AN OPEN VERDICT

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON:
JOHN MAXWELL AND CO.
4. SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET,
1878

Title: An Open Verdict, Volume 3 (of 3)
A Novel

Author: Mary Elizabeth Braddon

Release Date: May 10, 2022 [eBook #68040]

Language: English

Produced by: David Edwards, Eleni Christofaki and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at https://www.pgdp.net (This file was produced from images generously made available by The Internet Archive)

Transcriber's note

Variable spelling and hyphenation have been retained. Minor punctuation inconsistencies have been silently repaired. A list of the changes made can be found at the end of the book.

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CHAPTER I.

PATERNAL DIPLOMACY.

‘WHAT!’ roared Mr. Scratchell, scarlet of visage, ‘you are asked to marry a man with fifteen thousand a year, and you refuse? Did anybody ever hear of such lunacy?’

Bella sat shivering at the paternal wrath. Mrs. Scratchell was weeping dumbly. All the younger Scratchells were ready to lift up their voices in a chorus of condemnation. Bella’s folly in refusing Mr. Piper was, in their eyes, a personal injury.

‘You would not ask me to marry a man I cannot love, would you, father?’ faltered Bella; ‘a man I can hardly respect.’

‘You cannot respect fifteen thousand a year?’ cried Mr. Scratchell. ‘Then, in the name of all that’s reasonable, what can you respect?’

‘He is so rough-mannered and dictatorial,’ urged Bella, ‘so stout and puffy. And it is really dreadful to hear him murder the Queen’s English.’

Mr. Scratchell looked round at his assembled family with a wrathful glare, as if he were calling upon them all to behold this ridiculous daughter of his.

‘That ever I should have bred and reared such foolishness!’ he exclaimed. ‘What’s that fairy tale you were reading the little ones, mother, about the Princess and the seven feather beds? She had seven feather beds to sleep upon, one atop of the other, and couldn’t rest because there was a parched pea under the bottom one. There’s your proud Princess for you!’ pointing at his tearful daughter. ‘She turns up her nose at fifteen thousand a year because the owner of it doesn’t arrange his words according to Lindley Murray. Why, I never had much opinion of Lindley Murray myself, and, what’s more, I never could understand him.’

‘Father, it isn’t a question of bad grammar. If I loved Mr. Piper, or felt that I could teach myself to love him, I shouldn’t care how badly he talked. But I cannot love him.’

‘Who asks you to love him?’ cried Mr. Scratchell, folding and unfolding his newspaper violently, in a whirlwind of indignation. ‘Nobody has made mention

of love—not Piper himself, I warrant. He's too sensible a man. You are only asked to marry him, and to do your duty in that state of life to which it has pleased God to call you. And very grateful you ought to be for having been called to fifteen thousand a year. Think what you can do for your brothers and sisters, and your poor harassed mother! There's a privilege for you. And if Piper should take to buying property hereabouts, and give me the collection of his rents, there'd be a lift for me.'

Then Mrs. Scratchell feebly, and with numerous gasps and choking sobs, uplifted her maternal voice, and made her moan.

'I should be the last to press any child of mine to marry against her inclination,' she said, 'but I should like to see one of my daughters a lady. Bella has been a lady in all her little ways from the time she could run alone, and I am sure she would become the highest position—yes, even such a station as Mr. Piper, with his fortune, could give her. If there was anything better or brighter before her—any chance of her getting a young good-looking husband able to support her comfortably—I wouldn't say marry Mr. Piper. But I'm sure I can't see how any girl is to get well married in Little Yafford, where the young men ____'

'Haven't one sixpence to rub against another,' interrupted Mr. Scratchell, impatiently.

'And I know what life is for those that have to study the outlay of every penny, and to keep their brains always on the rack in order just barely to pay their way,' continued Mrs. Scratchell.

Bella gave a deep, despondent sigh. It was all true that these worldly-minded parents were saying. She was no romantic girl to believe in an impossible future. She knew that for women of the Scratchell breed life was hard and dry, like the crusts of the stale loaves which she so often encountered at the family breakfast-table. What was there before her if she persisted in refusing this high fortune that was ready to be poured into her lap? Another rebellious family to teach—an unending procession of verbs, and pianoforte exercises, dreary fantasias, with all the old familiar airs turned upside down, and twisted this way and that, and drawn out to uttermost attenuation, like a string of Indian-rubber. If nothing else killed her, Bella thought, she must assuredly die of those hateful fantasias, the ever-lasting triplets, the scampering arpeggios, stumbling and halting, like the canter of a lame horse.

Mr. Scratchell heard that long sigh and guessed its meaning. He checked his

loud indignation, all of a sudden, and had recourse to diplomacy. The girl's own sense was beginning to argue against her foolishness.

'Well, my dear,' he said, quite amiably, 'if you've made up your mind there's no use in our saying any more about it. Your mother and I would have been proud to see you settled in such a splendid way—the envy of all the neighbourhood—holding your head as high as the best of 'em. But let that pass. You'd better look out for another situation. With so many mouths as I've got to feed, I can't afford to encourage idleness. There must be no twiddling of thumbs in this family. The *Yorkshire Times* comes out on Saturday. There'll be just time for us to get an advertisement in.'

Bella gave another sigh, an angry one this time.

'You're very sharp with me, father,' she said. 'I should have thought you'd have been glad to have me at home for a little while, with my time disengaged.'

'What?' ejaculated Mr. Scratchell. 'Haven't you had your afternoons for idleness? Your time disengaged, indeed! Do you think I want a daughter of mine to be as useless as a chimney ornament, good for nothing but to look at?'

And then Mr. Scratchell took out a sheet of paper, dipped his pen in the ink, and wrinkled his brow in the effort of composition.

'Governess, residential or otherwise,' he began, pronouncing the words aloud as he wrote, 'competent to impart a sound English education, French, Italian, German, music, drawing and painting, and fancy needlework. Able to prepare boys for a public school. Has had the entire charge of a gentleman's family. First-rate references.'

'There,' exclaimed Mr. Scratchell. 'That will cost a lot of money, but I think it is comprehensive.'

'I don't know about drawing and painting,' objected Bella, with a weary air. 'I never had much taste that way. I learnt a little with Beatrix, but——'

'Then you can teach,' said Mr. Scratchell, decisively. 'If you've learnt you know all the technical words and rules, and you're quite competent to teach. When your pupil goes wrong you can tell her how to go right. That's quite enough. Nobody expects you to be a Michael Angelo.'

'I'm afraid I shall look like an impostor if I attempt to teach drawing,' remonstrated Bella.

'Would not object to a school,' wrote Mr. Scratchell, adding to the

advertisement.

‘But I would very, very, very much object, papa,’ cried Bella. ‘I will not go into a school to please anybody.’

‘My dear, you have got to earn your bread, and if you can’t earn it in a private family you must earn it in a school,’ explained her father. ‘I want the advertisement to be comprehensive, and to bring as many answers as possible. You are not obliged to take a situation in a school simply because you get one offered you—but if your only offer is of that kind you must accept it. Hobson’s choice, you know.’

Bella began to cry.

‘The little Pipers are very hateful,’ she sobbed, ‘but I dare say strange children would be worse.’

‘If the little Pipers were your step-children you could do what you liked with them,’ said Mr. Scratchell.

‘Oh, father,’ remonstrated his wife, ‘she would be bound to be kind to them.’

‘Of course,’ replied Mr. Scratchell. ‘Within certain limits. It would be kindness to get them under strict discipline. She could pack them off to school, and needn’t have them home for the holidays unless she liked. Come, I think the advertisement will do. It will cost three or four shillings, so it ought to answer. Herbert can take it with him to-morrow when he goes to his office.’

‘Father,’ cried Bella, desperately, ‘you needn’t waste your money upon that advertisement. I won’t take another situation.’

‘Won’t you?’ cried Mr. Scratchell. ‘Then I’m afraid you’ll have to go to the workhouse, which would be rather disgraceful at your age. I won’t keep you in idleness.’

‘I’d sooner marry Mr. Piper than go on teaching odious children.’

‘You’ll have to wait till Mr. Piper asks you again,’ replied her father, delighted at having gained his point, but too diplomatic to show his satisfaction. ‘You’ve refused him once. He may not care to humiliate himself by risking a second refusal. However, the advertisement can stand over for a day or two, since you’ve come to your senses.’

Mr. Scratchell went off to his official den presently, and Mrs. Scratchell came over to Bella and hugged her.

‘Oh, my darling, it would be the making of us all,’ she exclaimed.

‘I don’t see what good that would be to me, mother, if I was miserable,’ Bella responded, sulkily.

‘But you couldn’t be miserable in such a home as Yafford Park, and with such a good man as Mr. Piper. It isn’t as if you had ever cared for anybody else, dear.’

‘No, of course not,’ said Bella, full of bitterness. ‘That makes a difference.’

‘And think what a lady you would be, and how high you could hold your head.’

‘Yes, I would hold my head high enough, mother. You may be sure of that. I would have something out of life. Beatrix Harefield should see what use I could make of money.’

‘Of course, dear. You have such aristocratic ideas. You could take the lead in Little Yafford society.’

Bella gave a scornful shrug. The society in Little Yafford was hardly worth leading; but Bella was of the temper that deems it better to reign in a village than to serve in Rome. She put on her bonnet and went to call upon Mrs. Dulcimer. That lady was in the garden, her complexion protected by a muslin sun-bonnet, washing the green flies off her roses. To her sympathetic ear Bella imparted the story of Mr. Piper’s wooing and the paternal wrath.

‘My dear, I don’t wonder that your father was angry,’ cried the Vicar’s wife. ‘Why, Mr. Piper is the very man for you. The idea occurred to me soon after Mrs. Piper’s death. But I didn’t mention it, for fear of alarming your delicacy. Such a good homely creature—an excellent husband to his first wife—and so wealthy. Why, you would be quite a little queen. How lucky I was mistaken about Cyril! What a chance you would have lost if you had married him!’

Bella shuddered.

‘Yes, it would have been a pity,’ she said.

And then she thought how if Cyril had loved and married her, she—who was just wise enough to know herself full of faults—might have grown into a good woman—how, looking up at that image of perfect manhood, she might have learned to shape herself into ideal womanhood. Yes, it would have all been possible if he had only loved her. His love would have been a liberal education.

Love had been denied her; but wealth, and all the advantages wealth could

give, might be hers.

‘I really begin to think that I was very foolish to refuse Mr. Piper,’ she said.

‘My love, excuse me, but you were simply idiotic. However, he is sure to renew his offer. I shall call and see those dear children of his to-morrow. And when he asks you again, you will give him a kinder answer?’

‘Yes,’ said Bella, with a long-drawn sigh, ‘since everybody thinks it would be best.’

Everybody did not include Beatrix Harefield. Bella had not consulted—nor did she mean to consult—her old friend and playfellow. She knew quite well that Beatrix would have advised her against a mercenary marriage, and in spite of all her sighs and hesitations, Bella’s sordid little soul languished for the possession of Mr. Piper’s wealth.

Mrs. Dulcimer was delighted at the notion of conducting a new courtship to a triumphant issue. She put on her best bonnet early in the afternoon, and went to pay her visit to the Park, feeling that it behoved her to bring matters to a crisis.

Mr. Piper was at home, seated on a garden chair on his well-kept lawn, basking in the sunshine, after a heavy dinner which went by the name of luncheon. He had a sleek, well-fed look at this stage of his existence, which did not encourage sentimental ideas: but Mrs. Dulcimer looked at the big white house with its Doric portico, the stone vases full of bright scarlet geraniums, the velvet lawn and gaudy flower-beds, the belt of fine old timber, the deer-park across the ha-ha, and thought what a happy woman Bella would be as the mistress of such a domain. She hardly gave one thought to poor Mr. Piper. He was only a something that went with the Park; like a bit of outlying land, which nobody cares about, tacked on to a large estate.

‘I hope your dear children are all well and strong,’ said Mrs. Dulcimer, after she had shaken hands with Mr. Piper, and they had confided to each other their opinions about the weather. ‘I came on purpose to see them.’

‘You shall see them all presently, mum,’ replied Mr. Piper. ‘The schoolroom maid is cleaning ’em up a bit. They’ve been regular Turks all this blessed morning. They’ve lost their gov’ness.’

‘Why, how is that?’ cried the hypocritical Mrs. Dulcimer. ‘Bella is so fond of them. She is always talking of her clever little pupils.’

‘She’s left ’em to shift for themselves, for all her fondness,’ said Mr. Piper;

and then, being of a candid nature, he freely confided his trouble to the Vicar's wife.

He told her that he had asked Bella to marry him, and she had said no, and upon that they had parted.

'It was better for her to go,' he said. 'I couldn't abear the sight of her about the place under the circumstances. I should feel like the fox with the grapes. I should be always hardening my heart against her.'

'Dear, dear,' sighed Mrs. Dulcimer. 'I'm afraid you were too sudden. A woman is so sensitive about such matters. I dare say you took that poor child by surprise.'

'Well, mum, perhaps I may. I'd been thinking of making her an offer for a long time, but it may have come on her like a thunderclap.'

'Of course it did. And, being shy and sensitive, she naturally said no.'

'Don't you think she meant no?' asked Mr. Piper, swinging himself suddenly round in his garden chair, and looking very warm and eager.

'Indeed, I do not. She was with me yesterday afternoon, and I thought her looking ill and unhappy. I felt sure there was something wrong.

'Now you look here, Mrs. Dulcimer,' said the widower. 'I'm not going to offer myself to that young woman a second time, for the sake of getting a second refusal; but if you are sure she won't say no I don't mind giving her another chance. I'm not a proud man, but I've got a proper respect for myself, and I don't want to be humiliated. I shan't ask her again unless I'm very sure of my ground.'

'Come and take tea with us to-morrow evening,' said Mrs. Dulcimer. 'I'll get Bella to come too, and you'll be able to judge for yourself. Bring some of your dear children.'

'Thank you, mum, you're very kind; but I think until some of the Turk has been flogged out of them I'd rather not take them into company. But I'll come myself with pleasure, and if you like to ask Bella Scratchell I've no objection to meet her.'

Mr. Piper's olive branches now appeared, newly washed and combed, and in their Sunday clothes. Thus attired they looked a little more vulgar than in their every-day garments. They were all angles and sharp lines, and looked embarrassed by their finery, which, from the corkscrew curls at the top of their

heads to the tight new shoes upon their afflicted feet, was more or less calculated to give them pain.

Naturally Mrs. Dulcimer pretended to be enraptured with them. She discovered in one an extraordinary likeness to his papa, in another a striking—yes, a painfully striking resemblance to her poor dear mamma. She asked them questions about their studies and recreations, and having completely exhausted herself in less than ten minutes' performance of these civilities, she rose to wish Mr. Piper and his young family good-bye.

'At seven to-morrow, remember,' she said.

'I shall be there, mum,' answered Mr. Piper.

CHAPTER II.

MR. PIPER IS ACCEPTED.

MRS. DULCIMER'S tea party was a success. Bella appeared in her prettiest muslin gown—an embroidered Indian muslin that Beatrix had given her, with a great deal besides, when she went into mourning. She wore blue ribbons, and was bright with all the colour and freshness of her young beauty. Mr. Piper felt himself very far gone as he sat opposite her at tea. He hardly knew what he was eating, though he was a man who usually considered his meals a serious part of life, and though Rebecca had surpassed herself in the preparation of a chicken salad.

The evening was lovely, the sunset a study for Turner, and after tea Mrs. Dulcimer took Mr. Piper into the garden to show him her famous roses. Once there the worthy manufacturer was trapped. Bella was in faithful attendance upon the Vicar's wife, and presently Rebecca came, flushed and breathless, to say that her mistress was wanted; whereupon, with many apologies, Mrs. Dulcimer left Mr. Piper and Miss Scratchell together.

'Bella can show you the rest of the garden,' she said as she hurried off.

'Take me down by the gooseberry bushes, Bella,' said Mr. Piper. 'It's shadier and more retired there.'

And in that shady and retired spot, with the rugged old plum trees and pear trees on the crumbly red wall looking at them, and the happy snails taking their evening promenades under the thorny gooseberry bushes, and the luxuriant scarlet runners making a curtain between these two lovers and the outside world, Mr. Piper—in fewest and plainest words—repeated his offer, and this time was not refused.

'Bella,' he exclaimed, with a little gush of emotion, putting his betrothed's small hand under his elephantine arm, 'I'll make you the happiest woman in the three Ridings. You shall have everything that heart can wish. Poor Maggie never could cotton to her position. My good fortune came too late for her. She had got into a groove when I was a struggling man, and in that groove she stuck. She tried hard to play the lady; but she couldn't manage it, poor soul. She was always the anxious hard-working housewife at bottom. There's no rubbing the

spots out of the leopard's hide, or whitening the Ethiopian, you see, Bella. Now you were born a lady.'

Bella simpered and blushed.

'I shall try not to disgrace your fortune,' she said, meekly.

'Disgrace it! Why, you'll set it off by your prettiness and your nice little ways. I mean to get you into county society, Bella. I never tried it on with Mrs. P., for I felt she wasn't up to it; but I shall take you slap in among the county folks.'

Bella shuddered. The little she had seen and heard of county people led her to believe that they were very slow to open their doors to such men as Mr. Piper.

'Mrs. P. never had but one hoss and a broom,' said the widower, walking his chosen one briskly up and down behind the curtain of scarlet runners. 'You shall have a pair. I think you was made for a carriage and pair. Shall it be a landau or a b'rouche?'

Bella opined, with all modesty, that she would prefer a barouche.

'You're right,' exclaimed Mr. Piper, 'a woman looks more queenly in a barouche. And you can have poor Mrs. P.'s brougham done up for night work. And you shall have a chaise and the prettiest pair of ponies that can be bought for money, and then you can drive me about on fine afternoons. I'm getting of an age when a man likes to take his ease, and there's nothing nicer to my fancy than sitting behind a handsome pair of ponies driven by a pretty woman. Can you drive?'

'I dare say I could if I tried,' answered Bella.

'Ah, I'll have you taught. You'll have a good deal to learn when you are Mrs. Piper, but you're young enough to take kindly to a change in your circumstances. Poor Moggie wasn't. Her mind was always in the bread-pan or the butcher's book.'

In this practical manner were matters settled between Mr. Piper and his betrothed. The widower called upon Mr. Scratchell next day, and obtained that gentleman's consent to his nuptials. The consent was granted with a certain air of reluctance which enhanced the favour.

'As far as my personal respect for you goes, there is no man living I'd sooner have for a son-in-law,' said Mr. Scratchell, 'but you'll allow that there is a great disparity of age between you and my daughter.'

Mr. Piper was quite willing to allow this.

‘If I couldn’t marry a pretty girl I wouldn’t marry at all,’ he said. ‘I don’t want a housekeeper. I want some one bright and pleasant to look at when I come home to dinner. As for the disparity, well, I shan’t forget that in the settlement I mean to make upon Bella.’

This was exactly what Mr. Scratchell wanted. After this everything was speedily arranged. Mr. Piper was an impetuous man, and would brook no delay. He would like to have been married immediately, but he was persuaded, for decency’s sake, to wait till October. Even this would be very soon after the late Mrs. Piper’s death; but the indulgent Mrs. Dulcimer argued that a man in Mr. Piper’s forlorn position, with a young family running to seed in the custody of servants, might be excused if he hastened matters.

So Bella set to work to prepare her trousseau which was by far the most interesting part of the business, especially after Mr. Piper had slipped a little bundle of bank-notes into her hand one evening at parting, which bundle was found to amount to five hundred pounds. Bella spent long afternoons shopping at Great Yafford, attended by her mother and sisters, who all treated her with a new deference, and were delighted to hang upon her steps and look on while she made her purchases. She had already begun to taste the sweets of wealth. Her betrothed showered gifts upon her, and positively overwhelmed Mrs. Scratchell with garden stuff and farm produce. It was a time of plenty which the little Scratchells had never imagined in their wildest dreams. Mr. Piper tipped them all round every Sunday afternoon. His pockets were like the silver mines of Mexico. He was a man overflowing with new half-crowns and fat five shilling pieces—noble-looking coins that seemed to be worth a great deal more than five meagre shillings.

Beatrix was horrified when she heard of her friend’s engagement.

‘Oh, Bella, how could you?’ she exclaimed. ‘You are sacrificing yourself for the sake of your family.’

Bella blushed, for in her heart of hearts she knew that the interests of her family had been very far from her thoughts when she consented to become the second Mrs. Piper.

‘My father and mother had set their hearts upon it,’ she said.

‘But they had no right to set their hearts upon your marrying such a man as that.’

‘He is a very good man,’ pleaded Bella.

‘Have you really made up your mind to marry him? Do you really believe that you can live happily with him?’ asked Beatrix, earnestly.

‘Yes,’ sighed Bella, thinking of the barouche and pair, the pony carriage, the huge barrack of a house at the end of an avenue of elms, the dignity and importance that all these things would give her. ‘Yes, I have quite made up my mind, Beatrix. It will be such a good thing for my family—and I believe I can be happy.’

‘Then I will not say another word against Mr. Piper. Indeed, I will try my best to like him.’

‘He has a very good heart,’ said Bella, ‘really a noble heart.’

‘And that is of more consequence than the kind of English a man talks.’

‘And he is very intelligent,’ said Bella, anxious to make the best of her bargain. ‘You should hear him talk of Jeremy Bentham. Papa says it is quite wonderful.’

‘And what about his children, Bella? Are they nice? Do you feel that you can love them?’

Bella involuntarily made a wry face.

‘They are not very nice,’ she answered, ‘but it will be my duty to love them, and of course I shall do so.’

This conversation took place at the Water House one afternoon at the beginning of October. Beatrix and her companion, Madame Leonard, had been away for nearly two months, living quietly at Whitby and other seaside places, and Beatrix had come back improved in health and spirits.

Sir Kenrick had been absent six months, and was likely to return at the end of the year, unless the war continued. He would not care to leave the army while there was any hard fighting going on, and his regiment was in the thick of it. Mrs. Dulcimer loudly lamented this Burmese outbreak, which made it impossible for Kenrick to sell out with a good grace yet awhile. She was always talking to Beatrix about him, and entreating to hear little bits of his letters. Lately there had been an irregularity in the letters. Kenrick’s regiment had been moving about. He had been off the track of civilization and postal facilities.

One morning in October, just a week before Bella’s wedding day, there came

a startling letter—a letter which Beatrix brought to Mrs. Dulcimer.

‘Oh, my dear, my dear!’ cried the Vicar’s wife, ‘something dreadful has happened to Kenrick. I see it in your face. Is he dead?’

This last question was almost a shriek, and it was evident that Mrs. Dulcimer was prepared to go into hysterics at a moment’s notice.

‘No,’ answered Beatrix, ‘but he has been severely wounded, and he is on his way home.’

‘Coming home,’ cried Mrs. Dulcimer, ‘how delightful! But severely wounded! How dreadful!’

‘He writes in very good spirits, but I think though he hardly admits as much, that he has been badly hurt, and very ill from the effects of his wounds,’ said Beatrix. ‘He wishes you and Mr. Dulcimer to go to Southampton with me to meet him.’

‘Dear boy, how touching! Read me a little of the letter. Do, my love.’

Beatrix complied, and read all her lover’s letter, save those little gushes of sentiment which she would have considered it a kind of treason to confide even to Mrs. Dulcimer.

‘It is selfish of me to ask you to take so much trouble, perhaps,’ he wrote, ‘but it would make me very happy if you would come to Southampton to meet me. I know our good friends the Dulcimers would bring you, if you expressed a wish to that effect. I want to see you directly I land, Beatrix. I want your dear face to be the first to smile upon me when the steamer touches the English shore. The journey would be interminable if I had to wait till the end of it to see you. I am not very strong yet, and should be obliged to travel slowly. But if you will meet me and greet me, I think all my ills will be cured at once. A week or so at Culverhouse, with you for my daily companion, will make me as strong as a lion. I am bringing you home a poor little leaflet of laurel, dear, to lay at your feet. That last skirmish of ours brought me to the fore. Happy accidents favoured me, and our chief has said all manner of kind things about my conduct at the retaking of Pegu. I come back to you a major. I have not said a word yet about selling out. That shall be as you wish; but I confess that my own inclination points the other way. This last business has made me fonder than I used to be of my profession. I have tasted the sweets of success. What do you think, love? Could you be happy as a soldier’s wife? I write this at Alexandria. The steamer leaves to-morrow, and ought to arrive at Southampton on the 7th or 8th of

November. Shall I be so blest as to see you among the eager crowd on the quay when the boat steams into the famous old docks, whence so many a soldier has gone to his fate—where there have been such sad partings and joyous meetings. Come, love, come, and let me think I do not return unlooked for and unloved.'

'What do you think I ought to do, Mrs. Dulcimer?' asked Beatrix, humbly.

'Do, my love? Why, go, of course. There isn't a doubt about it. Clement and I will take you.'

'You are very good,' faltered Beatrix. 'Yes, I will go to meet him.'

CHAPTER III.

A WEDDING MARCH.

BELLA'S marriage was to take place on the last day of October. It had been laid down from the beginning that it was to be a very quiet wedding. There was a newness and brightness about that splendid monument to the late Mrs. Piper in Little Yafford churchyard which seemed to forbid high jinks at Mr. Piper's second nuptials. 'People might talk,' as Mrs. Scratchell said, happily ignorant that people were talking about her daughter and Mr. Piper with all their might already.

Hardly anybody was to be invited to the wedding. This was what Mr. Piper and everybody else concerned kept on saying; yet every day some fresh invitation was given. Mr. Piper had a good many friends among the manufacturing classes, innumerable middle-aged men with red faces and expansive waistcoats, every one of whom was, according to Mr. Piper, the oldest friend he had. These, one by one, were bidden, with their wives and families, —'the more the merrier.' In no case was the invitation premeditated, but it came naturally from Mr. Piper's lips when he met an old acquaintance on 'Change, or in the club-house at Great Yafford.

'Never mind, my dear,' he said, apologetically, to Bella. 'They are all carriage people. And they'll make a fine show at the church door.'

'But I thought we were going into county society,' said Bella.

'So we are, my pet, but we aren't going to cut old friends. There's Joe Wigzell, the jolliest fellow I know, and making twelve thousand a year out of hat linings. Mrs. Wigzell's a perfect lady, and there's a fine family of grown-up daughters. You ought to know the Wigzells.'

'I think if you want to be in county society you'll have to give up your Wigzells,' said Bella. 'They won't mix.'

'But they must mix,' cried Mr. Piper. 'I shall make it worth their while to mix. Such dinners as I shall give will bring the two classes together——'

'Like oil and vinegar,' said Bella, who was a little out of humour with her affianced.

These invitations of Mr. Piper's, given at random, had swelled the wedding party into an alarming number. Poor Mrs. Scratchell was troubled in mind as to how she should seat her guests. There was a difficulty about the tables. But Mr. Piper made light of everything. He would have no cutting and contriving, no humble devices of Mrs. Scratchell's, no home-made pastry. He went to Great Yafford and contracted with the principal confectioner of that town to supply everything, from the tables and decorations down to the salt spoons. The breakfast was to be a magnificent banquet, at a guinea a head, exclusive of wines, and Mr. Piper was to write a cheque for everything.

This arrangement pleased everybody except Bella, whose pride was keenly wounded by it.

'You have made a pauper of me among you,' she cried angrily, to the family circle, on the night before her wedding. 'I had rather have had the quietest, simplest breakfast that mother could have arranged, with the Dulcimers and Beatrix Harefield for our only visitors, than all this finery paid for by Mr. Piper.'

'Fiddlesticks!' exclaimed Mrs. Scratchell. 'You weren't ashamed to take his money for your wedding clothes. Why should you be ashamed of his paying for your wedding breakfast? I hate such humbug.'

'I have a little pride left,' said Bella.

'Very little, I should think,' answered her father, 'and what you have doesn't become you. It's like the peacock's feathers on the jackdaw. You weren't born with it.'

'Come upstairs and let us try on the wedding bonnets,' said Clementina. 'And be kind and nice, Bella. Recollect it is your last night at home.'

'Thank God for that, at any rate,' ejaculated Bella, piously.

The house had been transformed by an artificial and almost awful tidiness. Everything had been put away. The swept and garnished rooms were scarcely habitable.

'I never saw such discomfort,' cried Mr. Scratchell, looking discontentedly round his office, which smelt of soft soap, and was cleaner than he had ever seen it in his life.

His papers had all been stowed away, he knew not where. Valuable leases and agreements might have been thrust into obscure corners where they would be forgotten. The whole process horrified him.

‘You oughtn’t to have touched my office,’ he said, ‘business is business.’

‘I couldn’t help it,’ pleaded Mrs. Scratchell. ‘The men from Great Yafford said we must have a room for the gentlemen to put their hats and things, so I was obliged to give them this. You have no idea how they order us about. And then they asked me where they were to put your things, and almost before I told them, and while I was so flurried I scarcely knew what I was saying, your papers and tin boxes were all swept off.’

‘And pray where are they?’ demanded Mr. Scratchell, furiously.

‘I—don’t be angry, Scratchell. I couldn’t help it. They’re all safe—quite, quite safe—in the hay-loft.’

‘Where the rats are eating the Harefield leases, no doubt,’ said Mr. Scratchell.

‘It’s for a short time, dear,’ said Mrs. Scratchell, soothingly. ‘We’ll put everything back in its place the day after to-morrow; and I don’t think rats like parchment.’

The wedding day dawned, and to all that busy and excited household the sky seemed to be of another colour, and the atmosphere of another quality than the sky and atmosphere of common days. The Scratchell girls rose with the lark, or rather with the disappearance of the cockroaches in the old kitchen, where those black gentlemen scampered off to their holes, like Hamlet’s ghost, at cockcrow. The younger sisters were in high spirits. The idea of an inordinately rich brother-in-law opened a new hemisphere of delight. What picnics, and carpet dances, and other dissipations Bella could provide for them when she was mistress of Little Yafford Park! To-day they were to wear handsome dresses for the first time in their lives; dresses of Bella’s providing. As bridesmaids they were important features in the show. The maid-of-all-work was no less excited. She, too, was to wear a fine dress; and she had the prospect of unlimited flirtation with the young men from the pastrycook’s. She brought the girls an early cup of tea, and helped them to plait their hair. Ordinary plaits would not do for to-day.

‘I’ll have mine plaited in ten, if you can manage it, Sally,’ said Flora.

‘And I’ll have mine in the Grecian plait,’ said Clementina.

‘I don’t know what’s the matter with Miss Beller,’ said the faithful Sally. ‘It’s my belief she has been crying all night. Her eyes are as red as pickled cabbage. All I can say, if she isn’t fond of Mr. Piper she ought to be. I never see such a free-spoken, open-handed gentleman.’

Mr. Piper was intensely popular in the Scratchell household. Nobody considered that Bella was sacrificing herself in marrying so charming a man. His fifty years, his puffiness, his coarse red hands, about which Nature had made a trifling mistake, and supplied thumbs in place of fingers, his bald head with its garnish of iron-gray bristles—all these things went for nothing. He had won everybody's favour, except perhaps that of his young bride.

At a quarter to eleven everybody was ready; Mr. Scratchell in an entire new suit, which circumstance was such a novelty to him that he felt as if he had been changed in his sleep, like the tinker in the old story; Mrs. Scratchell, flushed and nervous, tightly encased in a shining purple silk gown, which made her presence felt as a mass of vivid colour wherever she appeared, like a new stained glass window in an old church. The bridesmaids looked bright and pretty in sky-blue, with wreaths of forget-me-nots round their white chip bonnets. The boys wore sleek broadcloth, like their father's, buff waistcoats and lavender trousers. Everything was intensely new. They all stood in the hall waiting for the bride, and contemplating each other curiously, like strangers.

'I never thought father could have come out so good-looking,' whispered Clementina to her eldest brother. 'I should hardly have known him.'

'Ah!' ejaculated Herbert, 'money makes all the difference.'

They felt as if they were all going to be rich now. It was not Bella only who went up in the social scale. Her family ascended with her. Even the faithful domestic drudge, Sally, rejoiced at the change in her fortunes. The fragments that fell to her share after the family dinner would be daintier and more plentiful. Her scanty wages would be more secure.

At last Bella came down, in glistening white apparel, clouded over with lace. That delicate taste which had always been hers, the instinctive refinement in all external things which made her mother say that Bella had been a lady from her cradle, had regulated her wedding dress. She looked as pure and aërial as some pale spring floweret, tremulous upon its slender stem. Her family bowed down and worshipped her, like Joseph's brethren, as represented in the vision of the sheaves.

'God bless you, my pet!' cried her father, in an unprecedented burst of affection. 'It is something to have such a beauty as you in one's family.'

The gray old chancel was like a bed of gaudy tulips, so varied and so brilliant were the dresses of Mr. Piper's manufacturing friends, waiting impatiently to behold him at the altar. Among all these bright colours and startling bonnets,

Beatrix Harefield, in her gray silk dress and old Brussels lace, looked like a creature belonging to another world. All the manufacturing people noticed her, and wanted to know who that distinguished-looking young lady was. Mrs. Dulcimer and Beatrix had the Vicarage pew all to themselves.

Presently the bride entered the porch, leaning on her father's arm, pale against the whiteness of her bridal dress. Mr. Piper, crimson with agitation, and breathing a little harder than usual, hurried forward to receive her. He offered her his arm. The four bridesmaids followed, two and two, the organist played a spirited march, and the business of the day began.

Bella gave the responses in a clear little voice. Mr. Piper spoke them with gruff decision. Mr. Dulcimer read the service beautifully, but Mr. Piper's manufacturing friends hardly appreciated the Vicar's deliberate and impressive style. They would rather have had the ceremony rattled over with modern celerity, so that they might get to the wedding breakfast.

'If there's any hot *ontries* they'll be spoiled,' whispered Mrs. Wigzell, the hat-lining manufacturer's wife, to Mrs. Porkman, whose husband was in the provision line.

'I'm beginning to feel quite faint,' answered Mrs. Porkman. 'Getting up so early and coming so far! It's trying for a weak constitution.'

'Did you ever see such a young thing?' asked Mrs. Wigzell, indicating the bride with a motion of her head.

Mrs. Porkman's only answer was a profound sigh.

'What can be expected from such an unsuitable marriage?' demanded Mrs. Wigzell, still in a whisper. 'After such a sensible wife as poor Moggie, too.'

'Oh, my dear, Moggie Piper never rose to the level of her position,' answered Mrs. Porkman.

And now all was over, and for ever and ever—or at least for the ever and ever of this lower world—Ebenezer Piper and Isabella Scratchell were made one. Whatever the incongruity of the union, the thing was done. Disgrace or death only could loosen the knot.

The organ crashed out the tremendous chords of the Wedding March, everybody looked delighted at the near prospect of breakfast. People crowded into the vestry to see Bella and her husband sign the register. There was much kissing of bride and bridesmaids, while poor Mrs. Scratchell, wedged into a

corner by the vestry door, wept a shower of hot tears over her purple dress.

‘I hope she’ll be happy,’ she ejaculated. ‘Marriage is a solemn thing. God grant she may be happy.’

And in her inmost heart the mother prayed and feared lest all should not be well with her daughter in this marriage which she as well as her husband had striven so hard to bring to pass.

‘We have done all for the best,’ she told herself, ‘and Mr. Piper is a kind, good man.’

Her maternal heart thrilled with pride presently at the church door when she saw the manufacturing people’s carriages, the sleek well-groomed horses, the smart liveries, the consequential coachmen and pampered footmen. They were a long time getting away from the church, and there was a good deal of fuss, and some offence given to punctilious minds, in bringing the carriages to the porch. Mrs. Porkman’s landau came before Mrs. Wigzell’s, which was wrong, as everybody knows that hat linings rank before provisions; and the great Mr. Timperley of the Linseed Mills—quite the most important person present—was left with his aggrieved wife and daughter till nearly the last. However, they all got off ultimately, and five minutes brought them to Mr. Scratchell’s door.

The breakfast was laid on two long tables in the common parlour; the best parlour did duty as a reception-room, and for the display of the wedding presents, which were exhibited on a side table. Mr. Piper’s friends had all sent offerings, scaly golden snakes with emerald or ruby eyes, mother-o’-pearl envelope boxes, filigree bouquet holders, lockets, fans, personal finery of all kinds. To the bride of a gentleman in Mr. Piper’s firmly established position, no one could think of offering the butter dishes and dessert knives, claret jugs and fish carvers, pickle bottles and biscuit boxes, which are presented to modest young couples just setting up in domestic business. Bella’s presents were therefore all of a strictly useless character. Beatrix gave her a set of pearl ornaments, Mrs. Dulcimer a dressing-case. The Vicar’s gift was a Bible in an exquisite antique binding, and a pocket edition of Shakespeare.

‘You need never be at a loss for something worth reading while you have those two books, my dear,’ he told Bella when he presented them.

The breakfast was a success. The Great Yafford confectioner had done his duty. There were perigord pies, and barley sugar temples, hecatombs of poultry and game, highly decorated hams and tongues, trifles, jellies, creams, hothouse fruit, ices, wafers, coffee and liqueurs. To the minds of the young Scratchells it

was the most wonderful feast. They played havoc among all the dishes, reckless of after-consequences. Such a banquet as that was well worth the cost of a bilious attack. The wines had been sent from the Park, and were the choicest in Mr. Piper's collection.

'There's a bookay about that 'ock,' said Mr. Porkman, smacking his lips approvingly, 'that I don't remember to have tasted for the last ten years. You don't get such 'ock now-a-days. Money won't buy it, no more than it won't buy Madeira.'

'I hope you'll crack many a bottle before the next ten years, Porkman,' roared Mr. Piper. 'It's Skloss Johnny's Berger that I bought out of old Tom Howland's cellar, after the poor old gentleman's death. He was a Connysewer, was Tom. I've got a whole bin, and it will be your fault if you don't punish it.'

'And so I will, sir, for it's real good stuff,' answered Mr. Porkman, blinking at the straw-coloured wine in his green glass.

The newly-married couple were to spend their honeymoon in Italy. Coarse as he was in appearance and manners, Mr. Piper had vague yearnings after the pleasures of refinement. He wanted to see the cities of Italy, and the pictures and statues with which he had been informed those cities abounded. He had not cared to travel in the first Mrs. Piper's time, firstly because that lady's health had been precarious, and secondly because she could not speak a word of any language except her own. Mr. Piper wanted a companion who could interpret for him, and assist him to squabble with innkeepers and hackney coachmen. Such a companion he felt he could have in Bella, and he would take a pride in exhibiting his pretty young wife at table-d'hôtes and in public places. He would like to be pointed out as a comfortable well-to-do man of middle age who had married a girl young enough to be his daughter. He was not ashamed of the disparity. It flattered his vanity.

Bella looked very pretty by and by in a fawn coloured travelling dress and a pale blue bonnet. There was a carriage and four to take Mr. Piper and his bride to the railway station at Great Yafford. He had insisted upon four horses, though two could have done the work just as well. The postillions were an imposing spectacle—smartly clad in sky blue jackets, with satin favours pinned upon their breasts, and slightly the worse for beer. Happily the hired horses were of a sober breed, or Mr. and Mrs. Piper might have come to grief on the first stage of their journey.

They were gone—amidst the usual shower of old slippers. The wedding

guests departed immediately after. There was to be no dance, nothing to wind up the evening, as Clementina and all her younger sisters and brothers loudly lamented.

‘I should think you’d better all go off to your beds, after the way you stuffed yourselves all through the breakfast,’ said Mr. Scratchell. ‘I saw you.’

‘What was the use of leaving things?’ demanded Herbert. ‘The pastrycook’s men will take everything back. They won’t leave us a crumb for to-morrow.’

Herbert was right. The confectioner’s men were already sweeping off the fragments of the feast—half-tongues—bodies of fowls—dilapidated pies. Mrs. Scratchell stood and watched them with regretful looks. The family might have subsisted for a week upon the savoury remains. The small Scratchells prowled round the tables and picked little bits out of the plates. Those manufacturing people had been delicate and wasteful in their eating. The broken bits were daintier than anything the little Scratchells had ever tasted before.

‘Come, clear out,’ cried the father, ‘you’ve all eaten too much already.’

But he thought it a hard thing that the pastrycook’s men should come down, like the locusts of Scripture, and make barrenness in the land, after Mr. Piper had paid for everything.

The house had a desolate look when the van had driven off with all the glass and china and long deal tables, the epergnes and artificial flowers. Bella’s room looked unutterably dismal. It was but a poor attic, at best, and now, in the untidiness of departure, strewed all over with crumpled scraps of paper, ends of old ribbon, cast-off cuffs and collars, and worn-out shoes, looked horrible. The younger sisters explored the chamber after all was over, in the faint hope of gleaning something valuable.

‘She hasn’t left a morsel of anything behind her,’ said Clementina.

‘I don’t think you can complain of that,’ said Flora. ‘She’s given us all her old clothes.’

‘If she’d had a spark of generosity she’d have given us some of her new,’ answered Clementina. ‘This is to be my room now. It’s a horrid hole. I’m sure the furniture must have been second-hand when Noah built the ark. Think of Bella, with her apple-green bedroom and dressing-room at the Park—all the furniture new and her own choice—and her barouche and pair—and her brougham for evenings. Doesn’t it seem too ridiculous?’

Clementina went to the shabby little looking glass on the chipped mahogany chest of drawers, and submitted her small blunt features to a severe scrutiny.

‘I’m not particularly ugly, and I’ve Bella’s complexion, which is the best part of her,’ she said, ‘but I don’t suppose there’s a Mr. Piper growing for me anywhere.’

‘Oh yes, there is,’ answered the cheerful Flora. ‘Bella will give lots of parties, and we shall meet with young manufacturers.’

‘Bella will do nothing except for her own gratification,’ said Clementina. ‘She won’t give parties to please us.’

CHAPTER IV.

KENRICK'S RETURN.

IN the dull dark days of November Mr. and Mrs. Dulcimer took their ward to Southampton, there to await her lover's return. They were to spend a week at Culverhouse with Sir Kenrick, and then he was to go with them when they went back to Little Yafford. Mrs. Dulcimer had planned it all. If Kenrick was ailing still—though that was not likely, Mrs. Dulcimer said, after the sea voyage—Rebecca could nurse him. There was no beef tea like Rebecca's, no such calves' foot jelly.

They went to the Dolphin Hotel at Southampton, and Mr. Dulcimer at once descended upon the old book-shops in the High Street, like a vulture upon carrion—very much like a vulture, since he cared only for the dead. Mrs. Dulcimer took Beatrix for a gentle walk, which meant a contemplation of all the shop windows. Beatrix looked pale and out of spirits.

'I know you are anxious about Kenrick,' said Mrs. Dulcimer.

Beatrix blushed. Her conscience smote her for not being anxious enough about her wounded lover. Had it been Cyril thus returning, what agonies of hope and fear would have rent her breast! But it was only Kenrick, the man she had promised, out of simple gratitude and esteem, to marry. Her feeling about him, as the hour of their meeting drew nigh, was an ever-increasing dread.

The day came for the arrival of the steamer. The weather had been favourable, late as it was in the year, and the boat came into the docks on the very day she was expected. Mrs. Dulcimer and Beatrix had been walking on the platform for an hour in the afternoon, when the Vicar came bustling up to them.

'The steamer is just coming in,' he cried, and they were all hurried off to the docks.

There were a great many people, a crowd of anxious faces all looking towards the open water across which the big steamer was cleaving her steady way.

Who was that on the high bridge beside the captain, looking shoreward through a glass?

'Kenrick,' exclaimed Mr. and Mrs. Dulcimer simultaneously.

Beatrix saw nothing. The docks and the people, the blue bright water outside, the muddy green water inside, the big gaily painted steamer, swam before her eyes. He was coming. He was coming to claim the fulfilment of her promise. That weak moment in which she had yielded to an impulse of grateful feeling now meant life-long misery.

A few minutes more and he was standing by her side, her hand clasped in his, Mr. Dulcimer giving him hearty welcome, Mrs. Dulcimer in tears, Beatrix dumb as a statue.

‘Oh, my poor dear Kenrick,’ cried the Vicar’s wife when she could find a voice. ‘How changed you are—how fearfully changed!’

‘I’ve been very ill,’ he answered, quietly. ‘I didn’t want to frighten you all, so I made rather light of it in my letter. But I’ve had a narrow escape. However, here I am, and I don’t mean to knock under now.’

The change was startling. The elegant and aristocratic-looking young man, whom they had parted from less than a year ago, was transformed into a feeble invalid, whose shoulders were bent with weakness, and across whose cadaverous cheek there appeared the deep cicatrice of a sabre wound. There was nothing absolutely repulsive in Kenrick’s aspect, but there was enough to make love itself falter.

They got him into a fly and drove off to the Dolphin, while Mr. Dulcimer stayed behind to look after the luggage.

‘Beatrix,’ said Kenrick, when they were seated opposite each other in the fly, ‘I have not heard your voice yet, and it is your voice that I have been hearing in my dreams every night on board the steamer.’

‘I am very sorry to see you looking so ill,’ she answered, gently.

‘My boot maker or my tailor would say as much as that. Tell me you are glad to see me—me—even the poor wreck I am.’

There are pardonable hypocrisies in this life. Beatrix’s eyes brimmed over with tears. She was deeply sorry for him, sorry that she could find no love for him in her heart, only infinite pity.

‘I am very glad you are safe at home,’ she said, ‘we have all been anxious about you.’

A poor welcome for a man who had lived through six months’ hard fighting with brown Buddhist soldiers, for the sake of this moment. But he could not

upbraid his betrothed for unkindness just now. Mrs. Dulcimer was there, tearful but loquacious, and he could not open his heart before Mrs. Dulcimer.

After breakfast next morning Kenrick asked Beatrix to go for a walk on the platform with him. They were to drive over to Culverhouse Castle in the afternoon.

It was a dim autumnal morning, the opposite shore veiled in mist, the water a dull gray, everything placid and subdued in colour—a morning that had the calmness and grayness of advancing age—the dull repose which befits man's closing years.

'My dearest love, your letters have been all kindness,' said Kenrick. 'There has not been much love in them, but I suppose I have no right to complain of that. You did not promise to love me. Your letters have made me happy. But yesterday I confess I was wounded by your reception of me. You were so cold, so silent. I looked in vain for the greeting I had foreshadowed. It seemed that you had come to meet me as a duty, that you wished yourself away. And then I thought perhaps the change in me was too great, that you were horror-struck at seeing so deplorable a wreck. If this was the cause of your silence——'

'It was not,' cried Beatrix, eagerly. 'Pray do not imagine anything of the kind. The change in you makes no difference in me. I am proud to think that you have done your duty, that you have been brave and noble, and have won praise and honour. Do you suppose I do not like you better for that?'

'If I thought otherwise, Beatrix, if I fancied that you were revolted by my lantern jaws, and this ugly gash across my cheek, I would say at once let all be at an end between us. I would give you back your freedom.'

'I could not accept it on such terms. There is nothing revolting in your appearance. If there were, if you were maimed and scarred so as to be hardly recognisable, I would remember that you had been wounded in the performance of your duty, and I would honour your wounds. No, Kenrick, believe me *that* could not make any barrier between us.'

'Yet there is a barrier.'

She had not the cruelty to answer the cold hard truth. He was ill and weak. He looked at her with eyes that seemed to implore any deception rather than a reality that would crush him. He had loved her and believed in her, when the man she loved had doubted and left her. He was at least entitled to gratitude and regard.

‘I have promised to be your wife, and I am going to keep my promise,’ she said, gravely.

‘Then I am happy. Shall it be soon, dearest?’

‘It shall be when you like after the new year.’

‘And am I to leave the army?’

‘No,’ she answered, quickly. ‘I am proud of your profession. I should be very sorry if for my sake you were to exchange the career of a soldier for the stagnation of a country gentleman’s life.’

‘There would be no stagnation for me at Culverhouse; yet I had much rather remain in the army. But is my profession to separate us? You may not like to go to India.’

‘It will be my duty to go with you.’

‘My love, I have no words to say how happy you have made me. It would have been a grief to give up my profession, but I would have done it without a word, in obedience to your wish.’

‘A wife should have no wish about serious things in opposition to her husband,’ answered Beatrix.

They were at Culverhouse Castle before dusk, and again the village gossips were bobbing to Beatrix, this time with the assurance, derived from Betty Mopson’s direct assertion, that she was to be their Lady Bountiful, the source of comfort and blessing at Christmastide, and in all time of trouble.

They spent a calm and quiet week at the castle. Beatrix liked the gray old buildings, with their quaint mixture of ecclesiastical and domestic uses. First a castle, then an abbey, then a good old Tudor dwelling-house. That was the history of Culverhouse. Kenrick brought out old county chronicles to prove what a big place it had been in its time. How it had belonged to a warrior of the Culverhouse breed in the days of the first crusade; how it had been afterwards surrendered to the Church by a sinning and repenting Culverhouse; and how, after sequestration and malappropriation under the tyrant Harry, it had come back by marriage to the Culverhouses, in a most miraculous way.

‘Your house seems to have always been buttressed by heiresses,’ said Mr. Dulcimer, poring over a musty parchment that Kenrick had produced for his inspection. ‘You have been a very lucky family.’

‘Luckier than we have deserved, I fear,’ answered Kenrick, with a glance at Beatrix.

They all went to Little Yafford at the end of the week, and Kenrick was established at the Vicarage, under strict charge of Rebecca. That worthy woman exercised an awful tyranny over him, feeding him with jellies and soups with as off-hand authority as if he had been a nest of young thrushes, or a turkey in process of fattening for Christmas. He bore it all meekly, for was not Mrs. Dulcimer the best friend he had, since it was she who had first suggested his winning Beatrix?

They were to be married early in the year. Everybody was talking about it already. It would be a much more interesting marriage than Mr. Piper’s second nuptials, though that event had kept the village gossips alive for full six weeks. The tide of popular feeling had turned, and Beatrix now stood high in the estimation of her neighbours. Even Miss Coyle was silent, contenting herself with an occasional shrug of her shoulders, or a significant elevation of her grizzled eyebrows. The slander had died a natural death, it had expired of inanition.

Beatrix and her lover saw each other daily. Madame Leonard was delighted with the wounded soldier, who had fought so well at Pegu. Everybody praised him. Even Beatrix’s manner grew a shade warmer, and she began to feel a calm and sober pleasure in her lover’s company, such a mild regard as she might have given to an elder brother, with whom she had not been brought up.

As Kenrick grew stronger they rode together across the wild bleak moor, and the fierce winds blew health and power into the soldier’s lungs. Kenrick spent some of his evenings at the dull old Water House, in that pretty white panelled sitting-room that had been so long shut up. Madame Leonard petted and pampered him in her cordial little way. Beatrix was kind, and read or played to him according to the humour of the hour. It was a placid, happy life.

CHAPTER V.

MR. SCRATCHELL GOES TO LONDON.

THE short days and fireside evenings of December, and the festivities of Christmas, were to Sir Kenrick Culverhouse brief and fleeting as a dream when one awakeneth. He had never been so happy in his life. To ride across the dull brown moorland with Beatrix, looking down upon the smiling village nestling in the hollow of the dark hills; to sit by her side in the lamplight listening while she read or played; these things made the sum of his delight. Life had nothing for him beyond or above them. And thus the weeks slipped by till February, and the 10th of February was to be Sir Kenrick's wedding day. He had improved wonderfully in health by this time. His bent back had straightened itself. He was able to endure the fatigue of a day's fishing, in the wintry wind and rain. He was altogether a changed man. Yorkshire breezes had done much for him, but happiness had done more.

'How he loves you!' cried Mrs. Dulcimer to Beatrix one day, in a rapture of admiration for her *protégée*. 'I never saw a man so devoted.'

'Do you really think he is so very fond of me?' asked Beatrix, gravely.

'My dear, how sad and distressed you look! as if his love were a thing to be sorry about. Yes, I do think and know so. Can you for a moment doubt it?'

'I have fancied that our marriage was on both sides rather one of convenience than inclination. He can give me the protection of an honourable name, my fortune can free his estate. We like each other very much, and, I hope, esteem each other. But I don't think there is much love on either side. He makes pretty speeches, of course. That is a compliment to my sex and my fortune. Don't you remember Mr. Dulcimer telling us that Solon made it a law that heiresses should be treated with particular respect?'

'I know nothing about Solon,' exclaimed the Vicar's wife, getting angry, 'but I know that poor young man is passionately in love with you. Why, child, he idolizes you. One can see it with half an eye.'

'Then I am very sorry for him,' said Beatrix, and there was an earnestness in her tone that startled the easy-tempered Mrs. Dulcimer.

‘Sorry that your affianced husband is devoted to you! My dear Beatrix, you must be going out of your mind.’

‘I sometimes think I am,’ answered Beatrix, in a low voice.

This conversation occurred about a fortnight before the wedding day. It made Mrs. Dulcimer very uncomfortable, but she said no word about it to anybody, not even to her chosen confidante, Rebecca.

Was it possible, poor Mrs. Dulcimer asked herself, that this match, the crowning glory of all her efforts, was going to turn out ill?

Beatrix sent for Mr. Scratchell next day, and received him alone in her morning-room.

‘I suppose you know that Sir Kenrick’s estate is heavily encumbered?’ she said.

‘Yes,’ answered the lawyer, ‘of course that will be considered in the settlements. It will be my care to protect your interests.’

‘Never mind my interests or the settlements, yet awhile. I want to pay off those mortgages before there is any question of settlements.’

‘You pay them off, before you are Sir Kenrick’s wife! My dear Miss Harefield, what an extraordinary notion!’

‘I cannot see that. My money is to release the estate sooner or later. That is an understood thing between Sir Kenrick and me. Why should I not do it before I am his wife? I, Beatrix Harefield, for him as my future husband, am surely able to pay off these mortgages.’

‘As the title deeds are deposited with Sir Kenrick’s bankers, under an engagement to execute a formal deed when requested, anybody can pay off the mortgage,’ answered the lawyer, ‘but there is some hazard in such a proceeding. Suppose Sir Kenrick were to die before your wedding day, or were to offend you. Marriages are sometimes broken off, you know. At the church door even. Then again, suppose you were married without a settlement, and Sir Kenrick were to die without having made a will in your favour. Failing a son of yours, the estate would go to his cousin Cyril. Ah, I see that fact rather startles you,’ said the unconscious lawyer, perceiving that Beatrix paled at the mention of her lost lover’s name.

‘These are serious considerations,’ urged Mr. Scratchell. ‘I should strongly recommend you not to touch those mortgages with your little finger until you

have two or three sons of your own. Why should you throw away fifty thousand pounds for Mr. Cyril Culverhouse's ultimate benefit?'

'It will be for Sir Kenrick's benefit as long as he lives.'

'Yes, but Sir Kenrick may not be a long-lived man. I don't want to make you unhappy about him, but I don't think he looks like one. And then there are the fortunes of war. He may be killed in battle. He had a narrow escape last time. It would be absurd for you to risk fifty thousand pounds upon such a life as his.'

'Absurd or not, I am going to run the risk,' answered Beatrix, with a firmness that frightened Mr. Scratchell. In a twelvemonth I shall be of age to do what I like with my money, without consulting anybody. You may just as well make yourself agreeable while I am in your power, and let me have my own way.'

Mr. Scratchell hesitated, sorely perplexed. To make himself disagreeable to Beatrix, even in the endeavour to protect her interests, might be fatal. Women are such self-willed, unreasonable creatures, he argued within himself. If he thwarted her in this ridiculous whim, she might resent his conduct all her life. In a year, as she had reminded him, she would be sole mistress of her fortune. She might dismiss him from his agency, which would be simple and unmitigated ruin. He was as dependent upon the Harefield estate for sustenance as a barnacle on a ship's bottom. In a word he could not afford to offend her.

'You have another trustee to consult,' he suggested.

'Mr. Dulcimer? Oh, I know he will consent.'

'Because he's a fool.'

'No, because he's a generous-minded man, and would like to see Sir Kenrick's estate set free.'

'Humph!' muttered the lawyer. 'It's a foolish business altogether. And pray where is the money to come from?'

'Have I not stocks or shares, or something that can be turned into money immediately?'

'Yes, you have a nice little fortune in consols and railway debentures. We might scrape up about thirty thousand that way, perhaps.'

'Then you can mortgage the Lincolnshire estate for the other twenty thousand.'

'Mortgage one estate—your own—to set free your husband's! Was there ever

anything so preposterous?'

'I take a warm interest in one estate, and no interest in the other,' answered Beatrix. 'What is the good of property if one cannot do what one likes with it?'

'My dear Miss Harefield, that is the spendthrift's argument.'

'I am no spendthrift, but I want to gratify myself in this one matter. Now, dear Mr. Scratchell, pray be agreeable. Go up to London this afternoon—see Sir Kenrick's bankers—sell out the stocks and shares and things—raise the twenty thousand on the Lincolnshire land—and get everything done by this day week.'

'Impossible, my dear young lady.'

'Nothing is impossible to a clever family solicitor; you can do the preliminary act by deposit of my deeds. Remember, Mr. Scratchell, if you accomplish this thing for me, I shall always consider myself deeply bound to you. It is a favour I shall never forget.'

'I don't think I shall be serving you well in this business.'

'You will be doing what I wish. I'll run and put on my bonnet, and we'll go at once to Mr. Dulcimer to get his consent. You must catch the two o'clock train from Great Yafford. My carriage can drive you over.'

Beatrix rang and ordered the carriage to be got ready immediately, and to follow them on to the Vicarage. Her impetuosity bewildered Mr. Scratchell. She ran out of the room, and reappeared in a minute or so in her bonnet and fur jacket. He felt himself revolving in a whirlpool. To leave his home at half an hour's notice, and go tearing off to London! He was rather pleased at the idea of a visit to London at a client's expense. Travelling, hotel charges, everything would be paid for him on the highest level. He had not seen the metropolis for ten years. It would be an outing such as he had never had in his life before. He began to hope that Mr. Dulcimer would consent to his ward's wild scheme.

They found the Vicar in his beloved library, surrounded with bulky folios, his feet on the fender, and his mind a thousand miles away, with the primitive Aryan races. He was tracing the footsteps of a nomadic Indian tribe from fertile valleys eastward of the Caspian, through Persia and Asia Minor, to the shores of the Hellespont, where they were to crop up by and by as the Heraclidæ.

'My dear Beatrix,' he said, 'the more I ruminate upon the subject, the more I am convinced that the Mosaic account is true, and that all the races of men have come from one common centre—in the East.'

‘Then how do you account for the woolly-headed niggers, and the Laplanders, and the people with pink eyes?’ inquired Mr. Scratchell.

‘Climate, my dear sir, climate. A question of atmospheric influences.’

‘Dear Mr. Dulcimer, I have come to ask you a favour,’ said Beatrix.

‘It is granted beforehand, dear child,’ said the Vicar, kissing her hand.

The Aryan races had been particularly amenable to Mr. Dulcimer that morning, and the Vicar, always good-tempered, was absolutely overflowing with benevolence.

‘Oh, but this is a very serious matter,’ interposed Mr. Scratchell, anxious to do his duty. ‘You’ll have to give it your grave consideration.’

‘I’m all attention,’ replied Mr. Dulcimer, with one eye on the Heraclidæ.

Beatrix explained her desire to set Sir Kenrick’s estate free.

‘Well, my love, you have always intended to pay off those charges after your marriage, have you not?’ asked the Vicar, with a business-like air.

‘Certainly.’

‘Then I cannot see that it makes any difference whether you pay them off before or after. Scratchell can protect your future interests in framing your marriage settlements. Be sure you see to that, Scratchell. It is somewhat Quixotic, my dear Beatrix, to take time by the forelock in this way, but it can do no harm, and it will afford Kenrick another evidence of your generous character.’

Mr. Scratchell did not feel himself called upon to explain to the Vicar all those objections which he had already expounded to Beatrix. If these people liked to make fools of themselves, it was not for him to hinder them. His own interest clearly lay in pleasing Miss Harefield. To do otherwise would be to take the bread out of the mouths of his innocent offspring. And then there was the tempting idea of a holiday in London, and the prospect of a longish bill of costs at the end of all. Decidedly it would be sheer madness stubbornly to oppose this romantic young lady’s caprice.

Miss Harefield’s carriage was waiting at the Vicarage gate.

‘It’s a quarter past twelve,’ she said, looking at her watch. ‘You have just an hour and three quarters to pack your carpet bag and drive to the station. Pray don’t miss the two o’clock train. You know where to find Sir Kenrick’s

lawyers?’

‘Yes.’

‘Remember, Sir Kenrick is to know nothing about what we are doing. You are to make that a condition with his bankers. He is to know nothing till I choose to tell him. It will not be later than our wedding-day.’

‘But the settlement?’

‘I will have no settlements,’ said Beatrix, impatiently.

‘My dear Miss Harefield, you must be mad.’

‘At any rate I will have no settlement that can interfere with my payment of those incumbrances. That is a free gift to Sir Kenrick, as much as if I were to give you a hundred-pound note. I never want to hear about it, or to think about it. I look upon the fifty thousand pounds as gone—sunk at the bottom of a well.’

‘You are a most extraordinary young lady.’

‘If you waste your time in wondering at me, you will lose the London train.’

Mr. Scratchell got into the carriage obediently, and was driven to his own house, where his apparition in a landau drawn by a pair of spirited horses caused wonder and consternation in all the household. That wonder increased when Mr. Scratchell informed his family that he was going to London on particular business for Miss Harefield, that he wanted a carpet bag packed with three or four shirts—his best—meaning those that were not too conspicuously frayed at the edges of the pleats and collars—and that his wife and children were to look sharp, and were not to bother him with questions.

Poor Mrs. Scratchell ran off in a flutter to explore her husband’s wardrobe, in which everything was more or less the worse for wear, except the new suit he had bought for his daughter’s wedding. The girls and boys meanwhile surrounded their father, like the merchant’s daughters in the story of Beauty and the Beast, each anxious that he should bring something from London.

‘Bring me a new dress, papa. If you are going on Miss Harefield’s business you will get lots of money,’ pleaded Clementina.

‘Do bring me a winter bonnet, papa, black velvet lined with pink,’ asked Flora.

‘You might get us a cricket bat, father,’ said Adolphus, a boy who always spoke of himself in the plural, as if to give prominence to his insignificance.

‘Go and cut me some sandwiches, girls, and mix me a little weak gin and water in a bottle,’ said Mr. Scratchell. ‘It will be night before I get to London.’

‘And then you will go to an hotel, I suppose? Won’t you be grand!’ cried Clementina, who fancied that the people who stayed at hotels were a splendid and luxurious race apart from the mass of mankind.

‘I shall stay at Sam’s Coffee-house in the Strand,’ said Mr. Scratchell, with a conscientious air. ‘I am not going to waste Miss Harefield’s money on fine hotels.’

A quarter of an hour later and Mr. Scratchell had torn himself from the bosom of his family, and was being driven at a brisk trot towards Great Yafford.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SECOND MRS. PIPER.

BELLA was reigning at the Park in all the glory of new-fledged royalty, her husband fascinated and subservient, her step-children all packed off to school, the sober old Georgian barrack transformed by new furniture and improvements of all kinds. At his wife's urgent desire Mr. Piper had bought the estate from Sir Philip Dulcimer, who, never having liked it, was very glad to turn it into money, which, carefully invested in railway shares, might bring him in five or six per cent., instead of the scanty two and a half which his paternal acres had yielded. Mr. Piper was therefore now Mr. Dulcimer's patron, as Bella reflected with a thrill of pride. She had ascended a good many steps above poor Mrs. Dulcimer, who had been so patronizingly good-natured to her in the days of her poverty.

For the brief three months of his wedded life Ebenezer Piper had been living in a state of chronic astonishment. 'This little woman,' as he called his wife, absolutely took his breath away. Her coolness, her self-assurance, her air of having been used to the possession of unlimited wealth from her babyhood, her insolence to people of higher rank—Lady Jane Gowry, for instance, and the Pynsents, and all the notabilities of Little Yafford—these things filled him with admiring surprise. She was not at all the kind of wife he had expected to find her. He had chosen her for her softness and pliability, and he found her hard and bright as some sparkling gem. He had expected to rule and govern her as easily as a little child, and behold! she was ruling and governing him. He was too much under the spell of her fascination to complain yet awhile; but this kind of thing was not at all what he had intended. He held himself in reserve.

Never was there such a change in any household. A butler in solemn black, with a powdered footman for his assistant, took the place of the decent parlourmaid, in her starched cap and apron.

The first Mrs. Piper had never consented to have indoor men-servants.

'My dear, why don't you keep a man?' Mr. Piper had sometimes inquired. 'He'd do much better than these girls of yours, who never quite know their business.'

'Piper,' his wife had answered solemnly, 'I am not going to bring you to ruin.

The girls are bad enough, what with their extravagance and their followers, but a man would eat us out of house and home before we knew where we were.'

'Please yourself, my dear,' returned Mr. Piper, 'and you'll please me.'

Thus it was that the Piper establishment had been conducted upon a strictly middle-class footing.

Now everything was on an aristocratic level. The present Mrs. Piper had a Frenchwoman for her own maid. She had a groom in top boots to sit behind her pony carriage. When she drove in her barouche the groom sat beside the coachman, and the two pairs of top-boots had a dazzling effect. Mr. Piper was rather astonished at the bootmaker's bill.

'My pet, here's no end of money to pay for top-boots,' he remarked. 'I can't say I see the use of 'em. Poor Moggie got on very well without top-boots.'

'I hope you don't expect me to go out with a coachman in trousers,' exclaimed Bella. 'I might as well have a fly from the "Crown" at once.'

'My love, I should have thought that any kind of conveyance would have been a novelty to you, and that you'd hardly have been so particular about the livery,' suggested Mr. Piper.

'I could have gone on foot all my life,' said Bella, 'but if I am to have a carriage I must have it decently appointed. I don't want to hang between heaven and earth, like Mahomet's coffin.'

Mahomet's coffin extinguished Mr. Piper. It had been flung at his head a good many times upon his venturing to object to his young wife's extravagance.

'And after all I am proud to see how well she does it,' he said to himself, smiling an uxorious smile. 'She's a regular little duchess.'

And henceforward in familiar conversation Mr. Piper was apt to speak of his wife as the 'Duchess.'

The house—which had now become his freehold—was made so fine that Mr. Piper hardly knew himself in it. Persian carpets of vivid and various hues were spread on the black and white marble of the hall, brocaded satin curtains, violet lined with amber, veiled the doors between hall and conservatory. The drawing-room was pale blue and gold, rich in easy chairs and tall gilded stands supporting Sèvres vases filled with flowers.

The chief bedroom was apple-green. Everything was radiant and smiling,

dazzling with gold and colour.

‘My word! it’s like living in a bower,’ said Mr. Piper, and he hummed a song that was then not quite forgotten—

‘There’s a bower of roses by Bendemeer’s stream.’

Having made her house beautiful, Mrs. Piper’s next desire naturally was to exhibit her splendour to the envious eyes of people with inferior houses. She therefore began to issue invitations on as large a scale as the neighbourhood allowed. These were not all responded to as cordially as she would have wished. Lady Jane Gowry had honoured Bella with a condescending call, but she flatly declined Mr. and Mrs. Piper’s invitation to dinner, on the ground that at her age she could not afford to extend the circle of her visiting acquaintance.

‘The people I dine with are people I have known for half a century,’ she wrote to Mrs. Piper. ‘I am too old to go out often, so I only go to very old friends. But if you and Mr. Piper like to come and take a cup of tea with me any Tuesday evening I shall be very happy to see you.’

‘After all, Lady Jane’s chestnut wig and violet-powdered complexion are not much loss,’ said Bella.

‘No, they ain’t, but I should like to have taken the old woman to dinner upon my arm, before the Porkmans and the Wigzells,’ remarked Mr. Piper. ‘I don’t believe they ever sat down to dinner with a title in the whole course of their natural lives. Wouldn’t old Timperley have stared! Earls’ daughters don’t come his way often, I reckon.’

Bella found that she would have to content herself in a great measure with the society of the Timperleys, the Porkmans, the Wigzells, and all the ramifications of those family trees. Everybody in this set was rich, and the chief struggle of everybody’s life seemed to be to spend more money upon display than his or her neighbour. The men boasted of their cellars, and vied with each other in giving high prices for their wines. A few loftier spirits bought pictures, and talked patronizingly of their favourite Royal Academicians. They seemed to think that Frith and Millais had been created for them, like Holbein for Henry the Eighth, or Vandyke for Charles the First. They all lived in brand-new houses within a few miles of Great Yafford, houses built by themselves, all spick and span and fresh from the builder’s hand, with not so much as an elderly apple-tree on the premises.

The county people had been condescendingly civil to the new Mrs. Piper; but that was all. They called upon her, and contemplated her curiously, as if she had been something to wonder at, like the only living gorilla. She was asked to three large dinners, at which she felt herself less than nobody—though she wore laces and jewels enough for a dowager of ancient lineage. Bella, clever as she was, found that these people's thoughts were not her thoughts, nor their ways her ways—and that all the distance between the east and west was not wider than the gulf between her and the county families. But this was a surmountable difficulty, she told herself. She was quick at learning languages, and would learn the jargon of the county families as easily as she had learned Italian. These scraps of social slang, these continual allusions to people she did not know, and pleasures she had never shared, could hardly be so difficult as Dante.

Mr. Piper looked on and admired, while his young wife wasted his money, laughed at his friends, and made light of his opinions; but he was not altogether satisfied or easy in his mind. It would not be always so, he thought. There would come a day! The Duchess was carrying things with a high hand. It was perhaps just as well to let her have her fling. She was so unaccustomed to the command of money, poor little woman, that she might be forgiven for spending it somewhat recklessly. And, after all, this increased expenditure was pleasanter than poor Moggie's carefulness and perpetual lamentations about butcher's bills and pounds of butter. Mr. Piper liked his new butler, and was even in his heart of hearts not displeased with the powdered footman or the top-booted groom, though he affected to despise those follies. He felt himself on a level with the Timperleys in their scarlet Tudor mansion, with its jutting windows and leaden lattices, its deep porch and iron-studded door, its gilded vane and many gables, at once intensely old and dazzlingly new. He was living as became his wealth and social status, living like the Porkmans and the Wigzells, and the rest of his purse-proud acquaintance. The first Mrs. Piper had hung upon him like a log on a hobbled donkey, and had deprived him of all freedom, with her ever-lasting economical scruples. He had been afraid to give a dinner party, knowing that for a month after there would be ceaseless wailings about the expense of the feast.

'Piper, have you any idea what grouse were when you asked Mr. Timperley to dinner last August?' Mrs. Piper would demand.

'I know the brace we had were uncommonly tough, and precious badly cooked,' Mr. Piper would retort.

'They were twelve shillings a brace, Piper. Here's the poulterer's bill to prove it to you. I call it sinful to eat game at such a price. You know *you* ordered them,

Piper. I should have inquired what they were to cost—but you never do.'

'I wanted to give Timperley a decent dinner,' Mr. Piper would reply. 'Hang it, Moggie! when I go to Timperley's he feeds me on the fat of the land. Besides, we can afford it.'

'Nobody can afford wanton extravagance,' Mrs. Piper would groan; and this kind of conversation would occur daily.

Thus it was a new thing to Mr. Piper to have his domestic life administered with liberal-handed luxury, to hear no complaints about the misconduct of servants or the price of provisions, not to be awakened abruptly from his after-dinner nap to be told that bread had gone up a halfpenny, or that Scrogfield was charging thirteen-pence for fillet of veal.

'Upon my word, little woman,' he exclaimed one day, delighted with his wife's cleverness, 'you have made the house a paradise.'

It was still more a paradise after Christmas, for the second Mrs. Piper, having found out that her step-daughters were sadly in want of dancing and calisthenics, which they could not be taught properly at home, and would be much benefited by being transplanted to Miss Turk's boarding school, on the outskirts of Great Yafford, the school at which Mrs. Dulcimer and all the best people in the neighbourhood had been educated, under the aunts and predecessors of the reigning Miss Turk.

Mr. Piper was rather disappointed, just at first, by this idea of Bella's. He had hoped to have his daughters always at home. They were troublesome, rude, and noisy, but still Mr. Piper loved them, as the gladiator loved his young barbarians.

'I thought you would have gone on teaching the girls, little woman,' he said, with a chap-fallen air.

'My dear Mr. Piper, what time should I have for society, or for you, if I did that? Quite impossible. Besides, the girls will be a great deal better at a first-rate school. They are too high-spirited to obey me, and now I am their mamma they would laugh at my attempts to teach them.'

Mr. Piper sighed and submitted. The boys went to school, as a matter of course. He had no objection to that. But he had hoped that his daughters would stay at home, and cheer his breakfast-table with their chubby common-place faces and small second-hand jokes, and thump their pianoforte duets of an evening for his delectation.

One evil which Mr. Piper had feared in taking Bella for his wife had not befallen him. He had fancied that the Park would be overrun with Scratchells, that Bella, as an affectionate member of a large family, would want to make his house a free warren for her father and mother, brothers and sisters.

But this apprehension of Mr. Piper's was in no manner realized. Bella sent her family ceremonious invitations to her second best parties, and made a duty call upon her mother after church every Sunday, a time at which Mrs. Scratchell was less distracted by thoughts about the kettle or the kitchen generally than at other periods of her existence; for the Scratchells always had a cold dinner on the Sabbath, not so much from piety as from a conviction of Mrs. Scratchell's that cold meat went further than hot.

This kind of intercourse was not what the Scratchells—especially Clementina and Flora—had expected; but they were fain to be thankful for the favours they received, and never carried their murmurs further than the sacred home circle, where, sitting round the winter fire, they discoursed at their ease upon Bella's worldliness and want of natural feeling.

'I was so glad when Lady Jane refused to go to her dinner party,' said Clementina. 'We weren't asked to that party. Oh no. We were not good enough to meet Lady Jane—nor the Timperleys either. And Lady Jane wrote and told Bella that she only went out to dine with old friends. Wasn't that splendid?'

'Did Bella tell you?' asked Mr. Scratchell.

'Catch her! She's too proud to tell me she's been snubbed. Lady Jane told Mrs. Dulcimer, and Mrs. Dulcimer told me, and I've no doubt everybody in the village knows all about it by this time.'

'No doubt,' sighed Mrs. Scratchell, in her doleful way. 'It was a pity Bella put herself so forward.'

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE CHURCHYARD.

‘My dear,’ said Mrs. Dulcimer to Beatrix quite suddenly one evening, when she and Kenrick were sitting round the fire in the snug dining-room, a little while before tea, ‘Cyril must certainly assist at your marriage.’

Happily for Beatrix, the lamp had not yet been brought in. There was only the changeful and uncertain firelight, which just at this moment left her face in shadow.

‘Well, yes,’ returned Kenrick. ‘I think Cyril ought to be invited. If he were not present it would look as if there were some quarrel between us. And we are very good friends, are we not, dear?’ he added, turning to his betrothed.

‘Yes,’ faltered Beatrix.

‘If he were not here people would talk,’ pursued Mrs. Dulcimer. ‘You see, Bridford is not more than thirty miles distant, and, as Kenrick’s first cousin and Mr. Dulcimer’s late curate, it would be only natural for Cyril to assist at the ceremony.’

‘I will write and ask him to-morrow,’ said Kenrick. ‘I ought to have thought of it before.’

‘He has been very ill,’ suggested Beatrix. ‘He may not be strong enough to travel.’

‘Thirty miles only, my dear. A mere nothing,’ said Mrs. Dulcimer. ‘Besides, he has quite recovered—or, at any rate, he has gone back to his duty. Clement told me so a week ago.’

‘Kenrick,’ said Beatrix a little later, when she and her lover were walking to the Water House together through the wintry night, ‘is it really necessary for your cousin to be at our wedding?’

‘His absence might cause a scandal, dearest. Remember, he is my nearest relation, known to be quite near at hand, and closely associated with this place. Do you not think that people would say unpleasant things if we left him out?’

‘Yes,’ sighed Beatrix, ‘people have a knack of imagining the worst.’

‘I should be very sorry if any one were to say that Cyril was absent from my wedding because he and my wife feared to meet,’ said Kenrick, with a sudden pang of jealousy.

‘They shall have no reason for saying anything of the kind,’ Beatrix answered, proudly. ‘Pray invite your cousin.’

‘Now you are angry.’

‘Not with you,’ she answered, quickly. ‘I am angry with the world, life, fate.’

‘What, Beatrix, now, after you have made me so happy, when all our life is smiling upon us—every cloud gone?’

Beatrix’s only answer was a sigh. But Kenrick was rapt in the placid delight of his good fortune. He loved his betrothed too well to believe it possible that she did not love him. They had lived so happily, as it seemed to him, for nearly four months, in each other’s society. They had never had a dispute—or even a difference of opinion. Could he doubt that she had grown fonder of him day by day in all that time? Her irritation to-night was natural, he argued. It arose from her scorn of the scandals that had darkened her young life. It was hard for her to forget these things.

Kenrick wrote next day to his cousin:

> ‘DEAR CYRIL,—The Dulcimers say you ought to assist at my wedding, and I think the same. Will you come?
>
> ‘Yours always,
> ‘KENRICK.’

The answer was very little longer:

> ‘DEAR KENRICK,—I agree with you and the Dulcimers. I will come to assist in the ceremony, and to wish you and your bride all blessings that this life and the brighter life after can yield.
>
> ‘My time is closely occupied here, so my visit must be of the shortest. I will come on Tuesday afternoon, and must return on Wednesday, directly after the wedding.
>
> ‘Yours in all affection and good faith,
> ‘CYRIL.’

This letter made Kenrick happy. It dispelled the one uneasiness of his mind, the lurking notion that he had helped to spoil his cousin’s peace. Cyril was

evidently reconciled to the existing state of things. After all it was his own doing, Kenrick thought. He had no right to complain.

Kenrick showed the letter to Beatrix, who read it slowly and thoughtfully, and returned it to him without a word.

‘A gentleman-like letter, isn’t it?’ asked Kenrick.

‘Very,’ she answered.

Did it please her that her former lover should write in so friendly a tone—that he should be willing to assist in the solemn act that was to make their severance irrevocable? No. His willingness stung her to the quick.

‘He never loved me,’ she thought. ‘It was Bella’s pretty face that he really cared for. But he thought my fortune would help him in doing good, and he was willing to sacrifice his own inclination in order to be useful to others. He liked me just well enough, perhaps, to be reconciled to the idea of marrying me and making use of my fortune. And then when the slander arose he drew back. Honour forbade him marrying a woman the world suspected of a hideous crime, and whom he did not love.’

Bitter thoughts for the bride of to-morrow! Tuesday morning had come. Mr. Scratchell had called at the Water House to tell Miss Harefield that everything was done according to her wish. The equitable charge on Kenrick’s estate had been paid off. Culverhouse Castle was as free as it had been in the reign of its wealthiest possessors.

‘I am very glad it is done,’ said Beatrix, and it was the first gladness she had shown for some days.

Madame Leonard wanted her to be interested in her trousseau, which was being packed by that clever little Frenchwoman and the honest unhandy English maid. Everything had been left to Madame Leonard.

Beatrix had taken no trouble about this mountain of new clothes which people had declared she must have, as if to mark distinctly that to get married is to turn over a new leaf in the volume of life.

‘It is all well to let me do in these things, to choose ze colours, and to devise ze modes, but it must be that you interest yourself a little now that it is all achieved, or I shall think you are not content,’ remonstrated Beatrix’s companion.

‘Dear Madame Leonard, I am more than content. But I am not very fond of

fine clothes. They do not fill my mind as they seem to do with some people.'

'Ah, my dear,' cried the Frenchwoman, 'it is all very well to be high and mighty; but I can tell you there are times in a woman's life when if she did not think about her dress she would have nothing to think of. And it is better to think of a new gown than a new lover. That amuses. And after all it is innocent. To talk of dress does no one any harm. It is not like scandal.'

'Dear Madame Leonard, you are wiser than I. But never mind the trousseau just now. Please pack my plainest dresses and wraps in one trunk. I am not going to travel with all those huge boxes, am I?'

'No, the biggest of those are to be sent straight to India. And the smaller are to meet you at Brindisi.'

Sir Kenrick and his bride were to spend their honeymoon in Paris and in Italy, travelling by easy stages to Brindisi, whence they were to start for India early in April, a fact which Mrs. Dulcimer bitterly bewailed.

'I thought Kenrick would sell out,' she said, 'and that you would divide your lives between Culverhouse Castle and the Water House.'

'That would have been to spoil Kenrick's career, just as it promises distinction,' answered Beatrix. 'I should regard that as a kind of assassination.'

Upon this last day of her maiden life Beatrix was strangely absent and troubled in manner. She shrank even from Madame Leonard's gentle sympathy, and while the anxious little woman was busy with the trunk and packing-cases, the owner of all that finery paced the garden walk by the dull gray river, reckless of the biting east wind, wrapped in gloomy thoughts. The swollen waters were rushing under the old stone arch, the moor was darkly purple against a sunless sky. All nature seemed in harmony with the mind of to-morrow's bride.

The packing business kept Madame Leonard and Mary closely occupied all day, so Beatrix was undisturbed. Sir Kenrick had gone to Great Yafford to get the odds and ends wanted to complete his outfit. Mrs. Dulcimer was engaged with her dress for the wedding, which was being made at home, a process which necessitated frequent discussions and consultations with Rebecca and the dressmaker, and which, undertaken from motives of economy, was likely to result in an expensive failure. Cyril was not expected till the evening. He was to arrive in time for the Vicarage tea, and was to occupy Mrs. Dulcimer's second best spare bedroom.

Beatrix had promised to call at the Vicarage some time in the afternoon. It

was a visit she would gladly have avoided in her present frame of mind, but she thought if she did not go Mrs. Dulcimer would be likely to come to the Water House in quest of her, and that might prove a heavier infliction. So she put on her bonnet directly after luncheon, and walked across the windy bridge, and up the windy street to the Vicarage. It was between two and three o'clock, a very safe hour at which to pay her visit, since Cyril was not expected until half-past seven. She had seen his letter to Mrs. Dulcimer, in which he named the train that was to bring him.

Mrs. Dulcimer was in her bedroom, with Rebecca and the dressmaker. Beatrix went up, at the housemaid's request, and found these three stitching and talking, as fast as tongues and needles could be driven. The dress had been three days in hand, but just at the last it was found necessary to put on an extra pressure to get it finished. Mrs. Dulcimer was sewing the braid on the skirt, Rebecca was pushing strips of whalebone into the body, which looked as stiff as a strait-waistcoat or a suit of plate-armour; the dressmaker was cording a flounce. The room was strewn with snippings of silk, satin, sarcenet, and lining, as thick as leaves in Vallombrosa. Mrs. Dulcimer looked the image of anxiety. If she had been a beauty of seventeen preparing for her first ball, or a young actress about to make her *début* in London, she could not have been more deeply concerned.

'Oh, Beatrix, I am so glad you have come,' she exclaimed, without stopping her needle. 'I long to know if you like it.'

'It' was the dress, now in scattered portions.

Beatrix looked puzzled.

'My love, how absent-minded you are!' said Mrs. Dulcimer. 'Of course you can't judge of the general appearance till the flounces are on, and it all comes together. But you can tell me what you think of the colour and the style of trimming.'

'Oh, you mean the dress,' answered Beatrix, with cruel indifference. 'I think that silver-gray is a pretty colour.'

'It's the new shade,' said Mrs. Dulcimer. 'You are sure it's the new shade, are you not, Miss Killick?' she asked, turning to the dressmaker.

'Yes, ma'am, it's quite the new shade,' answered Miss Killick solemnly.

Beatrix seated herself by the fire, and idly watched the blaze, while Mrs. Dulcimer went on working. There was not much sustained conversation. Everybody except Beatrix was thinking of the dress. Miss Killick and Rebecca

had their mouths full of pins, and dropped a few whenever they spoke, like the girl in the fairy tale. After half an hour or so Beatrix rose to go, but Mrs. Dulcimer entreated her to stop till the dress was tried on.

‘It will be ready in a quarter of an hour, won’t it, Miss Killick?’ she inquired.

They were all sitting close together now, Rebecca sewing the body to the skirt, the dressmaker sewing on the final flounce.

‘I don’t suppose we shall be much longer, ma’am,’ said Miss Killick.

‘And at four we are going to have a refreshing cup of tea,’ said the Vicar’s wife, ‘so you really must stop, Beatrix.’

Beatrix could not refuse so small a favour, so she went on staring at the fire; while the three workers hastened the finish of their task, with their heads close together, like the three fatal sisters intent upon the web of some particular destiny which Jove had ordered them to hurry to its conclusion.

‘There,’ said the three simultaneously, ‘it’s done.’

Five minutes later Mrs. Dulcimer was standing before her cheval glass, buttoned into her new gown, and trying to make it look as if it belonged to her, every fold having the stiffness, strangeness, and awkwardness which are characteristic of a new garment.

Beatrix had to assist at the discussion as to whether the sleeve should not be shortened a quarter of an inch, or the shoulder seam taken up a little, or the waist tightened, or the skirt lengthened. When she found herself free to depart the church clock was striking the quarter after four. The sky, which had brightened a little in the afternoon, was yellow in the west, where the sun would soon go down behind yonder black ridge of moor. The wind had dropped, and there was a mildness in the air like the sweet breath of early spring.

There was a circuitous way to the Water House, through meadows that lay behind the churchyard. It was a solitary walk, that Beatrix liked at all times, and which particularly suited her humour just now. She went in at the wicket gate in the angle of the churchyard, and followed the narrow path between the crowded headstones,—commonplace memorials of harmless uneventful lives.

The pathway took her by the side of the fine old parish church, close by the vestry, which was curiously squeezed in at an angle between transept and chancel, under the diamond-paned casement, beside which the white surplices were hanging, past the sunken door.

Just as she came to the door it opened, and a man came out.

She gave a little cry, and the whole scene seemed to rock before her eyes, the old gray wall, the crumbling tablets, the leafless elm branches, the tall black poplars, which rose like watch-towers between her and the sky. For a moment all seemed in tumultuous motion, as if a whirlwind had risen. Then, with a great effort, she clasped the railings of a tomb close by, and commanded brain and body to be still.

A hand was held out to her, and she took it with a mechanical air. Her lips moved slowly.

‘Cyril.’

Only his name, and the ice was broken. The next instant she had burst into passionate tears, and was hiding her face against the rusty insensible railings, anywhere, only to be out of his sight.

Her whole frame was shaken by those sobs. He could not but perceive, he could not even pretend not to perceive, her distress.

‘Forgive me,’ he said gently. ‘I am more than sorry that I came, if my presence grieves you. I ought not to have come, but,’ he faltered a little here, ‘respect for you, regard for my cousin, made it impossible for me to refuse.’

‘Respect for me!’ she exclaimed bitterly, lifting up her head, and choking down her sobs with a desperate effort, just as she had held herself back from unconsciousness a few moments before. ‘Respect for me—for a woman whom you could believe a poisoner!’

‘Beatrix, I never believed——’ he began.

‘You did not believe me innocent, or you would not have forsaken me,’ she said, confronting him with eyes that kindled as she spoke.

He could not gainsay her. She had spoken truth. No, not if all the world had been against her, not at the scaffold’s foot, could he have abandoned her, could he honestly have believed her guiltless.

But now that he stood face to face with her, now that he saw that noble countenance, the splendid indignation of those eyes, he was as convinced of her innocence as if he had never doubted her. His past doubts seemed madness, or worse than madness, diabolical possession.

‘If I had spoken with you after your father’s death,’ he said, ‘if we had met

face to face as we meet now, I should never have gone away. I would have borne the hardest things men could say of me, that I had married you for the sake of your fortune—that I had been unscrupulous because you were rich. I would have laughed such poisoned arrows to scorn for your dear sake.'

'You left me,' she said, growing colder as he grew warm, gaining strength and firmness as he showed himself weak. 'You left me. That is all. Perhaps you really never cared for me. Indeed, I have some reason to know there was some one else you secretly preferred.'

'*That* is wholly false,' cried Cyril. 'I never loved but one woman, and you are she.'

'What does it matter? Why try to explain the past? It is all over and done with. To-morrow will make me your cousin's wife. And you are come to assist at my wedding. But how is it you are here so early? You are not expected at the Vicarage till half-past seven.'

'I came by an earlier train than I intended, and having time to spare I went in to look at the old church,' he answered, hurriedly.

'And to pray for strength to bear to-morrow's agony,' he might have added, for he had been on his knees before the altar at which he had so often officiated, praying that his burden might be lightened for him.

There was a silence. Beatrix still stood with her back to the railings that guarded the once splendid tomb of a knight banneret of Elizabeth's reign. She had just strength to stand calmly there, steadily confronting her old lover, but she had no power to drag her limbs away from the spot. She knew that if she tried to move she must fall like a log at his feet; so she stood there, cold and white as the marble the tomb was made of.

'Beatrix,' cried Cyril, losing all mastery of himself in the bewilderment of being alone with her, close to her, as far from the outside world in that quiet corner of the churchyard as if they two had been lost upon the wildest bit of moorland in the country. 'Beatrix, why are you going to marry Kenrick? Why have you been in such haste to prove how utterly you had forgotten me?'

'Are you not glad my wounds have healed so quickly? You have nothing to reproach yourself with on my account. Not even a broken heart.'

'And you love Kenrick?' he asked, wonderingly.

'He has never suspected me of a hideous crime. When every one spoke

against me, he was staunch and true. I am very grateful to him.’

‘Gratitude is not love.’

‘Perhaps not, but affection and gratitude are near akin, and Kenrick is satisfied with affection.’

‘I would not be if I were he,’ cried Cyril, beside himself with anger and jealousy. ‘I would have nothing less than your love, your whole-hearted passionate love. What! be content to dwell beside the narrow sluggish river, and never sicken for the wide wild sea? I would not be your husband on such terms. I despise my cousin that he can marry you, knowing, as he must know, that you do not love him.’

‘You have no right to say that. Do you think yourself so much better than he that no woman, having once loved you, can love him?’

‘I know that no true woman ever loved truly twice. There is no such thing as second love worth having. It is the mere ghost of feeling, like a rose cut at midsummer to be shut up in a box and brought out at Christmas, revived by sulphur fumes—a phantom flower, with no more bloom or freshness than if it were made of paper. Just so much for second love.’

If she could have stirred she would have left him, but she had still an acute sense of her helplessness. She must stay and listen, let him say what he would. What was this conflict of feeling in her breast? Passionate love, passionate anger, scorn that made it sweet to wound him, fondness that made her long to fling herself upon his breast and cry, ‘Oh, give me shelter, give me rest! Let all the world go by. You and I can be all the world to each other.’

The yellow wintry light faded in the west, the sky grew dull and bleak, the headstones had a grayer look.

‘Why do you concern yourself about me?’ she asked bitterly. ‘You have come to assist at my wedding, in order that the conventionalities may not be outraged. That is all very right. My name has been bandied about on people’s lips quite enough already. It is just as well to avoid the scandal of your absence. But that ends all between us. We need never see each other’s faces after to-morrow. Why should we say hard things, or talk about the past? Had you not better go to the Vicarage, and let me go quietly home?’

She was much the calmer of the two, despite that inward struggle between love and resentment. He was mad with the pent-up feeling of all those long dreary days and nights in which he had fought with his passion, believing he had

beaten it, only to find it now starting up in his soul, indestructible as the principle of evil.

‘Let you go! No,’ he cried, with his strong grasp upon her wrist. He who had been weak as a child a few short weeks ago, was strong now with all the strength of a desperate tempted soul. ‘No, I have got you, and I will not let you go. Oh, my love, my love, my lost and only love, I will not let you go till I have told you something of the truth.’

His arms were round her now, her head drawn close to his breast, his eyes looking down into hers, with fond despairing love, his words hurrying thick and fast from lips that trembled as they spoke.

‘Yes, you shall hear me, you shall know the truth—all the mad foolish truth. When your father died, and people began to whisper, and to shrug their shoulders, and insinuate vile slanders against you, the devil got into my mind, as into the minds of those village gossips, and a horrible fear took hold of me. I thought it was just possible—just within the compass of human error—that, maddened by your father’s tyranny and injustice, you had blackened your soul with murder—your fair young soul, which till that hour I had deemed stainless. I saw you at the inquest, and I thought, God help me, that I could read guilt in your face and manner. I struggled against the conviction—I tried to believe you innocent, and all the world mistaken—but the more I fought against it the stronger that conviction grew. In my darkest hours I believed you guilty—at my best moments I was doubtful. So I swore I would pluck your image out of my heart. How could I cherish you, sin incarnate, and be faithful to my God? What was my individual happiness upon this little spot of earth when weighed against duty and honour? And so I left you, love—went away to forget you—worked as few men have worked—strove as few have striven—prayed without ceasing—and remembered you all the more vividly for the distance that severed us, and loved you all the more dearly because I had lost you. And now,’ he cried, straining her against his heart in one desperate embrace, pressing his lips to hers in one impassioned kiss, ‘now, marry Kenrick Culverhouse if you dare, and let the memory of me be your curse, as it is mine to remember you.’

After that kiss he loosed his hold and let her go. She tottered a few paces from the railing that had supported her, and then her feet seemed to get entangled in the long grass of a neglected grave, and she fell headlong at the foot of a gloomy old yew which stretched its crooked branches across her as she lay, like the scraggy arms of weird women—pointing to a foredoomed victim of Fate.

Cyril ran back to the vestry to get some water, and there happily encountered Mrs. Pomfret, the pew-opener, who had come to dust and garnish the church for to-morrow's ceremony.

'Miss Harefield has fainted,' he cried. 'Bring some water, and see what you can do for her, while I go and get a fly.'

He went into the street, intending to order a carriage at the inn, but luckily found the flyman who had brought him from Great Yafford, refreshing his horse with a nosebag and himself with a pint of ale before a small beer-shop over against the churchyard. He told this man to bring his fly close up to the gate for a lady.

'I must get back to the town directly,' said the man.

'I only want you to drive half a mile or so, and I'll give you a crown for the job.'

'Very well, sir, I'll do it.'

Cyril went back to the spot where he had left Beatrix. She was seated upon a low stone tomb, supported by Mrs. Pomfret, and looking dazed and white.

'I have got a fly to drive her home,' he said to the pew-opener. 'Bring her as soon as you can. It is getting cold here.'

The wind had risen. The tall poplars were swinging against the chill evening sky. The old yew was groaning drearily, like a giant in pain.

Cyril waited silently, and as silently accompanied Beatrix, when she was able to move slowly towards the gate, leaning on Mrs. Pomfret as she went. He handed her into the fly, with Mrs. Pomfret, who was to see her safe at home, directed and paid the driver, and waited bareheaded till the fly was out of sight. A wild white face looked out at him from the carriage window.

CHAPTER VIII.

KENRICK'S WEDDING DAY.

THE evening after that meeting in the churchyard was a melancholy one for Kenrick. He had counted upon spending it with Beatrix. The settlements were to have been signed at the Water House at nine o'clock, the Vicar, Mr. Scratchell, and Sir Kenrick meeting there for that purpose. When nine o'clock came Sir Kenrick and the two trustees were assembled in Miss Harefield's drawing-room, Mr. Scratchell's clerk in attendance with the documents, and ready to sign as witness whenever required; but Miss Harefield herself was not forthcoming. They waited some time, Sir Kenrick full of uneasiness, and then Madame Leonard came to them, looking pale and worried.

'I am sorry to have bad news for you, Sir Kenrick,' she said, in her pretty French, 'but Miss Harefield is much too ill to sign any papers, or to see any one to-night. Is it absolutely necessary these papers should be signed?'

'They must be signed before she is married,' said Mr. Scratchell, 'but it can be done in the vestry, five minutes before the wedding, if she likes.'

'But what is the matter?' asked Sir Kenrick. 'She was very well—or she seemed very well—when I was with her yesterday.'

'She is far from well to-night. She is nervous and low-spirited. It would be cruelty to insist upon her coming downstairs to receive you.'

'I am not going to be cruel,' said Kenrick, moodily. 'Perhaps it is cruel of me to ask her to marry me to-morrow. Her low spirits to-night seem to indicate that the prospect is repugnant to her.'

'Don't be savage, Kenrick,' said the Vicar. 'A young lady's nerves are a delicate piece of mechanism, and a trifle will put them out of order. The settlements had better stand over till to-morrow morning. We can all meet here at ten.'

'But I want to know why she is ill, or out of spirits,' urged Kenrick. 'Has Mr. Namby seen her?' he asked abruptly of Madame Leonard.

'No. She is hardly so ill as to need medical advice. She wants repose, to be left to herself for a little while, not to be worried about business matters. She

wished to have no marriage settlement. The whole thing is an annoyance to her.'

'She wished to play the fool,' muttered Mr. Scratchell, 'but I wasn't going to let her make ducks and drakes of the whole of her property.'

They all went away after a little more talk, Kenrick in a bad temper. This was like his welcome at Southampton, when, with a heart burning with eager love, he had found only coldness and restraint in his betrothed. She had been kinder, and had even seemed happy in his society of late; but there had been moments of coldness, days on which she had been absent-minded and fitful.

'I am a fool to love her as I do,' he thought, as he walked silently back to the Vicarage, while Mr. Dulcimer chewed the cud of his afternoon readings, and debated within himself the motive of Ovid's exile—a favourite subject of meditation with him, as being a key-note to the domestic history of Augustus, and a social mystery upon which a man might muse and argue for ever without coming any nearer an absolute conclusion.

'I am a fool to make myself miserable about her,' mused Kenrick. 'Why cannot I think of my marriage as a mere matter of convenience—the salvation of a fine old estate—as other people do?'

The tea party at the Vicarage had not been lively. Cyril looked ill, and had little to say for himself.

'You are overworked at Bridford,' said the Vicar, decisively. 'The place is killing you. I must have you back here, Cyril. There is quite work enough to be done, and you may indulge in your new-fangled ways as much as you like, for I know you are too sensible to consider outward fripperies an essential part of an earnest service. You shall do what you like with the choir, and have as many services at unearthly hours of the morning as you please. But you shall not kill yourself in that polluted town.'

'I am more useful there than I could ever be here,' urged Cyril.

'But you will be no use anywhere when you are dead. A living dog, you know, is of more value in the world than a dead lion. If you go on doing the lion's work yonder you will soon be in the condition of the dead lion, and of less use than the most insignificant live dog. They would stuff you and put you in a glass case, no doubt—or rather they would subscribe for a handsome tablet in the parish church, setting out your virtues—but the tablet would be useful to no one.'

'Your argument is forcible,' said Cyril. 'If I find myself really breaking down

at Bridford I will ask you to let me come back to my work here.'

'Be sure you do.'

The cousins were not alone together during any part of the evening. It was between ten and eleven o'clock when the Vicar and Kenrick returned from the Water House, and they found Mrs. Dulcimer alone in the library.

'Poor Cyril was tired after his journey,' she said, 'and I persuaded him to go to bed half an hour ago. Oh, Clement, I never saw such a change in any young man. I'm afraid he's going into a decline.'

'Fiddlesticks!' exclaimed the Vicar. 'There's nothing consumptive about the Culverhouses. Cyril has the shoulders of an athlete, and the constitution of a Spartan, reared at the public tables on the leavings of the old men. But if he goes on working night and day in the tainted air of Bridford, he will get himself into such a feeble state that his next attack of fever will be fatal.'

'I am sure I had no idea he was so seriously ill last September, or I should have gone to Bridford to see him,' said Mrs. Dulcimer, 'but he tells me he had excellent nurses, two Frenchwomen, sisters of some charitable order. You needn't be frightened, Clement. They were not nuns; and they made no attempt to convert him.'

'I would not despise them if they had made the attempt,' answered the Vicar. 'Every man has a right to offer his idea of salvation to his brother. The feeling is right, though the theology may be wrong.'

Kenrick was up soon after seven o'clock next morning, a wintry gray morning, without a ray of sunshine to gild his hopes. He was nearly dressed when he was startled by the sharp voice of Rebecca.

'A letter, sir, brought by hand from the Water House. I've put it under the door.'

Kenrick seized the letter, with a vague foreboding of evil. It was in Beatrix Harefield's hand.

> 'Forgive me, Kenrick, forgive me, if you can, for what I am going to do. Oh, forgive me, my poor friend, pray forgive me for having played fast and loose with you. I am going away to some corner of the world, where neither you nor any one I have ever known can follow me or hear of me. I am fleeing from a marriage which could only result in misery to both you and me. You love me too well, you are too generous-minded to be satisfied with

less than my true love; and that I cannot give you. I have prayed God to turn my heart towards you, to let me love you, but I cannot. There is always another whose image comes between me and my thoughts of you. I have tried to forget him—to thrust him out of my heart. I have tried to be angry with him for his doubt of me, but once having given him my heart I could not take it back again.

'For the last few days my mind has been full of hesitation and perplexity. I knew that if I married you I should be doing a wicked thing—I should stand before God's altar with a lie upon my lips. I knew that if I broke my promise I should give you pain. I have argued the question with myself a hundred times, but could come to no fixed conclusion. I have been swayed to and fro like a reed in the wind. I wanted to do right, to act generously and justly to you who have been so full of trustfulness and generosity for me. This afternoon I saw your cousin. The meeting was neither his seeking nor mine, Kenrick. Be sure of that. An accident brought us face to face in the churchyard. Oh, then I knew, in a moment, that I must not marry you—that it would be better to break a hundred promises than to be your wife. Before he had spoken a word, while he stood looking at me in silence, I knew that I had never ceased to love him, that, let him scorn me as he might, I must go on loving him to the end.

'So there was no alternative but this which I am taking, and this letter is my last farewell to you and all who have ever known me in England.

'Your estate is free from the mortgage that encumbered it. In the beginning of my trouble of mind—when I found myself hesitating as to what course I ought to take—I resolved that the home you love should be set free. It is done. I beg you to take this as a gift from one who has learned to love you very truly as a friend and brother, but who could never have loved you with the love you would have claimed from a wife.

'Yours affectionately and regretfully,
'BEATRIX HAREFIELD.
'*The Water House, Tuesday, Eleven o'clock.*'

'This is Cyril's doing,' cried Kenrick, beside himself with rage. 'They have plotted this between them. And she throws her money in my face. She thinks that I am so tame a hound as to take the wealth, for which the world would say I chose her, and let her go—the money without the wife. They have planned it between them. It is like Cyril. "Kenrick only cares about Culverhouse Castle,"

he told her. “Set the estate free, and he will forgive you all the rest.” But I will not forgive either of them. I will follow both with my undying hatred. I will fling back her pitiful gift into her false face. She let me think I had won her love, while she meant to buy my forgiveness with her money.’

And then he flung himself face downward on the floor, and gave vent to his passion in angry tears. He had been happier lying on the blood-soaked ground under the walls of Pegu, with the brown Burmese soldiers trampling upon him, and a very acute consciousness of a bullet in his shoulder. Never had he been so wretched as at this moment, never so angry with fate or his fellow-men.

He had to conquer his passion presently, and go calmly downstairs to tell Mr. and Mrs. Dulcimer that there was to be no wedding.

CHAPTER IX.

JILTED.

‘No wedding!’ screamed Mrs. Dulcimer, putting down the old silver teapot and staring aghast into space.

‘No wedding?’ repeated the Vicar.

‘No,’ answered Kenrick, hoarsely, and with a hardness of manner which he maintained all through that painful day. ‘Beatrix has been fooling me all this time. She has written to tell me that she never loved me—and—at the last—it came into her head that she ought not to marry me without loving me. An afterthought. And she flings me fifty thousand pounds as a peace-offering. As you throw an importunate dog a biscuit, when you don’t want him to follow you.’

‘It is most extraordinary,’ exclaimed the Vicar. ‘She was in such a hurry to pay off those mortgages before her marriage. I thought she was romantically in love with you.’

‘You don’t understand,’ said Kenrick. ‘That was how she meant to make amends to me. She valued my love, my manhood, my self-respect at fifty thousand pounds. I am paid in full, she thinks, and I have no right to complain.’

‘Women are an inscrutable species,’ said the Vicar.

‘I am a most unlucky woman,’ wailed Mrs. Dulcimer. ‘I took such a pride in bringing Kenrick and Beatrix together—such an excellent match—so well suited to each other—a large fortune—a fine position in the county—title—everything.’

‘My love, it will not mend the matter for you to get hysterical,’ remonstrated the Vicar. ‘Where are you going, Kenrick?’ he asked, as Kenrick moved towards the door.

‘To the Water House. Where is Cyril?’

‘He got an early cup of tea from Rebecca, and went round to see some of his old parishioners. He promised to be at the church before eleven.’

‘A superfluous civility,’ said Kenrick. ‘No doubt he knew there would be no

wedding.’

‘Kenrick,’ remonstrated Mrs. Dulcimer, but Kenrick was gone.

He walked down to the Water House faster than he had ever walked there in his life, though Love had lent him Mercury’s winged sandals. To-day rage and baffled love, and gnawing jealousy, drove him as fast as if they had been palpable scourges wielded by the Furies.

Everything looked very quiet at the old house by the river. The butler came to the door. Miss Harefield had gone away with Madame Leonard at six o’clock that morning. The carriage had taken them to the railway station at Great Yafford. No one had gone with them but the coachman, and he had not left his box. The porters had carried the luggage into the station. Yes, there was a good deal of luggage. The big cases were to be sent to a furniture warehouse in London.

The house was to remain in the care of the butler, and Mrs. Peters, the housekeeper. The servants were to be on board wages. Mr. Scratchell was to arrange everything.

Mr. Scratchell came in while Sir Kenrick was questioning the butler. He too had received a letter from Beatrix, which he allowed Kenrick to read.

> ‘DEAR MR. SCRATCHELL,—I am going abroad, most likely for a long time. Please receive the rents, as usual, attend to all repairs, and pay in all moneys to the bank, as heretofore. I shall be obliged if you will give the servants whatever allowance is liberal and proper for board wages. This had better be paid monthly, in advance. Please see that the house and grounds are kept in good order, and that all my subscriptions to local and other charities are regularly paid.
>
> ‘Mr. Dulcimer is to have any money he may require for his poor.’
>
> ‘Yours very truly,
> ‘BEATRIX HAREFIELD.’

‘Business-like,’ said Mr. Scratchell, ‘but I’m afraid the poor young woman is not quite right in her mind. Do you know what she has done about the mortgages on your property?’

‘Yes,’ answered Kenrick. ‘You don’t suppose I am going to keep the money?’

‘I don’t suppose you’d be so demented as to give it back,’ said Mr. Scratchell.

‘You’d better keep it. If she doesn’t make ducks and drakes of it one way, she will another. What was your quarrel about?’

‘Quarrel,’ echoed Kenrick, and then it occurred to him that it was just as well to let this vulgarian Scratchell believe that he and Beatrix had quarrelled.

How could a piece of such common clay as Mr. Scratchell comprehend the finer feelings of human porcelain? He only thought it cracked.

There was nothing more to be discovered at the Water House. Beatrix and her companion had gone. That was all. Miss Harefield had made her arrangements with coolness and promptitude. It might be just possible to follow her. But to what end?

Kenrick went in quest of Cyril. After a good deal of inquiry he found him with a bedridden old woman, listening to a doleful story of the winter’s sufferings.

‘I want to talk to you, Cyril,’ said Kenrick, and, with a gentle apology, Cyril cut short the dame’s rambling account of her bodily ills.

‘What is the matter, Ken?’ asked Cyril, when they were outside in the windy road. ‘You look as pale as a ghost.’

‘There is to be no marriage. Beatrix has gone away—and you know all about it. You planned it together yesterday when you met in the churchyard.’

‘Upon my honour, Kenrick, I know nothing,’ answered the other, solemnly.

‘Why should I believe you? She, whom I thought the noblest of women, has fooled and jilted me. In whose honour am I to believe after that?’

‘Kenrick, I am deeply sorry for you.’

‘Pray spare me that. Your pity would be the last drop of gall in my cup. Will you swear to me that you do not know where she is gone—that you had nothing to do with her going?’

‘Directly, nothing,’ answered Cyril, very pale.

His conscience smote him for that scene of yesterday. He had given the reins to passion, he, a man who had hitherto shaped his life upon principle. He felt himself guilty.

‘Directly, no. You are equivocating with me, as only your virtuous man can equivocate. You are Pharisees, every one of you, straining at gnats and swallowing camels. What about your indirect influence? It was that which broke

off my marriage.’

‘I met your betrothed wife yesterday, by accident. I was taken off my guard. In the bewilderment of that moment I may have said foolish things—’

‘Yes, you urged her to break off her marriage. You left her a year ago, of your own accord. And now, finding that I had won her, it came into your head to try and take her away from me. A manly course throughout.’

‘Kenrick, when I went away conscience was my dictator. Yesterday I let passion master me. I confess it with deepest humiliation. But trust me, if Beatrix did not love you, it is better—infinitely better—that you and she should be parted for ever. No happiness would have come out of your union——’

‘Preach your sermons to more patient listeners,’ cried Kenrick, savagely. ‘I will have none of them.’

And so the cousins parted. Kenrick went to Great Yafford to make inquiries at the station, but at that busy place there had been nobody with leisure enough to particularize two ladies—one tall and the other short—going away by the seven o’clock train. Neither Miss Harefield’s carriage nor Miss Harefield’s person had made any impression upon the mind of the porter who had carried her luggage into the station.

There was a train that started for London at seven, there was another that went northward at a quarter past. There was the Liverpool train at 7.30. She might have travelled by any one of these.

Kenrick went back to the Vicarage in a savage humour. No good could have come from the pursuit of his lost bride, but it was hard not to know where she had gone. Fortunately Cyril passed him unawares on the road between the town and the village, so those two did not meet again.

‘I shall go to London to-morrow,’ Kenrick told the Dulcimers that evening, ‘and present myself at the War Office next day.’

‘You want to go back to India directly?’ asked the Vicar.

‘Yes, I shall cut short my leave by a month or six weeks.’

‘Dear Kenrick, why not stop with us till you recover your spirits after this cruel blow?’ urged Mrs. Dulcimer.

‘My kindest of friends, I could never recover my spirits at Little Yafford. Forgive me for saying so, but the place has become hateful to me. Even your

kindness could not make it endurable.’

‘Kenrick is right,’ said the Vicar. ‘He has been very badly treated, and his profession will be his best consolation.’

‘There is one thing that must be settled before I go back to India,’ said Kenrick. ‘I must give—Miss Harefield—back her money. I cannot carry that burden away with me. You are her guardian and one of her trustees, Vicar. You and Mr. Scratchell must manage the business between you. I can only raise the money by a new mortgage. Would it not be best for Miss Harefield’s trustees to take a mortgage on my estate for the amount they have advanced? I paid the other people only four per cent. I might pay her five.’

‘I do not think she will take a mortgage. I do not believe she will take her money back in any form whatsoever,’ said the Vicar. ‘She has written me a letter, which I shall show you when you are calmer and more disposed to forgiveness. It is a very touching letter, full of truth and generous feeling. She has treated you very badly—she has been foolish, mistaken; but she is a noble girl, and she is much to be pitied. You will be ungenerous if you insist on giving her back the money. She has more than enough without it.’

‘I shall be a mean hound if I keep it,’ said Kenrick.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. PIPER'S DAY.

'I AM not surprised,' said Miss Coyle, when she was informed that Beatrix Harefield had gone away, and there was to be no wedding. 'That unhappy young woman's guilty conscience has driven her away. A just punishment for Sir Kenrick. Of course he was going to marry her for her money. He knows, as well as I do, that she poisoned her father.'

The wedding was to have been strictly private—altogether different from the imposing ceremonial that had made Bella Scratchell the second Mrs. Piper. There were no guests to be put off at the last moment; there was no confusion anywhere; but there was a great deal of talk in Little Yafford when it became generally known, through Mrs. Pomfret, the pew-opener, that Sir Kenrick's marriage was not to be.

There were various theories as to Beatrix Harefield's motive for her extraordinary conduct. 'Guilty conscience,' said Miss Coyle and her party. 'A prior attachment,' said the more charitably inclined. 'The girl must be wrong in her head,' said the matter-of-fact matrons and middle-aged husbands, who could not understand the fits and starts of passion.

Perhaps in all the neighbourhood there was only one person, except the rival cousins themselves, who guessed the real cause of Miss Harefield's flight. That person was Mrs. Piper. She knew how deeply Beatrix had loved Cyril, and it hardly surprised her that, at the last moment, she should refuse to consummate a loveless bond.

'It might have been happier for me if I had run away,' thought Bella, looking round her apple-green dressing-room, with all the gewgaws Mr. Piper's generosity had heaped upon her, 'yet any other life than this would be almost unbearable now.'

Time went on. Kenrick returned to India, leaving his honour in Mr. Dulcimer's hands. Miss Harefield's money was to be paid back, and without loss of time. Kenrick's lawyers and Mr. Dulcimer were to arrange the matter between them somehow; Kenrick did not care how; but the thing must be done. On that point Sir Kenrick was firmly resolved.

The lawyers were as slow as most of their craft, and saw no reason why such a business as this should be precipitated. Mr. Dulcimer was the last man to hasten the movements of the lawyers. Happy in his world of shadows—now digging out the forgotten temples of Nineveh and Babylon—anon wandering with the lost tribes of Israel—he was apt to let the actual business of life slip out of his mind altogether. Mrs. Dulcimer had to remind him of everything, to tell him what bills he ought to pay, what people he ought to visit—all the details of his quiet life. Now Mrs. Dulcimer was not disposed to remind her husband of Kenrick's desire to refund Miss Harefield's fifty thousand pounds. She hoped that Kenrick might, by fair means or foul, be made to keep the money. He had been cruelly wronged. The least atonement that could be made to him was the liberation of his estate from its old burdens. Thus argued Mrs. Dulcimer, while Kenrick was busy fighting the Burmese.

Before the bleak winds of March had ceased to blow their keenest across the wide waste of withered heather and sandy barrenness, before the last of the daffodils had faded in Mrs. Pomfret's neat garden, Cyril Culverhouse had come back to his old place at Little Yafford. He had done good work at Bridford, but the work had been too much for him. He could not be content to do half the work wanted, and leave the rest undone. Another man in his position would have been easy in his conscience after doing a quarter of the good that Cyril had done in that crowded lazar-house; but the knowledge of unconquerable evils, of cures only half wrought, weighed upon Cyril's spirits like an ever-present nightmare. He could not sleep for the thought of the evils round about him—the loathsome miseries—the rampant vices—the selfishness of the rich—the godlessness of the poor. His health broke down under the burden. This time it was no fierce attack of fever—no brain sickness and delirium,—but his strength went down like the sand in a glass when the hour is nearly done—appetite failed—the power of sleep left him, and Dr. Bolling told him, in plainest terms, that if he wished to go on living he must leave Bridford.

Brought face to face with this solemn question of life or death, Cyril discovered that existence was not altogether worthless. He, who a little time ago had courted death, had now no desire to die. There were mysteries that he wanted to solve in this life, before he went to investigate the awful mystery beyond it. He wanted to stand face to face with Beatrix Harefield once more. He wanted to know whether it was indeed for love of him she had at the last moment jilted his cousin. He wanted to find some stronger proof of her innocence than the sudden conviction that had flashed into his mind when he looked into her steadfast eyes, and saw scorn of his weak doubts, and fondest

love for himself, at war in her soul. While he lived there was always a chance, however remote, of his discovering the truth. While he lived there was always the possibility that Beatrix and he might meet. She was not his cousin's wife. Fate had spared him that last bitterness. He could think of her without sin.

So he came back to Little Yafford, to his old rooms, his old friends, his old ways, and the old quietly busy life which seemed so easy after his vain endeavour to cleanse that Augean stable, an overcrowded manufacturing town.

'I never feel as if I had too much work to do, so long as it is work that can be done,' he said to the gentle Vicar. 'To grapple with impossibilities and feel one's self being daily worsted! That is the trial.'

There were two of his parishioners at Bridford whom Cyril could not be content to leave behind him. Those were Emmanuel Joyce and his mother. Emmanuel's gratitude for the man who had risked his life to save him had done what argument and teaching might never have accomplished. Emmanuel was now a conscientious conforming Christian. He believed, as the leper believed, because he had been saved. The conduct of one Christian man opened his heart to receive the sublime mystery of a Redeemer who was more than man. He went to the altar without one lurking doubt. He made himself like a little child, and confessed that all the learning he had been so proud of was nothing, when weighed against his friend and teacher's one act of Christian self-abnegation.

'What was I that you should sacrifice yourself for me?' he said. 'When man can be so generous I will no longer refuse to believe that God can suffer and die for sinners.'

'I would have you believe upon better grounds than any friendly act of mine,' said Cyril.

'I have been face to face with death,' answered Joyce. 'Men learn strange things on their deathbeds. A death-bed repentance may be a poor thing, but a death-bed revelation may accomplish what a life of study could not do.'

And then Emmanuel, being by nature an enthusiast, talked wildly of the visions of his bed of pain—the cloud-curtain that had been lifted from the invisible world—the wonders that he had seen and heard in that mysterious border-land between life and death.

Cyril asked no more than a simple unquestioning belief.

It was with a thrill of joy that he saw Emmanuel kneeling before the altar rails, meekly lifting up his hands to receive the sacred symbols of Divine love. Could

he leave his convert behind him in the fever-tainted alley, where the sweet summertide was ever the harbinger of death? No. He made up his mind that Emmanuel and his mother should go with him.

‘I am doubtful if you would be able to live at Little Yafford by shoe-mending,’ he said, when he discussed the question with Joyce and the widow, ‘but, if I could get the schoolmaster a better berth somewhere else, I am sure you could manage the school, with a little help from me at the beginning.’

‘Oh, sir, it would be the very thing for him,’ cried Mrs. Joyce. ‘His father began life as a parish schoolmaster, and he gave Emmanuel a good plain education. He was very severe with the poor lad, but that was partly in his anxiety to make him a thorough scholar. I don’t think there’s any one could beat my boy in arithmetic or Bible history. I’m sure he could teach. You’d like to teach, wouldn’t you, Emmanuel?’

‘John Milton was a schoolmaster,’ said Joyce, with his face all aglow. ‘I should like it of all things, if you think I could do it, Mr. Culverhouse.’

‘As for book learning,’ cried the widow, ‘I don’t think there’s one in a thousand—no, not even among the gentlefolks—has read as much as my Emmanuel.’

‘A wide range of reading would hardly be required, though every teacher must be the better for it,’ said Cyril, smiling. ‘But I know that Emmanuel has been well grounded in a plain English education, and that he now thinks rightly upon religious questions, so I fancy he might teach well in our parish school. Of course, the first thing to be done is to get a better place for the present man, who is a very good master.’

Cyril did not add, as he might have done, that the present schoolmaster’s merits were chiefly his work. He had taken infinite pains to teach the teacher as well as the pupils.

Before Cyril had been at Little Yafford a month he contrived to get the schoolmaster transferred to a more profitable situation forty miles away, and to get Emmanuel Joyce accepted as master upon probation. He was to do the work for a quarter without remuneration; and if he succeeded in pleasing the Vicar and churchwardens, was to be engaged at the end of that time at the handsome stipend of five-and-thirty pounds a year, with a cottage adjoining the school, and an allowance of coals and candles. This, in Yorkshire twenty years ago was to be passing rich.

It is hardly possible to conceive greater happiness than that of Mrs. Joyce and her son when they came to take possession of their cottage at Little Yafford. The rustic beauty of the village, the grandeur of the moor, the blue river winding capriciously through the valley, the dark pine branches gently swaying in the April breeze, the gardens bright with spring flowers, the silvery blackthorn in the hedges, the primroses and dog-violets, the scattered houses, all more or less picturesque of aspect, the sloping meadows, and orchards full of pear blossom—all these things, to people who had lived in one of the most loathsome corners of a manufacturing town, were as a revelation of an earthly paradise. Could heaven itself be sweeter or fairer? Could death ever enter here? Mrs. Joyce wondered. Was there any coffin-maker in that peaceful village? The thread of life, spun gently in this fair tranquillity, must surely run on for ever. What should snap it?

The four-roomed cottage seemed to the Joyces the most luxurious mansion. Four rooms! What could they two possibly do with such a world of space? There would be room enough for ghosts in the unused chambers. And then Mrs. Joyce reminded her son how, before illness crippled his father, and brought poverty and trouble, they had lived in a four-roomed house just like this, with a scullery at the back of the kitchen, which might be accounted a fifth room, and a little yard where they were able to grow scarlet runners.

‘It is like old times, Emmanuel, when your father was earning his five-and-thirty shillings a week,’ said Mrs. Joyce, ‘and my house was the neatest and brightest in Saville’s Buildings.’

‘Wherever you lived, mother, the place would be neat and bright,’ said her son, admiringly.

They went out to explore the garden, enraptured with everything. It was quite an extensive garden, nearly a quarter of an acre. There were potatoes, and apple trees, and gooseberry and currant bushes, and roses in abundance. And there was room for scarlet runners, as Mrs. Joyce exclaimed delightedly.

The scarlet runner is the chief of vegetables in the estimation of the poor. That homely, useful bean will grow anywhere, and is a thing of beauty wherever it grows.

‘We might even try some vegetable marrows, Emmanuel,’ said the widow. ‘They would look so pretty behind the rose bushes in summer-time.’

Emmanuel began his work next day, after a long conversation with Mr. Culverhouse overnight. Cyril was going to allow him ten shillings a week during his time of probation. It was very little, perhaps, but the frugal widow could

manage to make it serve, and it was a great deal for Cyril to give out of his small means.

Before a week was ended everybody concerned was agreed that Emmanuel would do. The children liked their new master. There was something in his quiet manner which won both liking and respect. It was thought that he knew a great deal. He had taken the trouble to explain things to his pupils. He had enlarged upon the meagre history of England, in which the kings and heroes, politicians and Churchmen, were the merest shadows, and had told the boys of the greatness and power that had been in their native land since Alfred the Saxon, warrior and poet, kindled the light of letters amongst a barbarous people. The more intelligent of the boys were delighted with him—even the stupid ones brightened under his tuition. He was so keenly interested in his work. The pupils could hardly find their lessons a burden, when the master took so much pleasure in them.

On Sunday he sat at the end of the church, with his pupils ranged before him on a row of benches beside the organ.

He kept them in wonderful order, and the occasional dropping of marbles and attacks of spasmodic coughing which had been apt to disturb the congregation under the rule of Emmanuel's predecessor were no longer heard.

Cyril was delighted at the success of his scheme. The Vicar and churchwardens did not wait for the three months of probation to come to an end, before they expressed their satisfaction. At midsummer, Emmanuel Joyce was formally appointed schoolmaster, and his salary began from that time. The school-house was beautifully kept by Mrs. Joyce; the cottage and garden were a picture of neatness, unsurpassed by any house or garden in Little Yafford. Cyril had the deep delight of knowing that he had made two people happy.

His own life went on very quietly all this time. He was certainly happier at Little Yafford than he ever could have been at Bridford. He had plenty to do, and his work was successful. He saw the church crowded on a Sunday evening, and knew that people came from far and wide to hear him preach. Had he been vain of his power as a preacher his vanity might have been fully satisfied. The week-day services were well attended. The people led better lives than when he had first come among them. There was less drunkenness, there were fewer brawls. Over the young people his influence was powerful. He gave a more intellectual tone to their lives. He had opened a reading-room, which was now a self-supporting and self-governing institution, but its committee always looked to

him for advice in the choice of books.

He saw a good deal of the Dulcimers, in his occasional leisure hours, and with the kind and genial Vicar he was always happy. The keenest pang that he felt in all his sad memories of the past was when he passed the Water House, and saw its darkened windows, and remembered that she who should have reigned there as a centre of light and happiness was a wanderer none knew where, her fair fame clouded, her youth blighted.

He called once in a way on Mrs. Piper of the Park; not often, for the thought of Bella had never been entirely agreeable to him after that conversation with Mrs. Dulcimer, in which he had, in a manner, found himself accused of having misled the young lady—or at any rate the young lady's friends—as to his intentions. Now that she was married he had certainly no need to be uneasy on that score; but the recollection was an uncomfortable one, and he had a feeling about Mrs. Piper much too near dislike to be altogether Christian.

Bella, in all the fulness of her new powers, was not a person to be easily kept at a distance. She wanted captives at her chariot wheels, to make her triumph complete, and she was particularly anxious that Cyril Culverhouse—who, according to her own idea, had scorned her in her poverty—should see and wonder at her splendour and elegance. She pestered him with invitations, all of which he found it impossible to decline without marked discourtesy, more especially as Mr. and Mrs. Piper were regular worshippers at the parish church, and liberal subscribers to all local charities.

Bella had taken it into her head to receive her friends upon one particular day of the week. It was quite a new thing in Little Yafford—except for such a person as Lady Jane Gowry, who was a privileged eccentric—and had rather a foreign flavour. At the beginning of this institution visitors were slow to arrive, and Bella found it rather a dull business to sit waiting for them, looking her loveliest, in a dress just arrived from Paris, but with nobody but Mr. Piper to admire her.

'You look uncommon pretty, my dear,' said that devoted husband, walking up and down his blue and gold drawing-room, as restlessly as a polar bear in his cage, 'but I can't say that I hold with this new style of visiting. If you was to ask people to a jolly good dinner they'd be sure to come; if you asked them to a friendly tea, I dare say they'd come, though they might think it low. But you send 'em your pasteboard with "Mrs. Piper, Thursdays, At home from four to six," and I'll lay they don't know what to make of it.'

'It's quite the right thing, Mr. Piper. In London everybody of any importance

does it. And here, where the distances people have to come are so much longer, it is still more convenient.'

'Then I suppose you're not of any importance, my dear,' said the provoking Mr. Piper, 'for you see nobody comes.'

'How can you say so, Mr. Piper,' cried Bella, reddening with anger at this obnoxious truth. 'Miss Coyle came last Thursday.'

'Yes, and the Thursday before that, and the Thursday before that again. That old lady will come anywhere for the sake of a dish of scandal and a cup of strong tea.'

'And Mrs. Dulcimer comes.'

'Yes, I believe she has been once,' said Mr. Piper, and then, anxious to chase the thunder-cloud from his young wife's stormy brow, he added hastily, 'Never mind, my lass. You'll have a visitor this afternoon. I met Chumney this morning when I was in Great Yafford, and I asked him to drop in at five and pay his respects to you, and eat his chop with me at seven.'

'What!' cried Bella, 'you have invited that vulgarian, your old cashier! Mr. Piper, I am ashamed of you. You have not a particle of self-respect.'

'Why, what's amiss with Chumney? The most faithful servant a man ever had. Why should I cast him off because I've got a pretty young wife? The first Mrs. P. never made any objection to Chumney. She never said a word about the difference in the butcher's bill, let me bring him home as often as I might. Why should you object to him?'

'I don't object to him, as a faithful servant, but let him be kept in a servant's place. Why bring him home here—a man who eats peas with his knife, and bites his bread, and is always talking of the time when you were in trade. Can't you see that I am trying to raise the tone of your surroundings——'

'The tone be blowed,' muttered Mr. Piper.

'That I want to get you recognised by the county people; that I want to force you into the best society in the neighbourhood. You must know this, and yet you bring Chumney to spoil everything. He was at our last dinner party.'

'Well, he did no harm,' growled Mr. Piper, waxing savage.

'He was an eyesore. He was a blot upon the whole thing. Do you think I shall ever rise above your Wigzells and your Porkmans, while you weigh me down

with Mr. Chumney?'

'My Wigzells and my Porkmans are a deal pleasanter than the stuck-up lot *you've* contrived to bring about me,' retorted Mr. Piper, 'A pack of shabby-genteel lawyers and parsons and half-pay captains, that eat up my substance and stare me out of countenance, as if I was waxwork—and never offer me bite nor sup in return. I despise such half-and-half gentry. I'd as soon put electro-plated goods on my table as set them down to it. And as for the county,' cried Mr. Piper, snapping his fingers derisively, 'the county won't have cut, shuffle, or deal with us, and wouldn't, no, not if you were to put your eyes out upon sticks.'

This horrible expression, which Mr. Piper sometimes used when he was in a passion, overcame Bella. She began to cry, and murmured meekly that she wouldn't so much mind Mr. Chumney coming if it was not her 'day.'

'Your day!' cried Mr. Piper, growing bold in his scorn. 'Your day, be hanged! Nobody comes on your day. You might as well call it Queen Elizabeth's day, or Nebuchadnezzar's day. You've laid yourself out to know a parcel of arrogant people that don't want to know you, and you've turned up your nose at people that give three hundred guineas for a pair of horses, and live in handsome houses of their own building, and brag about the money they have earned with their own industry, instead of bragging about their great-grandfathers. You want to keep company with the Tudors and the Plantagenets. Nothing less than that will satisfy you. But they won't have you, and if you want any one to admire your fine clothes and eat your fine dinners you'd better be content with my friends.'

Mr. Chumney's arrival brought the conversation to an abrupt finish. He was a long lean man, with iron-gray hair and whiskers, thick black eyebrows, and an intelligent expression which atoned in some measure for his gaunt ugliness.

He loved Ebenezer Piper with the affection of a faithful dog that has never known but one master, and with regard to all the rest of the world he was strictly misanthropic. He was not a scandalmonger like Miss Coyle. He generally thought the worst of people, but he always kept his thoughts to himself. He believed every business man, except Mr. Piper, to be an innate rogue, and on the verge of insolvency, but he gave no expression to his doubts. He was not a lively companion, so far as conversation goes, but he was an accomplished listener; he had the art of looking ineffably wise, and of appearing to be able to give an immense deal of information, if he had not preferred to withhold it. He was like the great Lord Thurlow. Nobody ever could have been so wise as Samuel Chumney looked.

From the hour she became acquainted with Mr. Chumney Bella had hated him. She did not know why. It might have been his eyebrows, it might have been his vulgarity. For some undiscovered reason he was more obnoxious to her than any creature she had ever met. She thought him clever, and she had a lurking idea that he was able to read her as easily as he could read a book. She fancied that he knew everything that was passing in her mind—that he was perfectly familiar with her motive for marrying his old employer—that he had weighed and measured her till he was master of her most secret thoughts. She lectured her husband for his cultivation of Chumney; but she was wonderfully polite to Mr. Chumney himself. She feared him too much to be discourteous to him.

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTAIN STANDISH.

WHETHER it was that Mr. Piper's plain speaking had its effect, or that Bella grew wise by experience, is an open question; but soon after the particular Thursday upon which Mr. Chumney appeared as an unwelcome guest, the second Mrs. Piper changed her tactics altogether. She left off besieging the county people in their impregnable fortresses, surrounded with the moat of exclusiveness, and shut in with the portcullis of pride. She dropped a good many of those ultra-genteel professional people against whose impertinence Mr. Piper had protested, and she opened her house freely to her husband's commercial allies of the past —the Wigzells, the Porkmans, the Timperleys, and a good many more of the same class.

When she had made these people understand that her Thursday afternoon reception meant something lively and sociable she was no longer without visitors. The midsummer weather suggested a tent on the lawn, where tea and claret cup, and strawberries and cream, might be taken amidst the perfume of roses and warbling of blackbirds. Archery was introduced on the long stretch of grass on the other side of the ha-ha. Mr. Piper insisted on having American bowls for himself and his particular friends, in an old-fashioned garden on one side of the big square mansion, comfortably shut in by a dense holly hedge, a retreat where a man might smoke a clay pipe and be vulgar at his ease.

The Wigzells and their compeers all came in handsome carriages, and, if the men were somewhat given to eccentricity in their hats and collars, the women all dressed in the latest fashion. But their highest claim to Bella's favour was the fact that they brought very pleasant people in their train; officers in the regiment stationed at Great Yafford, clever young barristers, lawyers of higher standing than the starched solicitors who had retired to cultivate their roses and air their self-importance in the pastoral seclusion of Little Yafford. Bella perceived with delight that even these manufacturing people could be useful to her.

By midsummer, Mrs. Piper's Thursday afternoons, which had at first been such dire failures as to provoke the sarcasms of Miss Coyle and her set, had become so successful that Miss Coyle now found herself a neglected atom in the crowd, and sat apart with one of her chosen friends, breathing condemnations of

this new phase of worldliness and frivolity. Miss Coyle liked the strong tea, and unlimited pound cake, the claret cup, and strawberries and cream, and better still did she like the large opportunity for scandal which these gatherings afforded her.

'Poor dear Mrs. Piper,' she sighed, meaning the lady reposing under the sumptuous monument of many-coloured marbles. 'If she could only come back to earth for an afternoon, and look upon this scene! If!'

'Ah!' echoed Miss Coyle's friend, Mrs. Namby, the doctor's wife, 'if indeed! She would be surprised, poor dear, wouldn't she?'

'To think of the waste going on in the servants' hall, now, my dear!' continued Miss Coyle, with the tone of a Hebrew prophet bewailing the follies of his misguided nation. 'It was bad enough in the first Mrs. Piper's time, though there never was a more careful housekeeper. I've heard her lament it many a day. WHAT must it be NOW?'

Miss Coyle opened her eyes very wide as she uttered this awful question, and poor little Mrs. Namby, who always agreed with everybody, but wished harm to nobody, opened hers in sympathy.

'Ah!' she sighed. 'She's very young, isn't she? You can't expect much carefulness from such a pretty young thing as that.'

'Pretty young thing, indeed,' cried Miss Coyle, contemptuously. 'We've all been pretty young things in our day.' This was an assertion which, taken in conjunction with Miss Coyle's present physiognomy, was rather difficult to believe. 'But did that absolve us from doing our duty? Would that have excused us if we'd been given over to dress, and dissipation, and——' here Miss Coyle made a long and solemn pause——'FLIRTATION?'

'Oh,' cried poor Mrs. Namby, almost jumping off her garden chair, 'pray don't say that. I hope Mrs. Piper has too much respect for herself as a young married woman to be guilty of flirtation.'

'I say nothing,' replied Miss Coyle. 'Look at that, and judge for yourself, Mrs. Namby.'

'That' was as pretty a living picture of light-hearted youth as a painter of modern manners need have cared to paint. Against the green background of beech boughs, bright with their midsummer shoots, upon a carpet of velvet sward, stood two figures apart from the rest of the revellers—a man in gray, tall, well made, good-looking; a woman in an archery dress of Lincoln green, setting

off a form slight and delicate enough for one of Diana's nymphs, a hat and feather, *à la* Rosalind, poised lightly on her burnished auburn hair, neat little hands in tan gauntlets, and a tall bow that became her as a fan becomes an Andalusian.

The man in gray was Captain Standish, the crack captain in the crack regiment then stationed at Great Yafford. The regiment considered itself a great deal too good for Great Yafford, and the captain considered himself too good for the regiment. He was a man of good family; he had large means, a handsome face, and a fine figure; he had come off first in all athletic exercises at school and college; he had not learnt anything else in particular—or in his own words he had not 'gone in for' anything else; he left it to be inferred that he could have taken honours had he so chosen.

The lady in Lincoln green was Mrs. Piper the second. She had instituted these archery meetings for her own pleasure as well as that of her friends, but she had not yet learned to hit the gold. The three tall Miss Porkmans had been beating her ignominiously in this afternoon's contest. Captain Standish had taken her in hand, and was giving her a lesson in the management of her bow.

'Well, really now I can't see any harm,' said Mrs. Namby. 'He's giving her a lesson, don't you see? She's a poor hand with a bow and arrows.'

Miss Coyle gave a prolonged sniff.

'Mr. Piper may approve of such goings on,' she said. 'I don't think I should, if I were in his place. Look at him bending down to speak to her, and look at her, giggling and blushing like a silly school girl. If you don't call *that* flirting the word must have a different meaning from what it had in *my* time.'

The jerk of Miss Coyle's bonnet seemed to imply that she had done her share of flirting in the days that were no more, and was an acute judge of such matters.

Mrs. Namby looked at her with awe, marvelling what valiant knight of an extinct chivalry could ever have had the courage to flirt with Miss Coyle.

'You really must let me ride over some morning and give you a good long lesson. It excruciates me to see those three Porkman Gorgons getting the best of it in this way.'

That was what Captain Standish was bending down to say, with that air of grave reverence which from the distance looked tender. He was not brilliant in conversation. His talent had all gone into field sports and manly accomplishments, from foxhunting, hammer-throwing, cricket, billiards—down

to skittles. He could give any man odds at all these. It was astonishing what respect he won from his fellow-men on account of this gift. Had he been a second Newton or Herschel, he could not have carried things with a higher hand, or more keenly felt his superiority to the ruck of mankind.

Then, again, he had that calm sense of ascendency which distinguishes the man who has never been in want of money. You can see it in his looks. There is the tranquil arrogance of a being who has never shivered at the rap of a dun, or quailed at opening a lawyer's letter, or been politely reminded by his banker that his account is overdrawn.

'You must really allow me to teach you,' pleaded Captain Standish. 'I used to win prizes at this kind of thing when I was a lad.'

His words were humble enough, but his tone meant, 'You ought to be intensely grateful for my condescension in offering you such a privilege.'

It was Captain Standish's first appearance at Little Yafford Park, and Bella was fluttered by the triumph of getting him there—at last. His brother officers had come very often, from the blue-nosed colonel to the callow cornets, and had eaten and drunken and been jolly with Mr. Piper, and voted the whole establishment 'capital fun.' But Captain Standish was a different order of being, and never went anywhere till he had made people sensible of his importance and exclusiveness, by holding himself aloof. The Miss Porkmans and the Miss Wigzells were rarely seen without one of the callow cornets in their train. Mr. Porkman was on the most familiar terms with Colonel O'Shaughnessy, the blue-nosed commanding officer, who liked the Porkman cellar and the Porkman cook, and was not too refined to tolerate the Porkmans themselves. But Captain Standish was not to be had so easily. Cooks and cellars were indifferent to him. He affected a Spartan simplicity in his diet—drank only the driest champagne, and that seldom—dined on a slice of mutton and a tumbler of Vichy water, frankly avowed his abhorrence of provincial dinner parties, refused five invitations out of six, and, after accepting the sixth, disappointed his host at the eleventh hour. Can it be wondered that, in a society of newly rich provincials, Captain Standish was eminently popular?

His dog-cart, severely painted darkest olive, black harness, no plating, high-stepping brown horse, neat groom in olive livery, and unexceptionable boots, plain black hat and cockade, made a sensation whenever it appeared in the High Street, or flashed meteor-like past the broad plate glass windows of the villas on the London road.

Bella had heard of Captain Standish, both from his brother officers and from the outside world, until she knew his excellences and accomplishments by heart. She was inspired with the same desire to cultivate his acquaintance which agitated feminine society in the brand-new Granges, Moats, and Manors round Great Yafford. The Porkmans had met him at a fancy ball, where he had stood out from the tinselled King Charleses, and the spangled Black Princes, and the theatrical brigands and troubadours, in the actual dress of a Spanish bullfighter. He had once accepted an invitation to dine at the Porkmans', had disappointed them at the last moment, and had called a week after. The Miss Porkmans had forgiven the ungracious disappointment on account of the gracious call.

'He looks lovely in morning dress,' said Blanche Porkman, who was youthful and enthusiastic. 'If you knew him you would rave about him.'

'I never rave about people,' returned Bella, with dignity. 'And I don't in the least care about knowing this Captain Standish.'

'This Captain Standish!' echoed Blanche Porkman, indignantly. 'You needn't put a demonstrative pronoun before him, Mrs. Piper. There's nobody else like him.'

In spite of her affected indifference, Bella was bent upon bringing Captain Standish to the Park. He had called upon the Porkmans. Was she—with her advanced ideas of elegance and her unlimited capacity for reading French novels—to be of less account than the Porkmans? Was that overgrown Blanche, with her drab hair and complexion, and goggle eyes, to boast of an acquaintance beyond Bella's reach?

'The next time you come, colonel, you must bring Captain Standish,' said Mrs. Piper to the cordial O'Shaughnessy, after that gentleman had dined copiously at Mr. Piper's expense, and told all his tiger stories, in which he was apt to lose the tiger in a jumble of irrelevant parentheses.

'Madam, if I live and he lives till next Thursday, Standish shall do homage at the shrine of beauty and domestic excellence,' protested the colonel, which was merely his way of saying that Captain Standish should come to see Mrs. Piper.

The following Thursday came, but no Standish. Another and another Thursday, and the colonel still appeared, apologetic and disgusted. That fellow Standish was perfectly incorrigible, he declared. But this was the fourth Thursday, and Captain Standish was here.

'Madam,' said the colonel, introducing his junior, 'I have kept my promise. If

this fellow had tried to put me off to-day I should have lugged him here by the hair of his head.'

'And if I had known how charming—a place I was to see, I should have come ages ago without your interference, colonel,' said the captain.

There was a break in the sentence, a look in the captain's eyes that said in plainest language, 'If I had known what a lovely woman I was to see, &c., &c.' And Bella, having lately graduated in the novels of Charles de Bernard, thoroughly understood the look and tone.

Mr. Piper also was gratified by Captain Standish's visit. His friend Timperley had bragged of his familiarity with the captain; his friend Porkman had boasted of the captain's morning call. Mr. Piper did not wish to be behind those compeers of his. He had felt himself at a disadvantage when they were lauding the all-accomplished Standish.

'Well, Beller, my love,' he said, when the guests had all departed, and he sat down to a *tête-à-tête* dinner with his wife, who was quite exhausted by the cares and triumphs of the afternoon. 'I'm glad we've had Captain Standish at one of our Thursdays, since people round Great Yafford think such a lot about him; but I don't see that he's anything so wonderful. He's very much like all the other military men I've seen—extra well got-up linen—a neat-cut boot—and hair cropped as close as a convick's. That's the general pattern, I take it.'

'Oh, Mr Piper!' cried Bella, horrified at this blasphemy. 'Can't you see Captain Standish's superiority? There is a style—an air—a *je ne sais quoi*.'

'I don't know about the *junnysaker*, but I'll allow that his clothes are a good cut,' said the unimpressionable Piper. 'But why the dickens do the Porkmans and Timperleys think so much of him? I shouldn't have thought he was old Timperley's sort.'

'My dear Mr. Piper, Captain Standish is the fashion.'

'Oh, that's it, is it?' said Mr. Piper, meekly. 'Well, I like to be in the fashion as well as my neighbours. Suppose we ask Captain Thingamy to dinner? He's not the sort of chap that would want to borrow money of one, is he, by-the-bye? It's a way they've got in the army.'

'Captain Standish borrow money!' cried Bella. 'Why his mother is Lady Emmeline Standish——.'

'That wouldn't fill his pockets,' interjected Mr. Piper.

‘And his father is a partner in a great bank. I forget which, but some enormously rich bank. The Porkmans know all about it.’

‘Oh, well, if his father is rich, he may come here as often as he likes. I’m not afraid of a rich man; but your needy fellows are always dangerous. They’re like the serpent that warms itself at your hearth, and then stings you. They eat your dinners, and wind up by getting you to put your name to an accommodation bill.’

CHAPTER XII.

AT HER CHARIOT WHEELS.

CAPTAIN STANDISH did not wait to be asked to dinner. He made his appearance at Little Yafford Park within a few days of his first visit. This time he rode over, and his hack was a thing to wonder at.

‘I’m blest if he ain’t the first bit of horseflesh we’ve had inside these stables!’ exclaimed Mr. Piper’s coachman, who affected to despise the pair of bays for which his master had given three hundred guineas.

Mr. Piper was enjoying himself among his friends at Great Yafford. There was a club in that commercial town, at which Mr. Timperley and Mr. Porkman and their associates assembled daily to read the newspapers and discuss the money market. They were all strong politicians, and talked of politics as well as of the Stock Exchange, but they contemplated all public events from one standpoint. What would be the effect on the money market? How would this crisis in France, or this artful move on the part of Russia, or this pretty piece of business at Vienna affect the demand for cotton? Would Palmerston’s last great speech steady the price of consols?

Mr. Piper went to his club oftener now-a-days than he had gone in the first Mrs. Piper’s time. Bella was making him a man of fashion, as he complained sometimes, with a fatuous delight in his young wife’s frivolities. She would drive him into Great Yafford in her pony carriage in the morning, do an hour’s shopping at Banbury’s, or get a new novel at the circulating library, and fetch him in the afternoon in her barouche, after making two or three calls on the commercial aristocracy; for what is the use of having fine clothes, if you cannot show them to somebody, or a carriage and pair if you cannot keep it standing before somebody’s door? Bella heartily despised the Porkmans, Timperleys, Wigzells, and all their set; but she was by nature an actress, and must have a stage and an audience of some kind.

Thus it happened that Mr. Piper was at his club, and that Bella received Captain Standish alone. It was a lovely afternoon, the lawn was steeped in sunshine, the flower-beds were almost too dazzling to be looked at, the roses were in their midsummer glory. Bella received her visitor in the garden. She was fond of sitting out of doors. She liked to see the width and grandeur of her

domain, the fallow deer grouped gracefully in the distance, the cool shadows of beech and oak, the tall elms yonder where the rooks had built for the last century. Perhaps she knew that she looked her prettiest in the garden, sitting in a low basket chair, in the shade of spreading lime branches.

It was just the afternoon for archery. There was not a breath of wind to blow the arrows about. The noble old beeches shaded the long stretch of sward where the targets had been set up, and made it possible for an enthusiastic toxophilite to endure the midsummer heat. Bella made quite light of it.

‘I adore the summer,’ she said, when Captain Standish expressed his fear that she might find archery too great an exertion, with the thermometer at seventy-five in the shade. ‘I think I must belong to the cat family, I so enjoy basking in the sun.’

‘So do I,’ said the captain, who looked as fresh and cool as if he had just come out of a water-cure establishment; ‘and I detest the people who go about the world mopping themselves and grumbling at the heat on every decent summer day.’

Bella blushed. Mr. Piper had an unpleasant way of mopping his face with a brown and yellow bandanna on warm afternoons. She felt that there must be many habits of his that would jar on Captain Standish’s nerves, if ever they came to be intimate.

The lesson was delightful. The captain was a first-rate master, and after about an hour’s hard work Bella’s arrows began to fly straight to the target, instead of taking a slanting direction and losing themselves under the beeches. This was something gained. Once she went within half an inch of the gold. And then, when her arm began to ache desperately and she was obliged to give up, Captain Standish took her bow, and in the easiest way in the world, just like that famous marksman who drew his bow at a venture, shot three arrows in the gold, in the neatest little triangle.

‘I could write my name on the target,’ he said. ‘It’s the simplest thing in life when you’re used to it.’

Bella looked at her watch. Half-past four o’clock. How the afternoon had flown! She had promised to call for her husband at his club, and the carriage had been ordered for four. She explained her engagement to Captain Standish, who apologized for having detained her so long.

‘I was so pleased with your progress that I forgot all about time,’ he said.

‘May I come to-morrow—a little earlier? I want you to beat the Miss Porkmans next Thursday. You will be shooting on Thursday, I suppose?’

‘Yes, I dare say, if they come. I find archery a great relief on my Thursday afternoons. It is something for people to do. There is so little to talk about in the country. You must find it very trying, Captain Standish.’

The captain shrugged his shoulders.

‘I’m used to country quarters,’ he said. ‘And then in the very depths of Bœotia there are always bright exceptions. But candidly, I don’t care much for what people call society. I like to choose my friends, and when I have chosen them I am an enthusiast in friendship. Now pray put on your bonnet, and don’t let Mr. Piper be kept waiting through my indiscretion in staying so long. I’ll go round to the stable for my horse. May I ride beside your carriage part of the way, if I don’t make too much dust?’

Bella blushed and sparkled at the idea. To have this fine flower of the army, this glass of fashion and mould of form riding beside her barouche was an honour to boast of when next she met the Porkmans. He had never ridden at their chariot wheels. Cæsar’s triumph when he brought home Vercingetorix was not grander than this.

Bella leaned back in her carriage, holding up the daintiest lace-flounced parasol, just big enough to shelter the tip of her nose, while the captain’s sleek bay trotted at her side, and arched his neck, and sniffed the air, and gave himself resentful airs at being forced to suit his pace to the jog-trot of the over-fed carriage horses. They passed along the village street, under the cloudless blue, and Bella felt that the eye of the world—her little world—was upon them. Miss Coyle was clipping her solitary standard rose tree as they went by, and stopped, scissors in hand, to stare at them. Cyril Culverhouse was just coming out of his garden gate, with a black book under his arm. Clementina and Flora Scratchell were flattening their noses against the parlour window as usual. That vision of sisterly noses always greeted Bella as she passed. This time she took care to be looking another way. She did not want Captain Standish to know that her ‘people’ lived in the shabbiest house in the village.

The captain was far too good a horseman to keep up that ‘‘ammer, ‘ammer, on the ‘ard ‘igh road,’ of which the traditional cockney complained. There were plenty of grassy bits by the wayside where he was able to save his horse’s feet—stretches of open down on which he could indulge himself with a gallop. Sometimes he dropped behind and walked his horse for a mile or so, and then

startled Bella by descending upon her suddenly from some grassy height, fresh and cool, and riding with a rein as light as a silken thread.

‘What a lovely horse that is!’ exclaimed Bella. ‘He seems able to do anything.’

‘He was able to throw most of his riders before I got him,’ answered the captain; ‘but he’s tame enough now.’

There was a roll in the animal’s eye, and a liberal display of white, which went far to confirm this account of his antecedents.

Captain Standish was riding beside the carriage when they entered that newly-built suburb where the plutocracy of Great Yafford had built their habitations. They passed the Porkmans’ Grange, with its red walls, Tudor casements, and impossible gables, the Timperley Manor House, with its Norman sugar-loaf towers, and the Wigzells’ Italian Gothic Villa, all white stucco, terraced walks and scarlet geraniums. Bella, like Cæsar, felt that her triumph was complete. Captain Standish only left her at the door of the club-house.

‘Well, little woman,’ cried Mr. Piper, when he came tumbling into the barouche, with his white beaver hat at the back of his head, and his brown and yellow bandanna on active service. ‘You haven’t kept me waiting—no, not at all, neither.’

Bella told him all about Captain Standish’s visit. She was radiant with this small social success.

‘Didn’t I tell you that I’d introduce you into tip-top society, old woman?’ exclaimed Mr. Piper. ‘You shall hold your own with the best of ’em. I’ll spare no expense till I see you at the top of the tree. We must give a dinner party next week, and we’ll have Timperley, and Wigzell, and the whole boiling.’

‘Captain Standish is always meeting them at Great Yafford. Don’t you think we’d better ask the Dulcimers—and some of the Little Yafford people?’ suggested Bella.

‘Well, have it your own way, my dear. I like to have the Vicar’s legs under my mahogany. It looks respectable.’

Bella sent out her invitations for that day fortnight, carefully excluding the manufacturing element. She impressed on Mr. Piper that he was to give no accidental invitations. His impulsive hospitality must not be allowed to spoil this particular party, as in Bella’s opinion, at least, it had spoiled previous parties, by

the interpolation of ineligible guests.

‘Above all things let there be no Mr. Chumney,’ said Bella, authoritatively.

‘Chumney’s enjoying himself at Whitby,’ replied Mr. Piper, ‘and don’t want to be beholden to you for a dinner; but if you expect me to forget that Chumney’s father was the first man that ever gave me a week’s wages, you’ll find yourself disappointed. I’d take a knife and cut my heart out, if I thought it was capable of such base ingratitude.’

‘You may remember Mr. Chumney’s father as much as you like, but you needn’t always be talking of him, and of the time when you were glad to earn twelve shillings a week,’ remonstrated Bella. ‘There’s no use in harping upon such things.’

‘Yes, there is,’ answered Mr. Piper, ‘it shows that prosperity hasn’t made me proud.’

Mrs. Piper called at the Vicarage next day to ensure the acceptance of her invitation. Mrs. Dulcimer had seen Captain Standish riding by the Vicarage gate, in attendance on Bella’s barouche, and had heard about that ride of his from ever so many people already.

‘I don’t wonder people talk about him,’ said Mrs. Dulcimer. ‘He sits his horse splendidly, and there’s a wonderful style about him. One can see at a glance that he has always mixed in the best society.’

‘I hope you and Mr. Dulcimer can come to meet him on Wednesday week,’ said Bella.

‘Is he really coming to you?’

‘I’ve asked him.’

‘Oh, but he is so very exclusive. I hear he is quite difficult to get. He is not at all fond of visiting. He shoots and hunts a great deal, they say, but doesn’t care for balls or parties.’

‘I think he will come,’ said Bella. ‘Colonel O’Shaughnessy brought him to us last Thursday, and he seemed quite to take to—Mr. Piper.’

‘And he was giving you a lesson in archery, Miss Coyle told me. You must be very careful, my dear. I thought you were just a little imprudent to let him ride by your carriage yesterday. A man of that kind would get you talked about in no time.’

‘My dear Mrs. Dulcimer, I don’t the least mind being talked about.’

‘Bella!’

‘In fact, I rather like it.’

‘Bella! I don’t think I could endure my existence if I thought that people talked about me,’ cried Mrs. Dulcimer, solemnly. ‘Of course, in my case it would be particularly awful. A vicar’s wife is like Cæsar’s.’

‘Cæsar had so many wives,’ said Bella. ‘He could hardly expect all of them to be respectable.’

‘My dear,’ exclaimed Mrs. Dulcimer, her whole countenance suddenly illuminated, ‘I have such a splendid idea.’

Bella looked anything but delighted.

‘What is it, dear Mrs. Dulcimer?’

‘What a husband Captain Standish would make for your sister Clementina! My dear, he is the very man for her. A man of high family—rolling in money—young—handsome. WHAT a chance for that poor girl!’

‘My dear Mrs. Dulcimer, do you imagine that any man of high family would choose a wife out of my father’s house?’

‘But he need not see her in her father’s house—at any rate not till he is so deeply in love that he will not care a straw whether her family are rich or poor. He will see her at the Park—elegantly dressed—with you. He will only think of her as your sister. And if he were to propose I feel sure that Mr. Piper would do something handsome for her. He is the soul of generosity. You know that, Bella.’

‘He is very generous, but I cannot expect him to give all my sisters fortunes.’

‘Not all of them, dear. No, of course not;—but he would give Clementina something, if she were going to make such a match as that. A man in his position would willingly make some sacrifice to have Captain Standish for his brother-in-law. Only think, Lady Emmeline Standish would be your—something-in-law. It would be so nice for you to have people of high family belonging to you. It would give you the *entrée* to county society.’

‘It would be very nice, I dare say,’ said Bella, not elated by this brilliant perspective, ‘but it is just the most unlikely thing to come to pass. A man so run after as Captain Standish has been is not likely to fall in love with Clementina.’

‘I am not so sure of that,’ said Mrs. Dulcimer, sagely. ‘More wonderful things have happened within my knowledge. Clementina is a very pretty girl, almost as pretty as you, Bella. She has your complexion. I hope you’ve invited her for Wednesday week.’

‘No, indeed I have not. It doesn’t do to be overrun by one’s family always. You see I could scarcely ask Tina without asking papa and mamma; and that is quite out of the question.’

‘You might have her to stay with you,’ suggested Mrs. Dulcimer. ‘She would help to amuse your step-daughters.’

Elizabeth Fry and Mary Wolstencroft were coming home for their summer vacation in a few days, a return acutely dreaded by Bella.

‘Well, dear Mrs. Dulcimer, perhaps you are right. It might be as well to have Clementina.’

She could not be more in the way than those two troublesome step-daughters, Bella thought.

‘If you have your sister with you it will prevent people making disagreeable remarks when Captain Standish calls on you,’ said Mrs. Dulcimer. ‘It must be so awkward for a young woman like you to receive a gentleman, when your husband is out.’

‘Captain Standish is not quite a dragon,’ replied Bella, laughing. ‘I am not afraid of him.’

‘My dear, I am told he is a very fascinating man,’ said Mrs. Dulcimer, ‘and that is the worst kind of dragon for a young married woman. He certainly ought to marry Clementina, and if you and I exercise a little diplomacy I believe he will do it. Look at your position. I feel proud of that. If it hadn’t been for me you might have never been Mrs. Piper. Poor Mr. Piper might never have repeated his offer if I had not encouraged him.’

‘You are all that is kind and good,’ said Bella, inwardly rebelling against this patronage and interference.

‘Now go and invite your sister to stay with you, dear. And see that she is becomingly dressed. And you can polish her up a little in the next fortnight. Clementina sadly wants polish. She has never had your opportunities, you know.’

CHAPTER XIII.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

CAPTAIN STANDISH accepted Mrs. Piper's invitation. He rode over to answer her note in person; and to give her another lesson in archery. This time Clementina was with her and shared in the lesson. Captain Standish had no objection to teach two pretty girls instead of one, but he preferred Mrs. Piper, as the prettier and more fascinating of the two. She possessed a great superiority too, in his eyes, as a married woman. It was the rule of this great man's life, when he condescended to flirtation, to flirt with a married woman. No harm could come of it to himself. There was always the risk of the husband being made uncomfortable; but that was a detail. Captain Standish was not afraid of making a husband jealous, or even unhappy; but he was very much afraid of compromising himself by flirtation with a single woman, who might be absurd enough to expect him to marry her, and whose friends might make themselves disagreeable if he declined to do so.

He was therefore the very last man to walk into the silken snare that Mrs. Dulcimer had set for him. He was kind and courteous to Clementina, who was ready to 'worship him' or to 'rave about him'—in the Porkman phraseology—at a moment's notice; but he reserved his tender attentions, his thrilling looks and lowered tones, for Bella, for whom the sweet poison, the social deadly nightshade of an unprincipled man's flatteries had already too great a charm. Of the extent of the captain's influence over her mind Bella herself was not yet aware. Indeed, she believed herself hardened against any such influence by the counter poison of a previous love. She had loved once, and loved unhappily, and therefore could never love again. This she firmly believed, and, secure in this belief, walked blindfold into danger. Her pleasure in the captain's society she ascribed to the triumph of parading him before the astonished eyes of Little Yafford, the delight of lording it over the Porkmans, the fact that Captain Standish was the fashion.

The dinner party was a success. It was made up of the *élite* of Little Yafford and the surrounding neighbourhood—people who had 'places' of twenty to thirty acres, and who were altogether the next best thing to county families—Mr. and Mrs. Dulcimer, Colonel O'Shaughnessy, and Captain Standish. Clementina looked her prettiest, and was complimented on her likeness to her sister.

‘Bella,’ said the Vicar’s wife in a confidential tone, when the ladies were alone after dinner. ‘You are doing a noble thing for your sister. In my opinion Captain Standish is struck with her already.’

‘You are sanguine, dear Mrs. Dulcimer,’ answered Bella, smiling. ‘I have not seen him particularly attentive to her.’

‘Perhaps not, but he has been particularly attentive to you. He would naturally begin in that way.’

Bella was not quite clear upon this point; she had little faith in Mrs. Dulcimer’s judgment. Were not the most miserable hours of her life, her one inexcusable sin, referable to that lady’s mistake? But she found it rather agreeable to have Clementina as a companion. The girl was grateful, and willing to be useful, and was not in the way.

Mrs. Dulcimer was so elated at the prospect of another brilliant match, to be brought about by her agency, that, towards the end of the evening, she took Mr. Piper into her confidence.

‘Charming man, Captain Standish, isn’t he?’ she asked.

‘I’ve ‘eard that remark made a good many times, mum,’ he answered, candidly, ‘but as far as my individual opinion goes I don’t see anything remarkable about the captain that should single him out from the ruck of military men. Perhaps his hair is cropped a trifle closer, and his whiskers neater trimmed. I don’t deny either that there’s a *junny serquaw*, as my wife calls it, about the cut of his clothes, and that he has a high way with him, as if we were all upon a lower level, which I believe is uncommonly taking for some people, though I can’t say I ever was took by that kind of thing myself. I like a man who is my superior and yet takes care not to remind me of it. I can feel the superiority of that kind of man. I don’t want it put before me.’

Mrs. Dulcimer looked disappointed.

‘He is of a very high family,’ she said, ‘and enormously rich.’

‘That’s always a satisfaction to one’s mind, mum.’

‘Now don’t you think it would be a very grand thing if he were to marry your sister-in-law Clementina?’

Mr. Piper was not enthusiastic.

‘She might like it, Mrs. Dulcimer,’ he said. ‘That’s just according to her

feelings. But it’s no business of mine to find husbands for my wife’s sisters.’

This was disheartening, but Mrs. Dulcimer was not going to renounce her project because Mr. Piper looked coldly upon it. Clementina stayed at the Park, and Bella enriched her with a great many dresses and other adornments of which she was beginning to be tired, or which were of a fashion that had become too general for a fine lady’s wear. Generosity in a person of Bella’s stamp is only another word for extravagance. Bella would have as soon contemplated cutting off her right hand as giving away anything she wanted herself. These gifts to Tina necessitated the purchase of new things, and already the second Mrs. Piper had begun to get into debt, and to feel that she had bills which must be paid next year, or at some more definite period. The three hundred a year which Mr. Piper had settled upon her in the fulness of his heart, as an all-sufficing income for dress and pocket money, was not nearly enough to supply the manifold wants of a young woman who had been brought up in poverty. Bella wanted everything, for everything was new to her. She ran riot in laces, and silks, and velvets, bric-à-brac for her boudoir, dainty stationery, devotional books, which were seldom read, but which looked well on her dressing-table, parasols, fans, slippers, albums, everything of the costliest. She was surprised to find how soon her ready money had melted away, and almost afraid to calculate how deeply she was in debt. But the burden weighed lightly upon her. It would be easy to get Mr. Piper to give her a cheque, when things got desperate. He might be surprised, perhaps, that she had not managed her allowance better; but he would not have the strength of mind to refuse her the money.

One day poor Mrs. Scratchell ventured to ask her daughter for a little help. The tax-gatherer was pressing, and ‘father’ had nothing put aside for the taxes.

‘Oh, mamma,’ cried Bella, ‘what has he done with Mr. Harefield’s five hundred pounds? That ought to have set him up for life.’

‘My dear child, you must remember, surely. Father acted with the greatest prudence, and invested his legacy safely in railway shares. It brings us twenty-seven pounds a year. It doesn’t make a large addition, you see, and last year was so expensive. Bread was a penny dearer than it has been for ten years, and potatoes were dreadfully scarce. Altogether things have got behindhand with us ____’

‘I never knew them to be beforehand,’ sighed Bella.

‘But it’s a great comfort to see you so splendidly established. I’m sure I feel a thrill whenever I enter this house and think, “This is my daughter’s. My child is

the mistress of it all.” I feel almost as Esther’s relations must have felt when they saw her sitting beside the king. And now, dear, if you could let me have ten pounds——’

‘My dear mother, I haven’t ten shillings. Look, here’s my purse. You can count the silver, if you like.’

She handed Mrs. Scratchell a toy of mother-o’-pearl and gold, lined with rose-hued silk.

‘Oh, Bella, have you spent *all* your last half-year’s income?’

‘Every sixpence, except what you see there.’

‘My love, you must have been very extravagant—after such a trousseau as you had to start with.’

‘Why, mamma, there were lots of things forgotten in my trousseau. And then the fashions are always changing, and I have given my sisters such heaps of things. I dare say I have been extravagant in that particular. I am sure I have dressed Tina from head to foot.’

‘You have been very good, dear; but I so counted on you for the taxes. I thought a ten pound note would be nothing to you.’

‘That was a tremendous mistake. I assure you that for actual ready money I have been worse off since I have been Mr. Piper’s wife than I was as his governess. There are so many demands upon my purse. But if I can do anything next Christmas——’

‘Thank you, dear. We must get on somehow, I suppose. We always have struggled through our difficulties, and I suppose we always shall, thanks to Providence; but it’s a wearing life.’

The young Pipers came home for their holidays, and ran riot amidst the splendours and luxuries that Bella had introduced into the sober old house. These young people liked Bella better as a stepmother than they had liked her as a governess. She was very indulgent, so long as they did not spoil the furniture, or annoy her with too much of their society. She gave the girls fine dresses, and allowed them to share all her gaieties. She let the boys ride her ponies, when she did not want to use them. In a word she was a model stepmother, and everybody praised her, except Miss Coyle, who never praised anybody, and Mr. Chumney, who generally reserved his opinion as something too valuable to be parted with except under strongest pressure.

So the briefly glorious summer hurried by, and Bella lived only for pleasure, and to be flattered and followed by Captain Standish. She went to a great many parties among the Wigzell, Timperley, and Porkman section of society, and to a few among the professional classes and landed gentry, which latter were not so splendid as the mercantile entertainments, in the matter of eating and drinking, and were not much more lively; for whereas the Porkmans and Timperleys talked of nothing but money-making, the landed gentry had a language of their own which Bella, clever as she was, had yet to learn. Captain Standish was teaching her a great deal. Under his tuition she had learned to look down upon her fellow-creatures as an inferior set of beings, ‘mostly fools,’ to regard mental culture as a process only valuable to schoolmasters, college dons, clergymen, doctors, lawyers, and that altogether subordinate race which has to earn its bread by the sweat of its brains, to think of money as a stepping-stone to social importance, the pleasure of the present moment as the one vital consideration, the future as an unknown quantity, not worth serious thought.

This was the code of ethics which Bella learned from Captain Standish, but before all and above all he taught her to despise her husband, her husband’s children, and her husband’s surroundings, from the lordly Timperley, swelling with the importance of the biggest mills in the district, to the unpretending Chumney, living in modest retirement upon an annuity of ninety pounds, the result of his laborious existence.

Of this gradual corruption of his wife’s mind honest Ebenezer Piper had no suspicion. Her manner and conduct to him of late had been unexceptionable. The deeper and stronger that feeling of contemptuous aversion grew in the secret depths of her heart, the more carefully did she regulate her outward seeming. She had never appeared sweeter, fairer, or more guileless in her husband’s eyes than when she was most inclined to betray him. Vivien herself, that supreme type of falsehood in woman, employed no finer art against the enchanter Merlin than Bella used to guard herself from the hazard of discovery.

She knew herself false to the core, not quite a subject for the divorce court, but a creature whose good angel had long left her, shuddering and abhorrent.

Mr. Piper had not forgotten Mrs. Dulcimer’s ideas about Captain Standish and Clementina, and when he saw the captain and sister-in-law together he was inclined to believe that there might be some foundation for that inveterate matchmaker’s fancy. The captain had a knack of being particularly attentive to Tina under Mr. Piper’s eye.

And now autumn was approaching, the russet corn was cut in the wide shadowless fields, the ploughman's white horses were seen moving slowly along the upland ridges, against a cool gray sky.

Captain Standish went up into the wildest part of the moors for a fortnight's grouse-shooting, and to everybody's surprise came back to Great Yafford in three days.

He rode over to the Park on the afternoon of his return, and found Bella alone, yawning over a novel. She started and dropped her book when the footman announced him, and changed from pale to red, and red to pale again.

'You did not expect to see me so soon,' said the captain, keeping her little cold hand in his.

'No,' she faltered, unable to say more.

'You thought I should be able to endure a fortnight's life without you. I was fool enough to think so too—and made all my arrangements for staying away till the 27th. But three days were quite enough. How pale and tired you look!'

'I have had nothing to do, and I suppose that is the most tiring thing in the world. Tina has gone home. I did not want Mr. Piper to think that she was going to live here always.'

'What does it matter what he thinks?' said Captain Standish, with his supercilious smile. 'Mr. Piper was only created to be useful to you and your relations. And so you have missed—Tina.'

'I have been very dull.'

'If you knew how desolate my life was in those three days you would pity me,' said the captain, tenderly. 'Yes, Isabel, you would pity me for being so weak that I cannot live without you, so miserably placed that I am obliged to hide my love.'

And then Captain Standish went on to tell his story; the old, old story, the familiar melody, subject to such endless variations, such kaleidoscopic distinctions without difference, and always coming to the same thing in the end. 'We might have been happy had Providence willed it. Let us defy Providence, fling honour to the winds, and be happy in spite of fate.'

He talked and pleaded for a long time, and Bella listened with lowered eyelids, and lowered head, and let her hand lie locked in his, and did not answer his specious arguments by one straight outspoken denial. She paltered with this

tempter, as she had paltered with temptation all her life, always choosing the road she liked best. She said neither yes nor no. It was an awful thing that he was asking her to do. No more nor less than to surrender honour, social status, everything for his sake, to go to Italy with him, and live a gay, unfettered life there, among people who, according to his showing, would be willing to accept her as his wife. He painted the picture of that ideal Italian life so vividly that all the hideousness of his proposal was lost sight of under that bright colouring.

'Remember, dearest, I shall have my sacrifice to make too,' he said. 'I must leave the army. And I shall almost break my poor mother's heart, for she has plans for my marriage which she has cherished ever since I was at Eton. But I could sacrifice a great deal more than that for your sake.'

'Do not talk of it any more,' said Bella, in a frightened voice. 'It is too awful. I like you—yes,' as he drew her face round to him so that her eyes reluctantly met his,—'yes, very much. I hardly think'—falteringly and in tears—'I could go on living if you went away, and I were not to see you any more; but what you are asking is horrible—to defy everybody—to give up everything—to be pointed at and spoken of as something utterly lost and wretched—a thing to be spurned by other women—women who are my inferior in everything—except that one wicked act. Why, my very housemaids would look down upon me. No, I could not be so degraded. I could not sink so low.'

'I see,' said Captain Standish. 'You love yourself and your good name better than you love me. You were not ashamed to sell yourself to Piper. The world applauds that kind of bargain. But you are not generous enough to give yourself to the man you love.'

He had let go her hand, and was walking with long quick steps backwards and forwards across the deep bay, like a lion in a cage. Bella thought there was something grand and noble about him in this lofty rage. She loved him all the more for the hard things he said to her, since his hard speeches proved the intensity of his love.

'You are very cruel,' she said, piteously.

'I am very much in earnest. I thought to find in you something better and grander than the shallow conventional woman of society who only plays with hearts, who wants to walk through the deep waters of passion without wetting her feet. You talk of sinking very low—of degradation. Where is the degradation in the life I offer you—the fair sweet unfettered life that poets have loved ever since the world began?'

‘You would be tired of an idle life in Italy,’ said Bella.

‘With you, no. But we could wander about. We should not be tied to one spot. I would take you to Algiers—Morocco. We could ride over that strange land together—and when we had used up the Old World we would be off to the New. I would take you across the Rocky Mountains. I would make you my comrade and companion—a hardy traveller—a dead shot. You should be no slavish English wife, sitting at home while your husband enjoyed his life. No, love, you should share every sport I had, hunt with me—shoot—fish—row—ride with me. I would not have a pleasure in life that you could not share.’

The picture was full of charm for a woman who, in her eagerness to enjoy life, had already almost exhausted the pleasures of humdrum existence. Bella felt that this would indeed be the beginning of a new life; this would be to drain to the dregs the cup of youth and gladness. And then worldly pride for once took the shape of a good angel, and pointed to the view from that wide bay-window, the Park and deer, the avenue of goodly elms, the grandeur and importance of her position as Mrs. Piper. Was she to surrender all this, and give up her name to be a byeword and a reproach into the bargain? No, she had hearkened too long to the tempter, but she was not weak enough for this.

‘You must never speak to me of this again,’ she exclaimed. ‘I will try to think there has been no serious meaning in what you have said. Let us both forget it.’

‘I shall not forget it,’ said the captain, ‘but if you tell me to keep silence I will obey. I would do anything rather than live out of your society.’

‘If you ever repeat what you have said this afternoon, our friendship will be ended.’

‘Anything sooner than that.’

He took the little hand again and kissed it tenderly. So there was a kind of compact between them. He was to go on adoring her, but was to say nothing about it.

Captain Standish rode back to Great Yafford in excellent humour. He had considerably embellished the fact of his return, in his conversation with Mrs. Piper. He had come back because the weather had been abominable, and the birds hardly visible behind a dense curtain of driving rain. Three days of such uncomfortable sport had been quite enough for the captain.

‘Poor little thing,’ he mused, as he walked his horse, after a swinging galop over a grassy waste, ‘how very weak she is! I am glad she doesn’t want me to

run away with her. It would be uncommonly inconvenient. But when a man has flirted as desperately as I have a woman expects him to say something serious. She's really very pretty—quite the most fascinating little thing I've met for a long time. And if she were single—all things being equal—I don't think I should object to marry her.'

CHAPTER XIV.

A TURN OF FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

CYRIL CULVERHOUSE lived his useful life, full of thought and care for others, honoured, beloved, but with a deep and settled sadness at his heart. He could not forget the woman he loved, he could not forgive himself for having doubted her. Both their lives were blighted by that mistake; and yet, looking back, he knew that he had tried to do his duty. Love seemed a snare of Satan, and he had cut himself free from its meshes. But after that meeting in the churchyard all his doubts vanished, his judgment wavered no longer. There is a power in simple truth, when we meet it face to face, that is stronger than all reasoning upon a chain of possibilities.

He was convinced for ever of her guiltlessness, in the hour when he believed her irrevocably lost to him. Could he ever forget that meeting—that one despairing kiss—the sight of her lying at his feet among the rank grass that grows on graves? And she had confessed her love for him, by flying from a loveless marriage.

Could he follow her?—search this wide world for her? How small a penance would it be to wander over all the earth for her sake! But he felt he had no right to pursue her. He had wronged her too deeply to persecute her by a pursuit which no sign from her invited. It was for her to make that sign—it was for her to pity and pardon him.

'Let me go on doing my duty,' he said to himself, 'and if it is God's will that I am to be happy in that way, happiness will come to me. Yes, it will come some day, when I least look for it, as the angels came to Abraham.'

So he went on with his simple unpretending life, working with a quiet earnestness which achieved wonders. It was one of his chief gifts to do all things quietly. He worked almost as silently as the bounteous fertilizing sun.

The school was thriving under Emmanuel Joyce's care. The widow's heart did verily sing for joy, so sweet was her new life amidst rural sights and sounds, after the squalid misery of the Bridford courts and alleys.

The Vicar was delighted to have his old pupil back again. All the cares of the parish were lifted off his shoulders when he had Cyril for his curate. He knew

that, if he was luxuriating in scholarly idleness, there was nothing being neglected. When he was wanted Cyril called upon him, and he obeyed the call. He gave of his substance freely at Cyril's bidding. There could not have been a better alliance. Clement Dulcimer, all sweetness and light, shedding smiles and kindliness upon his parishioners, Cyril Culverhouse, the earnest worker, not withholding reproof when it was needful. Between them they made Little Yafford a model parish, an ideal republic, in a small way.

The Vicar had taken a great fancy to the new schoolmaster. Joyce's love of books was in itself a passport to Mr. Dulcimer's favour. He invited the young man to spend an evening with him occasionally, and Emmanuel revelled in long hours of talk upon far-reaching questions—conversations from which Mr. Dulcimer let himself slip insensibly into a monologue, and poured forth his stores of curious uncatalogued knowledge. In one thing only he was rather hard upon the aspiring student. He set his face strongly against Emmanuel's poetic efforts.

'They are as good as most of the prize poems it has been my lot to read,' he said, after he had conscientiously gone through Emmanuel's little collection of manuscript verses, 'but then you see a prize poem is generally the flattest thing in life. As intellectual efforts they do you credit, and as mental training I've no doubt the composition of them has been serviceable to you. But I will not be so weak as to say go on writing verses. There are about twenty poets born in a century, and about twenty thousand rhymesters. Shall a wise man waste his life—his brief precious sum of days and hours—in labouring to develop the rhymester into the poet? Why, the poet knows himself for a poet before he is twenty. The man upon whom that mantle has fallen, the man who is born to wear that crown, cannot be mistaken about himself. Look at Pope, Chatterton, Shelley, Byron, Keats—boy poets all. And is a man who has not put forth that supreme flower of genius in his youth to go on cudgelling his brain for rhymes, in the hope that labour will make him a poet? It is the stuff behind the rhymes that is wanting in him. He has nothing to say. But he thinks if he can say nothing melodiously—to somebody else's tune—that he may make himself a poet. Wasted labour, idle delusion. Go into philosophy, natural science, criticism, history—anything you like, my dear young friend—the field is wide, and in these studies a man can make himself. God makes poets.'

Emmanuel took the lesson to heart, humiliating as it was. For a long time he had hugged the idea that he was a poet. That electro-plated verse of his, modelled upon the verse of other singers, had for his deluded ear the ring of

genuine silver. Granted that there were only twenty poets born in a century. It seemed to him no less hard that he could not be one of the twenty. He had no pity for the nineteen thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine versifiers, self-deluded like himself, and doomed to disappointment as bitter.

It took him some time to recover from the shock which his self-esteem had received from Mr. Dulcimer's candour. At first it seemed to him that if he could not be a poet he could be nothing else. Those other fields of intellectual labour in which the Vicar invited him to work, offered no attraction. They were all dry and barren; he saw no flowers to be gathered there. Ambition seemed dead within him, now that a judge in whom he believed had told him that he was not an incipient Byron.

'You never write of an evening now, Emmanuel,' his mother said to him, when the shortening days of September brought them together by their cheerful fireside. 'I hope you haven't grown tired of your pen?'

'I have,' he answered. 'What's the use of writing trash?'

'Oh, Emmanuel, how can you talk so? I'm sure I never read sweeter verses than yours.'

'Yes, mother, you think them sweet because I am your son. You wouldn't care a straw for them if they were written by a stranger. Come, I'll read you a bit of real poetry, and you'll see the difference.'

He opened his well-used Milton, and read the hymn on the Nativity. He knew those noble verses by heart, and declaimed them well.

'What do you think of that mother?' he asked, when he had finished.

'I don't understand it all, dear,' she answered meekly, 'there are so many heathen idols in it. But it's poetry that rings like a great brazen bell, and there's more words in it than in yours.'

'Yes, mother, that's it. The man who wrote that was a born poet. He could do what he liked with the language, and make it ring like sound metal. My verse is like a poor little cracked sheep-bell, and sounds no better than tin. And I haven't above a quarter of the English language in my vocabulary. I've read a great deal, but the words don't come to my finger ends in all their wealth and variety, as they did to Shelley and Keats. No, mother, I'm no poet. Mr. Dulcimer is a good judge. If I write anything it must be prose.'

'I hope Mr. Dulcimer hasn't been putting you out of conceit with yourself,

Emmanuel.’

‘He has only told me the truth, mother. That’s always good for a man to know, though it takes him aback sometimes to hear it.’

‘I should be very sorry to see you give up your pen, dear,’ said the mother, persistently. ‘I should be so proud if I could live to see you an author.’

‘Well, mother, I will try to write a book, if it is only to please you. I will write something for my pupils—a book that may be useful and popular in schools all over England. The English history my boys read seems to me very dull and dry. I think I’ll try my hand at a boy’s history of England. I fancy I could make it interesting.’

‘I’m sure you could,’ said the mother, fondly.

Here at least in this quiet schoolhouse parlour was happiness almost perfect. It was a delight to Cyril Culverhouse, when he dropped in for half an hour on his homeward way, to see how well this one good work of his had prospered.

A great change in Cyril’s fortune was at hand—a change that came upon him as an almost overwhelming blow, for it gave a new colour to his life, and made the problem of existence doubly difficult.

Walking home to his lodgings one September afternoon with Mr. Dulcimer, Cyril met the village postman.

‘Any letters for me, Sparkes?’ asked the Vicar.

Cyril was not curious enough to inquire about his letters. He expected no pleasant tidings. Who should write to him? He stood alone in the world, for he did not hope that his cousin would ever regard him with friendliness again.

‘No, sir, there ain’t none for you,’ replied Sparkes; ‘but there’s a letter for you, Mr. Culverhouse, from Indy.’

Kenrick had written then, after all, thought Cyril, moved at the idea. Distance and lapse of time had softened the natural bitterness of his feelings.

And then and there, in deliberate defiance of the postal rules and regulations, Sparkes handed the curate a thin miserable-looking letter, in a black-edged envelope, addressed by a strange hand.

The Vicar and Cyril both looked at it, horror-struck.

‘Your cousin has been killed,’ cried Mr. Dulcimer.

Cyril felt the same apprehension. He knew no one in India except his cousin. This letter in a strange hand must bring evil tidings.

He opened the envelope hurriedly, with a shaking hand, as he and Mr. Dulcimer stood side by side in the quiet country road. The Vicar read the letter over Cyril's shoulder.

Yes, it brought the news both feared.

'SIR,—It is with deep regret that I write to inform you of the death of your cousin, Sir Kenrick Culverhouse. He was shot in a skirmish with the Burmese, which took place on the night of July 27th. They came down upon our camp unexpectedly during the night, and were repulsed with considerable loss, but unhappily your cousin, who was always reckless in exposing himself to the enemy's fire, received a fatal shot while leading his company in close pursuit of the retreating Burmese.

'There will, I hope, be some consolation to you, as his nearest relative, in knowing how nobly he did his duty throughout the last eighteen months, and how thoroughly he won the respect of his regiment, from the highest to the lowest. For my own part, I feel his death as a personal loss, and it will be long before I shall cease to deplore it.

'I have the honour to be
'Your obedient servant
'MALCOLM DONALDSON.'

'That is the colonel of his regiment,' said the Vicar. 'Poor Kenrick! Do you know, I had a presentiment that he would never come back to us. Hard to remember that he left us under such miserable circumstances.'

Cyril was silent for some moments, and then he said, suddenly, with intense earnestness,—

'Would to God that I rather than he had drawn the lot of death!'

'The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord,' said the Vicar, solemnly. 'We cannot choose our path in life, Cyril. Fate has not been kind to Kenrick. This is a heavy blow for both of us. For my own part, I feel as if I had lost a son. You and Kenrick have been as sons to me.'

'And to me he was like a brother,' said Cyril. 'We parted in unkindness. *That* is a bitter thing to remember.'

‘I do not think you can blame yourself, Cyril, because your cousin’s engagement ended unhappily.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Cyril. ‘It is just possible I may have influenced Beatrix at the last.’

And then he told Mr. Dulcimer, as a good Catholic might tell his spiritual director, about that meeting in the churchyard.

‘I hardly know what I said,’ he confessed, remorsefully; ‘I was beside myself. I knew in that moment she still loved me, that I had never ceased to love her—that I had been mad—foolish—besotted when I doubted her. I knew all this, and that to-morrow was to make her my cousin’s wife. I know not what mad words I may have said to her—words wild and strong enough to constrain her to break with Kenrick.’

‘I am not sure of that,’ said Mr. Dulcimer, thoughtfully. ‘I have a shrewd suspicion that Beatrix was meditating breaking off her engagement when she was so eager to redeem the Culverhouse mortgages. If she had meant to be his wife she might just as well have waited till they were married. But she was so impetuous, so determined. She bore down all opposition from Scratchell. Yes, I believe that she had made up her mind to jilt poor Kenrick, and that she meant the liberation of his estate as an atonement.’

This was some kind of consolation to Cyril, who thought of his cousin with a remorseful grief that was very real. And now, when those first days of mourning for the dead were over, he began to think of his own position, which was full of perplexity.

Kenrick’s death had made him master of Culverhouse Castle. He had new ties, new duties. His first thought was to repay Miss Harefield the fifty thousand pounds. The lawyers had dawdled about the matter, Mr. Dulcimer had been careless, and Kenrick’s parting injunction had not been obeyed.

Cyril went to Mr. Scratchell and told him that he should mortgage the estate directly it passed into his possession, and restore Miss Harefield’s money.

‘She meant it for my cousin Kenrick, and not for me,’ he said. ‘I should feel myself a thief if I retained the use of her money a day longer than I am obliged.’

It was agreed therefore that the money should be refunded as soon as Cyril found himself in a position to raise money upon his newly acquired estate. He was now Sir Cyril, an empty honour which he had no intention of parading among the simple people who only knew him as ‘the parson,’ and who might

possibly think a baronet less approachable and sympathetic in their difficulties and griefs than plain ‘mister.’

CHAPTER XV.

MR. PIPER ASSERTS HIMSELF.

‘YOU ride, of course,’ Captain Standish said to Bella, upon one of her Thursday afternoons, in the middle of September.

Bella blushed. She had never mounted a horse in her life.

‘I am very fond of riding,’ she said.

‘Have you ever ridden to hounds?’

‘Do you mean hunted?’ she asked, naively. ‘Oh no, never.’

‘Then you must begin this winter. I’ll show you the way, and take care of you.’

‘I don’t think Mr. Piper would let me hunt,’ said Bella, dubiously. ‘I’ve heard him abuse hunting ladies; and as he never rides himself——’

‘What has that to do with it?’ asked the captain, contemptuously.

Captain Standish had long cast off all semblance of respect in his manner of speaking about Mr. Piper. Bella had taken that first desperate step in a woman’s downward course which a wife takes when she submits to hear her husband depreciated.

‘What has Mr. Piper’s taste to do with your pleasure? It would be very difficult to find a horse that would carry him, and I suppose he would ride in about as good form as a sack of coals. I should so like you to hunt with me, Isabel. You must make him buy you a good hunter.’

Captain Standish was the only person who had ever called her Isabel. He had chosen to call her thus, in their confidential moments, because every one else called her Bella. The moment in which he had spoken that name marked an epoch in her life. She could look back and remember. They were standing side by side under the big beech, she leaning on her bow, as she stopped to rest after a dozen shots, when he bent over her to take the arrow out of her hand, and praised her for her skill in archery.

‘I am so proud of your progress, Isabel.’

The name spoken tenderly, in a subdued voice, was as startling as a name whispered in a sleeper's ear.

'You must not call me by my Christian name, Captain Standish,' she said, making her poor little protest, which he knew meant nothing.

'Yes, I must. It is the only name pretty enough for you. I have a choking sensation every time I have to call you Mrs. Piper.'

So from that time forward he had called her Isabel, whenever they found themselves alone.

'I don't think Mr. Piper would let me ride, much less hunt,' said Bella, thoughtfully.

'Yes, he would. You know very well that you can twist him round your little finger.'

'I should dearly love hunting,' she said, with a vague idea of skimming over ploughed fields, like a swallow, and flying over fences upon a horse whose only desire was to jump.

'Get Piper to give his consent to your having a horse of your own, and let me choose one for you. I think you could trust my choice.'

'Indeed I could,' sighed Bella.

That idea of hunting had taken possession of her narrow little mind already. It seemed the one thing needful to her happiness, the one distinction necessary to raise her to the social pinnacle she was always trying to scale. It would bring her into familiar intercourse with the county people, and then her prettiness and pleasing manners would do the rest. In the hunting field she would stand alone, not borne down by Mr. Piper's vulgarity.

'I'll tell you how to manage Piper,' said the captain. 'Say that you are out of health, and that your doctor has ordered you to ride. You can make your doctor order anything you like, you know. He'll take the hint, if he sees you've set your heart upon riding, and he'll tell Piper that it's a matter of vital necessity.'

Bella acted upon this idea. She was not so healthy a subject as Mrs. Piper as she had been when she was Miss Scratchell. She had languors, and nervous headaches, and shooting pains, and divers spasmodic or hysterical affections which were unknown to her in the days of her poverty. Hard work and hard living are the best regimen for these disorders. Bella had plenty of leisure now for imaginary ailments, and really believed herself a peculiarly delicate piece of

human mechanism.

She sent for Mr. Namby the day after this conversation with Captain Standish, and told him she was feeling low and nervous, and that she feared there must be something radically wrong, something organic.

Now if the village surgeon had been attending Miss Scratchell he would have laughed such a notion to scorn, but this idea of organic disease in the mistress of the Park was not to be dismissed too lightly. The Park had been an important source of Mr. Namby's income, in the late Mrs. Piper's time, and he did not want the doors to be shut upon him now, so he smiled his most sympathetic smile, and gave a gentle sigh; the smile to re-assure, the sigh to express fore-knowledge of every evil the Fates had in store for his patient; and then he put his two fingers gently upon Bella's wrist, looking at his watch the while, as if a beat more or less in the minute were a matter of supreme importance.

'Thready,' he said, shaking his head gravely.

'I have a weak pulse, have I not?' asked Bella. 'I fancy I want exercise—open air—a more invigorating life. I drive a good deal; but there is not much exercise in that, you know.'

'Very little,' assented Mr. Namby.

'Don't you think riding might be good for me?'

'The very thing I was about to recommend.'

'But I'm afraid Mr. Piper might not like me to ride,' suggested Bella.

'From my knowledge of Mr. Piper's devotion to you, my dear madam, I feel assured that he would not oppose anything likely to be of benefit to you,' said Mr. Namby, with conviction.

'Then perhaps you will be kind enough to mention it to him. Stop and take your luncheon with us. He is generally at home for luncheon. I feel that I ought to do something, I am getting into such a low way. I began to fancy my heart was affected.'

'If there really were anything wrong about the heart, riding would be dangerous.'

'Well, I dare say it is only indigestion, caused by want of exercise.'

Mr. Namby stayed to luncheon. His practice was not so extensive as to forbid his indulging himself with a little leisure once in a way. He had not enjoyed

himself so much for a long time; indeed, not since Bella's wedding breakfast, at which he had been a humble guest, squeezed into a corner at the foot of the table, where very few people saw him, and where some of the best dishes never penetrated.

Mr. Piper happened to be in a particularly good humour. He had been speculating a little, by way of amusement, in woollen goods, and his venture had turned up trumps. He opened a bottle of his best champagne for Mr. Namby, a rose-tinted wine, that creamed and sparkled gently in the shallow glass, and did not run over in foolish froth, like ginger beer.

Mr. Namby took some curried lobster, and a mutton cutlet, and the breast of a partridge, and a bit of Harrogate cheese, and a bunch of Mr. Piper's famous Alexandria Muscats, which had cost a small fortune to grow, and he had a very fair share of the rose-tinted champagne; and after being thus regaled, he declared, with conviction, that horsemanship was the one thing needed to restore Mrs. Piper to perfect health.

'Why, there's nothing the matter with her that I can see,' exclaimed Mr. Piper, taking his wife's little hand, and making a sandwich of it between two puffy paws. 'She's as pretty as ever, and she's as plump as the partridges we've just eaten.'

'These nervous disorders are very insidious,' said Mr. Namby.

'What should make her nervous?'

'We've had so many parties,' said Bella. 'And your Great Yafford friends are so coarse and noisy. I always feel tired to death after an hour or two of their society. And we have been to so many of their wearisome dinners. Nothing wears me out like one of those stupid dinners, where we sit three hours at table, wondering when the hired footmen will leave off bringing round dishes that nobody wants, except the people whose only pleasure in life is gluttony.'

'Mrs. Piper has a very feeble pulse,' said Mr. Namby, after a lingering sip of Madeira. 'She wants fresh air and vigorous exercise.'

'She can go out walking. I dare say she has given way to laziness a bit since she's had three carriages at her command. It's a new sensation for her, poor little lass. She had to stir her stumps, trudging backwards and forwards from here to the village every day, when she was governess to my girls.'

Bella was dumb with disgust and indignation. To have a husband who spoke of her thus! Who made his pompous boast of having picked a pearl out of the

gutter.

‘I don’t know about walking exercise,’ said Mr. Namby, who knew that his patient wanted a horse, and nothing but a horse. ‘That might possibly be too fatiguing for Mrs. Piper. Now riding is exercise without fatigue.’

‘Well, then, I suppose she must ride,’ exclaimed Mr. Piper, with an air of resignation. ‘If she has set her heart upon it she’ll do it, cost what it may. Yes, at the risk of breaking her neck, and an old fool’s heart into the bargain. There never was such a girl for having her own way. Look at her, Namby! Wouldn’t you think she was the softest bit of pink and white womanhood that ever mother Nature moulded, a gentle little puss that would sit on your lap, and purr with good temper and contentment, a lump of softness and affection that never knew what it was to have a will of her own? That’s what I thought before I married her. But I know better now. She’s as hard as nails, and when she wants anything she’ll have it, if it was to cost you your fortune.’

‘I don’t think I am asking for anything very dreadful,’ said Bella. ‘A horse which may cost you a hundred pounds——’

‘Oh, hang it!’ cried Piper. ‘We’ve horses enough. If you must ride you can ride one of the carriage horses.’

‘A creature nearly seventeen hands high,’ exclaimed Bella, contemptuously. ‘I don’t want to ride a camel. Pray say no more about it. It is Mr. Namby’s idea that I ought to ride, not mine.’

‘Does she really want it?’ asked the bewildered Piper, appealing to the surgeon.

‘I think it might give her tone. There is a decided want of tone at present.’

‘There was no want of tone when she used to come every morning to teach my children. She used to look as fresh as a newly opened rose.’

‘She had not the cares of a large household upon her shoulders in those days,’ suggested Mr. Namby.

‘The household doesn’t trouble her. She isn’t like poor Moggie, who fretted herself to fiddle-strings about sixpences. She’s a born lady, is the duchess yonder. She sits in an easy chair and reads novels, and lets the household take care of itself. If poor Moggie could rise from the grave and take a peep at our servants’ hall——well, it’s a comfort she can’t, for I’m sure she’d never go back again.’

‘Pray say no more,’ said Bella, getting up and going towards the door. ‘You have said more than enough already. I would not let you buy me a horse now if you were to go down on your knees to beg me.’

‘Hoity, toity!’ cried Mr. Piper, but Bella had bounced out of the room, leaving him face to face with Mr. Namby, who, alarmed at the storminess of the domestic sky, made haste to depart.

Mr. Piper ordered the pony carriage—his wife’s pony carriage—and drove himself to Great Yafford. This appropriation of Bella’s carriage and ponies was an act of self-assertion on his part, and was meant as a kind of manifesto. He felt that the time had come when he must be master. But it was the most joyless drive he had ever taken. The very road looked dreary, barren, and uncomfortable in the autumnal light. How fast the leaves were falling, how dull and cold everything looked. Yes, assuredly Summer had gone. He had hardly noticed it till now. He loitered at his club while the ponies were being rested and fed, and contrived to be home rather late for dinner. He expected black looks from Bella when he went into the drawing-room, where she was waiting, daintily dressed, with the unfailing novel open in her lap; but to his surprise she received him as pleasantly as if nothing had happened.

This mollified him, and he made no further attempt at self-assertion that evening.

‘I hope you didn’t want your ponies, little woman,’ he said. ‘I took ’em.’

‘My ponies,’ laughed Bella. ‘As if anything I have were really mine! I am like the butterflies in the garden. I enjoy all the sweets, but I don’t pay for them, and they don’t belong to me.’

‘That’s not true, Bella, and you know it,’ exclaimed Mr. Piper. ‘You haven’t forgotten the marriage service. “With all my worldly goods I thee endow.” I endowed you with my worldly goods, Bella, and, without wishing to hurt your feelings, I must say that so far you’ve made pretty free with ’em. But I see how it is, you’re offended because I refused you a saddle-horse this morning. Well, perhaps it was rather mean of me, especially after I’d made a little bit of money by a side wind. But you see, we’ve been spending a lot this year, and I began to feel it was time to pull in a bit. However, I’ve been talking to White, and he says the carriage horses are too tall for a lady, and they might throw themselves forward from the habit of hanging on the collar; so never mind, my pet, you shall have a saddle-horse, and as far as a hundred pounds will go you shall have a good one.’

‘No,’ said Bella, drawing herself up, ‘after what you said to-day—before Mr. Namby, too, no doubt it’s all over the village by this time—I wouldn’t let you spend another sixpence upon me. You made me feel my dependence too keenly. You expected me to be quite a different kind of wife, yielding, subservient, without an idea of my own, like a Circassian slave, bought in the market-place. No, Mr. Piper, I am not such a degraded creature.’

Mr. Piper had to supplicate before Bella would accept his offer of a hundred guinea horse. He did not actually go down on his knees, but he humiliated himself to the uttermost, and the dinner, which had been perilled by his late return, was spoiled by this extra delay.

This was the end of Mr. Piper’s first attempt at self-assertion.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAPTAIN STANDISH CHOOSES A HORSE.

HAVING gained her point, and secured the promise of a saddle-horse, Bella wasted no time in getting herself ready to ride him. She was far too wise a little woman to exhibit herself publicly on horseback, before she had learned how to ride. She drove to Great Yafford early next morning, was measured for a habit by the best tailor in the town, and from the tailor's went to a riding school in the suburbs, where the daughters of the plutocracy learned to sit straight in their saddles, and to take desperate leaps over a pole two feet from the tan floor.

Here Mrs. Piper arrived early enough to attire herself in a borrowed riding-habit, and to get an hour's private lesson before the daily class began.

'It is so very long since I've ridden,' she said to the master—a being of hybrid aspect, in whom the swing and swagger of the cavalry soldier was curiously mixed with the distinctive graces of the circus rider, 'my husband is afraid I might feel nervous on horseback.'

'Is it very long, ma'am?' asked the master, with a view to the selection of an animal of exceptional docility.

'Well, yes,' said Bella, who, in her present stage of being, had never ridden anything more dangerous than a wooden rocking-horse. 'It is rather a long time.'

'Tame Cat,' roared the master to his subordinate, and in about five minutes a horse of nondescript appearance—the kind of animal which seems to be grown on purpose for riding-masters and flymen—a creature with a straight neck, splay feet, and a rat tail, but gifted with an expression of patient longsuffering which, from a moral point of view, atoned for his want of beauty.

Bella was mounted on Tame Cat, the master mounted a tall ugly chestnut with a white blaze on his face, and the two horses began to circumambulate the barn-like building at a solemn walk. Then came the exciting canter, and then the mathematical trot, which was for first too much for even Bella's natural aptitude at doing everything she particularly wanted to do. At the end of the hour, however, there was a marked improvement, and the master complimented his new pupil.

‘You were a good deal out of practice, ma’am,’ he said, ‘but you’ll get into it again nicely in a dozen lessons.’

‘I shall come every morning for a week,’ said Bella, ‘and you must teach me as much as you can in the shortest possible time. Suppose I were to take a double lesson, two hours instead of one.’

‘You might find it too fatiguing.’

‘I don’t mind fatigue a bit,’ answered Bella, curiously forgetful of her depressed state of health. ‘I shall take a two hours’ lesson to-morrow. But, remember, you are not to tell anybody about my coming here. It seems so foolish for a person of my age to be taking riding lessons.’

‘Lor’ bless your heart, ma’am, there’s ladies that come here old enough to be your grandmother. You should see them go round in the canter, with their poor old elbows waggling.’

For six days Bella pursued this secret course of instruction. She contrived to have particular business in Great Yafford every morning. Once she went to carry a hamper of good things to the dear girls at Miss Turk’s, twice to her dressmaker, once to her milliner, once to change books at the library, once to make an early call upon Mrs. Wigzell.

Mr. Piper accompanied her sometimes, but she dropped him at his club, and he in no way interfered with her liberty. At the end of the week the habit was sent home from the tailor’s, and Bella had learned to ride. She had jumped the pole successfully at its greatest altitude, and it seemed to her simple soul that there was nothing she could not achieve in the hunting-field. She had learned to sit straight, to keep her right shoulder back, to trot easily round a corner. The riding-master dismissed her with an assurance that she was a first-rate horse-woman, which he could very well afford to do, as she had paid him a guinea a lesson and made him a present at parting.

‘If you really mean me to have a horse, Mr. Piper, I think Captain Standish would be kind enough to choose one for me. You know what a judge he is.’

‘I’ve heard people say as much,’ assented Piper, ‘and I must confess he rides and drives pretty tidy cattle. But I don’t see why I shouldn’t choose your horse myself. It will be my money that’ll have to pay for it, not Captain Standish’s.’

‘My dear Mr. Piper, horses are so out of your line. You might choose some big clumsy creature—very handsome in his way, no doubt, like the Flemish dray horses, but quite unsuited for me. And you know when you bought the bays you

never noticed the splint in Juno’s fore-leg.’

‘It wasn’t my business,’ growled Mr. Piper. ‘I paid for a vet’s opinion.’

‘Precisely, and got cheated in spite of him. Now Captain Standish is not like a veterinary surgeon. He’ll get no commission. You had better let him choose a horse for me.’

‘Well, my dear, if you like him to do so I’ve no objection. I’ve promised you a horse, and I won’t go from my bargain. Come, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll write you a cheque for a hundred, and you and Standish can settle the business between you. If he’s clever enough to get a good horse for seventy-five, you can spend the difference on a new gown. You’re never tired of getting new gowns.’

Mr. Piper wrote the cheque and went his way, with a mind untainted by jealousy. He trusted this pretty young wife of his with the guardianship of his honour, as implicitly as he had trusted homely middle-aged Mrs. Piper the first. He knew that Bella was not faultless. He was far from feeling perfect satisfaction with all her ways. He knew that she was spending his money like water. But the hideous idea that she could dishonour him, were it only in thought, had not yet poisoned his peace.

The cheque was written on a Thursday, and in the afternoon Captain Standish appeared among the commercial aristocracy who now recognised Mrs. Piper’s Thursday afternoons as a pleasant way of wasting a couple of hours, airing their self-importance, and exercising their carriage horses.

‘Has Piper consented to your hunting this season?’ asked the captain, eagerly.

He was just so much in love as to feel that the hunting-field would be an arid waste without Bella.

‘He has consented to my riding, and he has given me a hundred pounds to buy a horse. Here is the cheque, and if you really don’t mind the trouble of choosing one——’

‘You shall have the handsomest horse in Yorkshire,’ said the captain, putting the cheque in his waistcoat pocket.

‘But a hundred pounds won’t be enough for that, will it?’ asked Bella. ‘One hears of such extravagant prices being given for horses now-a-days.’

‘It will be quite enough, as I shall manage.’

‘Ah, you are so clever about horse-flesh. Our coachman says the horses you

ride are something wonderful.’

‘I don’t ride screws,’ said the captain, with a well-satisfied air.

He had a lofty pity for the poor creatures who had to ride anything they could get, and be thankful, and to dress themselves respectably upon something under that eight hundred a year which Brummel declared to be the lowest amount upon which a gentleman could clothe himself.

Early in the next week Bella received a little note from the captain, written at one of his London clubs.

‘Dear and liege lady,’—

‘I have bought you a perfect hunter, the gem of Sir Lionel Hawtree’s stud, sold at Tattersall’s this afternoon. I shall bring him to you on Thursday morning. Be ready for a preliminary canter in the park. He is young, and full of playfulness, but without an atom of vice. He is quite the handsomest thing you ever saw—black as my hat, and with the sinews of a gladiator, as light as an antelope, and as strong as a lion. I long to see you mounted on him.

‘Yours always,
‘STEPHEN STANDISH.’

Bella felt pleased, but slightly doubtful as to the advantage of such a combination of strength, playfulness, and agility. The horses she had ridden at Mr. Hammerman’s Riding Academy had not been given to playfulness. Nor did she feel sure that a creature with gladiatorial sinews and leonine strength would be altogether the nicest thing to ride. She might be tired before he was. However, she was full of pride at the idea of having a horse of such distinguished beauty, and of being able to lord it over the Miss Porkmans, who were very proud of their horsemanship, and very fond of talking about their hairbreadth ‘scapes and ventures, and how they had taken it out of their horses, which, according to their own account, were of a very wild and dangerous breed. Bella had no doubt she would be able to take it out of the black. She was glad he was black. There is something so common about a bay. She could hardly rest till Thursday morning came. She went half-a-dozen times to the stables to see that the black’s loose box was properly prepared, with its fringes and decorations of plaited straw, and all the newest improvements in stable fittings. She was walking up and down the

broad gravel drive in front of the portico, when the captain appeared, riding his handsome chestnut, followed by a groom, who led a creature so clothed and knee-capped and hooded, that nothing was visible but checked kerseymere. He appeared, furthermore, to have a monstrous hump, which gave him the appearance of a Bactrian camel.

‘I should have ridden him over myself, but I would not bring him to you with the dust of the road upon him,’ said the captain, dismounting, and shaking hands, a lingering hand-shake with a tender little pressure at the end. ‘Now, Dobbs, off with the clothes.’

The black was stripped in a minute or two, and stood before them in all his beauty, a glossy-coated, thoroughbred, finely moulded creature, with a backward roll of his full eye, and an alert movement of his delicate ear, common to horses of his high breeding.

‘Isn’t he perfect?’ asked the captain, contemplating his purchase with the eye of pride.

‘He is lovely, and I don’t know how to thank you,’ answered Bella, watching the black’s restless eyeball; ‘but isn’t he dreadfully high-spirited? You know I don’t pretend to be a Diana Vernon.’

‘You could not do anything badly if you tried,’ said the captain. ‘Don’t be alarmed. Erebus has a lovely temper. With your light little hand on his snaffle, and with a comfortable bit in his mouth, he’ll go as gently as a Shetland pony.’

‘Is he called Erebus?’

‘Yes, he was sold under that name. You can change it if you like.’

‘No, I think it’s rather a good name,’ answered Bella, patting Erebus’s velvet nose, a liberty which he endured with perfect affability. ‘It isn’t common.’

The Miss Porkmans’ horses were called Prince and Daisy.

The cause of the hump-like appearance which had puzzled Bella was a very handsome side-saddle of quilted doeskin—quite the perfection of a saddle.

‘I ventured to have him measured for a saddle directly I decided on buying him for you,’ explained the captain. ‘The saddlers had to work day and night to get it finished by yesterday evening. You must please to accept the saddle as my humble offering.’

‘Oh, I really couldn’t,’ exclaimed Bella. ‘It’s too good of you, but I’m sure

Mr. Piper would not allow——’

‘I’ll answer for Mr. Piper’s approval. And now run and put on your habit, and try Erebus’s paces over that smooth bit of turf.’

Bella ran away and reappeared in about ten minutes, looking the prettiest little huntress imaginable, perfectly dressed from the top of her neat chimney-pot to the point of her morocco boot. She had forgotten nothing.

Captain Standish lifted her into the saddle, gave her the reins, and then mounted by her side. They walked quietly to the stretch of turf, and then and there, the instant he felt the grass under his hoofs, Erebus bolted with his light burden.

She sat him splendidly, feeling as if her last hour were come. After making a wild circuit of a mile or so, he consented to be pulled up, and stood looking the image of innocence, when Captain Standish rode slowly up to him.

‘I hope you didn’t think me cruel for not riding after you,’ said the captain. ‘My horse would have only made yours go faster. I saw you were mistress of him. He suits you to a nicety. But you shouldn’t indulge him with that kind of spurt often. It isn’t good form.’

‘N—no,’ faltered Bella, who had no more control over the black than she had over the hastening clouds in the autumn sky.

‘Now we’ll go for a ride over the moor, and you shall take it out of him,’ said the captain.

They went upon the moor, and the black took it out of Bella, for she went home after a two hours ride more exhausted than she had ever felt in her life before.

There had been no opportunity even for the captain to breathe the sweet poison of his unhallowed love in his companion’s ear, although they were alone together under the wide heaven. The black had absorbed the attention of both. He was a creature of infinite resources, and of as much variety as the serpent of old Nile. They never knew what he might be doing next.

‘Do you really think I shall be able to hunt with him?’ asked Bella, when she dismounted, faint and exhausted, at her own door.

‘I’m sure of it. You have a first-rate seat. It’s only your hands that want a little more education. When we have had half-a-dozen rides together you will be able to do what you like with Erebus. I would not have bought him for you if there

had been an atom of vice in him. But before you ride him to hounds I'll hunt him a day or two myself, and see how he takes his fences.'

'Perhaps that would be best,' said Bella. 'Mr. Piper is so nervous about my riding. Certainly, Erebus is a most lovely creature. He must be very cheap for a hundred pounds.'

'Well, yes,' said the captain, smiling, 'he may fairly be called a bargain—at that price.'

CHAPTER XVII.

VANESSA'S VISIT.

EREBUS was in due course shown to Mr. Piper, who knew so little about horses as to be scarcely worthy to be called a Yorkshireman. His own particular vanity in the way of horse-flesh was a fast pony that could trot between the shafts of a light carriage for any number of hours without rest or refreshment. Anything beyond that was out of his line. He contemplated the black with a cool survey, and thought that there was very little of him for the money.

'Isn't he lovely?' asked Bella, patting the creature's sleek neck.

Erebus was of a heavenly temper in his stable. It was only when conscious of humanity on his back that he was subject to fits of waywardness.

'Well, he aren't bad-looking,' assented the unenthusiastic Piper; 'but if I'd chose a horse for you I should have picked one with more timber and a better back for the saddle. I hope he's quiet.'

'Oh, he's everything that's nice,' answered Bella, with a fluttering of her heart at the recollection of some of Erebus's manœuvres that morning. 'I shall feel as easy on him as in an arm-chair—when I get used to him.'

'And Captain Standish gave you a riding lesson, did he?' inquired Mr. Piper.

'Yes, he went over the moor with me, just to show me how to manage Erebus.'

'That was very civil of him. But you mustn't be riding about with him often, you know, Bella. It wouldn't do. You mean no harm, and he means no harm. I know that, my dear. But it would set people talking—and I'm as proud a man as Cæsar in my way. I won't have my wife talked about.'

Bella buried her pale face in the black's silky mane. She did not care to meet her husband's honest eyes just at this particular moment.

'I would not for the world do anything you dislike,' she said, meekly; 'but I want to learn how to manage Erebus, and I don't think any one could teach me so well as Captain Standish. And, by and by, when the foxhunting begins, if you did not mind, I should like very much to—to——' Here Mr. Piper glared at her

with a look so awful that she remodelled the end of her sentence—' to see the hounds throw off.'

'You could drive to the meet in your pony chay,' said Mr. Piper. 'Nobody could say there was harm in that.'

'It would be much nicer to go on horseback,' pleaded Bella, laying her little white hand caressingly on Mr. Piper's velvet collar.

'Why, what a baby you are, little woman!' he exclaimed, mollified by that light touch, and the coaxing look in the Dresden china face. 'Yon horse is a new toy. You'll be wanting to ride him into the drawing-room, I shouldn't wonder, or to have him lying on the hearth-rug of a winter evening, like a Newfoundland.'

This, in Bella's idea, meant permission to go to the meet, and once at the meet it would be very easy to follow the hounds for half an hour or so, and to declare afterwards that it was Erebus's doing, quite an involuntary bit of hunting on her own part. Bella was past mistress of those small arts by which an adroit unscrupulous woman manages to get her own way.

'I'll tell you what,' said Mr. Piper presently, 'if you want to have company when you're out riding, you'd better ask one of Porkman's girls to come and spend a week with you and bring her hoss. They're first-rate horsewomen, both of 'em.'

'I should be very glad to have Vanessa,' said Bella. 'I think she's the nicest—or, at any rate, the least nasty,' she added hastily.

Mrs. Porkman was a woman gifted with dim and uncultured aspirations after the beautiful. She had filled her drawing-room with heterogeneous bric-a-brac, including every variety of bad art, from Cleopatra's needle in Cornish serpentine to the latest monstrosity in Bohemian glass, and she had called her two eldest daughters Stella and Vanessa, having read of two young women of that name once in a book. She had forgotten all about the book, and the young women, but the names had lingered in her memory. She had her eldest daughter christened Stella, and in due time there appeared a Vanessa to complete the pair, and to take to Stella's cast-off frocks.

Bella thought it would not be altogether inconvenient—nay, it would be very convenient—to have Vanessa Porkman for her companion. With Vanessa riding on her left side, Captain Standish might ride on her right, without giving occasion for scandal. She was not at all afraid of Vanessa being scandalized by anything she saw or heard. The second Miss Porkman was so far in advance of

her age, that she had in a manner anticipated all the feminine fastness of the nineteenth century. The skating rink, the ladies' club of the future, contained nothing calculated to shock Vanessa.

Miss Porkman accepted Mrs. Piper's invitation gladly. She owned with a charming candour that she was always glad to get away from home. She was quite open-minded in her contempt for her own family, and never even pretended to think them refined or well-bred. 'Papa is simply dreadful,' she would declare frankly. 'I quite wonder how any of us put up with him. I suppose it is only because he is the family banker. If he wasn't, we should put him in the gardener's barrow and wheel him down to the edge of the river, and topple him comfortably in, and get rid of him as quietly as the gentle Hindoos do of their parents when they've lived long enough.'

Miss Porkman came. She was a florid young woman, with bold brown eyes, an affectation of short sight, an eye-glass, and an insatiable thirst for masculine society. Contemplated from an abstract ethnological point of view, she was a remarkably interesting example of the depth of deterioration to which the womanly character can descend among the well-to-do classes; but she was an excruciating young woman to live with.

In her mind the business of a woman's life was flirtation. To be admired, to agitate the hearts of men, to lure the luckless Strephon from his legitimate Chloe, these things, in Miss Porkman's mind, constituted woman's mission. She was not strong-minded, she was no eager reformer, she didn't care twopence about universal suffrage; but she wanted to be the Cleopatra of her small world, to have Cæsar, and Pompey, and Antonius, and the young Augustus, and every man of them subjugated and adoring. She had unlimited confidence in her own good looks, and a scornful pity for plain women, with whom nobody cared to flirt.

The fair Vanessa had tried her hardest to entangle Captain Standish in those flowery chains which she kept in stock for all eligible victims, but the captain had not allowed himself to be bound. She had seen with disgust that he was a constant guest at the Park, and that he lavished upon Bella those attentions which she had herself unsuccessfully invited. To flirt with a married woman was in Miss Porkman's eyes not so much immoral as it was cowardly. She would have excused the immorality, but she could not forgive the cowardice. Here was evidently a man who feared to trust himself within the range of her charms, lest he should be caught unawares and meshed in the matrimonial net, and who amused himself with a vapid flirtation in a quarter where he felt himself ignobly

safe.

‘He can’t care for such a little waxen image as Mrs. Piper,’ said Miss Porkman, contemplating her Juno-like figure in her cheval-glass, ‘but he doesn’t want to marry into the commercial classes, and he’s afraid to trust himself with *me*.’

Vanessa came to Little Yafford Park, resolved to leave it a conqueror. She brought her prettiest dresses. She brought her horse, and she believed herself invincible on horseback. If Captain Standish was as much at the Park as report said he was, Vanessa felt sure of victory.

She was not disappointed. Captain Standish came every day, and rode every day on the moor with Bella and Miss Porkman. He taught Bella how to manage the black, and he was sufficiently attentive to Vanessa to keep that young lady in perpetual good humour with herself and him.

Bella’s pluck, which was undeniable, made up in a great measure for her want of experience. In a week she was mistress of Erebus, and seemed well able to cope with his whims and uncertainties, his disposition to take fright at shadows, and to bolt on every inconvenient occasion.

‘I never knew any one learn to ride so quickly,’ said the captain, ‘for upon my word, you know, frankly, you knew very little about it when you first rode Erebus.’

Bella blushed, remembering how little she had known, how much less even than the captain gave her credit for knowing.

Mr. Piper saw them start for their ride sometimes, and was pleased to see his little woman happy. He could see no harm in her accepting the captain’s escort while she had Vanessa Porkman with her, an expensively educated, well brought up young woman, who knew what was what, and would be sure to keep Captain Standish in his place. He praised the black, and thanked the captain for buying that accomplished animal.

‘He’s rather too weedy for my style,’ said Mr. Piper, ‘but he looks well-bred, and he carries my little woman beautifully.’

Captain Standish dined at the Park twice during the week, at Mr. Piper’s particular invitation.

‘Do you know, Bella,’ said Ebenezer, one night, after Miss Porkman had lighted her candle and left them, ‘I think Standish is smitten with Vanessa. I

shouldn’t wonder if it was to be a match. She’s an uncommon fine girl, and old Porkman could give her twenty thousand and feel none the poorer for it. She wouldn’t be a bad catch for the captain.’

‘Catch!’ echoed Bella, contemptuously. ‘Do you suppose Captain Standish wants what you call a catch? Do you think he would care to take Mr. Porkman’s twenty thousand pounds, and go down to the grave associated with provisions? Captain Standish could not afford to marry Vanessa if he loved her to distraction. Whenever he marries he must marry rank. You forget that his mother is Lady Emmeline Standish.’

‘No, I don’t,’ said Mr. Piper. ‘But I can’t see that his mother’s having a handle to her name need make Porkman’s money less acceptable. Money can buy land, can’t it? and, in England, land means aristocracy. Put your money into the soil, and you’re an aristocrat. That’s how I take it. I should never have bought this place, to pay me two and a half per cent., if I hadn’t felt that I was hooking myself on to the landed gentry. I say,’ concluded Mr. Piper, spreading his coat tails as he stood with his portly back to the fire, ‘I say that Vanessa Porkman would be a capital match for Standish, and he’s a fool if he can’t see it.’

‘Pray don’t take up Mrs. Dulcimer’s craze of match-making,’ said Bella, scornfully.

She was indignant at the idea that any one could suppose Captain Standish in love with Vanessa—that large middle-class Juno.

Poor Mrs. Dulcimer’s good-natured soul was perturbed by Vanessa’s visit. She went to the Park on Thursday afternoon, and remonstrated with Bella for her short-sightedness and want of sisterly feeling.

‘My dear, you are letting that horrid Miss Porkman cut out poor Clementina,’ she complained. ‘This visit of hers will quite spoil Clementina’s chance with Captain Standish.’

‘Indeed, Mrs. Dulcimer, Tina never had any chance with Captain Standish. He is not a marrying man. I have heard him say as much.’

‘Oh, my dear, they all say that, and even think it until they are caught. It doesn’t make the slightest difference. I am sure he admired your sister, and it would have been such a splendid match for her, and so nice for you to have had such aristocratic connections. Lady Emmeline would have been your—something in-law. And now you have spoiled it all by inviting Miss Porkman.’

‘I wanted some one to ride with me,’ said Bella. ‘Clementina can’t ride, and

hasn’t a horse.’

‘Well, it is a great pity. Everybody says that Captain Standish is in love with Miss Porkman.’

Bella knew that Mrs. Dulcimer’s everybody usually meant herself and Rebecca.

And now the time drew near for Bella to try her fortune in the hunting-field. She sounded Miss Porkman, and found that young lady eager for anything fast and furious. Vanessa had never hunted—Mr. Porkman objecting to ladies in the field just as strongly as Mr. Piper. But she was quite ready to hazard the paternal anger, supposing it impossible to have a day’s sport without her father coming to hear of it.

‘He has never actually forbidden us to hunt,’ said Vanessa, ‘but I know he doesn’t like ladies riding to hounds. I’ve heard him say so very often. However, he won’t know anything about it till it’s all over, and when he does hear of it I must weather the storm somehow.’

Vanessa had weathered a good many paternal tempests since she had emerged from the nursery, stormy winds blown up by milliner’s bills, hurricanes provoked by too reckless flirtations, and divers other meteorological disturbances of a domestic nature. A storm, more or less, in Vanessa’s opinion made no difference.

Captain Standish rode the black to hounds, and pronounced him perfect.

‘There’s to be a grand meet next Thursday morning at Milvey Bridge, and we must all go,’ he said, to Bella. ‘You can tell Piper you are going to see the hounds throw off.’

CHAPTER XVIII.

OPENING HIS EYES.

WHILE Bella had been indulging in archery, dinner-giving, riding, and other expensive amusements, her husband's old friend and servant, Samuel Chumney, had returned from his fortnight's holiday, and had taken his place among those insignificant and unvalued guests whom the mistress of the Park regarded rather as lookers on, or as a kind of human furniture, than as actual participators in her gaieties and pleasures.

On her Thursday afternoons Mrs. Piper tolerated Chumney, as a necessary evil. His old-fashioned shirt-collars were ridiculous, but harmless. He was quiet, and was therefore much less vulgar than the prosperous Porkman or the millionaire Timperley. So, as it pleased Mr. Piper to have him there, Bella endured his presence without further complaint.

'As long as you don't invite him to my best dinners I don't mind,' she told Mr. Piper, which was certainly a great concession from a young lady who, a year or so before, had not always been sure of having any dinner at all.

Mr. Chumney looked on at Bella's career, and had his own opinion about her, and said nothing. Miss Coyle said a great deal to him, and he let her talk, but he never committed himself by any more direct expression of opinion than was to be gleaned from a grave nod, or a significant shake of the head. This dumb show of his, and the general reticence of his manners, possessed a wonderful fascination for Miss Coyle. She opened her mind to him freely, and felt herself in the presence of supreme worldly wisdom.

'If poor Mr. Piper were only like you, that foolish young woman would not venture upon such conduct,' said Miss Coyle, whereupon Mr. Chumney lifted his dark eyebrows, and thrust his fingers into his waistcoat pockets, and breathed a gentle sigh.

'Spending all her mornings riding about with that Captain Standish, a man of notoriously dissipated character,' said Miss Coyle, who knew as much about the captain as she did about the inhabitants of the moon.

'Ha!' groaned Mr. Chumney, as if in assent to a general proposition which he could not confute.

‘And making a bosom friend of that flashy Miss Porkman, while she neglects her own sisters. Birds of a feather——’

‘Flock together,’ concluded Mr. Chumney, venturing to commit himself so far.

‘How it is that Mr. Piper doesn’t see what is going on under his very nose is more than I can imagine.’

‘Piper is a man in a thousand, madam,’ said Mr. Chumney.

‘But so foolishly confiding. Ah, Mr. Chumney, it is trying to see the present state of things, after having had the privilege of knowing the first Mrs. Piper.’

‘True,’ sighed Chumney.

‘How different her habits were! She was a woman of real piety, equally anxious about this world and the next.’

‘She never could keep her cook,’ said Chumney, doubtfully. ‘I have seen worse cooking at Piper’s table than ever I saw in my own humble lodging.’

‘Poor Mrs. Piper was not fortunate with her servants,’ assented Miss Coyle, ‘but then she was such a good manager. No waste or riot in her time. How self-denying she was! To my own knowledge she rarely discarded a silk gown till it had been turned twice.’

Miss Coyle knew very little and talked a great deal. Mr. Chumney knew a great deal and held his peace, waiting, with masterly patience, until the time should come for him to speak. For the last three months he had taken upon himself the office of a private inquirer, without fee or reward. He had made it his business to find out all that was to be known about Captain Standish. He had gone into all manner of company in order to make these discoveries, but his informants had been chiefly of the back-stairs—grooms, valets, tailors, boot-makers, horse dealers, people of all grades, who had been honoured with the captain’s custom or patronage.

The result of his inquiries showed that Captain Standish was an unscrupulous, unprincipled man—a man who paid his way, simply because he had plenty of money wherewith to gratify his desires, but who did not shrink from a dishonourable act, or hesitate at a baseness, where dishonourable, or base, dealing could further his aims. He had contrived in a brief career to do as much mischief as would have earned for a young nobleman a handsome reputation, in the days when men wore powder and patches, and considered iniquity a

distinction. Another man in Samuel Chumney's position might have made an immediate use of his knowledge, and let his friend know the kind of person he had admitted to his house; but Mr. Chumney preferred to wait for some crushing proof of the captain's unworthiness, and he was not disinclined to let Bella proceed far enough in her folly to disenchant her husband.

'It will give Piper the whip-hand over her for the rest of his days,' he thought, 'if he finds her out in a compromising flirtation with this fellow Standish.'

This was the condition of affairs up to the evening before the foxhunt, when Mr. Chumney, through one of his horsey informants, became acquainted with the history of Captain Standish's purchase of the black called Erebus. This piece of information he considered it his duty to impart to Mr. Piper, without loss of time, so he walked over to Little Yafford next morning for that purpose.

It was the last day of October, and a lovely morning. The wind was in the south, a wind so balmy and gentle, that it only caressed the red and golden foliage, and hardly scattered the leaves. Here and there a withered leaf dropped lazily down from the dark brown branches, wet and shining with autumnal dew. The grass beside the road glistened in the morning light. A veil of vapour shrouded the hills, and gave a look of mystery to the distant landscape. Now and then a gleam of sunshine pierced the mist, brightening and warming all things, and then all was gray again.

'A fine morning for the hounds,' said a passing rustic by way of salutation, but Samuel Chumney responded only with a sulky nod. He did not care for the hounds. He looked upon all field sports as waste and foolishness, and considered it man's proper avocation all over the world to sit upon a high stool in a counting-house and add up columns of figures. He felt a half-scornful tolerance for soldiers and sailors, as needed to protect commerce, and defend the rights of the men who sat in counting-houses. But for all other grades of humanity he had only contempt.

Even for Mr. Chumney's long legs it was a two hours' walk from the town to the village, so, although he had started directly after his breakfast, it was nearly eleven o'clock when he arrived at the Park. Mr. Piper was walking up and down the lawn in front of his drawing-room windows, smoking his morning cigar.

'Holloa, Chum,' he exclaimed, 'what wind blows you this way? Come over to have a look at the farm, have you? The pigs are doing beautifully. I feel pretty sure of a prize for some of 'em. It's as much as they can do to stand already. Take anything after your walk? No? Well, I know what a sober old file you are.

Come round and have a look at the pigs.'

Mr. Piper put his arm through Chumney's, and led him towards the farm, which was shut off from the park and gardens by shrubberies and a fir plantation.

'Hang your pigs!' cried Chumney. 'To my eye a prize pig is the most hideous object in creation. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals ought to interfere. They're down upon a costermonger for over-driving his donkey, but they don't say a word against a nobleman for making an animal's existence a slow martyrdom, by gorging it with oil-cake until its legs refuse to carry the weight of its overfed carcass.'

Mr. Piper, elated with the anticipation of a prize at the Christmas Cattle Show, was in no humour to give ear to the voice of humanity on the lips of his old cashier.

'Come and have a look at the pigs, Chum, and don't you take to preaching sermons in your old age. It ain't oil-cake either, old boy. It's milk and meal, and the pork will eat as tender as a chicken and as mellow as a William pear. Do you suppose the animals are unhappy? Not a bit of it. They're no more unhappy than an alderman who over-eats himself with turtle and venison. And as to their not being able to stand, why, I've seen Porkman and Timperley many a time after dinner when they've not been able to stand, and they were as happy as lords.'

They had arrived at the pigsties by this time, and Mr. Chumney was regaled with the sight of various mountains of pinky flesh, out of whose tremulous bulk issued smothered gruntings as a sole indication of life. Here and there something like an ear was to be seen pendent from a hillock of bristly pinkness, but Mr. Chumney looked in vain for an eye. The organs of sight had disappeared under pendulous ridges of fat.

'You may call that an improving exhibition,' protested Chumney. 'I don't. And now if you will withdraw your mind from your pigs for five or ten minutes, I've got something serious to say to you.'

'Serious?' exclaimed Mr. Piper. 'Another failure in the wool trade, I suppose. Well, thank goodness, they can't touch me. My money is safe.'

'I'm not going to talk about your money. Where's Mrs. Piper?'

'Gone for a ride with Vanessa Porkman.'

'And Captain Standish, I suppose.'

‘Yes, the captain was with them. He keeps a couple of horses at the “Crown,” so as to be handy for the hunting. They’re going to see the hounds throw off at Milvey Bridge. I think the captain’s sweet upon Vanessa. It would be a very good match for him, and I know the Porkmans would jump at it. But my little woman says no. The Porkmans aren’t good enough for him.’

They had turned out of the farmyard into the plantation, a pleasant place for a morning walk and a friendly chat. The ground was carpeted with fir needles, and Mr. Piper had trodden for himself a narrow track under the trees, while he smoked his after-breakfast cigar.

‘Now, old Chum,’ he said. ‘Nobody can overhear us here. Say your say. It’s something about yourself, I suppose?’

‘No, it isn’t. It’s something about you. Now, I think you know that I’ve always looked up to you and honoured you, that I’d go through fire and water for you—real fire, and real water.’

‘Yes, I know that. Go on.’

‘Now I don’t like to see the man I honour putting himself in a false position, as you are doing every day you tolerate this fellow Standish’s attentions to your wife.’

‘Don’t be a fool!’ cried Mr. Piper, angrily. ‘Do you suppose I don’t know how to take care of my wife? She likes to have Standish here, because he’s the fashion, and everybody runs after him. I like her to have him here for the same reason. The Porkmans and the Timperleys would give their eyes to be as intimate with Captain Standish as we are; but they haven’t the knack of making their houses pleasant to a man of his stamp. Bella has. She’s spent my money pretty fast, but I don’t begrudge it to her, for she’s given me a position in society that I never had in Moggie’s time, and I’m not too proud to own it. Don’t you come here to insinuate anything against my wife, Chumney, or you and me will cease to know each other,’ concluded Mr. Piper, with dignity.

He was incensed with Chumney, but he was not in the slightest degree moved by what Chumney had said. His faith in Bella was rooted deeply. It was intertwined with his faith in himself, and that was invincible.

‘I couldn’t be jealous if I tried,’ he said. ‘My self-respect wouldn’t allow me.’

‘I don’t want you to be jealous, but I want you to respect yourself,’ answered Chumney. ‘I might have spoken sooner, perhaps, but I waited till I had good grounds for speaking. First and foremost, I’ve found out all about Captain

Standish. He’s a bad lot.’

‘He’s received everywhere in the highest society.’

‘There are a good many bad lots going about in high society, without any brand upon ’em either. He’s not a man I’d receive in my house, if I had a house.’

‘But you haven’t, you see,’ said Piper, testily. ‘That makes all the difference. Perhaps if you had a big house like this, and wanted to fill it with pleasant people, you’d lower your standard of morality a bit. It’s all very well for Diogenes to be particular about what company he keeps. He’s only got his tub to fill, and he can fill that himself.’

‘Don’t let’s beat about the bush, Piper. Would you like your wife to receive a present—something to the tune of a couple of hundred pounds—from such a man as Captain Standish?’

‘I wouldn’t let her receive such a present from any man alive, and she knows it. Her own sense must tell her,’ exclaimed Piper, getting warm.

‘You can’t always trust to a woman’s sense, particularly when she’s young and pretty,’ said the cynical Chumney. ‘I say your wife has received such a present—though I’ll give her the benefit of the doubt, and say she doesn’t know anything about it,—and by so doing has made you and herself the talk of the Great Yafford club.’

‘What present?’ asked Piper, pale with rage.

‘The horse she rides.’

‘That’s the biggest lie that’s been told at the club for a long time, though I’ve known ’em to tell some jolly big ones there. The horse my wife rides was given to her by me. I wrote a cheque for a hundred pounds, and put it in her hand. All Standish did was to choose the horse at Tattersall’s.’

‘Do you think such a horse as that is to be bought for a hundred pounds? Your friends at the club know all about the horse. It was the gem of Sir Lionel Hawtree’s stud, and sold for three hundred and thirty guineas. The difference between your cheque and the auction price was a gift from Captain Standish to your wife. You have boasted of getting Erebus for a hundred pounds, and have been laughed at by men who know all about the horse. I had heard some queer things said, but I only learned the real state of the case last night.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ exclaimed Piper. ‘Why should Captain Standish spend his money on a horse for my wife?’

‘I don’t know why, but I know he has done it,’ returned Chumney. ‘Read that!’

He handed Mr. Piper a cutting from *Bell’s Life*.

‘That’s from a paper two Sundays old,’ he said, ‘but I only got it last night.’

It was the description of a sale of hunters at Tattersall’s. The following paragraph was marked at the side in red ink:—

‘One of the gems of the stud was Erebus, a lady’s hack, fifteen two, rising six, black, without a white hair about him, and perfect in every point. This horse was knocked down to Captain Standish, at three hundred and thirty guineas, after a lively competition.’

‘How do I know it is the same horse he bought for my wife?’ asked Mr. Piper, when he had read the paragraph.

‘I don’t see much room for doubt. It’s neither a common name nor a common colour. Of course there may be no particular harm in a man spending his money to eke out your gift to your wife, but I think it puts you in a false position.’

‘Think!’ roared Mr. Piper. ‘It puts me in a position that will oblige me to kick Captain Standish out of my house; and if I thought my wife knew it—knew that she was riding a horse bought with that man’s money—I would shut my doors upon her as readily as upon him. I may be a fool about Bella, but I’m only a fool within certain limits. There are bounds, Chumney—bounds that I shan’t overstep. But I don’t believe she knows it—no, she could not be so ungrateful—she could not be so base as to degrade me in any man’s eyes—after my lavishing my money upon her—picking her out of the gutter to make a duchess of her—giving her an honest man’s love into the bargain. No, I can believe anything of that fellow’s audacity, but nothing against her. Don’t ask me to think ill of her.’

‘I don’t,’ said Chumney; ‘but I think it’s high time this philandering with Captain Standish should be put a stop to, and I fancy I’ve shown you a good reason for stopping it. I hope you don’t think I’ve gone beyond my duty as a friend.’

‘No, Chumney, no; you have done your duty, and I shall do mine. The horse shall go back to Standish’s stable this afternoon, and Standish shall never cross my threshold again. But if you hear men talk of this at the club, be sure you tell them that my wife knew nothing about it. She has been the victim of a fop’s impertinence—that’s all.’

‘I will, Mr. Piper. You may be sure of that.’

‘And now you’d better make yourself scarce, Chumney. I’d rather be alone when my wife comes home from her ride.’

‘You won’t be violent!’ urged Mr. Chumney.

‘No, Chumney, I am too angry to be violent. If I laid my little finger upon Standish it would mean murder. I feel it in me to do something dreadful. Don’t you be frightened, Chum. I shall treat him with the utmost civility. I shall only let him understand that his little game is found out. Good-bye.’

Mr. Chumney would have preferred to remain. He had an idea that his friend wanted him, in this crisis of his domestic life; but Mr. Piper thought otherwise, and was too resolute a man to allow himself to be overruled. So Chumney went away, unrefreshed and disheartened. He did not go back to Great Yafford immediately, but stopped at the “Crown” to regale himself with a temperate luncheon of bread and cheese and ale.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SHORT RECKONING.

WHEN Chumney was gone Ebenezer Piper walked up and down the narrow track in the pine plantation, ruminating upon what he had been told. Why should any man, however princely in his ideas, make a gift of two hundred and thirty guineas to another man's wife? Such a thing could hardly happen, without implying evil design in the giver. Bella might be innocent, but this man was guilty. This gift of the horse was one act of many, all tending towards a villanous conclusion.

And then there came back upon Mr. Piper's mind the whole history of his wife's acquaintance with Captain Standish—how this man, whose reputation had been made by an insolent exclusiveness, had been, from his introduction at the Park, a constant visitor. Mr. Piper had been flattered by this distinction, and had ascribed Captain Standish's preference to an Epicurean appreciation of his fine house, and an intellectual pleasure in his conversation.

Now, all at once, he saw the past in a new light, and knew that he had been blind, and deaf, and foolish. Bella's pretty face had been the attraction; Bella's winning manners had been the lure.

'If I thought that she had encouraged him, knowing his drift, if I knew that she had been false to me by so much as one erring thought, I would have done with her at once and for ever. She owes me too much. No, it is impossible. It isn't in human nature to be so base. And that pretty little smiling face of hers—no, that could not lie.'

This was how he argued with himself. Yet there was no assurance in his mind. His self-respect was strong still, his belief in his own claims and merits still unshaken; but there had appeared to him a vision of a phenomenal falsehood, a preternatural iniquity in woman.

'If he spent his money for that horse, and she accepted the gift knowingly, it was not his first gift,' he said to himself. 'There have been letters passing between them, perhaps. I'll search her room, and if I find one shred of evidence against her she shall stand condemned. I'll have no half-measures. Either she's my true and honest wife, or she's—something that shall have no shelter under

my roof. She must be all or nothing to me.’

He went back to the house.

‘Has your missus come back?’ he asked the footman idling in the hall.

‘No, sir.’

It was nearly three o’clock, long past the usual hour for luncheon. Mr. Piper passed the open doorway of the dining-room, through which he could see the table laid for the mid-day meal, with that modern elegance and glow of colour which Bella had substituted for the commonplace arrangements that had obtained before her time. He went upstairs with a heavy step, and walked straight to his wife’s boudoir. It was a gem of a room at the end of the corridor, with a large bow-window overlooking the garden, a room bright with all the luxuries and frivolities the second Mrs. Piper had accumulated during her brief reign, buhl, Sèvre, ormolu, tortoiseshell, ivory, malachite, celadon, turquoise, rose Du Barry, every colour and every substance, rosebud chintz, old lace, a carpet of velvet pile.

Mr. Piper, standing at gaze and breathing his hardest, in the centre of this crowded toy-shop-room, looked very like the traditional bull in the china-shop, and an infuriated bull to boot. He had come there with a purpose, but for the moment he paused irresolute. He felt ashamed of himself for doubting his wife ever so little. The sight of this room reassured him.

‘Didn’t I give her every one of these things?’ he said to himself. ‘How can she help being fond of me?’

And then, just at that moment, his eye lighted upon something which he had not given her. A Parian statuette, on a black marble base, Danneker’s famous Ariadne.

‘No, I didn’t give her that,’ he said, ‘and it wasn’t among her wedding presents. That’s something from *him*.’

The table was covered with books. He took up one in cream-coloured calf, gilt edged, tooled, an exquisite specimen of Riviere’s binding—Alfred de Musset’s poems.

On the fly-leaf there was a name written, a name that was almost strange to Mr. Piper, though his second wife had signed it in the marriage register.

Isabel.

Isabel, written in a bold masculine hand, beneath it a date, and two words in a language that Mr. Piper knew not.

Zum Gedächtniss.

He tossed the book aside, as if it were some reptile that had stung him, and went on with his investigation. In front of the window there stood an old Dutch escritoire, inlaid with many-coloured woods, a thing of numerous drawers and recesses, and quaint hiding-places, in which to keep secret store of money or documents. It might have been the joy of some Dutch housewife in days gone by, or the private treasury of some rich burgher, in the fat and fertile Low Countries, where life slides gently by in an unostentatious prosperity.

Mr. Piper had seen his wife write her letters at this desk. The lid was closely shut, locked. This exasperated him, though it was hardly a circumstance to be wondered at that a lady should lock her desk. In Mr. Piper's present temper it seemed an evidence of guilt. He tried to wrench open the lid by means of its delicate brass handles, and failing in this, he took out a strong knife which he used for lopping an occasional withered branch in his park or gardens, and prised the lock. Within all things were neatly arranged. Packets of dainty note-paper and envelopes, gold and ivory penholders, mother-o'-pearl blotting-book, pigeon-holes filled with letters.

Mr. Piper emptied the pigeon-holes, and ran his eye rapidly over their contents. The letters were all undeniably feminine. No, there was nothing here from Captain Standish. But then these old cabinets generally contain hidden receptacles for guilty secrets, sly nests, in which to hatch state, or domestic, treason.

Mr. Piper seized the sandalwood beading that framed the pigeon-holes, with both his hands, and drew them out bodily, in one piece, like a drawer. Behind them appeared a row of neat little recesses, each with its inlaid door.

'This is where she would keep anything she wanted to hide,' thought Mr. Piper.

He was not mistaken. In one of the recesses he found some money lying loose. A bank note and half a dozen sovereigns. In another there was a morocco jewel-case, containing an opal cross set with diamonds, a trinket which Mr. Piper had never seen till that moment. A third recess was crammed with letters, this time unmistakably masculine.

Bella's husband sat down before the desk, and read these letters one by one,

carefully. His commercial instincts came to his aid and kept him wondrously cool. He arranged the letters according to their dates, and after reading one, folded and endorsed it neatly before he laid it aside, as if it had been a business document. Had he been a lawyer preparing a case for the divorce court he could hardly have been more deliberate.

The first ten or twelve letters were innocent enough. Courteous little notes about archery—French novels—a volume generally accompanying the letter that recommended it. Then the tone grew gradually more familiar—the notes became letters; then came sentiment—as morbidly sweet as the correspondence of Julie and her St. Preux, but happily without Julie's tendency to sermonizing. Then they grew still warmer—the old, old story, abuse of the stern laws that set up the accident of wedlock as a barrier against the divinity of passion.

There was a great deal Mr. Piper could not understand, but the gist of all was very clear to him. He saw that to the bottom of her heart his wife had been false, and that if she had hesitated on the brink of criminal treason, it was because she loved Little Yafford Park and the wealth that went along with it, not because she had one spark of gratitude or affection for him, Ebenezer Piper.

There was no limit to her treachery. The husband saw himself ridiculed, travestied—in the lover's letters. His ignorance, his vulgarity, were put forward as reasons why his wife should betray him. Such a man—to put the insolent plea in plain words—was unworthy of pity; he was beyond the pale of social law—the code of gentlemanly honour did not recognise his existence. He was a cipher, like those wretched husbands in the old feudal days, from whom the lord of the soil might take everything, bride, honour, the right of property in a newly wedded wife, as in the land they tilled and the harvest they reaped.

Mr. Piper made the letters up into a couple of neat bundles, and put them in his pocket. There was a letter for every day in the week. Captain Standish's idleness had run into letter-writing. Then, pale to the lips, but cold and firm, Mr. Piper replaced the pigeon-holes, shut the escritoire, and went downstairs to see if his wife had yet come home.

'Home,' he repeated. 'No, she shall never call my house by that name again.'

And then he remembered his first wife, with her humble dog-like fidelity, her narrow spirit, troubled about many things, but always true to him, reverencing him as the king of men, the epitome of wisdom. Poor Moggie, who had been pretty and buxom once, and who had kept his house so well in those happy days when he was beginning to grow rich. Ah, how different from this beautiful viper,

this living lie, a creature that could smile at him and caress him while she kept those letters in her desk!

‘She shall never cross my threshold again,’ he said to himself. ‘There shall be no slander—no legal separation. I’ll give her a thousand a year, and she may go to the devil her own way.’

The clock struck five as he went downstairs. A cold white mist veiled the park, and crept into the house. The fire glowed redly on the hearth in the hall, before which the footman sat in a Glastonbury chair, reading the newspaper.

‘Mrs. Piper not returned yet?’ asked the master of the house.

‘No, sir.’

The man vacated the seat in his master’s favour, and went off to his tea and toast in the servants’ hall—such buttered toast as could never have been in the first Mrs. Piper’s time, when there were close calculations weekly as to the pounds of butter that had been consumed—‘made away with’ the late Mrs. Piper called it when she was angry—during the last seven days.

Mr. Piper sat before the fire, looking straight into the glowing pile of coal and wood, and thinking of the letters he had just read. His mind was so full of these that the fact of his wife’s prolonged absence troubled him not at all. It did not even strike him as strange that she should be so long away. That other wonder, the strangeness of her treachery, the wonder that any woman could so deceive, absorbed every thought. He sat before the fire, meditating this great iniquity, and with only a dreamy sense that the day had been long, and that evening was drawing in.

So he sat, till he was startled by the sound of wheels upon the gravel drive. He went to the door and looked out through the glass panel. A carriage was coming slowly up the drive, followed by a man and woman on horseback, Captain Standish and Miss Porkman. Then came a horse led by a couple of men—a black horse, that walked lame, and hung his head dejectedly.

Where was his wife among all these?

He opened the door and went out upon the broad stone steps. The carriage came up at a foot pace. A man got out—little Mr. Namby, the village surgeon.

He came up the steps to Mr. Piper. Captain Standish dismounted and joined them.

Even in the autumn dusk Mr. Piper could see that his foe was ashy pale, and

moved by some violent agitation. Standish tried to speak, but the words would not come.

‘You tell him,’ he said to Mr. Namby, and then turned his back upon them both, and leant against one of the pillars of the portico, with his face hidden.

‘My dear Mr. Piper,’ began the surgeon, tremulously, ‘something dreadful has happened.’

‘I know it,’ answered Piper, curtly.

‘You have seen a great deal of domestic trouble—your first wife’s long illness; but—I—I fear this is worse than anything you have had to go through.’

‘It is,’ said Piper.

‘But how is this?’ asked the surgeon, with a puzzled air. ‘Has any messenger come on to you? Have you heard——?’

‘Have I heard of what?’

‘The accident in the hunting-field, Mrs. Piper’s fall?’

‘Oh, she has had a fall, has she?’ said Mr. Piper, with a most extraordinary coolness.

Mr. Namby thought he had gone suddenly mad.

‘Yes, a very bad fall. I fear it may be fatal. Will you send for her maid, or some one? We are going to lift her out of the carriage. She is quite helpless. She must be carried to her room.’

Vanessa Porkman had alighted from her horse, and came up the steps to Mr. Piper.

‘Oh,’ she cried, ‘it is too dreadful—a judgment upon us for going after the hounds without your knowledge—or pa’s. It wasn’t I who proposed it—indeed it wasn’t, dear Mr. Piper, but I feel myself guilty for all that. Can you ever forgive me?’

‘Oh, you’ve been hunting, have you, my wife and you—foolish of her, for she was never on a horse till I—I beg pardon—till Captain Standish gave her one,’—this in tones loud enough for the ear of the Captain, who stood close by.

Then Mr. Piper went down the steps and saw his wife lifted out of the carriage, and carried slowly and carefully into the house. There were two doctors, Mr. Namby, and Dr. Milroyd, from Great Yafford, who had been in the

field when Erebus balked himself at a bullfinch, and rolled into the ditch with his rider beneath him. Bella's maid and the butler both assisted. There was no lack of aid, but Mr. Piper stood on the steps and saw the little lifeless figure in the dark green habit carried past him, and offered no help.

He was on the threshold of his door when he turned and confronted Captain Standish. All the rest had followed Bella. These two were face to face with each other, and alone.

'What do you want in my house?' asked Mr. Piper, sternly.

'I should like to stop till—till the doctors have made their examination—to know if things are so bad as they seem to think,' faltered the captain, thoroughly crestfallen; and then, with a sudden burst of passion, he cried, 'Can't you understand that I feel myself to blame for this? It was I that put the notion of hunting in her head. I feel myself her murderer.'

'Yes, I understand perfectly,' answered Mr. Piper. 'I've got your letters in my pocket—your letters to my wife. Do you understand that, scoundrel? First you perverted her mind, and then you killed her. That's enough, I should think. You can want nothing more in my house; but when you boast of having seduced my wife, tell your friends that among all the husbands you have injured, one, at least, left a lasting mark upon you.'

Mr. Piper seized the captain by the collar, and with one crushing blow from his clenched fist sent him rolling down the steps. Captain Standish was an accomplished pugilist, but that unexpected blow carried all the force of a strong man's outraged honour, and might have felled an ox. The tall slim figure swayed to and fro, swerved to the left, and fell face downwards against the base of a stone column.

CHAPTER XX.

LET SILENCE BE ABOUT HER NAME.

BELLA was dying. The doctors had pronounced their verdict. The spine had been fatally injured. A few hours of life—hours in which there would be happily little or no suffering—alone remained to Mr. Piper's second wife. Very brief had been the story of his courtship and marriage.

He had sent off a groom to Great Yafford on one of the carriage horses to summon the most famous surgeon in the town, but Dr. Milroyd, who was a physician of some standing, and the humble Mr. Namby, who was not without experience in surgery, assured Mr. Piper that the whole college of surgeons would be powerless to prolong Bella's life for an hour beyond the natural running out of the sand in a glass that had been turned for the last time.

'You can go and sit by her if you like,' said Mr. Namby, kindly. 'It can do no harm. She would like you to be there, I dare say, poor thing. And don't you think her family ought to be sent for?'

'Yes,' answered Mr. Piper. 'I dare say she'd like to see them.'

They were standing in the corridor outside Bella's room. That strange tranquillity of Mr. Piper's impressed the doctors. They ascribed it to the intensity of his grief. He was stunned, no doubt, poor fellow, by the sudden calamity.

Ebenezer Piper went into the apple-green bedroom where his wife was lying, the wife who was so soon to drift away from him down that dark stream which led he knew not whither. The certainty of impending death made her sacred. She was beyond punishment or upbraiding. One could scarcely say hard things to the vilest criminal, when his hour of doom was fixed and the rope round his neck. The final irrevocable sentence stultifies all lesser penalties.

Bella was lying with her face turned away from the light, her lovely auburn hair rippling over the pillows—that hair whose luxuriance had been one of her charms. One little hand lay inert upon the satin coverlet. How pretty she was! The sense of her beauty struck her husband with actual pain. So lovely, so innocent-looking, and so false!

'If she had lived I would have never seen her face again,' he thought, 'but

now it doesn’t matter.’

He sat down in the arm-chair by her bed, and waited for her to speak. For himself there was nothing that he could say to her. There was an aching pity for her untimely fate in his heart, coexistent with his burning indignation at her treachery. The fact that she was speedily to die might touch him with compassion, but it could not lessen the baseness of her ingratitude or make her falsehood pardonable.

She moved her head restlessly on the pillow, and gave a sigh of weariness.

‘Who’s that?’ she asked.

‘Your husband,’ Mr. Piper answered, quietly.

‘Can you forgive me for hunting without your permission?’ she said in a low voice. How often had that dulcet voice charmed her husband! ‘It was very wrong, very foolish, but you see I have to pay a big price for it.’

‘Is there nothing else you have to ask forgiveness for?’ he inquired, bitterly. ‘You had better make a clean slate while you are about it. Is there nothing else you are sorry for—on your deathbed?’

There was a pause. Almost unawares the husband took one of those long silken tresses and twined it round his fingers, the bright soft hair he had loved so well.

‘Perhaps I have not been grateful enough for all your kindness,’ faltered Bella. ‘You have been very good to me—very generous. Yes, I ought to have been more grateful.’

‘Do you really think so?’ asked Mr. Piper, with keenest bitterness. ‘Can you really find a speck or flaw in your conduct? Don’t you think you have been a perfect wife?’

Bella began to cry.

‘I am sure I have tried to do my duty,’ she said. ‘I have tried to make your home pleasant to you—and to improve your position in society.’

‘Yes,’ answered the husband, with an uncontrollable gust of passion. ‘You have made me acquainted with Captain Standish.’

Bella’s quiet weeping changed to hysterical sobbing. Her whole frame was shaken.

‘Yes,’ pursued Mr. Piper. ‘You have tried very hard to improve my position in society. You have held me up to scorn and ridicule. You have made me the laughing stock of my old friends, as the fond deluded husband—the middle-aged dupe of a pair of blue eyes and a rosebud mouth. While my first wife lived I was a respectable man. You have made me—what? A door-mat for Captain Standish.’

‘I have done nothing really wicked,’ pleaded Bella. ‘I have been foolish, perhaps. I have let him pay me compliments—and—and—that kind of thing. But I have not broken one of the commandments. I could kneel in church and hear them read without feeling myself a castaway.’

‘Don’t cry,’ said Mr. Piper. ‘There’s no use in talking about it. I have read Captain Standish’s letters to you.’

‘You have broken open my desk,’ cried Bella, in sudden alarm.

‘Yes, I have seen his presents, and read his letters, and I can guess what he thought of you when he wrote them, and what he meant to be the end of your acquaintance.’

‘He asked me to run away with him, and I refused,’ protested Bella.

‘That was the first time,’ said Mr. Piper, coolly. ‘You refused me the first time, you know. The captain meant to ask again, you may be sure.’

‘I have been selfish and ungrateful,’ sobbed Bella.

‘God made you so, I think,’ answered Mr. Piper, excusingly. ‘I believe it’s in the grain. Don’t cry, poor thing. If you had lived there must have been a bitter reckoning between you and me—but death squares everything. If God can forgive you, I must not stand out. He’s the largest creditor.’

He took the little cold hand lying loose upon the coverlet, and pressed it gently. It was not in his nature to be unmerciful. And then she was passing away from him—she was drifting out of his jurisdiction. There was that awe upon him which the hardest must feel in the presence of death. At that friendly pressure Bella gave a sob of relief.

‘Oh, if you can only forgive me, I think I can die in peace,’ she said. ‘It seems hard to die—so young—and just as life was so bright. But I have been very wicked—to others as well as you. There is some one to whom I must make atonement. Send for Mr. Culverhouse.’

‘Wouldn’t you rather see Mr. Dulcimer?’ asked Mr. Piper, thinking that the

Vicar ought to be a more powerful friend at this crisis.

‘No, no, Mr. Culverhouse. I cannot die in peace till I have seen him.’

‘He shall be sent for this minute, Bella. Don’t agitate yourself.’

Mr. Piper went out of the room and gave his orders, and then came back and seated himself quietly by the bed, and kept silence. It was not quite two years since he had sat by poor Moggie’s death-bed, and heard her talk of heaven, and how they two were to meet there and know each other again, and have all their children join them one by one in due time, like an affectionate Irish family whose elders had emigrated to America. To Moggie’s simple soul death had seemed verily emigration.

It was night when Cyril Culverhouse answered Mr. Piper’s summons. He had been for one of his long rounds in outlying districts, and only came home at ten o’clock, to hear of the calamity at the Park. To Bella those hours of waiting had seemed endless.

‘If I die without seeing him, I am a lost creature,’ she said.

‘But, Bella, if there’s any weight upon your conscience, can’t you trust your husband?’ asked Mr. Piper. ‘Surely there’s no one with a better right to know.’

‘It’s nothing that concerns you,’ answered Bella, impatiently. ‘You have found out the worst about me. This is a deeper wrong. This is something wicked that I did when I was a girl. It didn’t seem much to do, but it has weighed upon me ever since.’

Mr. Piper wondered at this confession. He had never seen any indication of a troubled conscience in his wife’s manner or conduct.

Presently Mr. Culverhouse was announced. Mr. Piper went out into the corridor to receive him.

‘My wife is uneasy in her mind about something,’ he said. ‘I dare say she’d like to see you alone. Don’t be hard upon her, Mr. Culverhouse, if she has done anything wrong. She has only a few hours to live. She has thrown her foolish young life away to gratify the whim of the moment.’

‘Hard upon her!’ exclaimed Cyril. ‘You need not fear.’

Cyril went alone into the apple-green bedroom. Mr. Piper walked up and down the corridor, waiting for the interview to be over. He was passing Miss Porkman’s door when Vanessa put her head out.

‘Oh, Mr. Piper, mayn’t I go to her?’ she asked. ‘The doctors have told me that they can’t save her. I feel so miserable. I feel as if it were my fault.’

‘It’s everybody’s fault,’ said Mr. Piper. ‘We’ve all been fools. I indulged her like a fool, and she made a foolish use of my indulgence. See what it has led to —a life thrown away.’

‘It’s too dreadful,’ said Vanessa, who had never before been face to face with the tragedy of life.

‘How did it happen?’ asked Mr. Piper. ‘You were with her, weren’t you?’

‘Yes, I saw it all. She had set her heart upon hunting, you know. And Captain Standish said the horse was a splendid hunter—and so he seemed, poor foolish thing, till he took that fatal jump. We went to the meet, and then when the hounds went off we followed them with the rest. It was lovely, the thing I had been longing for ever since I began to ride. For the first hour or so it was the easiest thing in the world—riding a little, and waiting about a good deal; and then they found the fox, and there was a rush, and we started at a splendid pace, Bella and I side by side, and Captain Standish close to us. She rode beautifully, and the horse behaved beautifully. The captain praised her for her pluck. She jumped three or four low hedges—and a ditch or two—and did it as easily as if she had been hunting all her life—and then we came to a stretch of open country, and the horses flew. We were among the first all through, and Bella was in raptures with her horse—and then—and then—the rest seems like a dreadful dream—all dimness and confusion—we came into a big ploughed field with a bullfinch at the end. “There’s a gap,” cried somebody, and I was just riding off with some of the others towards a corner of the field, when Captain Standish called to Bella very loud, “Don’t try it,” and in the next minute I saw the black lift himself up for the jump beautifully—and then his hind feet caught in the top of the quickset hedge, and he rolled over into the next field with Bella under him. It was all done more quickly than I can tell it.’

There was a long pause, and then Mr. Piper gave a shuddering sigh.

‘Did you know she was following the hounds without her husband’s knowledge or consent?’ he asked.

‘I’m afraid I did,’ answered Miss Porkman, with a contrite air. ‘But I did not think any harm would come of it. She rode so well, and the horse was a clever hunter. Captain Standish tried him two or three times. It was poor Bella’s inexperience; she went straight at that tall thick quickset hedge—an awful thing —like a wall.’

‘I don’t think it will be a particularly pleasant recollection for you to carry about with you during the rest of your life, Miss Porkman,’ said Mr. Piper.

‘Oh, Mr. Piper, surely you can’t blame me,’ remonstrated Vanessa, tearfully.

‘I do blame you for aiding and abetting my wife in disobedience,’ Mr. Piper answered, severely.

While this conversation was taking place in the corridor, Cyril Culverhouse sat in Mr. Piper’s chair by Bella’s pillow, and waited for the departing sinner’s confession, ready with words of comfort and exhortation.

‘I have been dreadfully wicked,’ she began, falteringly, ‘but it was all Mrs. Dulcimer’s fault.’

‘Mrs. Dulcimer! How could Mrs. Dulcimer cause you to do wrong?’

‘She put a foolish idea into my head, and it took root there, and poisoned my life. She told me that—I hate myself when I think how easily I was duped—that you cared for me.’

‘Hush!’ said Cyril, gently. ‘Why talk of that now? It was foolish of Mrs. Dulcimer. She has made a good many mistakes of that kind—out of kindness. But the error did not last long. I told her frankly that my heart had been given elsewhere—that you could never be more to me than a friend whose amiability and sweetness I admired. Why recall that? You have been happily married to a good man. He deserves all your pity in this dark hour—your affectionate consideration. And you have to think of God. You may have offended Him in many things. Give the short hours He has left you to prayer and meditation.’

‘I must recall that wretched mistake,’ said Bella, feverishly. ‘I tell you it was that which made me wicked. I have been very wicked. I have injured my kindest friend.’

‘What friend?’ asked Cyril, very pale.

‘Beatrix Harefield!’

‘You have injured her?’

‘Yes. Do you see a jewel-case on the dressing-table over there—a large morocco case? Take my keys from under my pillow. I have no power to move myself—but I made the doctor put my keys under my pillow. It is the smallest key of all,’ she went on, when Cyril obeyed her. ‘Now open the jewel-case, and press the little gilt knob at the right side of the tray. That opens a drawer, doesn’t

it?’

‘Yes, the drawer has come out. There is a letter in it,’ said Cyril.

‘Take that letter. I found it on the table in Mr. Harefield’s library the morning after his death. It is addressed to his daughter.’

‘And you have kept it ever since? This letter—left for his daughter to read after his death. You are indeed a wicked woman.’

‘I did not think how wicked it was at the time,’ faltered Bella. ‘But some devil prompted me to take it, and hide it—till—till I should feel inclined to give it up. And then—oh, why do you make me tell you all my wickedness? I knew that you loved her, and I thought—if—if people believed her guilty of her father’s death, you would not marry her. That awful suspicion would part you. The letter might have put an end to the suspicion, perhaps. I did not know what was in the letter. I never broke the seal, you see. Yes, I was steeped in wickedness when I did it. I would have sold my soul to Satan to part you and Beatrix. Do you think God will forgive me?’

‘God’s mercy is infinite, and forgives even treachery,’ answered Cyril, coldly. He was standing by the dressing-table, holding Christian Harefield’s letter in his hand. ‘But it is a sin that man finds it hard to forgive. What you did was a vile and cruel act. I cannot palter with the truth because your hours are numbered. That is the reason why I should speak all the more plainly. If I were a stranger to Beatrix Harefield, I should look upon your conduct with horror—but I—I—who loved and wronged her—wronged her by a suspicion which this letter might have set at rest for ever—how can I think of your conduct calmly? How can you expect pardon or pity from me?’

‘I don’t expect either,’ whimpered Bella. ‘I’m glad I am going to die. I have made a wretched use of my life. I am almost glad it is over. And yet it seems hard to die before one is five-and-twenty.’

Her hand, straying idly in its feverish unrest, entangled itself in a tress of auburn hair.

‘Isn’t it bright and long?’ she said, with a bitter little laugh. ‘With most women beauty dies first. They die piecemeal, a little bit at a time, till there is no trace left of the girl people used to admire. That must be dreadful. To look in the glass some morning, and see the change all at once, and cry, “Can this really be I?” I am glad I have escaped that.’

Cyril stood with the letter in his hand, silent.

‘Why don’t you open that letter?’ asked Bella. ‘It will solve the mystery, no doubt.’

‘Whether it can or no, I shall not break the seal,’ answered Cyril. ‘It shall be my business to put this letter into Beatrix Harefield’s hand.’

‘And you will tell her how wicked I was, and how I hated her from the moment I knew she had stolen your love.’

‘Her excellence commanded my love. She did not steal it. My heart never belonged to any other.’

‘Why do you quarrel with a poor dying creature about words? To me it seemed that she stole your heart. She came between me and the only man I ever loved. How could I help hating her?’

‘Why will you think and talk of these things?’ pleaded Cyril, going back to his seat by the bedside, determined, if it were possible, to bring this frivolous soul to the contemplation of eternity. She was so soon to be adrift on the wide ocean, and yet lingered so idly to trifle with the shells upon the shore.

‘Remember all your past life only as a dream that you have dreamt, a vision darkened by sin and folly. You were guilty of a great sin when you stole that letter, for you must have known that you were injuring a fellow-creature. You took the letter deliberately, to that end. But the motives that prompted you to that act are of little moment now. Think of it only as a sin to be repented of, with deep and heartfelt contrition.’

Then he spoke to her in his sacred character, and would not again suffer her mind to wander back to earthly things. He was with her, reading to her, talking to her, praying with her, for a long time, and he left her at last with a mind that was at peace with God and man.

‘You will see Beatrix,’ she said at the last. ‘Tell her that I was very fond of her—once. That the old love comes back now that I am dying. Tell her that it is sweet to me now to think of her being reunited to you. Ask her to forgive me—if she can.’

Cyril promised to come again early the next morning. She should have her husband and her family gathered round her bed, in that last sad communion, where the prayers of the living and the dying mingle in a solemn farewell.

But when Cyril came next morning, shortly after dawn, with Mr. and Mrs. Scratchell, and Bella’s eldest brother and sister, they were met on the threshold

of the house by Mr. Piper, who told them all was over. She had died very peacefully, in the chilly hour just before daybreak, with her hand clasped in his.

‘Poor little woman!’ sighed the tender-hearted Piper. ‘She spoke to me so sweetly just at the last.’

And Mr. Piper forgave even the treachery of an intrigue carried on before his face. Had his wife lived, pardon would have seemed to him almost impossible; but anger died in his heart as he stood beside the fair marble figure, and looked at the flower-like lips that could never speak falsehood any more.

He made Captain Standish’s worthless letters and valuable gifts into a parcel, and had it delivered at that gentleman’s quarters. The servant who carried it heard incidentally that the captain had had a bad fall from his horse on the Great Yafford road on the evening after Mrs. Piper’s fatal accident, and had gone home to be nursed.

This report caused Mr. Piper to smile, for the first time since his discovery of his wife’s falsehood.

‘I believe I’ve put a mark upon him that he won’t get rid of very quickly, even with her ladyship’s sick nursing,’ he said to himself.

This was true. The broken head which the captain had got that evening in the portico left a scar that was not likely to be cured, let him live as long as he might. But for once in his life Captain Standish felt himself constrained to take his punishment quietly. He had no redress against the man whose wife’s loyalty he had perverted, and whom his folly had widowed.

CHAPTER XXI.

‘BUT PROVE ME WHAT IT IS I WOULD NOT DO.’

FROM the house of death Cyril went straight to the Vicarage, to tell his Vicar all that had happened, and to entreat for immediate freedom. He could not rest a day until he had given Christian Harefield’s letter into Beatrix’s hands.

Clement Dulcimer was all indulgence, his wife all sympathy.

‘We shall miss you sorely, as we missed you before,’ said the Vicar, ‘but we shall manage to get on somehow, as we managed before, and you will come back to us, will you not, when you have accomplished your mission?’

‘Without fail I shall return, though it will not be to remain long with you, dear friend. Now that my health is restored I begin to long for a wider field.’

Then go as soon as you like, and God be with you,’ said the Vicar, heartily. ‘But I’m afraid you will have some trouble to find the runaway heiress.’

‘I will find her,’ said Cyril, ‘if I have to wander over all the earth in search of her.’

‘And you will marry her, and she will be Lady Culverhouse after all, for of course if you married you would have to take up your title,’ said Mrs. Dulcimer. ‘It may be weak-minded on my part, but I should like Beatrix to have the title. I always used to think of her as Lady Culverhouse. Poor Kenrick!’

‘I will take her that letter, her father’s last letter—a letter which I cannot doubt contains a statement of his fatal intention—the indisputable proof of her innocence. I will put that letter in her hand, and then she shall deal with me as she likes. It must be for her to decide my fate.’

‘Why not put an advertisement in the *Times*,’ suggested the Vicar, ‘a carefully worded advertisement, telling her that a letter written by her father on the night before his death has come to hand, and begging her to come home, where it awaits her?’

‘If she is abroad she is not likely to see the *Times*,’ answered Cyril. ‘Besides, I would not vulgarize her family secrets by putting them in an advertisement, however enigmatically worded. No, it shall be my business to find her. It is a

small thing for me to do—a small sacrifice, even if I were to spend seven years of my life upon the task—a small atonement for the cruel wrong I have done her.'

'If you think that, you may as well set out,' said the Vicar. 'But I don't believe your quest will take seven years of your life. Our modern civilization has set its heel on knightly enterprise. Now-a-days a man could not be chivalrous if he tried ever so hard. Railways, post-offices, electric telegraphs, have made all things easy. Romance is dead. Yes, Cyril, you must be content to be a common-place lover. You remember what old Aubrey says, "The divine arts of printing and gunpowder have frightened away Robin Goodfellow and the fairies."'

'You had a letter from Beatrix after she left us, Clement,' said Mrs. Dulcimer. 'That might be some use.'

'Not much, I fear,' answered the Vicar. 'She wrote to me from Paris within a week of her leaving us, asking my forgiveness for all the trouble she had caused me. My forgiveness, poor child! As if it were not her own life she had to dispose of, and her own soul to which she was responsible for her deeds. It was a sad sweet letter, full of affection and good feeling, but it told me very little of her plans for the future, except that she meant to wander about the Continent with Madame Leonard, and that in the course of her travels she intended to visit Italy, the scene of her mother's youth and of her mother's death.'

'That would be a natural desire,' said Cyril.

'I cannot conceive that there can be much difficulty in finding her,' continued the Vicar. 'A young woman of landed estate cannot hide herself under a bushel. She has a banker to whom she must apply when she wants funds for her travelling expenses. He must know something of her whereabouts.'

'Where does she bank?' asked Cyril.

'At Hodge and Turner's, at Great Yafford, the County Bank.'

'I will go at once and see if there is anything to be learned there.'

Cyril walked to Great Yafford that afternoon, saw the bank manager, and ascertained from him that Miss Harefield had written to the bank, from Paris, for six hundred pounds in circular notes, almost immediately after she left Little Yafford. She had drawn nothing since that time. The circular notes had been obtained by Messrs. Hodge and Turner, through their London agents, from the Temple Bar branch of the Union Bank.

‘The circular notes would go back to the bank that issued them, would they not?’ asked Cyril.

‘Naturally, but there is no rule as to the time of their return. The local banker who cashed a note might hold it over until he had other bills to transmit. A considerable time might elapse before the notes got back to the bank that issued them.’

‘I shall go to the Union and try to find out when and where the notes were cashed. Miss Harefield has been away more than six months. Some of the notes, at least, must have come back to the bank. Will you give me a letter of introduction to the manager?’

Cyril had already explained that he had a document of vital importance to convey to Miss Harefield, that it was in her interest he sought her.

The letter was written, and Cyril started by the midday train for London. He saw the manager of the Temple Bar branch early next day, and from his courtesy obtained the following information:—

Three notes had been cashed in Paris on the 21st of April.

Five notes had been cashed in Florence during the months of May and June.

A note had been cashed at Brest in August, one at Rennes in the same month, two at St. Malo in September. There was nothing later than this.

The notes bore the address as well as the signature of the writer. On those last notes cashed at St. Malo the address was,

HOTEL CHATEAUBRIAND,
ST. SERVANS.

It was the beginning of November. Cyril was in a position to trace Miss Harefield’s movements up to the 29th of September. She might have remained even longer at St. Malo. It was clearly there that he must go.

Happily for his impatience, which was extreme, the St. Malo boat sailed that night from Southampton. Within twenty-four hours after he left the Union Bank, Cyril was in the broad windy street of St. Servans.

The proprietress of the hotel perfectly remembered Miss Harefield. They had many English visitors, but this lady was so distinguished. She was at once so amiable and so dignified. She and her companion had always dined in their own

salon. They had never appeared at the *table d'hôte*. They had engaged a carriage for their express use, and had driven about to all the interesting places in the neighbourhood. The landlady was obligingly communicative, but when she was asked where Miss Harefield went upon leaving St. Servans, her information came to a stop. There was the visitors' book, in which Miss Harefield and Madame Leonard had written their names, but beyond their names nothing.

'But these ladies must surely have given instructions for their letters being sent after them,' said Cyril.

'But no, Monsieur. They received no letters while they were here; they appeared to expect none.'

'Did you never hear them talk of where they meant to go?'

'No, Monsieur, they were ladies of an extreme reserve—silent even—all that there is of the most gracious—but never communicative. They left St. Malo by the railway—that is all I can tell you. They did not leave by the English boat.'

Cyril was at a standstill. He seemed no nearer Beatrix now, at St. Malo, than he had been at Little Yafford. Six weeks ago she had been an inmate of this hotel, but in six weeks she might have travelled to the other end of Europe. She, who was as free as the wind, would hardly care to dawdle about the quiet old towns of Brittany.

'Was Miss Harefield well—did she seem in good spirits?' he asked the landlady.

'Alas, no! she had been suffering. She came to St. Servans for the sea baths. She needed strength. She had the air of one who had suffered much grief. Madame Leonard was always bright and cheerful, and devoted to the young lady; but the English miss was not happy. That showed itself to the eye.'

'Had she any medical attendant while she was with you?'

'No. She mocked herself of doctors.'

Cyril thanked the kindly proprietress, and strolled idly away from the hotel. He knew not which direction to take. The prospect was discouraging. Perhaps, after all, he would be compelled to put an advertisement in the *Times*, informing Beatrix, in veiled words, that a letter of her father's awaited her at a certain address. But even if he did this, how could he be sure she would see the paper? He knew of old how difficult it is to find an English newspaper in a French provincial town. No, he must find her himself; but to his impatience the thing

seemed hopeless at the outset. He walked through the well-remembered streets, by the ever-improving fortifications, white stone walls looking out upon a bright blue sea. The yellow sands by the Grand Bé were deserted by their holiday crowd. The cold autumn winds swept over the long low shores. Everything had a desolate look.

Cyril went into St. Malo to see the churches, which he remembered years ago. He spent a couple of hours looking at painted windows and sculptured tombs. And then he wasted another hour strolling about the streets and the quay, watching the boat being loaded, and wondering what he should do next. And then he went to the railway station to find out all about the trains, with a vague hope that some idea might suggest itself as to Beatrix's journey when she left St. Malo. He was on his way to the station when a face flashed upon him in one of the narrow streets, and passed him by before he had time to remember where he had seen it.

Whose face could it be, and why was it so familiar?

He stopped to consider, and looked back to see if the owner of the face was still in sight. Yes, there she was, walking briskly along the narrow pavement, threading her way dexterously through the crowd, a little woman, neatly dressed in a black silk gown and a gray mantle.

Dimly, as in a dream, did he remember that face. It must have been a memory of long ago, he thought. And then in a moment he recalled the scene to which that face belonged—his sick room at Bridford—the old-fashioned wainscoted bedroom, with its dull brown walls, four-post bedstead and drab hangings—the weariness of fever and delirium—the bright black eyes peering at him from the shadow of the nun's white hood.

'It is my little nurse,' he said to himself, 'the elder of those two good women.'

He turned and followed the lady in the gray mantle. It was strange to see her in a dress so different from her nun-like habit, but then she had told him that she belonged to no conventual order. Once having given her the start, it was not easy to gain upon her, she tripped along so briskly, and the street here close to the market was crowded. Cyril was almost breathless when he caught her.

'Pray, Madame, do not deny yourself to one who is deeply indebted to you,' he said, hat in hand, gasping a little. 'When you passed me just now I recognised you as one I well remembered, but I could not for the moment recall the circumstances of our acquaintance. I have so longed to see you again, to be able to thank you.'

The little Frenchwoman looked at him with a most innocent stare.

‘Monsieur deceives himself,’ she said in her own language. ‘I have not the honour of his acquaintance.’

‘Nay, Madame, you cannot forget one who owes you so much—perhaps life itself. You cannot have forgotten your fever patient at Bridford.’

‘Bridford,’ echoed the lady, ‘what is that?’

‘Oh, Madame, you are trifling with me. It is not possible I can be mistaken. Do you not belong to a nursing sisterhood, a band of holy women, who, bound by no religious order, go about doing good, attending their ailing fellow-creatures, without fee or reward?’

‘No, sir, I do not. I never even heard of such a sisterhood,’ replied the lady, resolutely.

‘I must ask you to pardon me, then. But it is a most wonderful likeness. I am deeply disappointed,’ said Cyril, allowing the lady to pass, with a respectful bow.

He was more than disappointed, he was mystified. In spite of the lady’s assertion he could not bring himself to believe that hers was not the face which he had seen by his sick bed in those long hours of languor and prostration, when he had nothing to do but watch his nurse’s kindly countenance, and listen to her friendly talk.

Yet, if this was his nurse, why should she deny herself to him? Was that one of the rules of her order? Was the order a kind of masonic association in good works?—a secret band of holy women, who disavowed their benevolent deeds after they were done?

CHAPTER XXII.

FAIR STILL, BUT FAIR FOR NO ONE SAVING ME.

CYRIL would have liked to follow the mysterious lady, but that would have been too discourteous; so he wandered listlessly in the streets of St. Malo for another hour or so, not knowing what to do with himself, and finally came to a standstill at an office on the outskirts of the town, whence a diligence started every afternoon for Dol.

‘Dol,’ he said. ‘What is Dol? I was never at Dol. I wonder if there is anything worth seeing at Dol, and if it be possible that Beatrix can have gone there?’

While he was wondering a hired fly drove up, containing the lady in the gray mantle, and a number of parcels of different kinds and sizes. The driver of the diligence went forward to receive the lady and her parcels. She was evidently a frequent patron of his conveyance. He took pains to instal her carefully in the wretched interior.

‘I’ll go to Dol,’ decided Cyril. ‘I am bent on finding out who and what this woman is. It will be only the loss of a day, and I shall have time to think out my plan for finding Beatrix.’

It was foolish, perhaps, he thought afterwards, to be so easily diverted from his path; but then the fact was that he had no path to take—he was fairly at a standstill. He could do no good by perambulating the streets of St. Malo. Dol was a place to explore—the chances against finding Beatrix there were as ninety-nine in a hundred perhaps—but it would be one town checked off the map of Europe, and he might be able to find out something about his mysterious sick nurse. So Cyril mounted to the seat beside the driver, where he had the shelter of an ancient leather hood to protect him from the wind, and where he felt very easy in his mind about the lady in the gray mantle. She could not escape him on the road.

He questioned the driver about his passenger, but the man could tell him nothing except that the lady lived at Dol, and that she came into St. Malo once a week to make her purchases. He could not say how long she had lived there, as he had been only driving the diligence for a month.

They drove through lanes and past fields and orchards which were entirely

Devonian in their aspect, halted at a village which was quainter and more picturesque, and, sooth to say, a little dirtier than a Devonshire village, and finally arrived, as the shades of evening were falling, at Dol, which impressed Cyril at first sight as the dullest town he had ever beheld. He knew Sandwich in Kent, he had visited Stamford in Lincolnshire, he had even seen Southend out of the Cockney season, but Dol had a more utterly deserted look than any of these. There were some fine mediæval buildings, there was a grand cathedral with two towers, one of which had been left unfinished in the Middle Ages. There were interesting courts and crannies and corners—but Melancholy had claimed Dol for her own. The country round looked flat and depressing—the outskirts of the town were arid and dusty—the modern houses had that intensely new and unfinished aspect peculiar to French architecture; and all ambitious attempts at improvement looked as if they had been nipped in the bud.

There was one rather pretty-looking house, in a small walled garden, and before the door of this garden the diligence stopped, and the lady in the gray mantle alighted. A French maid-servant opened the gate and ran out to take the traveller's parcels, and then mistress and maid went in at the door, and the walled garden swallowed them up.

The diligence deposited Cyril at an old inn in a small square not far from the cathedral, a good old house enough, where all things were cleanly and comfortable, and where he found a good-natured landlady, who was quite ready to answer his questions while he waited for the *table d'hôte* dinner.

He described the white house in the walled garden just outside the town, and asked if she could tell him anything about its inmates.

It was a house which let itself garnished, she told him, the owner being a merchant at Rennes, who only came to Dol occasionally, because it was his birthplace. Of its present inmates Madame knew nothing. She did not even know that it was let. It had been long unoccupied. She excused herself for this ignorance on the ground that she went out so seldom. The house, and then the kitchen occupied all her time, not to speak of her two little angels, who were exacting, like all children.

Of the two little angels, one was then squalling lustily in the adjoining kitchen, while the other hung to its mother's gown and scowled at the stranger.

'Have you had many English visitors this season?' Cyril inquired.

'Oh yes, Monsieur, a crowd. The English love so much our Brittany—and Dol is the first town in Brittany. It is interesting to the traveller were it only for that

reason.’

‘Naturally. Since September now—the end of September—can you recall any English visitors, ladies, who have been with you?’

‘But no, Monsieur. After September our season is over. It is late. We have had no English ladies since then.’

‘There are other hotels at Dol, I suppose?’

‘Yes, Monsieur, but this is the first.’

Cyril dined with a few sleepy-looking inhabitants, and a couple of sub-lieutenants from the neighbouring barracks, and after his dinner went to look at the cathedral, which had a shadowy grandeur by the light of a few solitary lamps burning here and there before a shrine.

After this he was glad to go to bed, having slept very little on board the St. Malo steamer. He put Christian Harefield’s letter under his pillow.

He was up before daybreak next morning, and was out with the first streak of pallid light in the east. He went first to look at the house which had swallowed up the lady in the gray mantle. He made a circuit of the garden-wall, but discovered nothing except that there were poultry on the premises, a fact imparted to him shrilly by a peculiarly energetic cock, apparently of the bantam breed, so eager was he, like all small creatures, to assert his importance. There was no indication of the life within to be drawn from the blank white wall, the closed venetians of the upper windows, or the gilded vane upon the roof. Neighbours there were none. So he left the spot no wiser than when he had approached it.

The morning was lovely, the air balmy, despite the lateness of the season. It was just that calm, delightful hour when earth seems as fresh as if the Creator’s work were but newly finished. Cyril set out on a perambulation of the neighbourhood of Dol. His hostess had talked to him last night of a certain Mont Dol, as a thing to be seen, so he went to see what this Mont Dol was like.

He walked for about a couple of miles through a level country, somewhat Flemish in its character, a country that had only the charm of rusticity to recommend it. Then he came all at once upon a raw-looking church, of a commonplace order, a few straggling cottages, and a steep rugged-looking hill, which rose out of the level plain with an extraordinary suddenness. He climbed this hill by a rough road, which dwindled by and by into a narrow winding track, and mounted in the early sunlight to an undulating heathy hill-top looking wide

over the blue waters of the Channel. On this hill-top there was no human habitation, only a votive chapel and the white statue of a saint, looking down upon the quiet hillocks and hollows, the clumps of furze, and tranquil sheep cropping the dewy grass in the sweet morning air. He had never looked on a more pleasant scene. The world, life, and all its cares lay far below him—the blue wood smoke was curling up from the chimneys of many-gabled Dol, the church tower and its stunted twin brother, the tower that had never been finished, rose darkly above all meaner things on the level plain, white sails of passing vessels were shining yonder against the blue horizon. He felt himself alone upon this lonely hill, in a serener atmosphere than the air of every-day life. A saintly hermit of old time might have passed his contemplative days pleasantly enough in a cell adjoining the chapel yonder.

He rambled round the hill-top, lingering every now and then to look landward or seaward, for on either side the prospect was full of beauty. It was a spot where any man, with a genuine love of nature, might feel that he could spend hours and days of life, alone with his own thoughts and the peaceful beauty round him. The big bell of Dol chimed nine, the bright autumn sun climbed higher in the blue clear sky, a sheep-bell tinkled, an elderly lamb bleated, a little shepherd boy sang his little nasal song, a late bumble-bee buzzed among late furze bloom. There were no other sounds.

Cyril made the circuit of the chapel, which was closely locked against intrusion. He looked at the statue, and turned his face idly seaward for the twentieth time, thinking within himself how foolishly he was wasting his day, and how little this perambulation of the Mont Dol would help him towards the accomplishment of his mission; and as he was thinking thus, and as he turned from the statue to the sea, he found himself face to face with something sweeter than the glad blue sea, dearer than all the wide bright earth, the face of the woman he loved.

She was standing before him, looking at him with a grave sad smile, dressed in black, and thin and careworn, beautiful only for eyes that loved her, since she had wasted the freshness of her youth and beauty in tears and sleepless nights, and untimely cares.

‘Beatrix!’ he cried, with a rush of gladness that almost stifled him. ‘Beatrix, Providence has sent us to meet here. I had sworn to myself to travel all over the world in search of you.’

‘Why should you want to find me?’ she asked. ‘I thought there were no two

persons on this earth with less reason to wish to meet than you and I.'

'I should not have presumed to follow you if I had not a motive strong enough to excuse my audacity. I have brought you this.'

He took Christian Harefield's last letter from his pocket, and gave it her without a word of explanation.

'From my father!' she cried, looking at the address, and then tearing open the envelope with trembling hands. 'In heaven's name how did you come by this letter—from my dead father? You who suspected me——'

Tears choked her. She brushed the hot drops from her eyes, and began to read the letter.

'"Sunday night, December 23rd,"' she began, falteringly.

'Why, that was the night before his death,' she cried. 'Read it for me. I cannot see the words. They swim before my eyes.'

Cyril stood by her side, reading the letter across her shoulder. He put his arm round her to hold her up, and she leaned against him trembling, hardly able to stand.

'MY POOR CHILD,—When you open this letter you will be fatherless—a little loss, for I have never been a father to you in anything save the name. For the last ten years I have been a miserable man, too miserable to care for my own flesh and blood, all that was good in me turned to evil.

'I loved your mother as women are not often loved, with an intense and concentrated affection that goes hand in hand with intense jealousy. I do not think it is possible for a man to love as I loved, and endure the knowledge that his love was unrequited, without having his nature perverted. My unrequited love engendered suspicion, evil thoughts, hatred of myself and the thing I loved.

'By a series of fatalities, which I need not set forth here, I was led to believe your mother false and unworthy—a degraded woman—a disgrace to you as she was a dishonour to me. To-night I learn that she was innocent—that her only sin against me was a sin of my own creation. She might have loved me, as the years went on, had I shown myself worthy of her love by trusting her truth and honour. My jealousy made her life miserable, and my groundless suspicion drove her from me, to die alone, friendless, hidden in an Italian convent.

‘Knowing what I know, knowing how happiness—the purest and deepest—was within my reach, and that I let it go, knowing that the bitterest miseries of my life were engendered in my own perverted mind, knowing that I made the misery of the being I fondly loved—I feel that I can no longer support the burden of a life without hope. Every chain must wear out in time. Mine was worn to attenuation before to-night—this last blow snaps it. To-morrow, when the world wakes to its petty round of cares and joys, my troubles will be over. You will find me as calm as if my life had been all peace. Saint and sinner are equal in death.

‘God bless you, poor child. May He be kinder to you than your earthly father has been. Love I could not give you—but the wealth which is mine to bestow I give you freely. Take warning from my miserable fate, and do not marry without the certainty that you are beloved. Your fortune will mark you out as a prey for every adventurer.

‘Should there be an inquiry about my death you can show this letter to the coroner. Should things pass, as, for your sake, I hope they may, without comment, let these last words of mine be sacred, the one only confidence I have ever given to my only child.

‘Enclosed you will find a statement from the principal of the convent where your ill-used mother spent her last days. It may please you some day to visit her grave in that lonely spot, and to weep there for the injuries my love inflicted on her, as I have wept for her this night, tears of blood, wrung from a heart tortured by vain remorse.

‘Your erring, unhappy father,
‘CHRISTIAN HAREFIELD.’

‘Do you believe now that I did not murder my father?’ cried Beatrix, turning to Cyril, with eyes that flashed indignant scorn through her tears.

‘I never believed otherwise, after we met face to face in the churchyard. I needed but to see you to know that you were innocent, and pure, and true. My suspicion was a monster of my own growth—the offspring of too much thought—and the fear that in winning your love I should seem a worshipper of mammon. Beatrix, I have been weak and despicable in this matter. My love should have been strong enough to withstand even a harder trial. I confess myself unworthy of your forgiveness, and yet I ask you to forgive me.’

‘Forgive you!’ she said, that changeful face of hers melting from scorn to

tenderness. ‘There is no moment of the past in which you were not forgiven. I was too ready to make excuses for you. I had no womanly pride, where you were concerned. It was only when I was made to believe that you had never cared for me—that from the first you had liked Bella Scratchell better than me—it was only then that I was weak enough to listen to Kenrick’s pleading. I thought it mattered so little what became of me, that I might as well give way. And then, when the time for our marriage drew near, I knew that I was going to commit a great sin, and I began to look for some way of escape. I only waited to arrange the release of Kenrick’s estate. I had made up my mind to run away before I saw you in the churchyard. You might have spared me some of your bitter speeches.’

‘Forgive me, beloved, forgive me.’

His arm was round her, her head lying on his breast, his lips bent down to hers, unreproved. There was no need of many words between them. Both knew that this chance meeting on the hill-top above the brightening sea meant eternal reunion. Who should part them now—these twin souls that had been parted and buffeted by the billows of fate, and had drifted together again at last? They clung to each other in a silent rapture, knowing that their hour of happiness had come.

‘I have never been angry with you,’ she faltered at last. ‘Fate has seemed unkind, not you. I have always believed you good, and true, and noble—even when you renounced me. Even when I thought that you had cared for Bella——’

‘Who could have told you that utter falsehood?’

‘It was Bella herself who hinted——’

‘Poor child, don’t you know that people who hint things they dare not assert are always liars? But Bella is gone, with all her sins upon her head. I will tell you more of her by and by. It is by her act that you have suffered. It was she who stole your father’s letter. On her death-bed——but I will tell you all by and by. You have had too much agitation already. How pale you are looking! And you are shivering too. We have been standing too long in this keen air. Let me take you home, dearest. Do you live far from here?’

‘A good way, but I shall be better presently.’

‘Lean on my arm, love.’

And so supported, Beatrix walked slowly down the narrow track, to the village at the foot of the hill, and by and by a faint colour came back to her cheeks, and a happy light shone in her lovely eyes. The clock struck ten as they passed the church.

‘I came out only for a ramble before breakfast,’ said Beatrix. ‘Poor Madame Leonard will be wondering what has become of me.’

‘Madame Leonard? Ah, that is your companion.’

‘Yes, the dearest creature in the world. I could never tell you what a comfort she has been to me—indulging all my caprices—consoling me in my sorrows—a second mother. And now she and I will go together to see my own mother’s grave—the convent where she died. I have been already to see the place of her birth.’

‘My Beatrix, do you think I will ever let you take any journey again without my company? A man who has lost a jewel and found it again knows how to guard his treasure. You are mine henceforward—mine till death—unless you tell me I have forfeited your love.’

‘I could not say anything so false. I have never left off loving you,’ she answered gently. ‘Do not let us talk of the past. Let us forget it, if we can. When I saw the announcement of poor Kenrick’s death in the *Times* I felt myself free—and—I thought—perhaps—some day I should go back to Yorkshire to see the kind Dulcimers, and my good old servants—and then—you and I might meet. But I never thought it would be so soon.’

‘God has been good to us, love. And now tell me, Beatrix, can you bear to give up your liberty and share the lot of a hard-working parish priest? Could you bear even to go with me into a busy, smoky town, full of foulest things—if I felt that duty constrained me to take up my abode there? Could you endure to live in such a place as Bridford, for instance? But, I forget, you do not know Bridford.’

‘I could endure life even at Bridford with you.’

‘Ah, but you have never seen the place, love.’

‘I repeat that I could share your life and labours even at Bridford,’ she said, smiling at him.

He gave a little sigh.

‘I am afraid you hardly know what you are promising. Know then, dearest, that I am in treaty with the Vicar of Bridford, with a view to getting his living transferred to me. It is a charge for which he is eminently unfitted. I began some good work there, and left it unfinished. As vicar I could do much that I vainly attempted as curate. I should have larger scope, better opportunities. I could get a band of hard-working young men round me. Yes, I believe I could transform the

place.’

‘I am like Ruth,’ said Beatrix, tenderly. ‘I follow where I love. Your duties shall be my duties, and your home my home. It shall go hard with me if I cannot make home pleasant to you, even at Bridford.’

‘And you will be content to see your wealth applied to doing good among a rough and often ungrateful population?’

‘I can imagine no better use for my wealth.’

‘Would you not rather that we should live at Culverhouse, in that fine old house, in the midst of that beautiful country? Poor Kenrick’s death has made Culverhouse mine, you know.’

‘I had rather live where your life can be most useful—noblest—and where I can help you.’

‘My own dear love, you make me happier than words can say!’

They came to the sleepy old town of Dol, and beyond it to a house half hidden behind a high white wall. Beatrix opened a green door leading into a garden, and Cyril followed her, full of wonder, into the very garden which had swallowed up the lady in the gray mantle.

That very lady came out, through an open window, to receive Beatrix.

‘My love, how you have given me a beautiful fright!’ she cried, in French; and then, seeing Cyril, stopped and looked confused.

‘Madame Leonard, let me present Mr. Culverhouse. He will stop to breakfast with us, I dare say, if you ask him.’

‘I begin to understand something,’ said Cyril, looking at Beatrix. ‘Madame Leonard was one of my nurses, though she denied it yesterday.’

‘Pardon!’ exclaimed Madame Leonard. ‘I said that I did not belong to a nursing sisterhood. I did not say that I had not nursed you.’

And then the little Frenchwoman gave a joyous laugh, out of pure satisfaction at the new aspect of things, and ran back to the house to order certain savoury additions to the breakfast, in honour of the unexpected guest.

‘Madame Leonard was one of my nurses,’ repeated Cyril. ‘And you were the other. Oh, Beatrix! how could I be so blind?’

‘Dear love, you were in the dark valley of death,’ said Beatrix. ‘It was my

sweetest privilege to watch and succour you. I owed all to Madame Leonard. When I read of your dangerous illness in the Bridford paper I was wretched at the thought of your loneliness, your helplessness, and I longed to come to you. Then this dear Madame Leonard suggested that we should come, in the disguise of nursing sisters, and take care of you. I should never have dared such a thing without her help. She arranged all—managed everything—smoothed away every difficulty. I can never be grateful enough to her for her goodness in that sorrowful time.'

'And to think that I should never have guessed! When you went from me I yearned for you, not knowing why. Your shadowy eyes haunted me, your image stayed with me like the memory of a dream. Oh, my dearest, my truest, how can I love you well enough for such love as this?'

They stayed in the wintry garden, talking of the past and the future, till poor Madame Leonard began to be unhappy about her carefully arranged breakfast. And then, after she had summoned them three times, they went in and sat at the snug round table drinking coffee, and making believe to eat, and arranging what was to be done next.

They were all to go back to Little Yafford together. Cyril and Beatrix were to be quietly married in the old village church, as soon as the Bridford living was his. The Water House was to be kept up in all its old comfort, and Madame Leonard was to be mistress there. It would serve as a country retreat for the Vicar of Bridford and his wife.

EPILOGUE.

TEN years later, and Sir Cyril Culverhouse and his wife are still at Bridford, in the good old Queen Anne parsonage, not five minutes' walk from the lodging where the two nursing sisters came to tend the fever-stricken curate. It is a fine old house, with red brick walls, deep-set windows, oak wainscots, broad staircase, and spacious hall paved with black and white marble, a house which, in the eyes of previous vicars, had been some compensation for the general smokiness and unpleasantness of the town. There is a good old garden too, at the back, which one would hardly expect to find in Bridford—a garden where the apple trees flourish, and the roses struggle into bloom somehow, in spite of the smoke, and where the young Culverhouses learn their lessons in summer, under the direction of Madame Leonard, whom they adore.

Every July there is a migration to the Water House, much to the delight of Mrs. Dulcimer, who spoils Beatrix's children, and believes religiously that she brought about the match between Cyril and Beatrix.

'Did I not advise you to go to France after her, Cyril?' demands the old lady, triumphantly, 'and did I not set my heart upon her being Lady Culverhouse?'

Within the ten years that are gone Cyril has done a great work in Bridford. That town is no longer a hotbed for the generation of vice, drunkenness, and fever. Sanitary reform, being a thing within the scope of human handiwork, has been done by line and rule, while other reforms, more subtle and secret, have been going on quietly, side by side with improvements in drainage and ventilation, water service and cottage building. Large resources have enabled Cyril to do what many a parish priest yearns in vain to accomplish. He has built streets of cottages, a club-house, half a dozen reading-rooms, a cottage hospital ten miles from the town, infant nurseries in every district. Instead of the one hard-worked curate, employed by his predecessor, he has four energetic young fellows going about all day long among the labouring poor, so that there is no corner of the crowded town in which the influence of the church is not daily felt, a protection against wrong, a succour in calamity, an incentive to cleanly living.

Once in every year, when the spring flowers are bright in the hedgerows, and the oaks are yellow with their unfolded leaves, Sir Cyril and his wife go with their children to Culverhouse Castle. This is the happiest time of all the year for

Beatrix and her children, the holiday of holidays. They know the country round Culverhouse by heart. They ride in the forest, and sail on the bright river, and make yachting excursions to the Wight, and go back to stony-hearted Bridford refreshed and strengthened by these simple natural pleasures. At Culverhouse, Beatrix is adored, as poor Kenrick prophesied she would be—but she is not more honoured or beloved there than by the rough factory hands of Bridford, where her name is a synonym for goodness.

Mr. Piper lives his life at Little Yafford Park, and spends unheard-of sums on the improvement of his farm buildings and hothouses. He has not married again, but has made for himself an idol in the shape of his farm. He goes on fattening cattle, and sacrificing generation after generation of pigs, in spite of the denunciations of Mr. Chumney, who continues to protest that so long as prize cattle are martyred at the shrine of human vanity the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is a mockery. Poor Mr. Piper finds a consolation for past sorrows in the fatness of his oxen and his pigs. His sons and daughters have grown up. The sons are in different commercial houses, learning to be merchant princes; the daughters are established at the Park, in the rooms which Bella beautified. The chief result of an expensive education at present to be perceived in these young ladies is a self-sufficiency which makes them despise their father, whom they publicly reprove for his faulty modes of speech, and his many deviations from the strict laws of etiquette as laid down by the Misses Turk. He is proud of his two tall, over-dressed girls, nevertheless, though not so proud of them as of his pigs, and he endures their youthful insolence with unvarying good temper. As the years go on he gets stouter and more puffy, eats more, drinks more, sleeps more, and more markedly assimilates the manners and customs of his prize porkers; whereat Chumney shakes his head dolefully, and prognosticates that Piper will go off some day like the snuff of a candle.

The school at Little Yafford has thriven under Emmanuel Joyce’s care, and the widow and her son still live happily in the cottage adjoining the school-house. Emmanuel is not solely dependent on his modest stipend as parish schoolmaster. He has been successful in his literary efforts. His books, all written for the young, have become immediately popular. His style is natural and pleasing, full of life and colour. That severe self-training he underwent in the days when he fancied himself a poet has stood him in good stead. His reading has taken a wider range, under the direction of Clement Dulcimer, and there is a richness of illustration in his later books that has a charm even for the unlearned. Mrs. Joyce’s pride in her son is boundless. She would like to see him married, but has not yet discovered that paragon of female excellence worthy to be his

wife. While she is looking out for that personification of all the virtues, Emmanuel grows more and more wedded to his books, his chimney corner, his meerschaum pipe, and the duties of that station which Providence has allotted to him.

Miss Coyle has departed this life, in the odour of sanctity, and her memory lives in the minds of Yafford people as a highly genteel person, who paid ready money for all her small requirements, was strict in her attendance at the services of her church, never carried a parcel, and was never seen out of doors without her gloves.

THE END.

J. AND W. RIDER, PRINTERS, LONDON

Corrections

The first line indicates the original, the second the correction.

p. 154

husband’s commercial allies of the past—the Wigzell’s,
husband’s commercial allies of the past—the Wigzells,

p. 192

a great many parties among the Wizgell, Timperley,
a great many parties among the Wigzell, Timperley,

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