing to her just then. And she was the sort of woman that is never sweeter and more loveable than in illness.

Geoffrey wrote to Mr. Framley Vere. But during this fortnight there came no answer. The first day Marion was downstairs again, Geoffrey told her that the morning's post had brought a letter from Miss Temple, begging him possible to meet her the following day at a half-way point on her journey homewards from Devonshire, as her escort could only bring her thus far, and in her helpless state her maid was not sufficient protection. The young man hesitated to comply, as he disliked the idea of leaving his wife alone in a barely convalescent state; but when she heard of it, Marion begged him to do as Veronica asked.

"It is but little we can do for her," she said, "and only think what a friend she has been to us both."

"To me," replied Geoffrey, "but I am not so sure that you have the same reason to say so. Had it not been for her—for meeting again at her house, I mean—the probability is, poor child, you would never have been talked out of your first decision. What would it not have saved you!"

"Geoffrey!" said his wife, looking up with eyes full of tears. He had never before said as much, and she was deeply touched. Unconsciously his few words revealed to her the rare unselfishness of his character. Even in looking back to what truly had been the bitterest trial of his life, he thought of the past if not solely, at least chiefly, from her point of view. "What would it not have saved *you*."

She might have perhaps said more, but a servant's entering interrupted them. Geoffrey was obliged to leave that morning in order to reach the half-way point the same evening, so as to be ready to start with his charge the following day at an early enough hour to reach Mallingford before dark the succeeding afternoon. But he carried with him on his journey a companion which cheered and encouraged him as he had little hoped ever again to be cheered and encouraged.

All through, the long railway journey, in the unfamiliar, bustling town where

he spent the night, it was present with him—the remembrance of a sweet, pale face and soft eyes dimmed with tears, gently calling him by name in a voice half of reproach, but telling surely of something more. Something he had not all through these weary months ventured to hope for as possible for him even in the furthest future. Could it be, or was he mad to think it, could it be that Marion, his wife, was learning to care for him?

The thought thrilled him through and through. It gave a brightness to his face and manner that poor Veronica rejoiced to see. She was not given to the asking of intrusive questions, or of beating about a delicate subject in hopes of discovering its exact condition, (both which modes of torture some people seem to consider a proof of the most devoted friendship) so she said nothing at all verging on the matter so constantly in her thoughts. But the tone in which Geoffrey replied to her affectionate enquiries about his wife, fell pleasantly on her ear.

“She is much better,” said Geoffrey, “but she really has been very ill. I can’t bear to hear her coughs, though the doctor assures me she is perfectly sound. To tell you the truth, Veronica,” he added, with a half smile, “I am such a baby about Marion, I didn’t half like leaving her even for a day.”

“It was very good of you, dear Geoffrey,” said Miss Temple. “I really don’t know how I should have got home without you. But if I had had the least notion she was ill I would never have asked it.”

“There was not the slightest reason really for my not coming,” said Geoffrey, “only you see I’m ridiculously anxious about her. But she would never have forgiven me if I hadn’t come. She is always so delighted if we can be of the least use to you. No one I’m sure deserves as much of us.”

“You are very dear, good children both of you,” said Veronica. “And were I, as I hope to be before I die, *perfectly* assured that I have throughout acted for your real good by both of you, I think—I think I should die content.”

“She had said more than she had intended. A moment after she almost regretted having done so, for though Geoffrey pressed her hand, her poor wasted hand, which years ago in girlhood had been so round and pretty, he said nothing; and she half fancied her words brought a red flush to his fair face.

Their journey was accomplished in safety. It was pretty late in the afternoon

when their train puffed into Mallingford station, and Geoffrey jumped out on to the platform to see that the easiest of the “King’s Arms” carriages was in waiting according to command, for the invalid lady.

Veronica meantime remained with her maid in the railway carriage, awaiting his return. He was absent barely five minutes—too short a time truly to change a man from youth to age, from the aspect of robust health to that of pallid, haggard sickness—yet, had five months, nay years, elapsed before Geoffrey Baldwin returned to Veronica, she would have been amazed and horrified at the change. His bright boyish face looked like that of a man of fifty, all drawn and pinched, pallid as with a pallor of death, blue about the lips, even the sunny hair at that moment seemed to be dimmed by a shade of grey.

Veronica was too terrified to speak. The one word “Marion,” she shaped with her lips, though her tongue refused to utter it. But Geoffrey understood her.

“No,” he whispered hoarsely “not that. But the old Bank, Baldwin’s Bank, has stopped payment. It was my own fault. I have ruined her. Curse that fellow, *curse* him,” he muttered fiercely between his teeth.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A FRIEND IN DISGUISE.

“With all her might she cloth her business  
To bringen him out of his heaviness.

\*            \*            \*            \*            \*

Lo here what gentleness these women have,  
If we could know it for our rudéness.  
Alway right sorry for our distress!  
In every manner thus show they ruth,  
That in them is all goodness and all truth.”

CHAUCER.

AN exclamation of terror from Veronica’s maid startled Geoffrey and made him look round, for in his madness of rage and misery he had instinctively turned his face away from the eyes of his gentle friend. The poor lady lay all but fainting, gasping for breath in a way piteous to behold. The sight to some extent recalled the young man to himself.

In a few moments, by the exercise of strong self-control, Veronica overcame the hysterical feeling which was half choking her, and allowed Mr. Baldwin to carry her to the fly. Not a word was spoken by either till they reached Miss Temple’s cottage; only just before they stopped, Veronica took Geoffrey’s hand, and gently pressed it in her own.

“My poor boy,” she whispered.

He turned his head away; though there was no one in the carriage but themselves, he could not bear her to see the tears which her sympathy wrung from his manhood. But they did him good. He began to collect his startled senses, and to consider how best to perform the terrible duty before him, of breaking the news to his wife.

When they alighted at Miss Temple's door, and the little bustle of conveying the invalid to her sofa was safely accomplished, the servant handed him a letter. The address was in Marion's handwriting. "Mrs. Baldwin," said the girl, "had called this afternoon, and had inquired at what time Miss Temple was expected home. Hearing it might be late, she had left the letter and asked that it might be delivered immediately."

The envelope contained a few words from Marion, enclosing a letter with a German post-mark.

Mrs. Baldwin's was as follows:

"DEAR GEOFFREY,

"The enclosed came by this morning's post. I see it is from Mr. Framley Vere, and as I know you are anxious to hear from him, I am going to take it in to Mallingford, that you may get it on your arrival at Miss Temple's. I am so much better, that the doctor told me I should take a drive to-day. I hope you have got on prosperously in your travels, and that you will bring dear Veronica safe home. Give her my best love.

"Your affectionate wife,  
MARION C. BALDWIN."

Even at that moment Geoffrey held the letter tenderly, looked lovingly at the words. It was the first letter he had ever had from his wife!

But it added a sharper pang to his wretchedness. "Your affectionate wife!"

"Ah! my poor child, what have I ever caused you but misery?" he murmured to himself.

He opened the enclosure. These were its contents:

"Baden, March 27th, 186—.

"DEAR BALDWIN,

"Your letter has only just reached me. I have been moving about lately so much. I write in great haste to assure you that all you have been told against the —— and —— is utter nonsense. There is no safer or better investment in the united kingdom at present. Whoever

told you what you wrote of to me must be either a knave himself, with his own purposes to serve, or the dupe of such a one. And if an honest man, I don't see why he should have bound you over not to give his name as your authority to your co-trustee. The thing does not look well. Within the last day or two I have heard, quite accidentally, from a friend in your county, certain vague reports affecting the Mallingford Bank. Very likely they have not reached you. Those on the spot, or most interested in such rumours, are often the last to hear them. And they may very probably be utterly unfounded. Still, all inclines me to lose no time in with-drawing my young cousins' money from its present quarters. I should strongly advise you also to look to your own property in the bank, as I believe it is of considerable amount. I should be glad to hear from you that you have done as I advise. With regard to your wife's and her brother's money, you have of course acted for the best: still the delay makes me a little uneasy. Give my kind regards to Marion. I hear very good accounts of her brother Hartford, from an officer in his regiment who is a friend of mine.

“Yours very truly,  
“FRAMLEY P. VERE.”

Geoffrey handed both letters to Veronica. She read them carefully before she spoke. He watched her impatiently. As soon as she had finished, he said in a dull, hopeless voice—

“How shall I tell her? And Harry too? She will feel his share of it even more?”

Veronica considered a little. Then she replied—

“Are you not acting prematurely in deciding that all is so very bad as you imagine? After all, it was a mere report you heard at the station. *Something* must be wrong, doubtless, but it may not be so bad as you think. Would it not be well, in the first place, to go to the bank, see Mr. Wrexham, and hear particulars?”

“Of course,” said Geoffrey, starting up and seizing his hat; “what a fool I was not to think of that before. But I really was stunned for the moment.”

“You must have a cup of tea or a glass of wine before you go,” suggested Veronica. “You will frighten everybody you meet, with that pale face of yours. Now be a good boy. Five minutes will make no difference—for the young man was chafing at the delay.

“And Marion?” he suddenly exclaimed, “she will be expecting me at home.”

“Stay here till the morning,” replied Miss Temple; “that will give us time to talk over matters after you have learnt the exact state of things. I will send a note to Marion while you are out, saying that I have kept you as you were tired with



your two days' journey, and asking her to send the carriage for you in the morning. I can get the gardener to take the note. He can borrow Dr. Baker's pony."

"Thank you," said Geoffrey. "That will do very well."

And thankful for the temporary reprieve, he set off on his errand of enquiry.

In about an hour' time he returned. Veronica was anxiously waiting for him. He entered the room slowly, and threw himself on the sofa, hiding his face in its cushions.

"What have you heard?" asked Miss Temple at last, though his manner had already prepare her for his answer. It came, after moment's interval, in a dull, dead tone.

"The very worst," he replied.

"How?" she asked gently. It was better to rouse him, to force him to face it, and as speedily as possible to make up his mind to what must be done next.

He shivered slightly, then made an impatient gesture as if he would fain push aside her enquiries and her sympathy. But she persisted bravely.

"How has it all been?" she asked. "Whom did you see?"

"The old clerk, Lee," he replied; "he is heart-broken. All his savings gone, and the disgrace, which I verily believe he feels more. As I should if I were alone. Good God! why did I bind that poor child's fate to mine! To think of it all. Baldwin's Bank—my poor father's bank—to have come to this! It is an utter, complete smash, a perfectly hopeless ruin. Some little trifle of Marion's and Harry's money I may possibly recover eventually. But mine is all gone—gone for ever. You see I was still legally a partner."

"But how has it been caused?" Veronica enquired again.

"You may well ask," he answered bitterly; that is the hideous part of it--to think that it has all been the work of that oily devil, and that he has taken himself off in time to escape the punishment he deserves. What *I* should have given him if the law hadn't! Cursed scamp that he is!"

“Hush, Geoffrey,” pleaded Veronica. “I am not blaming you, my poor boy, but when you speak so violently you startle me, and make me so nervous I cannot think quietly, as I should wish, of what is to be done. Wrexham, I suppose, you are talking of?”

“Yes,” said Geoffrey; “I can’t name him. It is all his doing. His wealth ‘elsewhere invested’ was all moonshine. He has been left far too much to himself, Lee says, the other partner having perfect confidence in him. He has been speculating in the most reckless way, it now appears; and, foreseeing the inevitable crash, has laid his plans accordingly and taken himself off in time. It is suspected he has taken, in some form or other—(diamonds perhaps, like the fellow in that book Marion was reading—a fellow who wasn’t himself or was somebody else; I couldn’t make it out)—a comfortable provision for himself.”

“But when was all this discovered? Can’t he be traced?” asked Veronica, breathlessly.

“He had been away four days before anything wrong was suspected, replied Geoffrey. “He didn’t run it too fine, you see. He was to have returned three days ago with lots of money. When he didn’t come, and sent no letter, they began to get frightened. Mr. Linthwaite, the other partner, then thought it would be as well to look into things a little, and a nice mess they found. They did what they could then, of course; sent off for detectives and all the rest of it, by way of shutting the empty stable-door, but it’s useless. He’s had too clear a start, and even if they got him they would get nothing *out* of him. He’s prepared for that, Lee says. If he has made off with property in any form it will be too well hidden for us to get at it. My case is the worst, for Linthwaite’s wife has money settled on herself, elsewhere invested, and no one had property in the bank to anything like my amount. They kept the doors open for a day or two, and paid out the little they had, for one or two of the farmers in the neighbourhood happened to draw rather heavily on Tuesday. But yesterday evening they lost all hope of the scamp’s turning up, and didn’t even go through the farce this morning of taking down the shutters.”

“But if old Lee has suspected that things were wrong, why in heaven’s name did he not warn you?” asked Veronica.

“He didn’t suspect anything,” replied Mr. Baldwin. “He disliked Wrexham personally, but he could have given no reason for doing so. Besides, unless he

had had something definite to tell, you couldn't expect the poor fellow to have risked losing his daily bread by talking against his employers. Ten to one, had he come to me, I would have thought him mad. No, that blackguard has deceived every one."

For some minutes they sat still, Geoffrey moodily staring into the fire. Then he repeated his old question.

"How am I to tell Marion, Veronica?"

"Shall I do so for you?" she said.

"I wish to Heaven you would!" he ejaculated. "It would be the greatest proof of friendship you have ever shewn me, which is saying a good deal."

"I will do it if you so much wish it," she replied, "still I do not feel sure it is right for *anyone* to break it to her but yourself—her husband. I think too you misjudge her in thinking *this* sort of bad news is likely to shock and prostrate her as you seem to imagine it will. Your wife is no fool, Geoffrey: she is a brave-spirited woman, and will find strength to suffer and work for those she loves."

"Ah, yes," he replied, with a groan, "had all been different in other respects, *she* would not have been found wanting. But you don't know all, Veronica. You never can. It was the only thing I could give her—a home and all that money could buy! And now, my darling will, for the first time in her life, be brought through *me* face to face with poverty. It is too horrible."

Miss Temple said nothing, but she had her own thoughts nevertheless.

They decided that the following day when Geoffrey returned home he should tell his wife that Miss Veronica was anxious to see her, and should arrange for her driving over as soon as possible to her friend's cottage.

But in this, they to some extent reckoned without their host. The carriage which came the next morning to fetch Miss Temple's guest home to the Manor Farm, brought in it, early though it was, Mrs. Baldwin herself, eager to welcome the travellers in person.

Geoffrey was already out. Off again to the scene of his troubles, the Mallingford Bank, there to meet Mr. Linthwaite, and go over with him all the

details of the miserable story. But he was to be back in half-an-hour. Veronica's heart failed her when she heard her young visitor's step on the stair. It was no light or pleasant task which, in her unselfishness, she had undertaken.

Suddenly it occurred to her, "might not Marion have already heard the bad news, and this be the reason of her early visit? How stupid not to have thought of this before!" She almost hoped it might be so, but a glance at Marion's face decided her that no bird of evil omen in the shape a Miss Tremlett, or any of her gossiping cronies, had yet carried the tidings to the young mistress of the Manor Farm. For Marion, though somewhat pale from her recent illness, looked bright and cheerful: happier by far than when last her friend had seen her; which did not make things easier for poor Veronica! The girl kissed her affectionately, and said something in her own sweet way (as far as possible removed from the coldness of which by mere acquaintances she was usually accused), of her pleasure at her safe return to them. Then some little details of the journey were mentioned, and Veronica remarked casually that Geoffrey had gone to the bank for half-an-hour on business, but would be back shortly, as he was expecting the carriage to meet him.

"Though he did not know you would be in it, dear Marion," said Veronica, "it was very good of you to come so soon. I was just writing a note to ask you to come this afternoon. I wanted particularly to see you."

Then there fell a little silence, and out of the heart of the elder woman there crept to that of her friend a soft, mysterious message of sympathy. Words were not wanted. A slight shiver ran through Marion, and she turned to Veronica.

"What is wrong? What is it you are wishing to tell me and cannot find strength to utter? Dear Veronica, do not fear for me."

And Miss Temple laid her hand gently on Marion's, and the girl's brave, clear eyes fixed on her drew forth the bare, unsoftened truth.

"My child, your husband is ruined. The Mallingford Bank in which was all he possessed has failed, and he is utterly penniless."

She had not meant to tell it so shortly and suddenly. She had thought of "breaking it" by degrees, as even the wisest and tenderest of us persist in doing to others, however we may suffer when the operation is performed on ourselves. But with Marion's eyes thus fixed on her she had no option but to tell the whole

sharply; to her own ears indeed cruelly, in its matter-of-fact accuracy and stern reality.

Marion's eyes never flinched. She said quietly, "And my money—and—and Harry's?" With the last word her face worked a little, and for a moment Veronica fancied a dimness overspread the grey eyes, still resolutely fixed on hers. But she too, answered calmly and deliberately.

"You and your brother rank as creditors. Eventually, therefore, some small portion of your property may be recovered, once the affairs of the bank are finally wound up. This however will probably not be known for some months, and in any case it will not be much. Geoffrey's settlements on you at the time of your marriage, by-the-by, I never thought of. I wonder if they will be considered *your* property. I am not enough acquainted with such matters to say. But in any case, my dearest Marion, I fear very, very little will be recovered. It is so dreadful. I don't understand how I am able to talk about it so coolly."

Marion did not speak for a few moments. Then she said:

"Have many others suffered in the same way—to the same extent?"

Veronica looked rather conscience-stricken.

"To tell you the truth," she said, "I did not ask; I was so absorbed in your part of it. But no one I am sure can have suffered to the same extent, for Mr. Linthwaite had not nearly so much money in the bank, and his wife is rich besides. Doubtless many of the farmers in the neighbourhood will have lost what to them will be as much as Geoffrey's is to him. It is all owing to his having unfortunately kept his whole property there these last few months. A thing he never contemplated save as a temporary convenience of course."

"And Mr. Wrexham?" asked Marion.

"Mr. Wrexham!" repeated Veronica. "Did you not know it was all his doing, that he has absconded? But, of course, not—how could you?"

And then she related to Marion the details she had gathered from Geoffrey of the reputed millionaire's little suspected rascality.

Mrs. Baldwin heard her in silence; but when all had been told she exclaimed

passionately:

“Then, Veronica, the whole is my doing. Geoffrey’s instinct was truer than mine. He distrusted that man from the first, and I talked him out of it. I thought him clever, and I see now how he was flattering me up! What a fool I was! Oh, Veronica, those two or three weeks might have saved poor Geoffrey this ruin. It will break his heart, I know, and it is all my fault.”

“Hush, Marion,” said her friend, “it will make it no easier to Geoffrey for you to blame yourself so exaggeratedly, and it is very unlikely that the two or three weeks’ delay has made matters worse. Geoffrey’s withdrawing any large sums when he first intended doing so would only have accelerated the discovery without probably saving anything.”

But Marion had got it into her head that she alone was to blame for the overwhelming catastrophe, and refused to listen to Veronica’s attempted consolation.

It was the worst bit of the whole to her, the reflection that it was her doing. What a curse she had been to this man, she thought to herself! Saddening his whole life, as she had done: remorseful when, as she much feared in her present mood, it was too late; and now, to crown all, the cause of his finding himself a pauper; he who till now had known nothing of battling with the world, struggling amidst the toilworn human beings for the means of existence. In a very blackness of misery Marion Baldwin sat in silence while she thus accused herself.

Veronica was grievously distressed. At last she hit on a new argument.

“Marion,” she said, “Geoffrey will be returning directly. The bitterest part of this to him, I need not tell you, is the thought of what it will be to you. It is for you only he dreads so fearfully the trials before you both. I have been trying to comfort and strengthen him by telling him he was exaggerating what it would be to you. You are brave and strong, my dearest—braver and stronger than you perhaps think yourself. I know it is not this misfortune in itself which is so crushing you. It is this morbid notion that you have had a hand in bringing it on. But even supposing it were so, Heaven knows you advised Geoffrey as you thought for the best. It is unworthy of you to make yourself miserable by this judging by results. And if Geoffrey finds you thus, how will he, poor fellow, be

able to stand it all? Don't think me harsh, my poor child, for speaking so at such a time. You will thank me afterwards for urging you to show yourself a true wife by forgetting *everything* but your husband's suffering, and strengthening him to bear it."

Marion looked up with a new light in her face, a glance of mingled strength and tenderness in her eyes. A door was heard to open, a step slowly and heavily sounded along the passage. She had only time to whisper, "You shall not be disappointed in me, Veronica," when the door opened and Geoffrey entered.

He had not expected to see his wife; and when he caught sight of her, his face flushed suddenly, and without attempting to greet her he sank down on the nearest chair, burying his head in his hands.

Veronica glanced imploringly at Marion, but her appeal was not needed. Without a word the young wife rose from her chair and crossed the room quickly to where her husband was sitting. He did not see her, his face was hidden, but he heard the rustle of her dress as she approached him. He knew it could not be the cripple Veronica; the step came quick and firm. A notion flashed into his mind that his wife was leaving the room because he had entered it; hastening from the presence of the man who had at last by his insane folly, put the finishing stroke to all the misery he had brought on her fair young life.

He would not look up. Instinctively he kept his face hidden, preferring to await blindly what he felt to be a crisis in his life. Less than a moment passed while Marion crossed the room, but time enough for a whole army of hopes and fears, doubts and misgivings to chase each other across poor Geoffrey's brain.

He felt weak and giddy, for he had gone through much and eaten little in the last few hours; and a quiver ran all through him when a hand was gently laid on his shoulder and a voice, sweeter to him than the loveliest music, called him by name.

"Geoffrey," it said, "my poor Geoffrey, my dear husband, look up and show that you trust me. It is to the full as much my fault as yours that this misfortune has come upon us. But why should either of us blame the other? It is not the worst sorrow that could have happened to us. We are young and strong, and we will meet it together bravely. Only, only—do not turn from me. Do not punish me for all my selfish coldness—all my wicked scorn, long ago, of your goodness

and affection—do not punish me by repulsing me *now*. Now, Geoffrey, in your time of sorrow when I brave all and remind you that I am your wife.”

Her voice broke and faltered: the last few words were all but inaudible. But they reached with perfect clearness and distinctness the ears of the man to whom they were addressed; they fell on his sore heart like drops of refreshing, invigorating rain on dried-up withered leaves. He lifted his head, he stretched out his arms, and drew her to him in a long, close embrace, and there were more tears on Marion’s face than those which had come from her own eyes.

Neither spoke, and there was for a moment perfect silence in the room. Then it was broken suddenly by a queer, irregular, stumping sound, which passed across the floor and out at the door almost before it was observed by the two so absorbed by their own emotion. It was Veronica’s crutch! Never before or since was she known to get out of a room so quickly, and she did it at no little risk to herself. But she felt that the moment was a sacred one—one of those in which a third presence, even though that of the most devoted friend, may jar on the sensitiveness of the excited nerves; may unwittingly interfere with the perfect healing of the disunited members, the sealing of the tacit bond of reconciliation.

An hour or two later, when the invalid bade adieu to her friends, and from her window watched them drive away to the home soon to be theirs no longer, some half-formed words escaped her.

“How little, after all, we know of ourselves or each other, or what is best for any of us! After all, who can say but what my two poor friends may have reason to remember with thankfulness the failure of the Mallingford Bank. Poverty and outward suffering and struggling may bring them more happiness than they have yet found since they joined their lives together. God grant it may prove so!”



## CHAPTER VIII.

### COTTON CHEZ SOI.

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

AUTUMN again! Three years only since the dull September day when we first saw Marion Vere in her father's house in the London square. Three years ago, which have brought more than one change to her, which have more than once utterly altered the current of her life. The last change which has come over her might, to superficial observation, seem the most disastrous of all. Let us see if in truth it is so.

A dull, uninteresting suburban street. Secluded and “genteel.” Too much so for even the enlivening neighbourhood of shops to be permitted in that portion of it where our interest lies. Rows and rows of monotonous little dwellings, all of the regulation pattern—two rooms on one side of the strip of lobby, undeserving of the more important name of hall; kitchen at the end thereof, a flight of some twelve or fifteen steps leading to the half-way room above the kitchen, on again to the two or three rooms occupying the position, in town houses of importance, usually devoted to drawing-rooms.

Ah, how wearied one becomes of this same everlasting pattern of house! How sick to death the architects must be of planning it, the masons of building it, and, worst of all, the occupants of living in it! Only fortunately, or unfortunately, the dwellers in these same regulation abodes have seldom much leisure, even had they the inclination, for pondering on such matters. The poor dressmaker class,

the struggling wives and overflowing offspring of scantily-salaried clerks in great mercantile houses, the landladies, legion by name, "who have seen better days," and are only too thankful to see the dreadful "apartments" card out of their window—all these and the rest of the innumerable multitude constituting the lower half of our English middle-class, are not likely to complain of the shape and arrangements of their dwellings, provided they are sufficiently warm and weather tight, and not usuriously high in the matter of rent and its attendant privileges, rates.

Rents are not so tremendous in the neighbourhood of smoky Millington as in the suburban districts surrounding the great Babylon itself. Lodgings in consequence are, or were some years ago, correspondingly few and far between. For our middle-class John Bull, be he but possessed of the most modest of salaries, has a wonderful tendency to feather a nest of his own, to assemble his poor little household gods—from the six "real silver" teaspoons left to Mary Ann by her god-mother, to his own gaudy but somewhat faded Sunday-school prizes—in a retreat where they shall be sacred from the inquisitive eyes and prying hands of landladies; where he can smoke his pipe of an evening, and young Mrs. John nurse her babies undisturbed by fears of complaints from the first-floor of "that horrible smell of tobacco," or "those incessantly screaming children."

But even the luxury of the smallest of houses of their own was as yet beyond the means of Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin; and Geoffrey was fain to be content with three tiny rooms and a civil-spoken landlady, when, preceding his wife by a few days to their new home, it fell to his share to do what he could in the way of preparing for her reception.

For the smash at Mallingford had been a very thorough one. Nothing as yet had been retrieved from the ruins. Months hence some trifling dividend might be forthcoming; but as their share of this would be altogether insufficient to provide for their daily wants, Geoffrey had declined Veronica's invitation to take up their abode with her till the exact amount should be known, and had manfully set his shoulder to the wheel by accepting the first chance of employment that came in his way.

It was not of a kind congenial to his tastes or education. A clerkship of a hundred a year in a Millington shipping-house does not sound paradisaical to most ears; least of all to those of a country-bred, country-loving man of thirty,

whose nightmare from earliest youth had been anything in the shape of office or desk, book-keeping, or book-learning.

But, as said the old friend of his father's to whom he was indebted for the introduction, it was better than losing time, and would do him no harm should some more desirable opening occur hereafter.

Had he been alone in the world when he thus for the first time in his life found himself face to face with poverty, Geoffrey Baldwin, there is no doubt, would have emigrated. He was just the man of which the right back-woodsman stuff is made, and the life would have suited him in every sense. But to his joy and his sorrow he was not alone in the world, and the being to whom every drop of his honest heart's blood was devoted, shrank, with a not unusual or unnatural shrinking, from the unknown horrors of life in an Australian sheep-farm, or the pathless "far west" forests of Canada. Even Millington, smoky and crowded, with its vulgar rich and toil-begrimed poor, seemed to her imagination to offer a far less terrible prospect.

"For after all Geoffrey, it is still England, and sooner or later something else may turn up. In two or three years Harry may be coming home, and think how terrible it would be for him if we were away at the other side of the world," said the poor girl.

So the subject of emigration was not again mooted, and the Millington offer accepted. Some ready money was realized by the sale of the Manor Farm furniture and Geoffrey's horses, but not very much, for when chairs and tables that have looked very respectable in their own corners for forty or fifty years, are dragged, to the sound of an auctioneer's hammer, into the relentless glare of day and bargain seekers' eyes, they, to put it mildly, do not show to the best advantage. And as to horses, they are not famous for being high in the market when one appears therein in the position of a seller. It was, too, the end of the hunting season when the smash came, and Mr. Baldwin was not in the habit of allowing his steeds to eat their heads off, so the lot of them were not in the showy condition conducive to the fetching of long sums.

Squire Copley, who, during the last few melancholy weeks of the young couple's stay in their own house, was suffering from a curiously spasmodic form of cold in the head, which attacked him most inopportunistically on several occasions when he happened to "step over" to the Farm, and necessitated a distressingly

lavish recourse to his pocket-handkerchief,—he by-the-by took a violent fancy to the now docile Coquette.

“Got her of course, under the circumstances, dirt cheap, Sir, dirt cheap, I assure you,” he told his neighbours, when the details of Baldwin’s sale were discussed “across the walnuts and the wine.”

The exact sum he was never known to mention, (nor did it ever reach Mr. Baldwin’s ears), for possibly every one might not have agreed with him in thinking two hundred and fifty pounds so *very* unparalleled a bargain. It went a good way to swelling the few hundreds of ready money with which in safe keeping against the possible coming of a still rainier day, Geoffrey Baldwin, after settling, down to the smallest, every out-standing claim upon him or his household, set out for the first time to do battle with the world, to win for himself and that other so infinitely dearer, the “daily bread” so carelessly demanded, so thanklessly received by those who have never known what it is to eat thereof “in the sweat of the face.”

But we have wandered too long from the little house in the suburban street.

In the small sitting-room looking out to the front sits Marion. The same Marion, only I almost think altered for the better. She looks stronger, and, to use a homely, but most expressive word, “heartier” than when we last saw her. Surely there is more light and brightness over the clear, pale features; and lurking in the depths of the grey eyes, one could almost fancy there was something of gladness if not of mirth. Or is it only the flickering, dancing light reflected on her face of the bright little fire which—for the evening was chilly—Mrs. Baldwin, after some house-wifely scruples on the score of economy, caused to be lit to greet her husband’s return?

We shall see.

She sits there in the fire-light, gazing into the red, glowing depths, but with the pleasant shadow of a smile on her face. She has been working hard enough to-day in various ways, to enjoy the half-hour’s holiday which she feels she has earned. A sensation worth trying for once in a way, oh ladies! with the soft, white hands, guiltless of aught but useless beauty, with the little feet to whom a few miles of tramp through muddy streets, over hard, unyielding pavement, is unknown. Or worse still, with brains unconscious of any object in their own

existence beyond the solution of some millinery problem, or the recollection of the calls falling due on their visiting list. "Very hard work indeed!" I have been told more than once by those who should be qualified to judge. "And very poor pay!" I should certainly reply, though the hardness of the work may be a matter of opinion.

A ring at the bell, a step along the passage, a somewhat fagged looking face at the door, which Marion sprang up to open, with bright welcome on her own.

"I'm very muddy, Marion," said the new-comer, "and rather tired too. I'd better run up at once and change my boots. I shall be awfully glad of a cup of tea."

The voice evidently *wished* to be cheerful, but could not quite manage it. Poor Geoffrey! truly Millington ways and Millington smoke did not suit you.

But there was genuine, unforced gladness in the tones which replied to him.

"Be quick then! as quick as you can. I have just infused the tea, and I have lots of things to tell you. I have been so busy all day!"

And as the wearied man slowly ascended the narrow staircase, some murmured words, un-heard by his wife, escaped him. "My darling! my darling! For myself I would bear it all fifty times over to know your goodness as I do."

A short toilette sufficed for the simple meal prepared for Mr. Baldwin in the little parlour which served him and his wife for drawing-room and dining-room in one, and in ten minutes' time he rejoined her. The room looked wonderfully comfortable and home-like he owned to himself, and for the time being he determined to forget the worries and annoyances of the day, and respond as far as he could to the unfailing cheerfulness of his wife.

"Tell me what you have been about to-day, Marion," he said. "You look even brighter than usual, which is saying a good deal. And that red ribbon round your neck and tying up your hair is very pretty," he added, looking at her approvingly.

"I am glad you like it," she replied laughing, "though in the first place it isn't a ribbon, it's velvet."

"But there's such a thing as velvet ribbon, isn't there?" he asked gravely.

“I’m sure I have heard of it.”

“Ribbon velvet you mean, you stupid Geoffrey,” she answered. “I am really afraid you’ll never do for Millington. You’re not the least of a shop-man.”

Geoffrey laughed.

“You had better take care what, you say, Marion. Imagine the horror of old Baxter if he heard you talking of his palatial warehouse as a shop!”

“But so it is, only a very big one,” persisted the incorrigible Mrs. Baldwin. “However you needn’t be afraid of my hurting the feelings of old Baxter, as you call him, or old anybody else. Not that he’s likely ever to hear me speak either of him or his shop. These Millington people are far too grand ever to take any notice of us.”

“I don’t know that,” said her husband. “That reminds me I’ve a piece of news for you too. But I want to hear yours first. Tell me what you’ve been doing all day.”

“This afternoon I have been busy at home like a good wife, darning your stockings, or socks, as Mrs. Appleby calls them. Really and truly, Geoffrey, I have darned four pair—that is to say three pair and a half, for in the eighth sock, to my unspeakable delight there was no hole. I poked my hand all round inside it, but not one of my fingers came through. There weren’t even any thin places which wanted strengthening, if you know what that is? You have no idea of the excitement of looking for holes. It is almost more fascinating than pulling shirt-buttons to see if they are loose. I have to force myself to be dreadfully conscientious about it. Sometimes I feel so tempted only to give a *very* gentle tug, which couldn’t pull even a very loose one off. Millington must be a ruinous place for poor people. You have no notion how quickly you wear out your stockings.”

“No, I certainly haven’t, as my good fairy takes care I never find any holes in them,” he answered tenderly. “But never mind stockings,” he went on, “tell me what you did this morning.”

“This morning,” she replied, “oh, this morning I went a tremendously long walk.”

“By yourself?”

“No, with Mrs. Sharp. You know I told you that nice little Mrs. Sharp had called here last week. The wife of the curate at St. Matthias’s. Her husband was a pupil at the Temples’, Veronica’s father’s, years ago, and that seemed a sort of introduction. She is really very nice. She knew something about us—about the bank breaking, I mean, and why we came here. I told her the first time I saw her how anxious I was to do something to help you, and—and—don’t be angry, Geoffrey—she came to-day to tell me she had heard of two pupils for me.”

“Marion!” exclaimed her husband.

She crept down to the floor beside him and hid her face on his arm, as she went on.

“It seems so very nice, Geoffrey. Listen and don’t say anything till you hear all about it. Mrs. Sharp took me to see the lady—a Mrs. Allen—whose two little boys I am to teach. They are very little boys, the eldest only ten. They generally go to school, but scarlet fever broke out there a month ago, and they are not to return till Christmas. It is only till then I am to teach them, and it is only to be three mornings in the week. Just to keep them in the way of lessons a little, their mother said. She is rather nice, fat and good-humoured-looking—but guiltless of H’s. She was very kind and pleasant about ‘terms,’ as she called it. Five guineas a month, *I think very good. Don’t you?*”

But Geoffrey was incapable of replying in the same light cheerful tone. He stooped down and passed his arm round Marion’s waist, thus drawing her nearer to him. Then he said in a choked husky voice,

“Marion, my dearest, you are an angel,—but, but—I can’t stand it.”

“My being an angel?” she answered lightly. “Certainly you haven’t had much experience of me in such a character—but seriously, Geoffrey, *do* say I may do this. I really haven’t enough to do all the hours you are away. Darning stockings, even, palls on one after a few hours! And it will make me so happy to feel I am earning a little money. Dear Geoffrey, don’t say I mustn’t.” And with a pretty air of appeal she drew his face round, so that she could see the expression in his eyes.

“It is only till Christmas, you say?” he enquired, doubtfully.

“Only till Christmas,” she repeated.

“And the distance,” he objected. “You said it was a long walk. How are you to go there and back three times a week?”

“In fine weather, walk,” she replied, unhesitatingly. “I am a capital walker, and you see yourself I am not the least tired to-night. And on wet days you can put me in the omnibus as you go to business in the morning. It passes the corner of this street, and Mrs. Sharp says it is never crowded at the hours I should be coming and going.”

There was nothing for it but for Geoffrey to give in; as, indeed, from the first he had instinctively feared would be the case. Though the plan went sorely against his inclination, he yet had a half-defined idea that possibly it was really kinder and more unselfish to yield to his wife’s wishes—that the additional interest and occupation might be of actual benefit to her, and help her to get through the lonely, dreary Millington winter he so dreaded for her in anticipation.

“You said, too, you had something to tell me, didn’t you, Geoffrey?” asked Marion, after a short silence, and with perhaps something of the womanly instinct of changing the conversation before the scarcely attained concession could be withdrawn.

“Did I?” he answered, absently. “Oh yes, I remember. It was when we were talking of the Baxters, and you said they were far too grand to notice us. Mr. Baxter told me to-day that his wife ‘hoped shortly to have the pleasure of calling on you.’ What do you think of that?”

“I am rather vexed,” she replied, speaking slowly and deliberately. “We have been very happy here by ourselves without anybody noticing us, and I would rather go on the same way. I am not silly or prejudiced, Geoffrey. I like nice people, whoever they are, but I cannot help shrinking a little from these terribly rich Millington people. I am afraid I am just a little bad in one way. I can’t endure being patronised.”

Geoffrey looked pained.

“I know, I know,” he said, hastily. “It is horrible for you. Perfectly



unbearable. You don't think I don't know it, and feel it. Heaven knows how bitterly! I was more than half inclined to tell the old fellow his wife might keep her precious visits to herself; only I dared not risk offending him. Condescension, indeed! Vulgar wretches!—as if we wanted them to come prying about us, the purse-proud——”

Marion jumped up and put her hand on his mouth.

“Hush, Geoffrey. It is very wicked of me to put such notions into your head. I had no business to talk about hating being patronised. It is very silly, and low, and mean of me. Of course they intend to be kind, and of course I should be civil to Mrs. Baxter, if she is as ugly as the queen of the cannibal islands. So don't say any more about her. I suppose she is elderly, and fat. These dread-fully prosperous people are always fat. They can't help it, I suppose.”

“I don't know, I'm sure,” said Geoffrey, listlessly. “Oh yes, by-the-by, I remember some one at the office saying Mrs. Baxter was much younger than her husband. An heiress too, I believe. That's always the way.”

“He looked weary and dispirited, and Marion felt remorseful for having caused it. So she played to him (Mrs. Appleby's front room actually boasted a piano, such as it was) soft, simple airs—for he was no connoisseur in music—till he went to sleep on the hard, uncomfortable little sofa of the regulation lodging-house pattern, the designers of which seem to be under the impression that human beings can at pleasure unhook their legs and fasten them on again sideways. In which posture only could anything like comfortable repose be possible for the wretched victims of upholstery torture.

Mrs. Baxter was as good as her word, or rather as Mr. Baxter's.

Two days later, a chariot, of the imposing appearance and dimensions suited for the conveyance of a Millington millionairess, drawn by two prancing, rocking-horse greys, comfortably conscious of their own amazingly good condition and unimpeachable harness, drew up at Mrs. Appleby's modest door. A gorgeous footman having made the enquiry necessary to preclude the possibility of his mistress's getting in and out of her equipage for nothing, and having reported to the lady that Mrs. Baldwin was at home, or “hin,” as Mrs. Appleby's factotum expressed it, the door of the chariot opened, and thence emerged one of the very smallest women Marion had ever seen.

From where she sat, all that passed in front of the house was visible to Mrs. Baldwin, and she observed with considerable amusement the immense pomposity of the whole affair, resulting in the appearance of the almost absurdly minute person of Mrs. Baxter.

But if the body was small, the mind evidently felt itself great. No five-foot-eight or nine woman ever sailed into a room with half the awe-compelling dignity, the incomparable "*air de duchesse*" of little Mrs. Baxter. It had done her good service in her day, this magnificent mien of hers; it (*and* the fact of her being "poor dear papa's only child") had won her the adoring homage of various young Millingtonians more inclined to spend than to earn, had finally achieved the conquest of old Baxter himself, and now in these latter days had constituted her the indisputable queen of Millington society.

Awful words! with bated breath only to be murmured, and reverence approaching that of Mrs. Appleby as she peeped out of the kitchen at the end of the passage, to behold, though at a distance, her lodger's illustrious visitor.

For Mrs. Baxter was not in the least pretty. Her "air," or "style" as dressmakers say, was the whole secret of the admiration she excited in the Millington world.

It was thought good taste to admire her, as "*far* more than a merely pretty person," —there was a faint flavour of aristocratic proclivities in the refinement of perception which saw more in this plain-looking little woman than in the sweet, rosy beauty we all love as we do the daisies, which depends not on the sweep of the robe or the richness of the material in which it is clothed. For, though I tremble while saying it, at my own audacity, there is not the shadow of a doubt that the magnificence of Mrs. Baxter was more than half due to her clothes. The other half lay simply in her entire, unimpregnable self-satisfaction, a quality far surpassing the fainter shades of vanity or self-conceit, which enabled her to hold her small person erect as a poker, which would have carried her without the slightest embarrassment through any conceivable womanly ordeal, from being presented at court, to rating (and soundly, too), a six-foot "Jeames" who would have made at least three of herself.

Idea, I was going to say, she had none. But this is incorrect. She had two—herself and Mr. Baxter—and round these, revolving as lesser satellites, deriving of course all their glory from the greater luminaries, "the little Baxters." You

could hardly have called her purse-proud. She was rather purse-accepting. Money to her was a simple fact, a necessity of existence like the air we breathe, the blood that flows in our veins. How people lived without it, had, once or twice in her life, occurred to her as a curious problem, with which, however, she was in no wise concerned, any more than one might be with the manner of life or physical peculiarities of the inhabitants of one of the fixed stars. But that by any terrible mistake on the part of Providence, she, or Mr. Baxter, or any of the little Baxters could ever come to want money, to have even to think about it at all, *never* entered the somewhat circumscribed space allotted to her brain.

There were poor people in the world, she knew. At least, if questioned on the subject, she would of course have admitted the fact, adding doubtless, that Mr. Baxter gave largely to charitable institutions, and that she herself had more than once officiated as lady patroness at some fancy fair or charity ball.

Poor people in the world? Yes, of course there are. But so likewise are there lions and tigers, and various species of ferocious or disagreeable animals, black beetles and toads, and black people and cannibals who eat each other. Ugh! But they don't come in our way, and so there's no use thinking of them.

So much for Mrs. Baxter's "philosophy of life and things." Breeding, in the generally accepted sense of the word, as might have been expected from her Millington education, she had none. Always of course excepting the imposing "*air de duchesse*," which really was very wonderful in its way, and may be cited as an instance of the great perfection to which electro-plate has been brought in these modern days. Breeding of the higher kind, culture of mind and spirit, she was even yet more deficient in. Under no possible circumstances, indeed, could such have been attainable by her to any great extent.

Yet after all she was far from a bad little woman; only her light was so *very* small! Not even sufficient to make visible to the owner thereof the surrounding darkness. Which quotation by-the-by is hardly applicable to immaterial objects, for we are not spiritually in such a very hopeless condition if we have attained to a perception of the darkness yet to be dispersed; we are some little way up the ladder when our sight descries the bewildering multitude of rungs yet to be ascended.

Mrs. Baxter, I say, was not a bad little woman. She was the most dutiful of wives and "exemplary" of mothers; she paid her bills punctually, and nursed her

babies irreproachably. Which latter occupation may be considered as the great end of her existence, as year after year brought a new olive branch to the Baxter nursery, each in turn received by its parents with perfect equanimity, and installed in its place as a member of the august household.

She went to church twice every Sunday throughout the year, excepting during the few weeks of her customary retirement; she never lost her temper, and she spoke kindly to the housemaid when she had the toothache.

More than all, here she was, in deference to her husband's wishes, performing the unheard-of act of condescension of calling on the wife of one of his clerks.

"People, they say," she confided to one of her female admirers, "who have seen better days. A thing I specially dislike." Which was repeated as one of her *bons mots* through her social circle; for—really I was forgetting the very funniest thing about this little woman—she, without one spark of imagination, without one touch of humour in herself or power of appreciating it in others, had yet acquired in the small world in which she moved, a considerable reputation as a wit!

This was the lady who sailed majestically into Mrs. Baldwin's little sitting-room.

Marion, whose height exceeded that of the average of women, rose to greet her, feeling, as sensitive people are apt to do when forced into such contrast, uncomfortably taller than usual. But this sensation was speedily succeeded by its equally unpleasant opposite, for seldom in her life had Mrs. Baldwin felt herself, metaphorically speaking, *smaller*, than when her little visitor extended her tightly gloved hand with a species of condescending wave, and addressing her in what was intended to be a reassuring tone, begged her to reseal herself and not to "put herself out" on her, Mrs. Baxter's, account.

Almost before she knew what she was about Marion found herself waved into a seat, while Mrs. Baxter proceeded calmly to ensconce herself in the most luxurious of the not very tempting chairs of the little sitting-room.

Then the great little lady proceeded to enter into conversation, by remarking that she hoped Mrs. Baldwin liked Millington.

"Oh yes," replied Marion, "we like it very well. Of course it takes some time

to feel at home in a perfectly strange place.”

“I daresay you find it very different from living, in the country,” observed Mrs. Baxter with an accent of superb scorn on the last word. “For my part I can’t abide the country. People grow so stupid and old-fashioned compared to what they are in town. Mr. Baxter talks sometimes of buying a country-place, but I always tell him I really couldn’t do at all without my six months at least in town.”

Marion felt slightly puzzled as to the exact sense in which her visitor was making use of the last word.

“Then do you at present spend half the year in town?” she asked cautiously.

“Half the year!” repeated Mrs. Baxter, “oh dear yes. Three quarters at least. We spend a month or two at the sea-side in summer. It suits very well, as it generally happens so that I want a little change just then. All the children except the twins were born in spring. And there’s nothing sets one up like the sea.”

Then there fell a little pause, Marion’s experience in the matters referred to by the lady, not being sufficiently extensive for her to hazard an observation in the presence of one evidently thoroughly “up” on the subject.

Mrs. Baxter swung herself round on her chair and scrutinized her surroundings.

“I never was in this street before,” she remarked. “I was afraid the coachman would never find the house, but the footman knew it, because his sister, who is a dressmaker, lives a little higher up. Mr. Baxter never likes me to go through back streets for fear of infections and those sort of things. But he made a point of my calling on you. More than a week ago he asked me to do him a favour, and this was what it was. I hope you haven’t stayed in for me though all this time? Mr. Baxter has taken quite a fancy to your husband, Mrs. Baldwin. So regular and steady in his hours, and quite a gentleman. He said so I assure you. ‘That young Baldwin is really quite a gentleman,’ he said to me.

Marion’s face flushed.

“I think perhaps Mrs. Baxter,” she began, “you hardly understand——.”

But the voluble little woman interrupted her.

“I was forgetting,” she exclaimed, “that Mr. Baxter wished me to fix a day for your dining with us. Just in a family way, nothing of a party. I thought most likely you would like better coming to luncheon, but he said it would be rather too far for your husband to walk backwards and forwards between business hours. He dines in town, I suppose? All the clerks do, I think. Of course *we* dine late. I don’t mean an *early* dinner. At six, we dine, and for once in a way, I daresay Mr. Baldwin could get away from business early. Will Wednesday do? I expect some of Mr. Baxter’s friends to be with us, so it will be quite a family party.”

“You are very kind,” Marion forced herself to say. “We have not gone into company at all since we came here, as I daresay you can understand.”

“Oh don’t make any apologies,” said Mrs. Baxter. “Of course I wouldn’t ask you except in an unceremonious way. Don’t trouble yourself about dressing or anything of that sort. You will do very nicely I am sure. A high black silk, or even a merino will do quite well. Of course *I* always wear a low dress, in the evening, but then that’s different.”

“It was not on account of my dress I was hesitating,” said Marion, quietly. “I was doubtful whether Mr. Baldwin would like the idea of going out to dinner even in the unceremonious way you propose.”

“Oh, but if you tell him Mr. Baxter will really make a point of it,” urged the dutiful wife, whose desire to carry the day evidently increased with the little expected hesitation she met with on Mrs. Baldwin’s part. “Mr. Baldwin is sure to agree to my husband’s wishes.”

This not very delicately expressed reminder of the relations between the two men, had its effect. With a strong effort of self-control, Marion answered gravely.

“I daresay you are right, Mrs. Baxter. Then I think I may say we shall hope to have the pleasure of dining with you next Wednesday.”

Her mission thus successfully accomplished, the visitor took her leave, sailing out of the room as majestically as she had entered; and in another minute the magnificent equipage of the Millington millionaire rolled away in ponderous

grandeur from Mrs. Appleby's door.

Marion shook herself and stamped her feet. Then catching the reflection of herself in the little mirror above the mantel-piece she laughed at her own childishness.

"How silly I am to mind it," she said to herself. "But *what* a woman! How thankful I am it is not her children but that nice kindly Mrs. Allen's I am going to teach! By-the-bye I am not at all sure that Mrs. Baxter would have asked us to dinner if she had known I am was engaged to give daily lessons. I wish I had told her. It would have been such fun to have seen her face. I must not tell Geoffrey much about her; it would infuriate him. And after all I suppose she means to be kind. But the idea of her telling me my husband was 'was really quite a gentleman!' My Geoffrey! My poor Geoffrey! What a vivid idea this gives me of what he must have to endure among these people in his daily life. And how uncomplainingly he bears it. At least let *me* do my part to smooth things to him."

She kept her resolution. When Geoffrey returned home in the evening Marion told him in the simplest, most matter-of-fact way of Mrs. Baxter's visit and invitation. "It is kind of them to ask us," she said, "and I thought it best not to chill or hurt them by declining it."

Geoffrey looked thoughtful.

"Yes," he replied at last. "I think you did right to accept it. It goes rather against the grain, and no doubt it will be rather an ordeal to both of us. But you did right, dear, as you always do," he added fondly.

Marion had her reward.

"What sort of a person is Mrs. Baxter?" he asked presently.

"A little woman," replied Marion, "not pretty, but very well dressed. Rather lively too. At least with plenty to say for herself. Good-natured too, I should think, though of course not very refined. But we got on very well."

He looked relieved.

"I am glad you did not find it very dis-agreeable," he said. "After all, dear, it

may be a good thing for you to have a few acquaintances here, and even a family dinner at the Baxters' may be a little variety for you."

She was leaving the room as he spoke. As she passed him she stooped and kissed his forehead as he lay back on the regulation sofa.

"Yes, dear Geoffrey," she said; "I have no doubt it will be rather amusing than otherwise. Besides, it is always interesting and good for one to see the different sorts of people there are in this queer world."

He caught her hands and clasped them in his own, looking up at her with ineffable tenderness in his eyes.

"Marion," he said again, as he had said a few evenings before, "my darling, you are an angel!"

He had no great command of language, you see, poor fellow!



## CHAPTER IX.

### “GOOD-BYE AND A KISS.”

“And oh we grudged her sair,  
To the land o’ the leal!”

SCOTCH BALLAD.

“AND what sort of a person did you say Mrs. Baldwin was, my dear?” enquired Mr. Baxter of his wife, when, the engrossing ceremonial of the correct four or five courses having been gone through for the day, he established himself in heavy comfort on one of the gorgeous gold and blue couches in that lady’s drawing-room.

“Oh, she seems a nice enough young woman,” replied Mrs. Baxter. “Rather too free-and-easy in her manners for my taste. Of course she was very plainly dressed, and is quite without any sort of style. But these country-bred people always are. Besides, she has been brought up in a very plain sort of way, I suppose. Didn’t you say she was the daughter of some poor country Clergyman?”

“I really don’t know who she was,” answered the husband. “The friend who introduced Baldwin merely said he was married. He himself is so superior looking, gentleman-like a young man, I could have imagined his having rather a nice wife. But, as you say, country breeding always shows more in a woman than a man.”

Mrs. Baxter had not said anything half so original, but took care to pocket the observation for future use, a little feat she was rather clever at performing.

“I didn’t say she wasn’t nice,” she replied. “I only said she hadn’t any style.”

“And you asked them for Wednesday?” pursued Mr. Baxter. “What day do you expect Mr. and Mrs. William? I really forget.”

“Monday,” replied the lady. “And that great trollopy Maria Jane of theirs. Why they couldn’t have her at home, I can’t imagine. Mrs. William writes she is so much improved by that new school, she is growing quite a fine girl. Fine girl indeed! She will be six feet if she doesn’t leave growing soon.”

“Why isn’t she at school now?” enquired Mr. Baxter, lazily.

“There was a fortnight’s holiday because of some death in the governess’s family,” replied Mrs. Baxter, carelessly. “By-the-by that reminds me Mr. Baxter, Phillips wants to go home for a week. His sister is dead, and he wants to go to the funeral. So inconvenient, too, just as Mr. and Mrs. William are coming. I can’t abide any one but Phillips driving me; it shakes my nerves to bits, and makes me all over ‘ysterical.’ ” (It was, to do her justice, very seldom that Mrs. Baxter fell short in this way, but now and then, when somewhat excited, her h’s were apt to totter.)

“Tell him he can’t go, then,” said Monsieur, sleepily, for the combined influences of his three glasses of port, the fire and the blue and gold sofa, were growing too much for him. And to tell the truth for Mrs. Baxter too! So, till startled by the entrance of Jeames and tea, the millionaire and his wife slumbered peacefully (though in one case sonorously), on each side of that marvel of tiles and fire-brick, burnished steel and resplendent gilding, which to them served as the representation of their “ain fireside.”

Wednesday came, and at six o’clock in the evening thereof, Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin, four-and-sixpence the poorer for the fly which had conveyed them from their “back-street” to the Millington West End, where the Baxter residence was situated, made their appearance in the blue and gold drawing-room.

Somewhat against her wishes Geoffrey had insisted on Marion’s attiring herself in a manner more befitting the wife of the rich Mr. Baldwin of Brackley Manor, than the helpmeet of one of Mr. Baxter’s clerks on a salary one hundred

and fifty pounds a year.

“When your dresses are worn out, and I can’t afford to buy you more,” he said with some slight bitterness in his tone, “then you may go about in brown stuff if you like. Or black more likely,” he added, in an undertone, with as near an approach to a cynical smile as was possible for him, “for *I* shan’t live to see it. By then it is to be hoped you will be free of the curse I have been to you one way and another, my poor darling!” And with the last words, though only whispered to himself, there stole into his voice, spite of his bitter mood, an inflection of exquisite tenderness.

So the dress in which Marion Baldwin made her *début* into “cotton at home,” socially speaking, though plain, was of the richest and best as to fashion, colour, and material.

Mr. Baxter positively started as he caught sight of her. Mrs. Baxter even, felt a little taken aback, not by the woman herself, but by her clothes, the quality of which her feminine acuteness was not slow to estimate as it deserved. Into such particulars of course Mr. Baxter, in common with his sex, did not enter, but the effect of the whole, the *tout ensemble* presented by “Baldwin’s wife,” struck him with admiration and surprise.

“Country-bred!” he muttered to himself. “It seems to me, my dear Sophia, you have made a little mistake hereabouts.”

For though the range of his ideas was not so limited, nor their circle so circumscribed, as was the case with those possessed by his wife. Brain work of *any* kind, even though it be confined to invoices and shipping-orders, and never soar above the usual round of mercantile interests and excitements, having an innate tendency to develop generally the mental faculties and widen their grasp.

The “family dinner” was a very gorgeous affair. Besides Mr. and Mrs. William and the “trolley Maria Jane,” there were some six or eight of the *habitués* of the Baxter circle, making in all a company of fourteen or fifteen guests.

Dinner announced, Marion, to her surprise, and the secret chagrin of the observant hostess, found herself selected by Mr. Baxter to occupy the place of honour at his right. Just, however, as she was placing her hand on the old gentleman’s arm, to her amazement a sudden rush (if so undignified a word may

be applied to the movements of so stately a lady) was made from the other side of the room by Mrs. Baxter and a tall man, to whom she had the look of acting as a small but energetic tug. The pair pushed their way to the front of the company, and Marion beheld for the first time the unusual spectacle of the hostess preceding her guests to her own dining-room. Mrs. Baldwin's cheeks, despite her philosophy, flushed.

"Can this," she said to herself, "be done intentionally to insult me? I don't mind for myself, but if Geoffrey thinks that little woman is rude to me it will make him so angry, and our coming here will have done more harm than good."

Somewhat anxiously she glanced up at Mr. Baxter's face, to see what he thought of this extraordinary procedure on the part of his wife. The worthy gentleman was smiling blandly, and modestly made way for the advancing couples, as one by one they filed out of the room, till at last, his sheep-dog occupation at an end, he and his bewildered charge brought up the rear, and, crossing the tessellated hall, through a double row of Jeameses, took their places at table.

Evidently nothing in what had occurred had in the least astonished him. The whole, therefore, must have been thoroughly "*en regle*," according to Millington ideas. "Truly," thought Mistress Marion to herself, sententiously, as her gaze fell first on the splendour of the table appointments and next on the faces surrounding her, and she began to realize something of the wonders of cottonocracy, the talent and energy which have made it what it is, the extraordinary contrasts and inconsistencies discernible in its social aspects. "Truly," thought to herself "the wife of one of Mr. Baxter's clerks," " 'we live and learn and *do* the wiser grow.' " Glancing across the table she caught sight at the other end of Geoffrey's face, and a smile on it brought a bright expression to her own. He looked cheery and comfortable enough, which it relieved her to see; and in the very bottom of her heart she, though sitting there as "grandly dressed," as the children say, as any at table, felt not a little glad that for once in a way her poor boy was sure of a really good dinner and as many glasses of excellent wine as his extremely temperate habits would allow him to consume.

For, with all her housewifely care, their living at Mrs. Appleby's was necessarily of the plainest, and sometimes Marion had sharp misgivings that this, among other things, was beginning to tell on Geoffrey's health. He *professed* to dine, or lunch, in Millington, but as often as not his wife suspected that the so-

called meal was nothing more substantial than a biscuit; for all their funds passed through her hands, and out of the infinitesimal sum which was all she could persuade him to appropriate to his personal expenses, very few luncheons worthy of the name, it was evident even to her inexperience, could be provided.

One of these sudden misgivings visited her just now, as glancing again in her husband's direction she observed attentively his face, this time turned from her. Surely the profile was sharper than of yore, the cheek-bone more defined, the hollow round the eye, strangely deeper? A sort of mist came before her sight, and into her mind there flashed one of those commonplace sayings, household aphorisms, to which, till they touch us practically, we pay so little heed. "It is not always the strongest-looking men that stand the most or are the wiriest," she had heard said a hundred times, without considering the meaning of the words. Now, however, they suddenly started before her, invested with new force and significance, and she was rapidly falling into a painful reverie, when she was recalled to present surroundings by the fat, commonplace voice of her host, remarking to her by way of saying something original, that "he hoped she liked Millington."

Much in the same words as she had replied to the same observation on the part of Mrs Baxter, Marion answered. "Oh, yes, she liked it very well. Doubtless, in time, she would like it better."

"When you have made a few more friends here, perhaps," said the gentleman civilly. "I am sorry my wife was so long of calling on you, but to tell you the truth it was not till lately I was aware my friend Baldwin was married." (A fib, of course, or at least three-quarters of one.)

"It was very kind of Mrs. Baxter to call," said Marion, with a simple dignity that was not lost on her hearer. "And you, I know, Mr. Baxter, have been *very* kind to Geoffrey. When we came here, of course, it was with no idea of living in any but the most retired way. I hardly, indeed, expected to make any acquaintances at all."

"An expectation which, for the sake of Millington, I certainly trust may not be fulfilled," replied Mr. Baxter gallantly.

Marion smiled, and accepted the good-natured little compliment with her usual unaffectedness.

“You have been accustomed to a country life, I believe?” continued the host.

“No,” replied she. “Till the last two years I lived principally in London.”

“Indeed!” remarked the gentleman, and forthwith discarded the poor-country-clergy-man’s-daughter hypothesis. Sophia had been at fault somehow, he began to feel sure. He rather enjoyed the idea of reminding her of her “nice enough young person.” But in the first place he must make sure of his own ground.

“Your father, I believe, ma’am, was in the church?” he enquired, gingerly.

“Oh no,” she replied, good-naturedly still, though beginning to think that all this cross-questioning must surely be another peculiarity of Millington manners. “My father was not a clergyman. At one time of his life I believe it was proposed he should go into the church, as one of his uncle’s livings was vacant; but he did not like the idea, and never entered any profession, unless you call politics such.”

“Very hard work and very poor pay, any way,” replied Mr. Baxter, rubbing his hands in a self-gratulatory manner. “I thank my stars *I* had never anything to say to them. Then your late father, ma’am, was, I suppose, a Hem P.?”

“Yes,” said Marion, simply, “for ——. My father’s name was Vere—Hartford Vere.”

“You don’t say so. I *beg* your pardon,” exclaimed Mr. Baxter, though why he did so Marion could not quite understand. Upon my soul.” (“Ah, Sophia, I shall have a little crow to pluck with you.”) “Very strange,” audibly again. “Very strange I never heard it. A great loss to his country, a very great loss, was Mr. Vere. Your father! Well, to be sure. Ah, indeed.” And with a series of such little detached, fragmentary observations the worthy gentleman composed his somewhat startled nerves.

The rest of dinner passed uneventfully enough.

Marion got on decidedly better with the gentleman than she had done with the lady. And Mr. Baxter, on his part, mentally pronounced her a most charming woman.

Geoffrey’s neighbour at table was the Maria Jane, so cuttingly described by

her aunt as “trollopy.” She was tall certainly, for her age, rather alarmingly so, with the possibility in prospect of continuing to grow some four or five years to come. And thin, very thin, “lanky,” to use another of Mrs. Baxter’s favourite expressions. But at her age thinness, lankiness even, if the word be preferred, has, when coupled with gentleness and perfect absence of affectation, to my mind a certain touching, appealing sweetness of its own. But this, of course, is a matter of opinion. It may be very bad taste, but I have rather a horror off *fat* young girls.

Maria Jane Baxter was, however, really and truly a very sweet girl. Geoffrey’s heart she very speedily won, for before they had been ten minutes at table, she asked him timidly if he could tell her the name of “the lovely young lady on her uncle’s right.”

So he and she, as might have been expected from this auspicious commencement, very speedily made friends; and when the ladies retired after dinner to the drawing-room, Maria Jane took care to establish herself in a modest corner not far from Mr. Baldwin’s attractive wife.

The conversation of the elder ladies was to Marion so utterly uninteresting, to say the least, that it was with a feeling of immense relief that she heard herself accosted by name by a gentle voice, asking if she would like to examine a collection of really beautiful engravings in a portfolio on the table. Mrs. Baldwin responded cordially to the young girl’s modest attention.

Over the engravings they fell into conversation.

“Do you draw, Miss Baxter?” Marion happened to ask.

“A little,” replied the girl. “That is, I am very fond of it, and my master thinks I have taste for it. But lately I have had to give it up, as at the school where I am now they were afraid of its making me stoop.”

“Then you are at a boarding-school, I suppose?” enquired Marion. “I was never at school myself; but sometimes, being an only daughter, I used to wish my father would send me. Are you happy at your school?”

“Very,” replied Maria, heartily. “It is a very nice school. It is not like those you read of, where the girls are harshly treated. We have such pretty little bedrooms; only two in each. I have a little girl in mine, whom I take care of. She has

only lately come, and at first she was very lonely. Poor Lotty! But now she is getting accustomed to it. She is very fond of me, poor child!”

Maria felt so perfectly at ease with her new friend, that she waxed communicative in a wonderful way.

“ ‘Lotty,’ did you say your name was?” said Marion. “I once knew a little girl named Lotty.”

What memories, what associations the simple word recalled! “Lotty,” Mrs. Baldwin repeated, half mechanically. “What is her other name, Miss Baxter?”

“Severn,” replied the girl. “Lotty Severn, Charlotte Severn, that is to say,” she added, glibly. “She is an orphan. Her father was a baronet, and now her uncle is one. She has always been brought up at home till lately. But about six months ago her little sister—”

Maria stopped, something in Mrs. Baldwin’s look of intense interest arrested her.

“Her little sister—Sybil—yes, I know,” exclaimed Marion. “Go on, please, Miss Baxter. I want to hear *very* much. You don’t know how much. Only don’t say that Sybil——.”

“I don’t like to tell you,” said Maria, looking frightened and half ready to cry.

“Please go on,” repeated her companion.

“This little sister—Lotty Severn’s little sister, Sybil, she has often told me her name— Don’t look so, dear Mrs. Baldwin, you frighten me—little Sybil *died* six months ago. That was why they sent Lotty to school. She was pining so for her sister.”

“Oh, Sybil, my dear little Sybil, my poor little dove!” moaned Marion to herself, but softly, so softly that no one of the Millington ladies at the other end of the room could have suspected the sad little tragedy taking place so near them. “So you are gone, my little girl, my gentle darling! And I not to have known it! Could you not have stopped an instant on your way to kiss me goodbye, as you used to say? And the only creature left to *him* to love,” she murmured, in a yet more inaudible whisper, though her former words had hardly



reached the oars of the sympathizing girl beside her.

For a few moments there was silence at the little side table, whereon lay the book of costly engravings. Then Marion, with a strong effort, recovered herself, and looking up, said gently:

“Forgive me, Miss Baxter. I loved that little girl very much, and, till now, I had no idea of this. Will you be so very good as tell me all poor Lotty told you about—about her sister.”

“Lotty does not *very* often speak about her,” said Maria. “I was told not to encourage her to do so very much as it makes her cry dreadfully. So I don’t know many particulars. She was not ill very long—not at last—though I believe she was always delicate?”

Marion assented silently.

“She died of some sort of fever,” went on Miss Baxter. “Lotty might not see her to say goodbye, but poor little Sybil sent her a kiss two hours before she died. She was very fond of her uncle, Lotty says, but he was abroad at the time.”

“Did Lotty ever happen to mention to you any one else Sybil was very fond of?” asked Marion.

“Yes,” said the girl, after some consideration. “There was a governess they had abroad. I forget her name. Lotty said Sybil cried for her when she was ill. And she sent goodbye and a kiss to her by Lotty. But Lotty thinks the lady went to India. Her grandmother, who takes care of her, told her so.”

“Will you do me a little favour, Miss Baxter?” said Marion.

The girl assented eagerly.

“When you see Lotty Severn next—(You are returning to school soon?) “The day after to-morrow,” said Maria)—“tell her that, without her knowing it, dear Sybil’s last message has been delivered. Tell her, too, that Marion Freer has never forgotten her two little pupils and will always love them. And if, dear Miss Baxter, you will continue to show kindness to poor Lotty, it will be *very* good of you. You will have *my* gratitude if no one’s else.”

“You may be sure I will do all I can for her,” said the girl warmly. “And I will give her your message.”

“Thank you very much,” said Marion, adding, as she was obliged to turn towards the rest of the company, for the gentlemen had just entered the room, and Mr. Baxter was bearing down upon her, “You won’t mind my asking you not to mention what we have been talking about to any one?”

“Certainly, I will not,” answered Maria. “I would not have done so even if you had not asked it.” For the girl felt instinctively that her disclosure had trenched on sacred ground, and from what she had gathered of Mrs. Baldwin’s history from Geoffrey’s allusions during dinner, she was quite aware that it had been a somewhat eventful one.

“Thank you,” again said Marion, and for an instant pressed the young girl’s hand in her own.

And the poor clerk’s beautiful wife and the rich man’s young daughter, though they had never seen each other before, and would, probably enough, never see each other again, felt more like friends than many women who have lived for years in each other’s constant companionship.

## CHAPTER X.

### LITTLE MARY'S ADVENT.

“But the child that is born on a Sabbath day  
Is blithe and bonny and wise and gay.”

IN consequence of the family dinner at Mrs. Baxter's, and the impression there made upon the master of the house by the discovery of Mrs. Baldwin's antecedents, that young lade received the honour of morning calls from some half dozen, more or less distinguished, Millington matrons. For a short time indeed, Marion ran some chance of becoming the fashion, but as the prospect was not a tempting one and the horrors of being patronised did not diminish on nearer view, she managed, quietly, though without giving offence, to let her new acquaintances understand that she and her husband were of one mind as to the expediency of living in a perfectly retired manner.

“Quite out of the world,” Mrs. Baxter called it, and though Marion smiled inwardly at the Millington lady's notion of society, she had the good sense to say nothing which could have uselessly irritated the wife of Geoffrey's superior.

“Nor indeed would it be right not to seem to appreciate what they think so attractive,” said she to her husband, “for after all, though our ways of looking at things may be utterly different, they are in their own way worthy people, and I suppose they mean to be kind to us.”

“I suppose they do,” said Geoffrey, “but I couldn't stand many of those dreadfully heavy dinners. Even if we could afford the cabs, which we can't.”

“In the bottom of her heart I think Mrs. Baxter is by no means sorry that we have decided against ‘visiting,’ ” said Marion. “I can’t make her out. She has been so wonderfully civil to me since we dined there, notwithstanding the dreadful revelation of my teaching Mrs. Allen’s boys. But yet I am certain she is not sincere in so urging us to accept her friend’s invitations.”

“She is a nasty little cat,” said Geoffrey; “she’s ready to scratch your eyes out because old Baxter has gone about praising you. He’s an old goose, (not for admiring you, I don’t mean that) but he talks in such an absurd pompous way. All the same, he’s a long way better than his wife, for he’s honest and she’s not. What a nice girl that little niece was we met there! The tall thin girl I mean.”

“Very,” assented Marion, and then her thoughts recurred to what had been little absent from them for some days—the tidings which had so strangely reached her of gentle Sybil’s death. She had not told Geoffrey about it. He had never heard any particulars of her life at Altes, and had she told him any she must have told him all, which on the whole she felt convinced was better not.

There was nothing really to be concealed, nothing of which she was ashamed. Years hence, some day when they had left all the past further behind, she would perhaps tell him the whole story. But not just yet. She had wounded him once so deeply, that even now, there were times at which she doubted if all was thoroughly healed; though for the last six months each day had but served to draw them closer together, in a way that, but for their loss of wealth, it might have taken years to achieve.

They were very happy together. Still, Geoffrey was at times dull and depressed almost to morbidness, and though Marion, correctly enough, attributed these moody fits greatly to outside circumstances, she yet could not but fear that to some extent they arose from misgivings as to *her* happiness, exaggerated self-reproach for what he had brought upon her.

At such times she found it best to ignore, in great measure, his depression. Protestations of affection did not come naturally to her, nor would they have convinced him of what, if he *did* doubt it, time alone would prove genuine. Her devotion to him in practical matters at such times even seemed to deepen his gloom.

“You are too good to me, far too good,” he would say, but with a tone as of

disclaiming his *right* to such goodness, inexpressibly painful to her.

At other times again he would brighten up wonderfully, and Marion's anxiety about him, physically and mentally, would temporarily slumber.

So the days wore on, till it grew to be within about three weeks of Christmas. The engagement with Mrs. Allen, which had been punctually fulfilled, was drawing to a close, much to Marion's regret; for the five guineas a month had proved a very acceptable addition to Geoffrey's modest salary, and the task till latterly, had seemed a light and pleasant one. Mrs. Allen had shown herself most consistently kind and considerate; many a day she had suddenly discovered a pressing errand at the other side of Millington obliging her to drive in the direction of Brewer Street, where Mrs. Appleby's mansion was situated, curiously enough at the very hour of Mrs. Baldwin's return thither.

"So as it happens, my dear," the worthy lad would say, "I can give you a lift home without taking me five yards about."

The little boys were very nice children, gentle and teachable. The youngest one indeed rather unusually and precociously intelligent; but as is generally the case with such children, physically speaking, fragile to a degree. They were the youngest and only remaining of a large family, all of whom had dropped off, one by one, as the mother expressed it, like buds with no life in them.

"Though how it should be the young ones come to be so delicate considering how strong Papa and I are, I can't understand," said Mrs. Allen to Marion, as she wiped away a few tears one day when she had been relating the history of her successive bereavements.

As the weather grew colder Geoffrey seemed to feel stronger. The long walk to and from Mr. Baxter's warehouse was not half so trying to him in winter as in the close oppressive days of their first coming to Millington. But it was not so with Marion. Day after day she felt her strength mysteriously diminishing, and as the last week of her daily lessons' giving approached, she felt thankful that the engagement was so near its termination; for easy as the task had been, she felt that it was growing too much for her.

One morning the boys had been a little more troublesome than usual, and she herself by the close of the lesson felt utterly exhausted. The children had run out to their play, she was alone in the school-room putting on her bonnet and cloak

preparatory to her long walk home to Brewer Street, when the door opened suddenly and Mrs. Allen appeared. She had come, good soul, with her usual transparent little fib about having to drive in Mrs. Baldwin's direction; but before she had time to explain her errand, to her surprise and alarm, Marion burst into a violent fit of weeping.

"What is the matter, dear Mrs. Baldwin? tell me, I pray you," said the kind-hearted woman. "Have the boys been teasing you, or are you not feeling well this morning?"

Marion tried to answer her enquiries, but for some minutes could not control her voice sufficiently to do so. Mrs. Allen fetched a glass of wine which she made her drink part of, and in a short time the poor girl was well enough to speak as quietly as usual, and smile at her own "silly fit of crying."

"Truly," she assured Mrs. Allen, "I had no reason for crying. Alfred was rather slower than usual at his sums, but he was perfectly good, poor little fellow. I may have been a little tired by that, however; it is the only thing I can think of. Only"—and she hesitated.

"Only what, my dear?" urged Mrs. Allen.

Marion looked up at the kind, motherly face. Its expression invited confidence.

"Don't tell anyone what I am going to say, dear Mrs. Allen," said she, laying her hand appealingly on her friend's arm. "I cannot help feeling it would be a relief to tell some-body. Do you know I am afraid I am getting ill. Sometimes I feel as if I must really be going to die. I am so dreadfully weak, and every day I feel more so. It is making the very miserable, for I don't know how Geoffrey could live without me. And my falling ill would be such a fearful aggravation of all his troubles."

She looked as if she were ready to burst out crying again. Mrs. Allen made her finish her wine, and then said very kindly,

"I don't think you are going to die, dear Mrs. Baldwin, but I certainly think you must take more care of yourself, for I am sure you need it. You are very young and inexperienced, my dear. I should like you to see a doctor."

“I don’t think it would be any use,” said Marion, sadly. “Besides,” she added, her face flushing, “doctors are so expensive, and my seeing one would alarm Geoffrey so. Of all things I wish to avoid doing so till I am obliged. I *may* get round again gradually, when the weather is better.”

“No, my dear,” persisted Mrs. Allen. “It does not do to trust to ‘*may* get wells.’ You must see a doctor. And if you don’t want to alarm your husband, I’ll tell you how we’ll manage it. If you will stay just now to early dinner with me and the boys, whenever it’s over I’ll take you to our own doctor. As nice a man as ever lived. You’ll go with me you know in an easy sort of way. Nothing to pay *this* time any way. I’ll tell him I brought you, a little against your will, feelin’ anxious about you. If he goes to see you at your own house again that’ll be another affair. To-day you’ll be like as might be my daughter.”

Marion gratefully agreed to the arrangement so thoughtfully proposed, which was accordingly carried out. Nothing could exceed Mrs. Allen’s motherly kindness, and Marion felt not a little thankful for her presence and sympathy, for wholly unexpected and somewhat overwhelming was Dr. Hamley’s solution of her mysterious loss of strength.

Was she sorry or glad? she asked herself, when, set down at her own door by her friend, she had an hour or two’s quiet to think over this little looked-for intelligence, before the usual time for Geoffrey’s return from business.

She could not tell. If they had still been rich, she thought to herself, this new prospect before her would have been one of unalloyed rejoicing. But now? They were so poor, and she feared much, the thought of another help-less being dependent on his unaided exertions would sadly deepen the lines already creeping round Geoffrey’s fair, boyish face, would quickly mingle grey hairs with the golden ones she had learnt to love so fondly. And then there came back to her recollection the words of Lady Anne, that day at Copley Wood when she had been so frightened about Geoffrey, and had yet been cruel enough to chill him by her affected indifference to his safe return.

“Geoffrey is so fond of children,” had said Lady Anne.

“Would he still feel so?” Marion asked herself. She could not make up her mind.

So she kept her news to herself for a while.

But when at last one day she confided it to her husband, she almost repented not having done so before. The relief to him was so immense of having a satisfactory explanation of Marion's failing health and wearied looks, that all other considerations faded into insignificance. He had been watching her, though silently, with the most intense anxiety, and though fearful of distressing her by objecting to the fulfilment of her engagement with Mrs. Allen, had been counting the days till it should be at an end.

"Oh, my darling!" he said; "I am so thankful, so very thankful it is this and not worse. For the last week or two I have been in such misery about you. I saw how ill you were—saw you growing weaker and weaker before my eyes without knowing what to do. I seemed paralyzed when I first realized that it was not only my fancy, and yet I dreaded startling you by noticing it. Only to-day I had made up my mind to write to Veronica and ask her to arrange for your going to her for the rest of the winter. I thought this place was killing you, and yet I could not endure the thought of parting with you."

"And do you think I would have left you, Geoffrey?" she whispered.

"I feared you would object to it, in your unselfishness, my darling—your generous pity for the man that has ruined your life."

"Don't, don't," she interrupted, laying her hand on his mouth. "It pains me so terribly when you speak so. It isn't pity, Geoffrey. It is far, far more."

He did not contradict her in her words; he looked at her fondly, with mingled reverence and tenderness. But she did not feel satisfied that he quite believed her.

"You are the whole world to me," he murmured. "Surely I am not selfish in wishing to keep you all to myself for a time. It may not, will not, I think, be for very long. And then—heaven grant I may have strength to work for her while she has no one else to look to."

He spoke too low, for Marion, who had moved across the room, to catch his words. When she had got her work she came back and sat down beside him.

"It is frightfully hard upon you," he said anxiously. "No comforts, no anything. If only we had a little house of our own, however small. But we must not think of that just yet. In a few months I hope we shall get the two thousand



pounds, which is all we shall ever see of the old Bank. Then, perhaps, we might think of furnishing a little house here.”

“We should be *dreadfully* rich then,” said Marion cheerfully. “Another hundred a year! Oh, yes, we might quite furnish a house then, and keep, perhaps, two servants.”

“But furnishing would make a hole in the capital, and then we shouldn’t have as much as a hundred additional,” said Geoffrey, dolefully.

“Not at all,” exclaimed his wife. “You are forgetting the three hundred pounds ready money we have already. It is with that, or part of it, I intend to furnish.”

“Well, we must see,” he said, unwilling to damp her pleasure in these plans, but mentally resolving that in the meantime at least the precious three hundred must not be trenched upon. “We must see,” he repeated. “One thing I am thankful for, and that is, there can be no more question of *your* doing anything but take care of yourself. No more trappings to Mrs. Allen’s, or still more horrible omnibus drives.”

“It wasn’t horrible at all,” said Marion, brightly. “I am really very sorry it is over. They are dear little boys, and Mrs. Allen herself is the best and kindest creature possible. And as for sitting at home and taking care of myself, I can assure you I have no idea of doing anything of the sort. I have lots of things to do,” she went on, her face flushing a little. “Just think of all the sewing I must get through. I shall spend five pounds of the money I have earned in materials, and I shall make everything myself.”

Geoffrey smiled. A smile more piteous than tears.

“My poor darling,” he said, “to think that you should have to work your pretty fingers sore! I am afraid I don’t feel very amiably inclined to the little \_\_\_\_\_”

“You are very wicked,” said Marion, laughing in spite of herself.

“I am not, indeed,” he pleaded. “How can I feel amiably disposed to anything that will cause you so much trouble. But I won’t say it if it vexes you. I dare say you think me horribly unnatural, but how *can* I care for anything as I do for

you?”

“Never mind,” she replied. “You’ll care quite enough when the time comes. And I never said I was going to work my fingers sore, you exaggerating creature.”

Then she brought out the five pound note she had that day received from Mrs. Allen, and set to work to calculate how far was the farthest to which the hundred shillings could be persuaded to extend themselves in her contemplated purchases.

Geoffrey’s Millington experience was applied to as a competent authority on the probable prices of various materials; but, to tell the truth, though he gave his most solemn attention to the subject under consideration, he failed to distinguish himself as might have been expected, and ended by getting himself called “a great stupid, who didn’t know the difference between linen and cotton, valenciennes and crochet.”

It was laughable enough in its way, this little domestic scene, I dare say. But pathetic too. Marion, through all her cheerfulness, was yet conscious of the peculiar loneliness of her position. Motherless, sisterless, her only confidante in these essentially womanly matters a man, whom, at first sight, one would hardly have selected as likely to excel in delicate adaptation of his strength to her weakness, his thorough manliness to her shrinking refinement. Yet, great rough ploughman as he called himself, few men were better fitted than Geoffrey Baldwin to be mother, sister, and friend, as well as husband, to the solitary girl who had no one but him to look to.

Christmas brought a letter from Harry, enclosing a cheque for ten pounds, “to buy Marion a winter bonnet,” he said. Since the news of their misfortune had reached him, Harry’s conduct had been beyond all praise. Not only had he at once cut down his already moderate personal expenses, but, by the strictest economy, he had succeeded in saving the little surplus he now sent to his sister as a Christmas-box. How welcome a one he little guessed! For it was, of course, at once appropriated to be spent in the same direction as the obstinate five pounds, which so resolutely-refused to behave themselves as ten.

“Don’t be unhappy about me,” wrote Marion’s brother. “I only wish I could see that you and Baldwin are as jolly as I. My pay is, as you see, more than enough for my expenses, and if all goes well, by the time we come home again, I have a very good chance of being made

adjutant, which will enable me to manage without difficulty in England. By another Christmas I shall hope to be with you at home; Millington or anywhere, it doesn't matter—wherever you two are is home to me.”

Some tears were shed over this letter. It was not in woman-nature—sister-nature—that it should be otherwise. Nevertheless, it added not a little to the cheerfulness of Mrs. Appleby's two lodgers as they ate their modest Christmas dinner in the sitting-room looking into Brewer Street. A ponderous invitation to perform that same important ceremony in the presence and at the board of Mr. and Mrs. Baxter, had been received but civilly declined.

“Let us have a nice quiet Christmas-day together, in our own little room,” pleaded Marion; and Geoffrey was by no means loth to comply with the request.

Christmas past, the new year soon began. January, February, and March, three ugly, dirty, slushy months, in Millington at least, followed each other in gloomy succession. With April things began to mend a little. Fresh sprouts made their appearance, with infinite labour and patience, even on the few smoke-dried shrubs and trees in Brewer Street. And in-doors at No. 32, there was comfort and content; for Mrs. Baldwin had been far from idle these last few months, and surveyed with no small satisfaction the piles of neatly-fingered little garments which bore witness to her industry.

Then came May, sweet, fickle, provoking May! *Mois de Marie*, which still we dream of as loveliest of all the twelve; though seldom, if ever, are our fond visions realised. But this year May was, for once, true to her legendary character, and the end of the month was fresh and sweet and genial, as we all fancy May used to be, long ago, when we were children: in the times when Christmas was *always* clear and frosty, seen through a brilliant vista of holly and mistletoe, plum-pudding and mince-pie; and Midsummer's-day a suitable fairy carnival of sunshine and flowers, dances on the green, or picnics in the wood.

What has come over the world in these later days? Why is Christmas, as often as not, muddy and foggy and raw, ending in uneatable plum-pudding or deplorably indigestible mince-pies? Is it in us, or in it, this extraordinary change? Where have they all gone to—the beautiful winters and summers of long ago? The lovely, hot, sunny days, when the nights seemed years apart, and the deep green woods the proper place to live in—when we made daisy-chains and cowslip-balls, and all manner of sweet, silly, summer things, whose very names now sound as the dreams of a former existence. The spring with its blossoms, the

autumn with its fruit. The bright sparkling winter, with its snow-balls and skates, roast chestnuts and fire-side games, surely the most delightful of all! What has come over them all?

Now-a-days, all the year round, with few if any exceptions, the days have a uniform shade of grey. With the exception of certain physical sensations, certain practical and not unwelcome suggestions from the housemaid, to the effect that “it is getting time to begin fires again,” many a week would go by without my thinking of, or realising the change of the seasons. Then again some trifle will bring it all back to me—the first snow-drop head peeping through the soil, a cluster of red berries on the hedge some early autumn day, the children’s voices passing my door, intent on a summer day’s ramble, as beautiful to them, I suppose, as it once was to me; or, more tender still, the sweet, quaint words of the Christmas carols in the village street—with any of these, the old wonderful feeling surges over me to overwhelming; and I ask myself if indeed my youth is gone for ever, or but veiled for a time, to be found again with all the beauty and truth, the essentially everlasting, in the far-off land we *must* all believe in, or cease to exist?

But I have wandered from Brewer Street, and what happened there one Sunday morning a bright, lovely May morning, the last day but one of the capricious month.

A daughter was born to the young couple, with whom fortune had played such malicious tricks. A sweet, tiny, soft, blue-eyed doll of a thing. Truly the very nicest of babies! Healthy as heart could wish, comfortable and content.

“A real Sunday child, is she not?” said Marion to Geoffrey, as with tremendous precaution and solemnity he bent down to kiss the funny pink nose emerging from the nest of flannel by her side. “A nice, good, happy Sunday child. I am very glad she is not a boy. A girl will be far more of a comfort to us, won’t she, Geoffrey? And may I call her ‘Mary?’ ”

“Of course you may, my darling,” he replied, “or any name you choose.”

He would not have objected to “Kerenhappuch,” or “Aurora Borealis,” as a small friend of mine once suggested at a family consultation of the kind. He was perfectly satisfied with the baby, whatever its sex or name, seeing that its mother, the light of his eyes, the being for whose happiness he was willing, nay,

ready at any moment to die, was well and strong, and pronounced by the authorities to be in a fair way towards a speedy and prosperous recovery.

## CHAPTER XI.

### MARION'S DREAM.

“Between the dawning and the day,  
The wind fell and the thunder ceased,  
The rod light came up from the east,  
As my dear love a-dying lay  
Between the dawning and the day.”

BALLAD.

THE night after the baby's birth Marion Baldwin had a somewhat remarkable dream. Remarkable in more ways than one. In the first place it was unusually coherent and clear; in the second, it was the first and only time in which Ralph Severn, the being who had exerted the greatest influence on herself and her life, ever appeared to her in “a vision of the night;” in the third place, after events satisfied *her* at least that to some extent the dream was prophetic as well as retrospective.

She dreamt that she was again a little child. A girl with flying curls and nimble feet, playing with her brother Harry in the garden of the little cottage at Brackley. All that had happened to her since then—her eventful girlhood, her sufferings and joys, her wifehood had hardly as yet realized motherhood—her whole life in short, was for the time being, swept out of her mind. She was again little May Vere, chasing butterflies and running races on the grass with still smaller Harry. Suddenly, in the midst of their play there was wafted towards her a strong, sweet scent. It was that of honeysuckle; the scent which, ever since the

meeting in the old garden at the Peacock, she had not been able to endure. Any day she would gladly have walked some miles rather than encounter it.

In her dream it acted upon her in a peculiar, bewildering way. For a short time there came over her the painful sensation of partial suffocation; it seemed to her that she stopped in her running, and lay down on the soft, velvety grass. At this point Harry disappeared; nor did the remembrance of him return to her again throughout the dream. Gradually the oppression cleared away, and her breathing became easy. She was still conscious of the honeysuckle scent; but no longer to a painful or disagreeable extent. Then some one called her by name, clearly and distinctly. She knew the voice to be Ralph's; but, looking up eagerly to see him, to her amazement she recognized the person approaching her as Geoffrey. As he drew nearer she saw that he looked pale and tired and walked very slowly. Something too he was carrying in his arms, the form of which she could not at first distinguish. Then she saw that it was a little child, lying across his breast as if asleep. It was not a baby, for a shower of thick, dark hair fell over and concealed the face: and as Geoffrey came close to her, and stood half fainting beside her, with one hand he gently put aside the hair, and she saw that the child was Sybil. Then he spoke.

"Help me to carry her, Marion," he said. "I promised to take care of her and see her safe home, but she was too tired to walk any further; and I am nearly worn out myself."

Marion stretched out her arm to take the child, but suddenly, as she did so, Sybil seemed to awake, slid from her grasp, and stood before her. Without speaking, the child for a moment gazed at the husband and wife with yearning love in her face; then, kissing her little hands she turned from them and hastened rapidly away, seeming rather to fly than run; but ever as she went, turning to kiss her hands with a sort of beckoning gesture. Marion did not feel the least surprise; but looking at Geoffrey was amazed to see him in violent distress.

"I must go," he cried, "I must go." As these words reached her ears she was seized with that fearful, indescribable sensation of dream horror, combining in itself every shade of human agony. Throwing up her arms in her extremity, she heard again Ralph's voice calling her by name; and immediately she felt her hands grasped in his. Looking up, she met his tender, loving gaze fixed on her.

"Marion, Marion," he cried, as if in reproach, "why did you not tell me

before? Why did you leave it for Sybil to tell? See only how Geoffrey is suffering. Could you not have trusted my great love, not even for *his* sake?"

Then blinding tears fell from her eyes. In a mist as it were, she saw Ralph dart forward, in time, barely, to prevent Geoffrey's falling to the ground; the sense of suffocation again oppressed her, and making a strong effort to overcome it, she woke, with a slight scream — to find Geoffrey bending over her in some anxiety; for her sleep had been disturbed and he had obtained the nurse's permission to watch beside her, while that good lady was occupied in performing Miss Baldwin's toilette for the day.

It was early morning. There were birds, a few at least, even in Brewer Street; and their sweet spring chirping sounded fresh and bright to Marion's waking ears.

"I have had such a queer dream," she said to her husband, and she looked at him anxiously. "You are quite well this morning, dear Geoffrey, are you not?" she asked. "You have not been sitting up all night beside me?"

"Oh, dear, no," he answered cheerfully, "I have had an excellent night's rest. But now I must be off; for the old dragon in the next room made me promise I shouldn't let you talk first thing in the morning, before you have had anything to eat. I shall get my breakfast and start for town. I'll be back for an hour in the middle of the day to see how you're getting on. Be a good girl, and get well as fast as you can, and don't dream queer dreams that make you scream in your sleep."

"It wasn't a disagreeable dream exactly," said Marion, "but I don't quite understand it."

Geoffrey smiled at the grave consideration she bestowed on the subject. Then he kissed her tenderly, and was gone.

It might have been only the faint light in the room, but somehow, Marion could not rid herself of the idea that Geoffrey did *not* look well that morning. Certainly he had had plenty to try him of late; his anxiety about her had of itself been enough to knock him up. She must not be morbid or fanciful, she said to herself. The best thing she could do for her husband, was to get well herself as quickly as possible; so as to be able to take care of him and see he played no tricks with himself; in the way of not changing his wet clothes, going too long



without food, or any nonsense of that kind!

She did her best to keep to her resolution, and her recovery progressed satisfactorily. The baby was certainly very delightful, its fingers and toes especially. It really cried very little indeed, hardly at all “compared with a many,” said the nurse, and Marion thought it a round ball of perfection. The nicest time was the evening, when Geoffrey came and sat beside her, his day’s work over; and she made him hold the baby in his arms and laughed at his wonderful clumsiness till the tears ran down her cheeks.

When she was well enough to be carried downstairs, and established on the regulation sofa, which, by the help of a few pillows, Geoffrey had succeeded in rendering somewhat more comfortable, some few visitors dropped in to enquire after her. Kind Mrs. Allen, of course, who indeed had allowed few days to pass since baby Mary’s arrival, without calling herself, or sending a servant, with far more fruit than Mrs. Baldwin could possibly have consumed, and flowers in sufficient abundance to have decked the greater part of the front parlours in Brewer Street—not to speak of more substantial proofs of friendliness in the shape of jellies and blancmanges, and a dozen of old port surreptitiously confided to Mrs. Appleby’s care, for the use of the young mother “when she begins to get about again.” It was all done so simply, with such homely, matter-of-fact kindness, that even Geoffrey could not feel offended, or otherwise than grateful for the motherly goodness which his young wife’s gentleness and sweetness had thus drawn forth.

The Baxter chariot made its appearance in Brewer Street one day, and the descended therefrom in person, to inspect the new thing in babies which had made its appearance at No. 32. She condescended to approve of small Mary, handled her in a wonderfully knowing manner, and altogether over-whelmed her mamma by the astonishing amount of monthly nurse talk she managed to get through in a quarter of an hour. In this domain evidently she felt herself at home, and thorough mistress of all she touched upon.

Two or three weeks soon passed, and Marion began to resume her regular habits. Her anxiety about Geoffrey, though it had to some extent subsided, had by no means altogether left her. At times he looked almost like his old self; then again any extra fatigue or unusual anxiety would tell on him fearfully. One day when he left for town he told her not to expect him home for an hour later than usual, as he thought it probable he would be detained till that time. It was a fine,

mild evening. Marion opened the window of her room upstairs, from whence she could see some way down the street, and sat there watching for his return. He came at last, walking slowly and looking very wearied. A slight shiver crept through her as suddenly the remembrance of her strange dream flashed across her mind. She darted downstairs and met him at the door, then drawing him gently into the little sitting-room—

“Geoffrey,” she said, “are you not well? I have been watching you coming along the street, and I fancied you looked so pale and tired.”

He did not answer her immediately. He sank down on a chair and covered his face with his hand. She grew frightened.

“Geoffrey,” she said, with the slight petulance of nervous anxiety, “speak to me, do! Are you not well, or is anything the matter?”

He roused himself and looked up in a bewildered manner.

“Don’t be vexed with me, dear,” he said. “I know I am very stupid. No, there is nothing the matter. I am quite well, only a slight feeling of giddiness came over me just now. I have had rather an extra long walk, and it is getting very close and oppressive in the warehouse now the summer is coming on. I shall be all right after tea. Let us have it now, for I have a lot of things to talk to you about.”

She saw he was very tired, and therefore said no more, till, refreshed by the meal, he settled himself comfortably in an arm-chair by the window.

“How delightful it must be in the country just now,” said Geoffrey. “Brentshire will be looking its very best.”

“Yes,” said Marion, a little sadly. “I am not happy when I think of your being cooped up in this place all through the summer, Geoffrey. I can see it does not suit you.”

“It is not so bad for me as for you,” he replied. Then with a sudden change of tone: “Where do you think I went to-day after leaving the office? I set off to call on your friend, Mrs. Allen.”

“To thank her for all her kindness?” exclaimed Marion. “I am *very* glad. It is

just what I have been wishing you would do, but I didn't like to propose it, for you have seemed so tired lately in the evenings."

"Well, to tell the truth it was not *merely* to thank her," said Geoffrey. "I wanted to consult her about you. I am not quite satisfied that you are getting as thoroughly strong again as you should. And one day the doctor said something about sea-air being always desirable after this sort of thing. I couldn't get it out of my head, so at last I went to consult with Mrs. Allen as to how it should be managed. She has made the most capital arrangement, if only you will be a good girl and agree to it. What a good creature Mrs. Allen is!"

"Awfully good!" answered Marion, warmly. "What is this plan of hers?"

"I'm almost afraid to tell you. I shall be so horribly disappointed if you don't agree to it," said Geoffrey. "They, the Allens, are going to the sea-side on Friday, for a month and she has asked you and the baby, and nurse of course, to go with them for a fortnight."

"And leave you?" exclaimed Marion in dismay.

"Only for a fortnight, dear," he replied; "I shall get on very well. Possibly I may get away on Saturday-week and stay with you till the Monday. Don't refuse to go, my darling. You don't know what a relief it will be to my mind to know you are having a breath of fresh air."

"But you want it more than I do, my poor Geoffrey!" remonstrated Marion, her voice faltering. "How can I leave you here alone for a whole fortnight? And you are not well. I see you are not well, though you won't own to it."

"But surely it would not mend matters for *you* not to try to get stronger, now you have really a chance of doing so," he urged. "Think of all depending on you—that little monkey, too. Supposing I *were* to fall ill, which Heaven forbid, so long as I am any good to you, my dearest, all the more reason for *you* to keep strong."

There was reason in this, Marion could not deny.

Geoffrey saw she was beginning to yield and resolved wisely to strike while the iron was hot.

“I promised to send Mrs. Allen a line by to-night’s post,” he said briskly. “Give me my portfolio, and I’ll write it now and get Sarah Ann, or whatever her name is, to post it. I am so glad to have it settled. You are a very good girl, Marion;” and he kissed her fondly.

“Promise me you won’t get ill while I am away,” she said wistfully.

“Of course I won’t. Don’t talk nonsense,” he replied. The words were rough, but the tone of the tenderest. “Seriously,” he went on, “I don’t think I am a bit worse than I was last year when we first came here. It is only the close weather that tries me.” And his satisfaction at the successful result of his little scheme, made him look so bright and cheerful that Marion’s spirits rose again, and she began to think her fears had been exaggerated.

“Be sure you write every day,” were her last words on the Friday morning, when, for the first time since their coming to Millington, the husband and wife separated. He nodded a cheerful assent, and in another minute the train puffed out of the station, and poor Geoffrey, standing solitary on the platform, straining his eyes to catch the last glimpse of his wife, was lost to sight.

Notwithstanding her misgivings on his account, Marion could not but feel that the change of air and scene was very acceptable and pleasant. The Allens were the kindest and most considerate of hosts; the fresh sea air seemed to give her new life and strength with every breath; little Mary thrived as a Sunday child should, and everything but the thought of Geoffrey’s loneliness conspired to refresh and inspirit her.

For the first week every morning brought a few words from Brewer Street. He was “getting on all right,” wrote Geoffrey; delighted to hear she was so well and happy, and looking forward, if all were well, to a Saturday and Sunday together by the sea before her return.

One day he forwarded to her a letter in an unfamiliar hand. She opened it with some curiosity, and hastily glanced at the signature. It was that of “Maria Jane Baxter.”

“How kind of her to write,” thought Marion, and the CONTENTS OF the letter pleased her very much.

“I have not been able to write before,” wrote Maria, “for at school we are not allowed to

send letters to any one not a relation. The holidays have just begun, and I want very much to tell you that I gave your message to Lotty Severn immediately I saw her. She was so very glad to hear about you. She asked me a good many questions, and I hope it was not wrong of me to tell her what I know. That you were married, I mean, to Mr. Baldwin, and how handsome and kind he was, and also that I thought you had lost a great deal of money. I hope it was not wrong of me to tell that? I heard them speaking of you at my uncle's, the next day after you dined there, and I was not sure that I caught your name rightly, for I think Uncle Baxter said your name used to be *Vere*, and I understood you to say *Freer*. But Lotty says I am quite right, and that before you were married, and at the time they knew you, you were Miss Freer. She asked me to give you her love if ever I saw you, and to tell you she would always remember you, and she hoped Mr. Baldwin would make a great deal of money at Millington. She said she would not talk about you to any one but her uncle—not to her grandmother, for Sybil always thought Lady Severn was unkind to you, Lotty says—but her uncle loved you very much for being so good to Sybil; and Lotty says she is sure he will like to hear about you. I think that was all Lotty said. I should like to see you again very much. I heard you had a little baby, and I told Lotty so. She wished you would call it 'Sybil.' I am afraid I shall not see you again, for my Aunt Baxter offended my mamma the last time we were there, and mamma says she will never go there again," &c., &c.

And so the simple, girlish epistle ended. But it pleased Marion even while it recalled painful associations. She was glad to have been able to send a message to poor Lotty, and to receive this assurance of the little girl's affection. Pleased, too, that, even in this indirect roundabout way, some tidings of her should penetrate to Ralph. She was glad that he should know that her strong interest in his little nieces had in no wise faded, that sweet Sybil had not been unmourned by her.

That the incident should lead to any other result in no wise occurred to her.

It was on the Thursday morning of the second week of her stay with the Allens that she received this letter. The day but one following—the Saturday—was to bring Geoffrey. Friday passed without any tidings of him; the first day he had missed writing. She felt a little uneasy. Still more so when Saturday morning brought no letter. But Mrs. Allen persuaded her that as he was coming that day he would not have thought it necessary to write; might, not improbably, have been detained late at business the previous evening in preparation for the Saturday's holiday.

Marion felt but half satisfied, but tried to think it was all right. To kill time till the hour at which Mr. Allen promised to escort her to the station to meet her husband, she went a long walk with the two boys. She did her best to be cheerful; they hunted for shells, they built sand fortresses for the waves to undermine, they ran races on the shore; but for all that her heart was heavy with

unacknowledged misgiving. At last they turned towards home. A few paces from their own door they met Mr. Allen hastening towards them.

“You must have been quite a long walk,” he said, speaking, it seemed to Marion, rather faster than usual. “I have been some distance in the other direction looking for you. What a lovely day it is!” he went on, hurriedly. “Just the day for the sea-side. Mr. Baldwin would have enjoyed it so much. Such a pity he can’t come.”

“Can’t come,” repeated Marion in astonishment. “He is coming, Mr. Allen. I had no letter this morning, and he would have been sure to write had anything prevented his coming.”

She glanced at Mr. Allen’s face; he did not speak, but she read something in his expression which caused her heart for an instant to stand still, and then again to beat with almost suffocating rapidity.

“Mr. Allen,” she exclaimed, wildly, “you are playing with me. It is nonsense. I see it all in your face. You have had some dreadful news while I was out. You have had a letter saying that——. Good God, tell me the worst. Give me the letter, if you won’t speak.”

“Not a letter,” stammered Mr. Allen, his rosy face suffused with perspiration drawn forth by his very unsuccessful attempt at “breaking it gently to the poor thing.” “Not a letter. A telegram from Mr. Baxter, and, and—— yes, you shall see it,” he went on, fumbling in his pocket for the large thin envelope, with the fatal “immediate” in the corner; “for I Heaven’s sake, don’t excite your-self so, my dear young lady. Think of the poor baby.” (He was a family man, you see, and none of the little Allens had been brought up “by hand.”) “After all, it may not be so bad as you think.”

She seized the envelope, tore out the paper it enclosed, and devoured the words with hungry eyes.

From Robert Baxter, Esq., Millington, to “Henry Allen, Esq., Sandbeach.” (Thus ran the telegram.)

“Not seen Baldwin two days. Sent to enquire. Find him very ill. Better send his wife at once.”

That was all. All that could be learnt for the next dreadful three hours, which

must elapse before the poor wife could be by the bedside of her suffering, perhaps dying, husband.

For “send,” good Mr. Allen read “bring”; and after a waking nightmare of hurry and confusion, Marion found herself but half conscious of where she was or what she was doing, in the railway, hastening back to the home she had quitted so unwillingly but a few days before.

Baby Mary was with her, of course, torn from her cot, poor child, to be hastily enveloped in hood and cloak, and hurried away on this unexpected journey. But it was all one to her. She was really a wonderful baby for taking things coolly, and reposed, poor little soul, in calm unconsciousness of her father’s danger, or her mother’s agonising anxiety.

“ ‘Never so bad but it might have been worse,’ ” quoted Mr. Allen to himself. “It would really have been dreadful if the poor baby, as they generally do, had seen fit to scream all the way!”

Millington, dirty, smoky, unlovely Millington at last. A wretched, jolting drive, in a wretched, jolting cab, with a stupid driver who could not, or would not, read the names of the streets or the numbers of the houses; (in consequence of which the greater part of the transit from the station to Brewer Street was performed by Mr. Allen with the upper half of his stout little person—ensconced in the regulation pater-familias sea-side costume of Scotch tweed, which he had not had time to change—extended out of the cab window as far as it could reach in the direction of the driver) ending at last in a sudden halt at Mrs. Appleby’s door.

Careless of cab fare, all but forgetful of baby, Marion dashed open the little garden gate and flew to the door. It was opened before she had time to ring; Mrs. Appleby had heard them stop.

“How is he?” was all she could say.

“Very poorly, I’m afraid,” replied the land-lady. But even that was better than the worst.

Then hastened up Mr. Allen; and, leading the way into the front parlour, Mrs. Appleby related to the two new-comers the particulars of Mr. Baldwin’s seizure.

“He had not been ‘not to say *well*,’ since Mrs. Baldwin left,” said Mrs. Appleby. Up to Thursday, however, he had been able to go to business as usual. On that morning he had not got up, told Mrs. Appleby his head was so bad, he thought he must stay in bed. He seemed to sleep most of that day, and the landlady was in hopes by Friday morning he would be all right again. But it was not so. She felt at a loss what to do, and proposed to him to send for the doctor, or Mrs. Baldwin both of which propositions he most decidedly negatived. *This* morning, however, Saturday, he was so evidently worse, light-headed Mrs. Appleby fancied, that she grew frightened: and when a young man from Baxter Brothers called to ask if Mr. Baldwin were ill, she sent by him a note to the same medical man who had attended Mrs. Baldwin, and a request to some of the gentlemen at the office to telegraph to Mr. Allen at Sandbeach.

“Had the doctor been?”

“Oh yes,” and was to call again in the afternoon.

“I will wait till he has been,” said Mr. Allen decidedly. And when Marion began to make some piteous apology for so trespassing on his kindness: “My dear,” said the little man, drawing himself up to his full height of five feet five and a half. “My dear, do you take me for a monster---a monster,” he repeated, “in human form? No, no, as sure as my name is ‘Enery Hallen, I. feel towards you, my dear, as a daughter in this time of trouble. Now run away to your ‘usband, poor fellow, and do your best to be calm. I shall do very well here till I have seen Dr. ‘Amley. This good lady, I have no doubt,” with a gallant inclination towards Mrs. Appleby, which forthwith gained the worthy landlady’s heart. “This good lady will get me a chop, and shall still have time to catch the last train to Sandbeach. Now don’t think any more about me. Run away to your ‘usband.”

She needed no second bidding. But, alas! when she stood by Geoffrey’s bedside, laid her cool hand on his forehead, called him by every endearing name, he no longer knew her! He lay in a sort of stupor, perfectly quiet, not apparently suffering. His eyes were open, but for her, sightless. He stared at her, evidently without the slightest recognition. It was fearful! She had never before come in contact with this sort of illness, rarely indeed with serious illness of any kind: and she crouched down by the bedside and sobbed her very heart out.

Suddenly she fancied she heard him speak. He was only muttering to himself.



“The letter,” he said, “I must put it where she will be sure to see it—at once, as soon as ever it is all over. Veronica will be good to her at first.”

He spoke so rationally, though the words made her shudder, that she fancied he must be recovering his consciousness.

“Yes, dear Geoffrey,” she said, “I am here. Shall I fetch the letter?” But he only stared at her vacantly, and repeated, “She will be to see it—yes, sure to see it, when all is over.”

Then he dozed off again, and for an hour or more she crouched beside him in her desolation of misery.

At the end of that time came Mrs. Appleby, to tell her that Dr. Hamley was below, and to entreat her to take some nourishment.

“For the dear baby’s sake, ma’am;” which reminder had the desired effect.

Marion could not succeed in obtaining much satisfaction from the doctor. At that early stage in an illness of the kind, he said to her, it was impossible to give an opinion. No doubt it was likely to be serious; but Mr. Baldwin was young, had an excellent and unimpaired constitution, and with care and patience they had every reason to hope the best. She must take great care of herself, he added, as a parting injunction—for every sake, baby’s of course in particular.

“Oh yes,” replied Marion, “you shall see how reasonable and sensible I shall be, Dr. Hamley, if *only* you will let me nurse him myself.”

“Not unassisted? Indeed, my dear young lady, it would be quite out of the question,” said the doctor. “For a short time you really must have a nurse. It is a case in which everything depends on constant, unflagging care and watchfulness. I shall look out a nice nurse myself and send her this evening.

“Thank you very much,” faltered Poor Marion, as he left her, promising to call again early the next morning.

To Mr. Allen, whom he saw alone on his way out, Dr. Hamley was much more out-spoken and explicit. “He is terribly ill, poor fellow,” he said. “It will be at best a touch-and-go case. You see it has been coming on evidently for some time. A sort of break up it is in fact; resulting from all he has undergone, and the

complete change in his life and habits since coming here. If he recovers, a return to a country life will be his only chance. But it will be some weeks before we can venture to talk of him and recovery in the same breath! I only hope that poor girl's strength may keep up."

"Poor thing, poor thing," said Mr. Allen, sympathisingly. Then he added with some little embarrassment, button-holing Dr. Hamley as he spoke: "They are very poor, Doctor, and illness is expensive. You will know where to apply to if there is any difficulty of this kind? I must hasten to catch the next train, but with you I feel that I leave them in good hands. You will see that they want for nothing that a little ready money can supply?"

"All right, my dear Sir," replied the doctor cordially, and added as he shook hands with Mr. Allen, "They are fortunate in having such friends as, I know of old, your worthy lady and yourself are sure to prove in time need."

The nurse arrived before night and was installed in her place.

Then began the weary monotony of a long and dangerous illness; to those who have not come directly in contact with it, so indescribable; to those who have themselves watched for weeks in a sick room, so painfully familiar.

It proved indeed, as Dr. Hamley had prophesied, a close race between me and death. For many days none could have said which was the more likely to win.

Of acute suffering there was little; for the occasional paroxysms of fever and delirium alternated with long fits of death-like stupor, during which for hours together, Geoffrey Baldwin neither moved nor spoke. When delirious, his thoughts appeared chiefly to run on the letter to which he had alluded in the beginning of his illness. Marion got accustomed to his speaking of it, and came to think it must be merely a dream, for though she looked in every direction, in likely and unlikely places, she found no letter to which his broken sentences could refer. She soothed, or tried to soothe, his anxiety on the subject (for she was never sure if she understood what she said) by assuring him she had read the letter and would attend to all its injunctions. "When all is over?" he asked her once, wistfully gazing in her face. But not even to satisfy him could she bring herself to repeat the dreadful words—"Yes, when all is over."

All through the weary weeks she watched him, as if with the concentrated devotion of mother, sister and wife. She did not allow herself to *think*: had she

done so her strength must assuredly have failed; as it was, it stood the test in a way that astonished all about her.

“You do not know how wiry I am,” she said one day to Dr. Hamley, and she judged herself correctly.

At last, at last—when June had grown into July, and the leaves on the few trees in Brewer Street were already, poor stunted things, brown and shrivelled by Millington dust and smoke, and seemingly inclined in disgust and disappointment to drop off in premature decay—at last, after the long waiting, the heart sickness of hope deferred till it had all but become despair, Marion had her reward.

“He has got the turn, my dear,” said Dr. Hamley. “He has got the turn, and if we can now keep up his strength and spirits, we shall, by God’s blessing, pull him through.”

## CHAPTER XII.

### GEOFFREY'S WIDOW.

“One law holds ever good,  
That nothing comes to life of man on earth  
Unscathed throughout by woe.”

PLUMPTRE'S SOPHOCLES.

SHE had thought the worst over, but it hardly proved to be so. He lay, indeed, peaceful and calm, her own Geoffrey again, restored to himself in mind and spirit, no longer tossed by the anguish of delirium, or deadened by unrefreshing stupor. But he did not gain strength. From day to day no progress was made. Dr. Hamley was nonplussed.

“He doesn't seem to *wish* to get better,” he said to Marion. “I can't understand it. I have tried every argument to rouse him, but he only says he is perfectly comfortable, and begs to be left undisturbed. I have told him if he goes on like this he will never get well, but he doesn't seem to care. He smiles and thanks me with that sweet voice of his till I feel ready to shake him.”

And Marion at last began to lose heart.

One evening—it was growing late, Geoffrey was already settled for the night—she sat alone in the little parlour, very weary and very sad, when her glance fell on her husband's old Bible, lying on the side table. It was the one they had always used at family prayers, in the days when they were the centre of a

household, and it had accompanied them to Millington, but during the last few weeks, spent principally in Geoffrey's bedroom, it had not been opened. Half mechanically now Marion drew it towards her, and opened it at one of her favourite chapters, some few verses of which, sweet words of comfort and support, she read with silent, but not the less fervent appreciation. As she lifted the book to replace it, a letter fell out. She started and shivered as the superscription met her eyes. "To be read by my widow when all is over with me." And in the corner the initials, "G. B.," and the date, "June 14th," the eve of the day on which Geoffrey had been taken ill.

After a moment's consideration she deliberately broke the seal, drew forth and read the paper it contained.

It was letter, addressed to herself, and ran as follows:—

"MY DEAREST WIFE,

"I feel that I am going to be very ill, and I have a strong belief that I shall not recover from the illness which is coming upon me. I have felt it coming on for some time, but I had hoped to keep up a little longer till I had been able to make better arrangements for your comfort. What I could, I have done. Within the last day or two I have received the two thousand pounds due to you as creditor, by the old bank. I have made it over to the care of Mr. Framley Vere. He will, I trust, prove a better trustee than I did, my poor child. Some other matters I have also explained to him—as to the guardianship of our little daughter, &c. I have also for some time past had a promise from Veronica, that so long as you require it, the shelter of her home shall be open to you. I think you will be happy with her for a time. She wishes to have you and the baby with her very much. But it is not so much about these matters I wish to write to you. It is about yourself, my own darling! You have been the dearest and best of wives to me. You pained me once, terribly, how terribly I trust you may never know, but it was not your fault. I had brought it on myself by my own selfishness, my headstrong, presumptuous determination to have you for my own at all costs. But that pain is past. Your devotion to me of late has more than effaced what indeed I never blamed you for. I think God that I am not to be a life-long burden to you, generous, unselfish woman that you are. For, my dearest, you must not from any mistaken regard to my memory, any morbid wish to atone for the pain you could not help once causing me, refrain from accepting the happiness which, sooner or later, will, I feel sure, be yours to take or refuse. *His* name I do not know. I know indeed nothing but what you yourself told me. I have never sought to know more. But long ago you told me he was good and noble, otherwise, indeed, how could one so pure and sweet as you have given him your heart? I gathered, too, that he was rich, and of good position, socially; so there will be no outward difficulties in the way. I have, too, an instinctive belief that he has been constant to you. Once, indeed, you said as much yourself to me. Quite lately some words of yours dropped half unconsciously—I think it was the day we dined at the Baxters'; you were sitting by the fire late that evening on our return, and you did not know I was in the room—gave me to understand that he had not married any one else. (I am getting so tired, I can hardly hold my pen.) I had meant to say a great deal more. But I can sum it up in a few words. Show that you forgive me, dearest, for the cloud I have brought over your life, by being happy in the future, as but for me you would have been long before this. For your

goodness to me, your great and tender pity, the devotion all the more wonderful because of its utter unselfishness—for all you have given me, all you have been to me, for so much affection as you *could* give me, I would thank you if I had words to do so. I cannot express half I feel, my own love, my darling! I am not sorry to die young, for, my dearest, there was one thing you could *not* give me, and without it I owe to you the thought of life—long years of fruitless longing on my side, of almost superhuman effort on yours to make up for what could not be made up for is less attractive to me than that of death. You will always, I know, think tenderly of me. When all is over with me, no bitterness will mingle with your remembrance of me.

“Yours most devotedly,  
“GEOFFREY.”

She read every word of it without moving. When she had finished it, she folded it reverentially and replaced it in the envelope. Then she sank on the ground beside the chair on which she had been sitting, and hiding her face in her hands, knelt there in perfect silence for a long time.

The night was far advanced when at length she crept upstairs to her husband’s room. By the faint night-light she saw that he was lying perfectly still, his eyes closed. She thought he was asleep.

In a few minutes he moved slightly.

“Marion,” he said, “is that you?”

“Yes,” she answered softly. “I thought you were asleep.”

“Is it not very late for you to be up?” he asked. “I won’t keep you, but I want to say one thing to you which has been troubling me. When I was at the worst, Marion, delirious, I mean, did I not speak about a letter? It was one I wrote the night before I was taken ill, and I cannot remember where I put it. I should not like it to be lost, and yet I am afraid it would vex you, startle you, if you found it just now. If only I could get up and look for it!”

“You need not wish that, Geoffrey,” she said in a very low voice. “I *have* found the letter. It slipped out of your big Bible that lies on the table downstairs.”

He started. “You have found it?” he repeated.

“Yes, found it, and—don’t blame me, Geoffrey—I have *read* it.”

“When?” he asked.

“This very evening. An hour or two ago.”

There was a dead silence for some minutes.

Then the wife bent over her husband. She wound her arms round his neck, she buried her face in his breast, so that he could not see the tears that rushed at last to her eyes, could scarcely hear the words, the pleading, earnest words that rose to her lips.

“Geoffrey,” she said, “my own Geoffrey. I have read the letter. It is generous and beautiful and unselfish. It is like you. But for all that, don’t you see, don’t you feel, Geoffrey, it is all a mistake?”

“Yes,” she replied; “a mistake. It was all true that I told you, of course. True that I loved that other with a girl’s passionate first love, and I suffered fearfully that day—soon after we were married, Geoffrey, before I had learnt to know you—when I met him, and the sight of his face, the sound of his voice, most of all my agony of pity for his terrible sorrow, revived it all for the time. Not merely for the time in one sense; for I shall always honour and care for him, love him even, with the sort of tender, reverential love we give to the dead; but it is all different from now, *that* love is softened and sacred, and as if—yes, that is the only way I can say it—as if he had long been dead. But you, Geoffrey, you are my own dear living husband, the father of my little child, the dear Geoffrey that has suffered so, and been so brave and patient. You *need* me. Geoffrey. I belong to you as I never did to him. And I need you. We have grown into each other’s lives and beings, and we can’t be separated. If you die and leave me, I can’t stay behind. Not even for baby. Oh, say you won’t die. Don’t, don’t say you want to leave me.”

“Want to leave you?” he repeated in a broken voice. “My darling, my darling, if this wonderful thing you tell me is true, how could I ever want to leave you? How can I ever find words to tell you the wonderful perfection of happiness you have brought me? But is it true? You would not, you could not deceive me, Marion, lying here, till five minutes ago believing myself a dying man. Before God tell me, Marion, my wife, it is not out of *pity* you have spoken thus to me—not out of *pity* you have told me that you love me?”

He raised her head so that he could see the expression of her face, the truth and earnestness in her clear deep eyes.

“It is true, Geoffrey,” she said solemnly. “It is thoroughly and utterly true. No *pity* could have made me say what I have said just now. It is no new thing this love of mine for you. Long, long ago I felt it growing, quietly and steadily and firmly. Only then I thought it had come too late. My worst sufferings at the Manor Farm were when I thought this.”

He said no more; he was perfectly satisfied. He kissed her brow, her mouth, her eyes, as if to seal the blessedness of his new found joy. Then he lay back, and closed his eyes, for he was weak still, weak almost as an infant. And the sun, when it rose that morning above the smoke and heavy, dusty air surrounding the great city, might have seen one pleasant sight, the sweet sleeping face of Geoffrey Baldwin, a man to whom, after bitter disappointment and sore trouble, manfully met and patiently borne, God in His goodness had sent new life and little looked-for happiness.

From this time forth, as might have been expected, Geoffrey made steady progress towards recovery. It was still, of course, but slow work; there were days on which both he and Marion felt sadly disheartened, but Dr. Hamley kept up their spirits by assuring them that all was going on well; as well, that is to say, as could be expected after so serious, so nearly fatal an illness.

And at last they grew satisfied that his opinion was correct, for by the end of August Geoffrey was going about again, and beginning to speak of ere long resuming his daily duties; for thanks to the representations of that monster in human form, the worthy Mr. Allen, Mr. Baldwin’s situation in the counting-house of Messrs. Baxter Bros. had been kept open for him.

But there was a great hole made in the three hundred pounds of ready money they had been hoping by this time to furnish a little house with!

On one point Marion was resolute. Before Geoffrey should “dare to allude to such a thing as going back to business,” he must have a little change of air. To which he offered no great objection provided she would go with him. “She,” of course, including baby Mary and her nurse. So to Sandbeach they went for a week, thereby making a still greater hole in the little nest-egg, but enjoying themselves amazingly nevertheless.

Back again at Millington, there was no help for it. Geoffrey must no longer delay presenting himself at Mr. Baxter’s office, and resuming the weary jog-trot



of his uncongenial duties. But it was with a lighter heart than ever he had dared to hope for, that the young man paced the long stretch of dirty pavement, which in the last fifteen months had grown so familiar to him.

Marion was watching anxiously for his re-turn.

“You are not very tired, Geoffrey?” she asked, as she met him at the door.

“Oh no,” he replied cheerfully. “I’ve got on very well, and I *did* eat some luncheon, Marion, I did, indeed. They were very kind and cordial to me down there, old Baxter and the rest, hoping I was all right again, and all that sort of thing.”

Later in the evening, as they were sitting together quietly, Geoffrey resting on the sofa, he suddenly exclaimed, “By-the-by, Marion, I heard rather a queer thing to-day. Last week while we were at Sandbeach it appears we had a visitor.”

“A visitor?” she repeated. “What do you mean?”

“Well, not a visitor exactly. He didn’t come to this house; but somebody, a gentleman, called at the office and asked if I was there. They told him of my illness, so he asked to see old Baxter, and made particular enquiries about me. How long I had been ill, and I don’t know all what. He didn’t leave his name, at least if he did Baxter won’t tell it; but the clerks say they are sure he was what *they* call a ‘swell.’ (Don’t scold me, Marion, I’m not talking slang.) I should never have heard of it, but through one of them who saw him come in, and overheard my name. Old Baxter was uncommonly civil to him, they say; showed him out himself, and was fearfully obsequious. I wish the sight of my grand friend, if he is a friend of mine, would make the old screw raise my salary, *I* know! But there’s no chance of any such luck. I shall never get on in Millington I fear, Marion. I can’t understand their ways. I can keep books and so on well enough. I’ve had to do with farm books all my life; but it’s quite a different sort of thing.”

“Poor Geoffrey,” she said, sympathisingly. “But it will never do for you to get low-spirited the very first day you’re back at your work. Let us talk of something else. Who can this gentleman have been. What was he like?”

“Not tall, they said,” answered her husband. “About the middle size and slight. Not good-looking, but gentlemanlike; very dark, and black hair, rather

grey for his age, for they say he didn't look much over thirty. I can think of no one I know answering this description, who would be likely to be enquiring after me. Can you?"

"I don't know," said Marion, rather dreamily, but any one more observant than Geoffrey would have thought that for a woman she manifested singularly little curiosity about the mysterious unknown.

"Black hair, rather grey for his age," she murmured softly to herself more than once that evening. "It had not a thread of silver when *I* knew it."

A week later came one morning a letter for Geoffrey which, arriving after he had left for business, excited, not a little, Marion's curiosity during the day. It was addressed in a somewhat stiff, old-fashioned hand, and its postmark was Mallingford. She had more than half a mind to open it, fearful of the effect of possible bad news coming suddenly on her husband; but ended by not doing so. Afterwards she was very glad she had left it for Geoffrey to read first himself.

It was from old Squire Copley, containing a formal offer to Mr. Baldwin from Lord Brackley, of his Brentshire agency, unexpectedly made vacant by the death of the last holder some six weeks before!

"I need hardly, my dear fellow," wrote the Squire, "urge your acceptance of this offer. It is a capital good thing of its kind, the income, one way and another, very little short of a thousand a year, inclusive of course of the house, a sweet pretty place for a young couple as one would wish to see. Brackley has been down here himself for a week or two, looking into things a bit, and when he told me you had been recommended to him for the post, and that he was entertaining the idea, I was as pleased, I assure you, as if you had been a son of my own. 'The very man for the place,' said I. And so say one and all hereabouts, my boy. Lady Anne and Maggie—Georgie's in India, you know—will be only too delighted to welcome you and your wife and the little one I heard of if I'm not mistaken, back to your old neighbourhood. And I'm not afraid that you will break your hearts at having to leave Millington, for you're Brentshire born and bred, and so in a sense is your wife."

Then followed a little local gossip, to which, however, it was hardly to be expected that Geoffrey or his wife could at this moment pay much attention.

They looked at each other with tears in their eyes, but sunshine in their hearts.

“Oh, Geoffrey, how thankful I am!” she exclaimed. “Now you will have a chance of getting like your old self again. Now I need not feel anxious about you any more. How happy, how very happy we shall be.”

“My darling,” he replied, drawing her towards him, “will you really be happy in a pretty country home of your own with a stupid old ploughman like me? Squire Copley is right, it is a dear little place, the house where we shall live. Much prettier than the Manor Farm, though not so large. But I am not sorry to begin our new life in a new house. You had plenty of sorrow in the old one, my dearest. Heaven grant you may have little in your new home! None at least of *my* causing.”

“And only think how delightful it will be to have a garden for Mary to play in when she begins to toddle about by herself,” exclaimed Marion.

“And a home to welcome poor Harry to at Christmas,” added Geoffrey.

Truly there were few, if any, happier people that night in the world, than Mrs. Appleby’s two young lodgers!

Late in October that year there came a sort of Indian summer. A week or two of inexpressible beauty, tinged with a certain mellow tenderness, a sort of pensive echo of the summer glories past and gone, peculiar to this lovely “*été de Saint Martin*,” of which we so seldom see anything in our part of the world.

It was just at this time that the Baldwins, after a week or two spent at Mallingford with Veronica Temple, took up their quarters in their new home. A pretty, cosy nest of a place as it was, it could hardly have been seen to greater advantage than on the day on which Marion first entered it as its mistress.

“You are pleased with it, dear?” asked Geoffrey, and the look with which she answered him said far more than words.

“I have been rather puzzled by something I heard to day,” Geoffrey went on after a moment’s pause. “I was speaking to our clergyman, Mr. Brace, you know, whom I happened to meet in the village. He was congratulating me on our return. ‘Yes,’ he said to me, ‘it is the very thing for you, Baldwin. Sir Ralph Severn could not have given you a better proof of his friendship than by recommending you to his uncle for the post.’ I felt exceedingly amazed at this, Marion, but I said nothing to Mr. Bruce. I thought I would first tell you about it.

Is it not strange that Sir Ralph Severn, whom to my knowledge I have seen in my life, whom I hardly know by name, should have recommended me to Lord Brackley? And it must be the case, for Bruce evidently had heard it from Lord Brackley, and I know he is not the sort of man to mention a thing without foundation. Is it not *very* strange? Surely there can have been no mistake about it!" And poor Geoffrey looked perplexed and distressed.

Marion's heart beat a little faster, but she felt that the right time had come.

"No, dear Geoffrey," she said gently, "there is no mistake. I have suspected this before. I guessed who the stranger was that called at Mr. Baxter's and enquired all about you and your circumstances. I recognized him from what you told me of his personal appearance. It was he that got you Lord Brackley's offer. Don't you know now, Geoffrey? Can't you guess who Sir Ralph Severn is, and why he did this?"

For a moment Geoffrey sat silent, still with the look of bewilderment and anxiety. Then a sudden light broke over his face.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I see. I see it all. And from the bottom of my heart I thank him for his goodness, and I pray God to bless him. But Marion, my dearest, my own darling," and as he spoke he drew her towards him and looked with the tender trust of happy love into the clear sweet eyes that met his gaze, "I could not—generous and noble as he is—I *could* not have said what I have, could not have felt as I do, but for the remembrance of the sweetest hour of my life, the night when you found the letter, and told me, my darling, that I need not die—that you had learnt to love me."

Marion hid her face in her husband's breast and felt that she was at rest and happy. But tears rose gently to her eyes, as there flashed across her mind the remembrance of her dream.

"Dear, I look from my hiding-place,  
Are you still so fair?— Have you still the eyes?  
Be happy."

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