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NELLY BROOKE.

A HOMELY STORY.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

(MRS. ROSS CHURCH.)

“Love is strong as death.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

1868.

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NELLY BROOKE.

CHAPTER I.

HOW THEY LIVED AT BICKTON FARM.

THE house which belonged to Bickton Farm had been built at two separate periods. The old building had been both picturesque and solid, with gabled eaves and Gothic casements, and deep window-sills of oak, dark with age and polished with use, each one of which served both as a seat and a chest for storing books or linen.

The new portion, which had been added within the past fifty years, was equally substantial, perhaps, but far less interesting in appearance. Its rooms were lighter and loftier than those of the old farm-house had been, but they had no ceilings raftered with dark wood like the ceiling of a chapel, or

wainscotings which reached half-way up the wall, and were surmounted by an old-fashioned chintz paper which had been varnished until its pattern was hardly distinguishable. Its chimneys, perhaps, were less liable to smoke, and its grates were more modern and convenient ; but it possessed no narrow mantelpieces, six feet from the flooring, with wide sides, which, although they had received many a sacrilegious coat of paint, were yet carved from top to base.

When the first building was about to be pulled down, it had been decided that three of its rooms were too perfect to be destroyed, and therefore as they lay to the back of the site whereon the new house was to be erected, they were permitted to stand, and were connected with the more modern part by a long covered passage. Notwithstanding which, they were almost like a separate dwelling, for they had a door for private egress, and fronted the sunniest side, looking out upon the only piece of flower-garden which the Farm possessed. These were the rooms that the farmer's " boys " had hitherto occupied, and of which they had sadly complained, as being dark and gloomy and cold ; and these were the rooms which Mr. Weston now offered

at a nominal rent, as the future abode of Robert and Nelly Brooke.

The brother, at first, was greatly opposed to the idea; he "hated" the Westons; and the rooms were "poky and inconvenient," and he would live in no one's house but his own. But after much gentle reasoning and persuasion, and when he had convinced himself that it was quite necessary they should let the Farm Cottage, and there was no other place in Little Bickton for them to go to, he permitted his sister to accept Mrs. Weston's offer—although he never ceased grumbling at their mutual ill-fortune in being obliged to do so. During these cheerless days, and the many cheerless days which followed them, Nelly, mentally and physically, worked like a little slave. She ran backwards and forwards from the Farm to the Cottage twenty times a day, and never returned without a large market basket heavily laden with all the smaller necessaries of a household. One hour she would be seated on the ground, laboriously stitching together the carpets to make them fit the larger rooms, the next on her knees nailing them down; or perilously perched on the top of a pair of steps while she hung up the curtains which were to keep the draught

from Bertie's sofa. Then she would fly back to the Cottage to sit for an hour by his side, not to rest herself, but only to coax him into permitting her to leave him with a better grace for the afternoon. Except for such assistance as Mrs. Weston, or her red-elbowed maids could occasionally give her, she was all alone in her labours; for if old Aggie had been less feeble than she was, some one would still have been required to attend to Bertie's multifarious wants. And then, when Nelly, after a long day of contrivance and arrangement, would return utterly weary to her tea at the Cottage, there was her brother to talk to and amuse for the rest of the evening, and to wait upon until he chose to go to bed, which was generally not until twelve or one o'clock. Yet for all that, she did not forget or omit a single thing for his comfort, before she allowed him to move from the Cottage to the Farm. On the evening on which the flitting was accomplished, she had everything ready for his use before she went over in Mrs. Weston's pony-chaise to fetch him to his new abode, and when supported by her arm, he entered the old-fashioned parlour, he was saluted by such an air of home that he almost forgot to grumble as he was fully prepared to

do. The substantial, though faded curtains, were carefully drawn across the embrasured windows ; a huge log burnt cheerfully in the wide fireplace, and his own sofa, which he had resigned but half-an-hour before, was already waiting him, placed close to a cosy tea table.

“Come ! this is better than I expected !” he graciously said ; and the remark was all the thanks for her trouble which Nelly required. When he retired that night to his bedroom, which adjoined the parlour, Robert found everything just as comfortably settled for his use. All the best and most convenient articles of furniture had been moved into his room ; and the easiest mattresses and the thickest blankets, and the warmest curtains, had found a resting-place there. He was pleased with his sister’s forethought and care for him ; he kissed her more than once, and declared she was a “darling,” and his “own Nelly ;” and if it were not for her, he should wish himself dead a thousand times over ; and she drank in his praises, sweeter to her than from any other mouth, and was perfectly content. It was moments like these that atoned to her for the sacrifice of her life.

Of what consequence was it, that her bedroom, which was separated from his by a short

passage and a dip of three steps, was the most draughty and ungenial apartment of the three; that it possessed no fireplace, and that she had not had time to do more than order the furniture which was not required for the other rooms, to be piled in it anyhow; so that she could hardly find space to move, far less wash and dress herself with comfort? Bertie sank in the depths of his feather bed, and with a bright fire burning within a few feet of him, slept none the worse for all this, and why should she?

Though nurse Aggie, who occupied a small bed in the corner of her mistress's room (another uncomfortable arrangement, for Nelly had hitherto always enjoyed the luxury of privacy), was not disposed to take things quite so quietly as her young lady. The poor old woman having already twice stumbled over the steps which led into the room, was not in the most amiable temper in consequence, and when Nelly retired to bed she found her indignant at the disorder of the apartment.

"It's just like you, Miss Nelly," she exclaimed, "to have all the rubbige of the house brought into your own room, and whatever them wenches of Mrs. Weston's have been about not to help you a little with things, I

can't think. Why here's three wash'and stands and four tables, and all the kitchen chairs 'eaped anyhow, to say nothing of crockery. I've put it as straight as I can, but I'm sure when I first come in 'twas a difficulty to turn oneself, for the room aint any larger than it need be, and without a fireplace too. It strike like a cellar."

Nelly was very weary, and a little out of spirits, and she could not quite stand being thus taken to task by the old servant. So she answered rather sharply :

"Well, there was nowhere else to put the things, and so it can't be helped. If it is uncomfortable, nurse, I have to bear it as well as you, and if you were half as tired as I am, you would be thankful to lie down anywhere, and not think twice of the disorder of your room."

It was seldom that Aggie heard her nurseling speak to her in such a tone. Nelly's temper was usually so equal that the old woman occasionally found herself adopting the general custom, and treating her with less consideration than was her due ; but one quick word, or reproachful look, was always sufficient to bring her back to a sense of her duty, and in the present instance she was out

of bed before her mistress's sentence was concluded.

“ In course, my dearie, and I am worse than an old fool to go and vex you with my maun-derings when you have been toiling for every one's good but your own. No! Miss Nelly, dear! I can't, nor I won't go back to my bed, not till I've tucked you up in your'n. I couldn't bide quiet now, and see you a-doing anything for yourself, my bird!”

But it would have been well for Nelly Brooke if her first day at Bickton Farm, however full of annoyance or fatigue, had been her worst.

It was the dullest of November weather when they settled there, and the girl had need of all her patience, and cheerfulness, and hope, to help her to bear up through the dark months which followed. In the first place, they were very poor. Deducting the expenses of their present rooms, the twins were to receive twenty pounds from James Weston as the rental of the Farm Cottage, and ninety pounds a-year is not much on which to support three persons. As Nelly was the housekeeper, Mr. Ray had spoken more seriously on the subject to her than to her brother. He had explained to her how very limited was their

income, and how necessary it was that she should practise strict economy since there was no possible means by which it could be increased. He had bid her divide her ninety pounds by twelve, and then consider how far she could make seven guineas a month go, and resolve that it should never be exceeded. At first Nelly thought that it would be very easy. Seven guineas a month—nearly two pounds a week—seemed ample for the requirements of their simple household. But when she came to try the experiment, she found it very different from what she had anticipated. So many extra wants cropped up of which she had had no idea ; which cost so little, and were absolutely necessary, and yet which ran away with so much of the weekly allowance. There was Bertie's tobacco and beer ; and on occasions, his bottle of brandy. There were the tit-bits without which he could not eat his breakfast or tea ; and there were the advertisements of books or catchpenny toys which caught his eye in the newspapers, and to procure which it seemed so hard to refuse him a few shillings. They had not been so badly off in the grandfather's lifetime because not only had the old man supplied all deficiencies in his exchequer at the end of the year, by drawing

on his principal, but he had gratefully received the presents which such friends as Mr. Ray or the Westons sent him. But Bertie's absurd pride had led him to forbid Nelly to take anything in the shape of eatables from either the farm or the vicarage. He called all kindness, which took the form of help, charity; and if left to himself would have indignantly refused it. His sister contrived to reject the many offerings which were sent them without offence, but her housekeeping purse sadly felt the want of them—eggs, and fruit and vegetables, and home-cured bacon had all to be purchased now, instead of had for a "thank you!" and yet Bertie complained if he were asked to forego any of his accustomed comforts. It was hard for Nelly to be called a "screw," and to be told she must be a "precious bad manager," or to see her brother put out of temper for a whole evening because she had had nothing but bread and butter to set before him at tea.

But it was harder still to come to the end of her seven guineas before the month was up, and to be obliged to take "just a very little" out of the next month's allowance, and then to find the impossibility of making up for it

by economising any more than she had done before.

Yet these troubles alone would not have been sufficient to cause Nelly's figure, as the months went on, to lose much of its plumpness, or her step to become less light, and her voice lower and more subdued. She had a sharper pain to contend with than the pain of refusing to provide Bertie with money for unnecessary purposes ; and a more wearing anxiety than the fear that, during the ensuing month, she should have to go without butter to her bread, or sugar in her tea. And this trouble was also connected with her brother.

Robert Brooke, who had exhibited from his infancy, a sullen and exacting disposition, had become subject, since his grandfather's death and the quarrel with his cousin Nigel, to fits of gloomy despondency, which were of sufficient frequency and duration to alarm his loving sister.

Sometimes he would be for days like his former self, that is, he was neither very agreeable nor disagreeable ; (he was always selfish in the eyes of every one but Nelly) ; but at others—and these occurred the oftener of the two—he would lie for the same time without uttering a word of his own accord, and occa-

sionally refusing to answer, even when addressed. At such periods he would take advantage of his sister's anxious solicitude on his behalf, to wound her feelings in every possible way ; he would seek the most roundabout methods by which to pick a quarrel with her ; and when, having borne with his wayward temper as long and patiently as she could, her broken spirits would find relief in tears, he was always ready to call her " mealy mouthed " and " hypocritical " and to say she " got up " her emotion for the purpose of exciting the sympathy of " that old fool, Aggie," and " those interfering brutes, the Westons."

Then, a day or two after, perhaps, when the black mood had passed, and peace was restored between them, Bertie would hide his face on Nelly's bosom, and shed real tears, and call himself by such dreadful names, whilst he exalted her virtues to the skies, that his penitence was more painful for her to witness than his temper had been. But after they had kissed and cried over each other, and had mutually sworn never to quarrel more (although the poor girl had little cause to reproach herself in this respect), Bertie would brighten up wonderfully, and in a few hours would be himself again, and as selfish as ever.

If he had permitted Nelly at this time to have other companions than himself so that she might occasionally have had a little change, the burden would not have fallen so heavily upon her. But this was what he would not do. Young Mrs. Weston, from the Farm Cottage, who was a rosy, cheerful girl of about one-and-twenty, and who had left several sisters behind her in the Sussex homestead, from which she came, would have been delighted sometimes to slip away from James and Tom, and to spend an afternoon with Miss Brooke up at the Farm ; and the vicar's daughters, who thought nothing of the distance by which the houses were divided, would have been equally pleased to visit Nelly, or to have her to stay with them.

Such companions would have done the girl good, and have preserved her young life fresh in her. But though they were all fond of Nelly, Robert Brooke was a favourite with none of them.

The young ladies from the vicarage declared they were afraid to encounter him without the protection of either their father or mother ; and when Alice Weston's smiling face presented itself for admittance at the portals of their door, it was generally met for welcome

by a scowl, sufficient to drive a less timid visitor away. Robert would not hear of his sister again leaving home, nor did she wish to do so ; but he was not pleased when she absented herself even for a simple walk ; and he was too unsociable in his bearing towards those who would have sought her company to make it worth their while to cross his threshold ; so that Nelly was reduced to his companionship alone.

She was even cut off from enjoying in any great degree the society of her old friend, Mrs. Weston, and to see whom daily had been her favourite anticipation in moving from the Cottage to the Farm.

What long afternoons had Nelly pictured, passed in the pleasant sitting-room which Mrs. Weston usually occupied ! What uninterrupted lessons on the piano, or readings from their favourite authors ! What cosy evenings when the kind old farmer would come in and take a hand at whist, and lose his sixpences to Bertie and herself ! But Bertie had never been sociable with any of the Westons, and now he seemed less disposed to be so than ever. He did not positively object to his sister spending an hour or two in their company, but he steadfastly refused to have his

couch wheeled into the Farm parlour ; and he was always so gloomy and out of temper when she returned thence ; and to see him with a lowering brow pained Nelly so much that she would have sacrificed any pleasure to prevent it. So that, by little and little, she quite gave up going to sit with Mrs. Weston, or asking her to bring her work into their room ; and a few words of greeting exchanged as they passed through the kitchen, or met in the garden, was all the intercourse which now took place between the matron of the Farm and her young friend.

But Mrs. Weston had insisted upon doing one service for Nelly, about which she consulted neither the brother or sister, and that was to have her own pianoforte placed in their apartment. It was in vain they remonstrated with her, and affirmed it was impossible they could take advantage of her kindness : Mrs. Weston refused to have the instrument moved back again. She even went so far as to declare that they would be doing her a favour by letting it stand there ; that it was seldom used, took up too much room in the parlour, and required a warmer situation to keep it in order.

It was a jangled, worn-out old piano, which

many people could not have listened to without having their teeth set on edge, but it was a never-failing source of amusement to poor little Nelly. Hour after hour would she sit at it with one of Mrs. Weston's ancient music books spread before her, whilst she patiently picked out, more from ear than knowledge, the old-fashioned tunes and ditties which it contained.

But Nelly's love of music was genuine : her touch was soft and uncertain, and her voice was low and sweet ; and Bertie liked to listen to her trifling in the twilight ; therefore, an Erard and the power to translate Mendelssohn and Beethoven, would hardly have been able to afford her greater satisfaction.

All this time, the subject of Nigel Brooke and Orpington Chase was never mentioned between the twins ; still less discussed. At first Nelly had more than once inadvertently alluded to the forbidden topic, but the look with which Bertie had saluted her want of thought, had taught her studiously to avoid it. Mr. Ray, as far as he considered necessary, had satisfied Mrs. Weston's curiosity with regard to the estrangement between the cousins, and now, even he appeared to have forgotten all about it.

Nurse Aggie was much given to lamenting to herself in an audible tone, over the sudden downfall of her nurseling's brilliant prospects, and hinting that she knew Master Robert was at the bottom of it all, and that she had felt it would be so from the very beginning. But though the old woman would have been glad enough to have had Nelly for a listener, and to have confided all her ideas on the past, present and future to her ear, the girl was too high-minded to discuss in the kitchen what she dared not mention in the parlour. She had been reared in old Aggie's arms, and cradled on her bosom, and loved her as much as it is possible for a grateful child to love its nurse ; but she could not condescend to hear one word from her lips which Bertie might not have listened to. So that a total silence was maintained on the subject throughout the household, unless the few moments when Mrs. Weston and old Aggie could get together to lift up their voices and hands in concert, as they secretly bewailed the ill-fortune of their favourite and the delinquencies of her brother could be termed an infringement of the general rule.

Otherwise, the name of Cousin Nigel (except in Nelly's memory), was utterly tabooed.

CHAPTER II.

SOME ONE COMES WITH THE PRIMROSES.

THE winter was past : spring had returned, and when the violets and primroses were gemming every lane and bank in Little Bickton, a break came to the monotony of the brother and sister's life.

It was on a genial day towards the middle of April, that Nelly, fresh from a morning run with Thug, stood before Bertie's couch, laden with a large basket of primroses, while it was hard to say whether her bright face or the delicately tinted flowers illuminated the old parlour most. But Robert Brooke was not in a mood to admire either. He had been in one of his unhappy tempers for several days past, during which time his sister had been worse than companionless : for association with him under such circumstances was very similar to sitting at table with a corpse for company. As he now lay upon his sofa, he noticed neither the flowers nor Nelly, but kept his blue eyes

(so much lighter in colour, and shallower in expression than her own), half-closed or fixed upon the opposite walk, whilst his broad white brow, about which the hair was already beginning to grow thin, was contracted as though with pain, and his hands with interlaced fingers, were closely clasped together. As Nelly looked at him, the constant inward cry of her heart again arose, "Oh! I *wish* he would do something: I wish he had *anything* to do," for she felt that want of occupation was ruining her brother. The many hours which he passed in idleness afforded him so much leisure for brooding over his real and fancied wrongs that his life was burning away within him, under the continued fever of fretting. But although his looks upon the present occasion were sufficient to daunt the best-intentioned heart, his sister made a bold effort to rouse him, as she always did, however unpleasant the consequences might be to herself.

"Look here, Bertie!" she said, cheerfully addressing him as though nothing were the matter, as she held her basket of primroses before his eyes, "are they not lovely?" but he only made a gesture of annoyance and thrust the flowers to one side.

"You *must* look at them, darling," she con-

tinued in the same strain, "for they are such beauties. I am sure you never saw bigger ones; and would you believe it? Thug and I have only been once round the old nut-walk, and home through the two fields at the back of the Cottage, and we gathered all these on the way. I never saw such a quantity of primroses as there are this year. The place is quite yellow with them."

"You know I hate the smell of primroses," Bertie at last condescended to observe, "you might have brought violets whilst you were about it."

"There were none, dear," she exclaimed. "I searched for them everywhere, but I will go farther from home to-morrow, and try and get you some. The children gather all within reach. I saw that little monkey, Jemmy Barnes, with quite a large bunch of them, and I asked him to give me a few, but he said he wanted two-pence for them, the young rogue. Fancy, two-pence for a tea-cupfull of purple violets. But they smelt delicious."

"And two-pence was too large a sum, I suppose, to spend on *me*," remarked Robert, sarcastically.

A look of pain flitted over Nelly's face.

"Oh! Bertie, darling, how can you say so?"

but I am obliged to be so careful of every penny, but you *shall* have them," she added, with sudden resolve, as she put down her primroses on the table and prepared to leave the room again. "Come, Thug, old fellow, we'll have another little run together, and I am sure we shall overtake Jemmy, for he was only outside the gate when I spoke to him."

But as she was about to cross the threshold, her progress was arrested by the appearance of one of Mrs. Weston's red-cheeked and red-elbowed farm-maidens, who, with floury arms rolled up in her blue checked apron, came to announce that a strange gentleman wanted to speak to Miss Brooke.

"A gentleman!" exclaimed Nelly, changing colour with surprise, and another feeling—half hope and half fear—which seemed suddenly to knock against her heart.

"Yes, Miss, it's true — and Aggie — she couldn't come to yer, for the bread's just a rising; and so I leave 'un in the mistress's parlour, and run to tell yer. And please be I to shew 'un in here?"

"But a gentleman, what gentleman?" reiterated Nelly; and as she asked the question she glanced at her brother's face, fearful of what effect the answer might have upon him,

for she could think herself of no gentleman but one. Bertie's expression was not promising—he looked very dark, and his mouth was sternly set.

“I know naught about 'un,” replied the girl, “he give his name, but I ain't good at remembering forrin names. He come from Reddington though. Maybe he's a gentleman from one of the shops there.”

Nelly breathed again; had the visitor been her cousin, the servant would have had no difficulty in recalling a name with which she was so familiar. Perhaps, after all, it was only some one travelling the country for orders. Her brother also seemed to dismiss the fear which had evidently attacked him, the cloud rolled away from his brow, and his mouth relaxed again.

“What shall I do, Bertie?” next asked Nelly, “go to the man, or have him in here?”

“Go to him, of course,” he answered decidedly, “and send the fellow about his business; it's only some travelling bagsman. And do take your horrid flowers away with you,” he added, as she was about to quit the room, “their smell makes me feel quite sick.”

She caught up her basket of primroses, and putting her hair, which had been blown about

by the wind, off her face, followed the farm-servant down the whitewashed passage which led to Mrs. Weston's sitting room. Her first idea of the stranger being Nigel Brooke, had been so completely dispelled by the maid's assertion that he bore a foreign name, that it would have been quite a shock to her, had she, after all, encountered her cousin. But she could scarcely have felt more surprise than she did when, on turning the handle of the door, she was met by Dr. Monkton. Yet, there he was, with his dark eyes and whiskers, and his white teeth, and his faultless attire, sitting on Mrs. Weston's horse-hair sofa, and awaiting her presence in uncomfortable state.

"My *dear* Miss Brooke," he exclaimed with emphasis, as she advanced to receive him; "I am charmed to meet you again," and he took Nelly's disengaged hand which was rosy and cold, and stained from picking primroses without gloves, and pressed it in his warm, kidded palm. She was so astonished at his appearance in Bickton, that she could hardly answer him. Her thoughts, which had torn themselves from Orpington Chase, now flew back there with lightning speed.

"Oh! Dr. Monkton," she said anxiously, "there is nothing wrong—is there—at the Chase?"

Her only idea was, that he had been sent to announce bad news. But he looked as surprised at the question, as she had done at himself.

“At the Chase?” he echoed, “certainly not, at least, that I know of, but I have not been there for some time. I thought—I have understood, that is to say—that you have not had much communication with your aunt yourself, lately, Miss Brooke.”

“No, I have not,” she faltered, “at least, *we* have not; some misunderstanding between my brother—or rather—between——”

“I perfectly understand,” interposed Dr. Monkton, pitying her confusion, “these little contretemps are always occurring in families; and I have found it rather difficult to keep on good terms at the Chase myself. Mrs. Brooke is a lady of very uncertain temper, and——”

“Do you never see them now, then?” demanded Nelly.

“Well, I can hardly say ‘never,’ my dear Miss Brooke, but certainly not so often as I used to do. In fact, I have left off attending Mrs. Brooke in a professional capacity. But all this time I am keeping you standing. Will you not be seated?”

At this, Nelly blushed, remembering what

she ought to do if she wished to appear hospitable. The room in which they had met had no fire in it, and the doctor had doubtless come off a long journey, and needed refreshment, yet she dared not invite him to take it, or ask him into their own apartment, without first speaking to Bertie. So she stammered sadly as she replied :

“This is not our own sitting-room, but we have but one, and my brother is such an invalid, that I am afraid I must go and ascertain if he is well enough to see you before I ask you in there.”

“It is of no consequence, my dear Miss Brooke, no consequence in the world,” said Dr. Monkton, as he reseated himself on the unyielding horsehair sofa, and tried to repress a shiver. “But I daresay you will be wondering what has brought me to Bickton. The fact is, I was summoned to a consultation at your pleasant little town of Reddington, yesterday, and had to sleep there, and never having forgotten the very charming day on which you and your aunt honoured me by lunching at Hilstone, I thought I would just come on and have a peep at you. Particularly as I have always felt, since the conversations we had on the subject, a keen desire to make the acquaintance of your brother.”

The remembrance of that conversation and of the hopes it held out of Bertie's cure, now flashed upon Nelly's mind, and tinged her cheeks with crimson.

"Yes," she answered, eagerly, "and I have not forgotten it either, Dr. Monkton, nor what you said about him. Oh! I should so much like you to see him and judge for yourself. Would you mind waiting here for one minute, whilst I run and speak to him about it?"

She placed her basket of flowers on the table as she spoke, and looked pleadingly into his face. He had admired her from the first moment he had seen her at Hilstone, but she looked twice as attractive now, with her hair hanging loose about her shoulders, and her simple country frocks and country manners.

He assured her, with his dark eyes fixed upon her face, that he would wait for any number of minutes—for an hour, if she thought fit that he should do so; that he was entirely at her service, but only trusted she would remember that his time was short, and wasted while she absented herself from the room. Nelly did not wait to listen to his compliments; she flew along the white-washed passage back to Bertie's side, feeling almost confident that in a few minutes she would re-

turn to conduct the doctor there. But when the minutes had elapsed, many times over, she took her way back with slower steps and downcast eyes, sadly wondering what on earth she should say to Dr. Monkton that would not seem impolite, and followed by old Aggie, with the necessary implements for lighting the fire in Mrs. Weston's parlour. It was evident that there was no present chance of the visitor finding himself in that of Mr. Robert Brooke.

"I fear your brother is not very well this morning," was the doctor's remark, as his practised eye scanned Nelly's troubled face, and guessed the cause.

"No, he is not!" she answered, with hesitation, "he has not been himself for several days past. I am afraid he will not be able to see you; and, oh! Dr. Monkton," she added, in one of those bursts of genuine frankness which seemed so natural to her, and rendered her so different from other women, "I know you will think me very rude and inhospitable, but I *can't* ask you to dinner. I would have been glad to do so, for I am sure you would have taken us as we are, and made every allowance for our country way of living; but Bertie is really not well. I think he frets him-

self ill, for he is always thinking of this quarrel with his cousin. The very sound of Orpington or Hilstone is enough to make him angry. Can you excuse it? After all your politeness to me at Hilstone, and the kind way in which you spoke of Bertie, I feel how rude it must appear. But it is not my fault, and it does make me so uncomfortable." And after this long speech, which she had delivered in breathless haste, Nelly stood heaving and blushing before her visitor as though she expected him to turn upon her as vehemently as her brother had done. But the calm, unexcited voice in which Dr. Monkton answered her, tended greatly to allay her fear.

"My dear Miss Brooke! not the slightest apology is needed, I can assure you. I should have liked to make your brother's acquaintance, and do not despair of doing so yet; but as to dining with you, much as I should have enjoyed it, it would have been quite out of the question, as I have ordered a late dinner for this evening at Reddington, and I never touch anything in the middle of the day; and as I wish to see a little of this part of the country, I shall seize the opportunity of your dinner hour to take a stroll round about. But let me see!" drawing out his watch, "it

is now close upon one o'clock, probably not far from the time itself!"

"We usually dine at half-past one," said Nelly, answering his look of enquiry.

"Well, then, I shall take my leave for the present, and come again by-and-bye. Meanwhile, if you can persuade your brother to see me on my return, I hope it may be for his advantage. Tell him, Miss Brooke, that although I come from Hilstone, I have no connection now with Orpington Chase, and perhaps that fact may make him a little more reconciled to seeing me. And if he and you can agree to give me a cup of tea before I return to Reddington, at about five o'clock, I shall be very grateful and very thirsty, I have no doubt," and with a laugh, Dr. Monkton took up his hat and left the house, and Nelly had nothing more to do but to return to her brother's side. As she did so, her spirits were at their lowest ebb, for as soon as Bertie had heard *who* it was that desired to make his acquaintance, he had become so vehement, so abusive, in fact, not only of Dr. Monkton for daring to appear in Little Bickton, but of herself for having been the means of his coming there, that she had no hope of being able to persuade him to receive the visitor on

his return. All that she dared look forward to, was being permitted to give the doctor his cup of tea in Mrs. Weston's parlour, and to dispatch him on his way back to Hilstone with a fervent wish that he might never shew his face there again. But she was greatly disappointed, for Dr. Monkton's appearance had revived all her fond dreams of a cure for Bertie, and to let him leave Bickton without seeing her brother, seemed like deliberately thrusting Providence on one side.

Yet none of these sorrowful feelings were depicted on her face as she waited upon Bertie at the simple meal which shortly followed. She was not lively, perhaps, but she was certainly cheerful, or tried to appear so, and her assiduity was the same as usual.

Bertie was in one of his lazy moods that day, which often accompanied his ill-tempered ones, and preferred to lie on the sofa, instead of sitting up at the table, and to have all his food carried to him there. Backwards and forwards tripped Nelly with meat, and pudding, and ready peeled fruit, (for however scanty might be the meal for Aggie and herself, her brother was always sure of having some dainty especially prepared for him) and with each plateful she had a smile for him,

or an encouraging word, or 'a touch so gentle that it amounted to a caress. And meanwhile not one allusion did she make to the untoward event of the morning, or to the unjust manner in which he had visited it upon her unoffending head.

At last Bertie could bear it no longer. The ice within him had been gradually melting for some hours before, and his sister's present forbearance put the finishing touch upon his cure. Each thing with which she served him he felt less and less inclined to eat, until, as she gave him the fruit, and at the same time laid her kind hand upon his head, his pride gave way all at once, and he seized her fingers, and pressed them against his hot lips.

"Oh! Nelly, Nelly!" he said, as the action brought her round to his side, "why are you so kind to me? What a brute, what a beast I am. Here have I been worrying you for days past, and you have never given me one word of reproach in return. What a darling you are. Why is it that you are so patient and so good, and I am only everything that is bad and worthless?"

"Oh! hush, my dear Bertie!" she said, soothingly, as she laid her cool cheek against

his fevered face, "don't say so, dear ; don't think so, it is not true !"

"But I must think so," he replied, "as long as I make such a confounded fool of myself. I don't believe it's *me*, Nelly, I believe that I am possessed with a devil, and that he enters into me at these times, and your brother goes away. Can you forgive me, dear, *once more* ?"

"There can be no such word as 'forgiveness' between you and me, Bertie!" she fondly whispered. "We are *one*, remember! We could not live without loving one another."

"I wish we were both *dead*!" he muttered in reply. "I often think what a good thing it would be, if I just took one of my grandfather's old pistols, or the carving knife, and put a bullet through your head, Nell, or cut your dear little throat, and made away with myself directly afterwards. There would be an end of misery for us then at all events. I wonder if it would be very wicked !"

But he was startled by the scared face she lifted to his own. Perhaps his unaccountable moods had sometimes made her fear lest his brain should be affected.

"Oh, Bertie! is it really you whom I hear talking in that dreadful manner? Darling,

it would be *very* wicked, very wicked indeed. If you were to die, Bertie, I don't think I could stay long after you, but it must be when God wills, dear, not when we will."

"But, Nelly! now tell the truth! wouldn't it be a good thing if I were out of your way?" continued her brother, who even in the first moments of his fresh penitence could not resist working a little on her feelings when chance temptingly threw the opportunity in his path. "You know that I am only a burden and a nuisance to you; I worry your life out with my horrid tempers; and I am of no possible use to any one. Wouldn't you be much happier—after a little while I mean—if I were dead?"

But when he saw the look of deep distress with which Nelly heard the question, even his selfish heart regretted having put it. The tears rushed to her eyes and her lips quivered; but she looked him steadily in the face as she replied:

"Bertie, you are least kind to me when you insult my love by such a question. Oh! my own brother! how can you ask it? Anything, anything sooner than that!"

"Well, but just see how I have bothered you to-day," continued Bertie, feeling a little

ashamed of his former speech ; “ it isn’t your fault that this doctor has followed you from Hilstone, at least I don’t suppose it is, and yet I made as much fuss about it as if you had asked him on purpose to annoy me.”

[Whenever Robert Brooke’s spirit had been newly set free from the demon of temper by which it was so often held in thrall, he was apparently most just in taking all the blame to himself that he could possibly deserve ; metaphorically speaking, he gloried in covering his head with ashes, but it was invariably observable that the deeper his voluntary humiliation, the sooner he forgot all about it, and delivered himself up once more to the bondage of evil.]

“ I am not *very* much bothered, Bertie,” replied Nelly, smiling re-assurance on him through her tears, “ at least, not for myself. I particularly wanted you to see Dr. Monkton, because he is the gentleman who spoke so confidently to me whilst I was at Orpington, of being able to cure you—to make you strong again, dear, only fancy ! and able to walk and run about as I do. So, of course, I am disappointed, for your sake, but that is all.”

“ Able to make me strong ?” exclaimed Bertie, with suddenly awakened interest.

“What! to cure my wretched back? You never told me of this before, Nelly.”

“My dear, how could I? Have you not forbidden me to mention anything which took place during my visit to the Chase? But I have never forgotten it. We took luncheon once with Dr. Monkton at Hilstone (he is very rich, Bertie, and has such a beautiful house and garden, right in the middle of the town), and he talked to me of you almost all the time, and seemed so interested in all that I told him, and related so many similar cases in which he had effected a complete cure. He is very clever, I believe, and is considered the best doctor in Hilstone.”

“But he never could cure me now,” said Bertie musingly, in whose mind the idea of restoration to health seemed to have caused a complete revulsion of feeling towards the obnoxious doctor. “I must be much too far gone for that. Did you tell him that my spine had been weak ever since I was a baby, Nell?”

“I told him everything, Bertie,” she replied, delighted at the interest which he evinced, “and Dr. Monkton’s own words were, that he saw no reason whatever your health should

not be restored even if your back could not be—be—”

“Made straight again, Nelly; why are you always so afraid of speaking the truth to me? Well, it would be something to feel I could walk about like other men, wouldn't it? and I never expected that any doctor could do as much as that for me. I wonder if this fellow Monkton is a humbug or not.”

“Oh! I am *sure* he is not,” said poor Nelly, fully believing what she wished to believe, “and Bertie,” she added timidly, “if it will make any difference to you to know it—and I think it will—he told me to tell you that he had no connection whatever now with Orpington Chase. I think from what he said that he and Aunt Eliza must have quarrelled about something; but at all events he is no longer her doctor, and he never goes there now.”

“Difference,” exclaimed her brother in a tone of vexation, “I should think it did, it makes all the difference in the world. Why on earth, didn't you tell me so this morning, Nell? instead of letting me send Dr. Monkton off in the rude manner I did. You may have done me an irreparable injury. Of course, I thought coming from Hilstone that he was a friend of those *grand relations* of ours at

Orpington. If I had known this before I would have seen him directly ; I shall never forgive you for not having told me."

"But Bertie," said Nelly, with sparkling eyes, "he is not gone, my dear, he is coming back this afternoon, and I did not repeat anything rude to him, I only said you were not quite well enough to see him ; and he said he hoped you would be better when he returned, and he would come and take a cup of tea with us at five o'clock, if you didn't mind. And will you really see him, darling ? ah ! I am so glad."

"See him, of course I will, I should be a fool not to see him," replied Robert Brooke, now thoroughly roused from his morbid humour, and restored to more than ordinary cheerfulness. "You're a brick, Nell, that's what you are. I don't believe any fellow ever had a better sister, or a cleverer one, into the bargain."

"Oh ! Bertie, Bertie ! the less said about the cleverness the better," she answered laughing, "but I think I am just clever enough to go and see about tea being ready at the proper time, and so for the present, good-bye to you." And she went singing into the kitchen. .

CHAPTER III.

DR. MONKTON'S VISIT AWAKENS BOTH HOPE AND FEAR.

WHEN Dr. Monkton, both cold and hungry, turned away from the gates of Bickton Farm to wander about the village till five o'clock, he thought he had done a very foolish thing in going there. It had been quite an unpremeditated freak on his part, for he had been really summoned to a medical consultation at Reddington as he had informed Nelly, and the idea of visiting her (partly begotten of a pleasant remembrance of the pure, bright face which had greatly taken his fancy at Orpington, and partly of curiosity to learn if all Mrs. Brooke had repeated to him concerning the twins were true) had only entered his head upon finding himself there. But he had heard sufficient of Robert Brooke's uncertain temper to make him aware that it was more than likely that he should leave Bickton without seeing him ; and had he done so, in all pro-

bability, the brother and sister would never again have been brought in contact with him. But it happened otherwise ; for when Dr. Monkton rapped a second time for admittance at the Farm, the door was opened to him by old Aggie, who, although she eyed him with a glance of suspicion, at once begged him to follow her to the apartments of her young master and mistress, when he not only found a warm fire ready to welcome him, but a substantial tea table awaiting his arrival : a very different reception from what he had anticipated after the inhospitality of the morning. He was at a loss to account for the change, but as a wise man should do, he took the goods the gods provided him, whilst not a feature betrayed that they were unexpected.

Robert was alone when Dr. Monkton was announced, (his sister having absented herself for some household purpose) and as his guest entered the room, he essayed to rise from his recumbent position ; but this he was not permitted to do. Dr. Monkton, perceiving the intention, sprang forward to prevent it.

“ Not for the world, my dear Mr. Brooke, not for the world,” he exclaimed in the bland, but gently decisive tones which he used to everybody, as he extended his hand to grasp

that of the young man, "I am delighted to make your acquaintance, which is a pleasure I have long looked forward to, but if I find that my presence causes you in the slightest degree to incommode yourself, I shall run away again directly." And so saying, Dr. Monkton, with a smile and a bow, drew a chair close to the invalid's couch, and, as though he had been his medical adviser for years, proceeded in the most easy and natural manner, to enquire how he found himself that afternoon.

"I have not been quite so well as usual lately," replied Robert Brooke, who felt that some apology was needed for his previous behaviour, "I am sorry I could not see you this morning, but at times I especially shrink from encountering strangers. I often have a feeling of shyness in that respect; I suppose it arises from my weak' health, and the secluded life which we lead down here."

"Not the slightest doubt of it," said the doctor, who nevertheless had his own ideas on the subject, "and knowing the nature of your complaint, Mr. Brooke, I could have told you so much before I saw you. It is only natural in a case like yours, even had there not been a stronger reason. I am afraid you have had

cause to dislike the sound of my name, since you probably have only heard it in connection with that of Orpington."

"I certainly have no reason to like anything which comes from there," said Robert, hardly knowing what answer to make to this direct allusion.

"Nor I," replied the doctor, with ready acquiescence, "but, as perhaps Miss Brooke has informed you, I am no longer on visiting terms at the Chase. Had I been so, I should hardly have ventured to shew my face *here*," and he smiled knowingly as though to intimate that he was well aware of the fact of the quarrel between the relations. "The truth is that Mrs. Brooke, who is a lady of rather—what shall I say? of rather an excitable disposition, had a quarrel with me, an argument perhaps would be the more correct term, upon a subject not entirely unconnected with yourself and your charming sister, which ended in a complete estrangement between us, and I have never been called in to 'The Chase' since. I have very old-fashioned ideas upon some subjects, Mr. Brooke, and where I feel strongly I am apt to speak my mind, which, although not perhaps the most politic proceeding in the world, satisfies my conscience, and therefore

satisfies myself. And you have had much to bear with, my dear young friend; much to bear with."

And Dr. Monkton lay back in his chair, and threw a seriously compassionate glance upon his "young friend," beneath which Robert Brooke reddened, though not with displeasure.

"Ah! you'd say so if you knew all!" he observed in reply.

"And suppose I *do* know all," said the insinuating doctor.

At this supposition the boy fired up.

"Why, then Nigel Brooke is a greater scoundrel than I took him for, to discuss so strictly private a matter before strangers. If I had thought," continued Robert clenching his impotent fist, "that he would have dared to repeat what has passed between us, I would have told him my mind a little more plainly than I have."

"Gently, gently, my dear Mr. Robert," said Dr. Monkton, laying his small soft hand upon that of the excited lad, "are we not running on a *little* too fast? I do not think I said anything to lead you to infer that your cousin and I have had any communication on the subject of the difference between you. If I did so, I beg your pardon and his. That I

have learned the circumstances of the case is true, but that is due to Mrs. Brooke, his mother, who has certainly shown little reserve in mentioning them before me, and thereby exciting all my sympathies on your own behalf. You need have no hesitation in speaking to me about it, for I can assure you beforehand that I have ever held but one opinion on the matter, and that is, that both you and your sister have been cruelly wronged."

Had Dr. Monkton not been so ready and bold in bringing forward the names of Nigel Brooke and Orpington Chase, they would probably have not been mentioned at all during his visit to the Farm; for Robert having found, as yet, none amongst his friends to agree with him in the extreme view which he took of his cousin's behaviour, had become rather shy of encountering further opposition by discussing it. To find, therefore, one whose ideas appeared so thoroughly to correspond with his own, was not only a novelty to him, but a most pleasant surprise. There was a fire of resentment against Nigel Brooke, always smouldering in his heart, and ready to burst out upon the least occasion, and it was a relief and a comfort to be able to give it vent, without fear of contradiction or reproach.

So that in another minute he was busily occupied in informing Dr. Monkton of all the principal circumstances (of all, that is, which he had told Nelly), which had engendered the quarrel between himself and his cousin. How Nigel Brooke's father had behaved in the days gone by ; how his mother had wished to bestow charity on himself and his sister in return for that injury ; how Nigel himself had come under false pretences, and lured Nelly to Orpington Chase ; all the absurd fantasies and imaginations which had crept into the boy's diseased brain, added to much which occurred to it on the spur of the moment, were recapitulated for the benefit of his new friend, whilst Dr. Monkton listened and acquiesced and sympathised ; and, by an occasionally well-directed note of blame or approval made the simple lad fully believe that the man of the world was entirely on his side, and that he was even a more right-judging and spirited fellow than he had given himself credit for. So that when Nelly, after an unavoidable absence of a quarter of an hour, which (thinking that her brother and his new acquaintance would have so little in common,) she had striven as much as possible to abridge, entered the room, she was astonished to find Bertie and the

doctor deeply engaged in amicable converse, whilst the former with a face of fire argued and animadverted upon the particulars of their family trouble.

At first she could hardly believe her ears ; but then, as the names and subjects which she in her simplicity imagined should have been held sacred from the world, were openly canvassed, her surprise became patent in her face.

“ Bertie ! ” she exclaimed in a voice of horror, “ what *are* you talking of ? ”

“ Of what Dr. Monkton knows as well as we do, Nelly, ” he replied ; and then turning to the doctor, he continued : “ My sister cannot see the justice of my sentiments on this subject, and therefore it has become almost a forbidden one between us. But it is lost time arguing with women, Dr. Monkton, as perhaps you don't need me to tell you. ”

Robert Brooke delivered this last sentence with such an air of bombast and superiority over poor Nelly, consequent on his dwarfed and miserable manhood, that the doctor could hardly refrain from laughing. But he was too politic to betray the inclination, for “ *hardly* ” often came between him and the expression of his real feelings.

“If not useless, Mr. Brooke,” he said, as he gallantly rose and offered his own seat for Nelly’s accommodation, “it is at all events unnecessary. According to my creed, the fairer portions of creation were never intended to trouble their brains with anything so dry as argument; although for ourselves there is no logic so powerful as their smiles. Your brother has so far honoured me with his confidence, Miss Brooke, that he has spoken openly of his late quarrel with his cousin, but he has told me nothing, I can assure you, but what I had already heard from others.”

He had seen at a glance that the girl’s mind was troubled at the idea that Robert had been divulging his private affairs to a stranger, and he was far more anxious to conciliate her than her brother.

“But since the topic is not, and cannot be a pleasant one to you,” he continued with the same intent, “and I am sure, that gathered round this tempting tea-table (to which I am getting quite anxious to be invited), we may find many more genial,—suppose we drop it, and take to discussing tea and toast instead. I assure you, Miss Brooke, that I am ready to fulfil my prophecy of this morning, and to be

very thirsty indeed ; added to which I find I have picked up such an appetite as I little expected, amongst your Kentish hills."

This easy and ready dismissal of a subject which threatened to endanger the general sociability, was calculated to win the sister quite as much as the doctor's former demeanour had won the brother ; and created quite a diversion in the opposite direction.

Nelly's attention was immediately engaged with the cares of hospitality. Robert declaring that their visitor had done him more good than any quantity of medicine, insisted upon sitting up to the table, where Dr. Monkton joining them and keeping their thoughts occupied with all the news of the great world from which they were shut out, caused them to spend a pleasanter and more cheerful hour, than they had done for many months past.

They could not help liking their new friend, he entered so cordially into each subject that was started ; he appeared so interested in everything they had to tell him ; and opposed so heartily any confession of ignorance or rusticity on their own part. What the world called ignorance, he affirmed, was generally simplicity of thought and action ; the mind enlarged far more readily beneath the

pure sky of the country, than amid the smoky atmosphere of a town; and only needed a finishing touch from art to render complete what nature had matured. He spoke to them of London and its varied pleasures and excitements; and when Robert said, with a sigh, that he supposed neither Nelly nor himself were ever likely to see the place, Dr. Monkton quite laughed at the absurdity of such a notion; and clapping the poor young fellow on the shoulders, bid him remember that his life and the world were all before him, where to choose, and that it lay with a man to make his own destiny.

Nelly stared at this address, for she knew that her brother's infirmity, to say nothing of his want of education, must for ever preclude his admittance to any of those paths by which the strong and energetic toil on to fortune; but the doctor seemed so much in earnest, that she did not like to spoil the effect of his eloquence by reminding him of what he appeared to have overlooked. Robert, on the contrary, though quite as well aware as his sister, that he was totally unfitted for work, and probably, would not have chosen to attempt it, if he had not been, was delighted that the truth for once should be ignored.

He was constantly bemoaning his crooked back, and railing against Providence for having awarded him so unfortunate a lot ; in general he loved to make the most of his deformity, particularly when he wished to work on Nelly's feelings, and yet, so contradictory is human nature, he liked now to be spoken to as if he were made like other men, and fitted for the same occupations in life. He was as pleased and flattered by Dr. Monkton's familiar words and actions, as an ugly woman is to be called "pretty," although her sense may tell her that the honied compliment is only a delusion and a snare.

When the meal was concluded, the guest drew out his watch, and said, with many a regret, that he feared he must not stay longer, or he should not get back to Hilstone that night. Upon which Nelly expressed a hope that he would not lose the dinner which was to be prepared for him at Reddington. In truth, it had never been ordered, but Dr. Monkton thought he might just as well derive the advantage of being supposed to have made a sacrifice.

"It is of little consequence if I do," he replied, with his softest smile, "I shall deserve no pity on that account, Miss Brooke, since

the exchange has been only *too* delightful to me." And thereupon the twins thought that their new acquaintance must be as generous and unselfish as he was otherwise charming.

"But I must not forget," he continued, as he rose from his seat, "that my principal object in coming here, was to make a few enquiries relative to Mr. Robert Brooke's state of health. I am aware," turning to the brother, "that you already have a professional attendant, who doubtless has done everything for you that is necessary; therefore, pray acquit me, in this offer, of any wish or intention of intruding on his privileges; but two heads are said to be better than one, and if my advice or opinion, as a friend—as a *friend* remember—and in no other capacity, will be likely to be any comfort or reassurance to you, pray command me."

"You are very kind," commenced Robert.

Although his chief inducement to receive Dr. Monkton had been founded on the hope of his doing something for him, now that he had been spoken to as if he were like others, he had become ashamed again of displaying his deformities.

"Oh! Bertie, dear, *do* let Dr. Monkton see your spine," interposed Nelly, fearful lest

her brother's hesitation should indicate a coming refusal.

“As a *friend*, mind,” reiterated the doctor; “if I give my opinion on your case, it must be as one friend speaking to another. Perhaps it would even be best not to mention the fact of my having done so to the gentleman who is at present attending you.”

“Oh, Bumble wouldn't mind,” said Robert, carelessly, “he is an awful old fool, he said himself, that——”

“Excuse me, my dear friend,” said the doctor, blandly interrupting, “but there is a certain etiquette observable in our profession, which must not be outraged. I would rather hear nothing of the capabilities or method of treatment of the person who has hitherto advised you. It would make no difference to my own opinion. Is it to be then or not? I am afraid the time is going.”

At this Robert's vanity yielded to the urgency of the case.

“Well, perhaps it would be best, since I may not see you again for some time. Nelly, take care that no one comes into the room.”

She crept out of it with a grateful passing glance at Dr. Monkton, and took up her station as guard in the whitewashed passage. In

reality she did not remain there more than ten or fifteen minutes, but in her anxiety she thought that the interview would never be over. At last, the muttered conversation was at an end, and there was a sound of hearty farewell, and of steps approaching the door. How cheerful was the doctor's voice. He would never surely speak in such lively tones if Bertie's back were quite incurable. And her brother was laughing too, actually laughing. Nelly clasped her hands and prematurely returned thanks to Heaven. In another minute the door opened, and Dr. Monkton came out.

"I have not a minute to lose," he said hurriedly. "Good-bye, Miss Brooke. Many thanks for your hospitality. You will see me here again, some of these days. Good-bye, good-bye."

But as he released her hand, she ran after him down the passage, saying:

"Oh! Dr. Monkton, what do you think of Bertie's back? Pray tell me, I am so very anxious!"

"But it is a long story," he replied, smiling, "and if I stay to tell it you now, I shall never get back to Reddington in time for my train. May I not write it?"

"Oh! no! no! I *am* so anxious; let me

walk by your side as far as the gate," and throwing a plaid shawl over her head, she passed out with him upon the gravel path.

At first the doctor was puzzled what to say to her, he would have greatly preferred writing; but she was almost imperative in her love and suspense.

He had examined her brother's back, and seen at a glance that the case was hopeless of cure; it was not a weak spine which Robert Brooke suffered from, but a curvature which had existed since his birth; and he had also made another discovery concerning him during his visit, which he was still more unwilling to disclose. But Dr. Monkton was a man who, in his seductive tones, could assure a patient, on whose forehead Death had already commenced to set his seal, that a few hours would, in all probability, see a change for the better in him; and therefore he was not long at a loss how to satisfy poor Nelly's anxiety.

"Ought he to take any medicine?" was her first question.

"Beyond a simple tonic to keep up the strength," replied the doctor, "your brother's is not a case for medicine, Miss Brooke. Less good is effected in spinal complaints by inward treatment than by outward means, such as

mineral baths, shampooing, and the use of such supports as shall enable the patient to take the exercise necessary to strengthen the muscles without the fear of encountering fatigue."

"Which he will never have the means or opportunity of procuring," said Nelly, mournfully.

"We must not make too sure of that, Miss Brooke. They are not to be had in Bickton, certainly, but your brother may not always live in Bickton. Meanwhile he and I are going to commence a correspondence on the subject. He has promised to write to me a week hence, and tell me all about himself, and as business will probably bring me this way again in the course of next month, I shall then hope to see you again, if you will permit me to do so."

"We shall be only too pleased," said Nelly, "but, Dr. Monkton, do tell me one thing before you go—if Bertie had all these baths, and instruments and things, is he likely to be cured then? Is there any chance that he will ever be able to walk upright, or to walk at all like other people?"

They had reached the Farm gate by this time, and as she placed her hand upon it, pre-

paratory to letting him pass through, she fixed her dark blue eyes so seriously upon his face, that Dr. Monkton shuffled about and felt that he could not deceive her.

“I hope so—I should trust so!” he replied, “but without a trial it is quite impossible to say. Meanwhile, Miss Brooke, the great thing is to keep his mind from becoming too anxious about himself, and not to permit him to be exposed to the evening air; these spring months are very treacherous.”

“But there is not,” she enquired, in breathless alarm, “there is not anything else the matter with him, Dr. Monkton, is there?”

“Oh dear, no!” replied the doctor, though uneasily, “nothing, at least, of any consequence; his chest requires care, and he has a cough, as of course you know, which will doubtless disappear with a change of weather.”

“Bertie has had that cough for some time past,” faltered Nelly, “but it was so slight, it seemed to give him so little trouble, that we never thought it required any attention.”

“And no more it does, beyond what I have mentioned,” said the doctor, reassuringly, “but I will speak further with you, Miss Brooke, on this subject when next we meet, for I shall assuredly come again to Little

Bickton, and that at a distance of not many weeks ;” and with a farewell shake of the hand he left her.

When he had walked a little way on his road to the small public house where he had desired the fly which had brought him there, to wait, Dr. Monkton turned his head towards Bickton Farm to have another look at Nelly. She was in the same position as when he had left her—leaning with one hand upon the garden gate, whilst the other held the folds of the plaid shawl which she had carelessly gathered about her throat. She was leaning there, regardless of the chilly April evening, or of her guest’s departure, trying to extract a further meaning from his information than he had chosen she should do.

“Yes! I shall assuredly come again, Miss Brooke,” was the doctor’s mental reiteration, as he watched the graceful figure, and waved his hand in token of a last good-bye ; and then, turning the corner of the road, he disappeared from her abstracted view.

CHAPTER IV.

FOR WHOM DOES HE COME ?

WHEN Nelly Brooke returned to her brother's side, he was in higher spirits than she remembered to have ever seen him display before. She had intended to take him to task for speaking so unreservedly before a stranger, but something in the tone and manner of Dr. Monkton during their brief colloquy, had awakened a chord in her heart which made all thought of reproving Bertie die away. She found him eagerly expecting her return ; ready, with bright, excited eyes to communicate the new fallacious hopes with which his breast was filling, and as she entered the room, he exclaimed—

“ Hurra ! Nelly ! there's a chance for me, yet ! the doctor says he shall be this way again in a fortnight, when he will bring a drawing for me to look at, of some famous instrument which will support my back in standing or walking (what a fool old Bumble must

be, never to have proposed such a thing for me before), and meanwhile I am to take as much exercise as I can without fatigue, and I'll tell you what I mean to do—borrow Mr. Ray's crutches! I know he has a pair, for he used them when he broke his leg on the ice five years ago—and when old Watts was in his last illness (you remember old John Watts' death, Nell, don't you?) he had the loan of them for a long time, so I suppose Ray would lend them to me if I asked him."

"I am sure he would," said Nelly, "for he has offered them to you before now, Bertie, only you were so averse to using them. But had you not better lie down again, darling? You have sat up so much this afternoon that I am afraid you will be terribly tired, and your cheeks and hands are burning."

"Nonsense," he replied, impatiently, "I am not in the least tired, besides Monkton says I am to take as much exercise as I can. The fact is, Nelly, I have been kept lying down a great deal too much as it is—these country doctors know nothing about a case like mine. If I had had a fellow like Monkton from the beginning, I should have been as strong as other men. I only require judicious treatment to set me all right again."

“Did Dr. Monkton tell you that, Bertie?” enquired Nelly, with compassionate surprise.

“Well! no, not exactly; but he said that I might have twice the enjoyment out of life that I do, if I was once put in the proper way of managing myself. It’s all management, Nell! You’ll see! I shall be able to outwalk you this day six months. But what a capital fellow this Monkton is—I could listen to him for ever; I think he is the cleverest man I ever spoke to: and so kind with it all.”

“He does seem very kind,” replied Nelly, “for he can have no object but kindness in taking so much interest in us. But Bertie, dear, don’t you think you were a little—just a little—too free in telling him about the quarrel between poor grandpapa and uncle Nigel?”

“Not a bit of it,” said her brother, decidedly. “You came in at the fag end of our conversation, and had not heard what I did. Dr. Monkton knew the whole story before he ever came here; and we were only discussing the details.”

“But are you sure of that?” enquired Nelly, dubiously.

“Would you discredit the assertion of a

gentleman?" was the magnanimous reply. "You never cast a suspicion on anything Nigel Brooke told us of himself, or his intentions, and yet you doubt the word of a man like Monkton, who is worth twenty of him."

"Oh! no, not *doubt*, Bertie, that is too decided a term to use; but we are all apt, when speaking fast, and on a subject which interests us, to deceive ourselves, and I thought perhaps that you might have drawn a deeper inference from Dr. Monkton's words than he intended you should do, and you would not like so unpleasant a story to be circulated, would you?"

"You thought, in fact," said Bertie, in a tone of injury, "that either I or the doctor might be a fool, and incapable of comprehending each other's statements; but I made mine pretty clear, at all events. If anyone is to blame for the repetition, it is that precious aunt and cousin of yours at Orpington, whom you are always so anxious to defend, and who appear to have blabbed the matter far and wide, in the most indecent manner. But I'll be even with them yet," he continued, compelled at last to seek the rest which he had refused at her suggestion. "The day may come when I shall be in a position to cry

quits with Mr. Nigel Brooke, and then he shall see whether I can hold my own or not."

Whenever her brother became thus grandiloquent and bombastic in his manner of talking, Nelly knew that it was time for him to leave off conversation, for he was apt, after any excitement, to pass a feverish and restless night, so she hastened to wheel his couch round to the fire, and to throw a warm rug over his recumbent figure, and then taking up a book to read aloud to him, she soon lulled him off into his usual afternoon doze. But that was not the last absurd boast which she was destined to hear from Bertie's lips. To her astonishment, during the next few days his energy on the subject appeared rather to increase than to decrease, and he so often made allusions to the probability of finding himself in the future in a position to take his revenge on his aunt and cousin, that she began to wonder what Dr. Monkton could possibly have said to raise such an idea in her brother's mind. Yet the visit had not been without its good effect; Bertie, from the date of it, really made an effort, with the assistance of Mr. Ray's crutches, to take more exercise, and his appetite and temper becoming less capricious in consequence, caused

poor Nelly to think she had reason to bless the day on which she had first seen the face of the Hilstone doctor. When a week had elapsed, her brother sat down to open a correspondence with his newly-made friend. He said that he had promised to do so, and that it was necessary for the progression of his cure ; and Nelly was too pleased that he should have found any interest in life, to suggest that the proceeding, considering they were so soon to see the doctor again, must be rather an useless one. She did not even ask to read the epistle, which was composed and despatched with an assumption of great importance and secrecy, and Bertie, who loved at times to stand on such miserable little bits of dignity, did not offer to shew it her. But she was quite content, she had only welcomed Dr. Monkton for her brother's sake ; and when his answer arrived, intimating that the Reddington case would again require his attendance on the following Saturday, and that if they could procure him a bed in the village he would sleep at Little Bickton, she was prepared to do all she could for the comfort of one whom she had already come to look upon as Bertie's friend. Yet she could not quite agree with the latter when he in-

sisted that there was no bed in the village good enough for the doctor, and that either he or she must resign their own quarters for his accommodation. She would not have had Bertie inconvenienced for the sake of a prince of the blood royal, and yet it was more difficult to procure shelter for two persons than one.

“If *you* will not do it!” her brother had said, “*I* must,” an unprecedented offer on his part, but one which he well knew would never be accepted; “but we cannot possibly allow this man to come down here solely to benefit *me*, and then consider it too much trouble to put ourselves to a little inconvenience in order to make him comfortable.”

“But I will give him up my room directly, darling, if you will only tell me where Aggie and I are to go to. They have a spare bed at the Farm Cottage, which Alice Weston says we are welcome to use; but it is only a single one.”

“Well, surely you can take that, and Aggie can sleep anywhere, on the floor or in the passage. It is only for one night.”

“Nurse Aggie is a very old woman now,” said Nelly, thoughtfully, “I think I am better able to sleep on the floor than she is.”

“Oh, very well, Nelly! if you had no in-

tention of making yourself agreeable, why didn't you say so at once, and save all this trouble. *I shall sleep at the Cottage, then, and the doctor can have my room. That's decided.*"

"I'm sure it isn't," exclaimed his sister, as he knew she would. "I would not have you move for the world, Bertie, and with your cough too. Aggie and I will find beds somewhere, never fear, and Dr. Monkton shall sleep in our room; and I am sure if your health is improved by his visits, no sacrifice could be too great to make for him."

"Well, that is just what I said," replied her brother, mollified by her acquiescence, "and after all, what is giving up one's bed for a single night?" and, indeed, considering that the bed was not his own, it appeared less than nothing in Bertie's eyes.

But Nelly was not permitted to carry out her hospitable design. On the day fixed, Dr. Monkton duly arrived, but he would not hear of occupying her room, and when pressed by Robert on the subject, threatened to return to Reddington if he were not allowed to do as he chose. So he lay that night at the Farm Cottage, and Nelly and old Aggie retained undisputed possession of their own apartment.

Dr. Monkton made himself quite as friendly and agreeable on this occasion as he had done on the last, even more, indeed, but Nelly perceived a difference in his manner of doing so. In the first place, he was not so eager to talk about Bertie's infirmities as he had been during his previous visit. He brought down, as he had promised, designs of the various surgical instruments used in similar cases, with their makers' names and prices attached, all of which were considerably higher than either of the twins had imagined, and he presented Bertie with a small volume containing the rules to be followed for his general health, which he advised him to peruse and be guided by.

But here his attentions were directed towards the presentation of a splendid bouquet of hot-house flowers, which he had bought for Nelly; and of a parcel of books which he pretended were to be read aloud for her brother's amusement, but which had evidently been selected more with a view to her own taste. He was so anxious to learn what Miss Brooke thought of the flowers, and whether she had yet read the books, that he answered poor Bertie's long accounts of his latest symptoms and observations rather more curtly than was

flattering, and which for awhile, the patient was disposed to resent. Nelly also perceived this apparent relaxation of interest for her brother's case on the part of the doctor, but she attributed it, with an inward sigh, to the fact that he considered it hopeless ; and when she found that she could not bring the conversation round to the old subject, tried all she could to divert Bertie's observation from the fact that it was no longer the engrossing topic. But although Dr. Monkton talked over the tea-table of other things than spinal complaints, he was still so pleasant and entertaining, that as before, his host and hostess could not but be charmed with him. The next day Robert Brooke much wished his guest to remain with him during the hours of morning service, so that they might have a good opportunity for private converse, and threw out several hints to that effect ; but the doctor was smitten with a particular desire to inspect the whitewashed interior of the unpretending building which went by the name of Little Bickton church, and begged to be permitted to accompany Nelly there. After which there was some other native curiosity, lying quite in the opposite direction to the Farm, which he was anxious to see, and by

that means induced his unsuspecting guide to lead him home by a much longer route. Still Robert had the doctor for some time to himself before he remounted his horse (he had ridden from Reddington this time) and rode away from Little Bickton. As he did so Nelly felt that she was not so anxious to see him again as she had been before. Much of her enthusiasm about Dr. Monkton had already evaporated, or rather he had frightened it away, by having allowed her more than once to detect him in the act of regarding her in the same steadfast and glowing manner which had caused her so much uneasiness on the first occasion of their having met. Each time she had encountered the fixed and piercing gaze of his dark eyes, her thoughts had flown back to the coursing match on Hilstone Downs, and to all that her cousin Nigel had then said concerning the man before her, and she instinctively felt that, notwithstanding all his kindness to Bertie, the day would come when she should dislike him. Yet, when he was once more lost to view, she tried to reason herself out of what appeared to be a childish prejudice. It might only be the doctor's manner, she argued, and after all, he came in the capacity of her brother's friend, and not

hers. And had he been Mephistopheles himself, she would scarcely have dared under such circumstances to resent any conduct he might choose to assert towards her. But she was rather inclined to find fault with his having taken so little notice during this second visit of Bertie's ills—particularly as Bertie himself more than once alluded to the same subject. Yet, when not a week afterwards, a friendly tap with the knuckles on their parlour door was followed, to their intense surprise, by the re-appearance of the doctor, they mutually agreed they had wronged him by deciding so hastily that his interest in the invalid had been too sudden and great to last. This time they had not received the least notice of his coming, and Somerset appeared, in their unsophisticated minds, to be such a long way off that they could not believe, until Dr. Monkton assured them it was the case, he had made the journey for the sole purpose of visiting themselves. Yet he spoke the truth in saying so, for although it took several hours to traverse the distance between Hilstone and Reddington, a return ticket did not cost above a couple of pounds; and what was that to a man like Dr. Monkton, who was flying about the country half his time, and

taking fees every hour in the day. He did not stay very long on this last occasion, as his time was valuable, but he made the most of his short visit. He came to inform Miss Brooke that he had taken the liberty of bringing a small hamper for her acceptance as far as the Reddington Station, which should be forwarded by the carrier next day, containing a few spring trifles in the way of fruit and vegetables from his own garden, so that she and her brother might be able to judge how far assiduity was effectual in turning a little plot of cathedral ground to use.

And, indeed, if the forced strawberries, the green peas, and the sea-kale—to say nothing of the roses and mignonette which the unpacking of that hamper on the following day disclosed—had really all been grown in the month of May on the doctor's plot of cathedral ground, his skill in gardening could not have been too highly commended.

But he had also a proposal to make and this was for the brother's benefit. He had found almost by chance (so Dr. Monkton averred) that he had an invalid-chair lying somewhere in his stables, not new certainly, but still perfectly fit for use, and it was positively none to himself. Would Mr. Robert Brooke allow

him to forward it to Bickton for his convenience? It was light and easy, and might be of service in conveying him about the lanes in summer time, and he would be giving the doctor real pleasure by his acceptance of it.

At this offer, Nelly expected to see some remembrance of a similar one, which had been abruptly refused, flash across her brother's face, but no such token appeared that Nigel Brooke's kindness was not utterly forgotten. Robert appeared delighted with the doctor's present; was profuse in his expressions of gratitude; only fearful apparently of encroaching on his friend's generosity by a too ready acquiescence. But his sister did not say a word; she felt that she could not; she was too pained at the marked difference with which Bertie had received the announcement of this gift, and of the other.

The chair and the hamper arrived in due course, and for a month from that period the twins were never free from the visits of Dr. Monkton. He was constantly making his appearance at all sorts of unexpected times, although he generally came on a Sunday, and never empty-handed. Now he brought some simple apparatus for strengthening and expanding Bertie's cramped muscles, or a medi-

cal work by which he might study his own symptoms, and reckon up his chances of relief, for the youth was very fond of perusing any books which bore upon his case ; then the last new song or novel for Nelly, or bonbons, of which she was childishly fond ; or a new collar for Thug, or anything which may be presented and accepted between those who are only friends.

Of course these constant and marked attentions on the part of the Hilstone doctor, could not take place without exciting much comment amongst the acquaintance of the twins.

Mr. Ray, as soon as he heard of his visits to the Farm, made a point in his capacity of guardian of becoming acquainted with the stranger, and whilst he publicly expressed his approval of his clever conversation and courteous demeanour, privately, or before his wife and daughters, would rub his hands and chuckle over the prospect of so excellent a marriage for his favourite little Nelly.

For there was but one person in Bickton, who had any doubt with respect to the object of Dr. Monkton, in so often making his appearance there.

Mrs. Weston, who had passed her opinion

on him from the first, as being the possessor of the most elegant figure and the finest eyes she had ever seen, declared she had never met anyone so worthy to be Nelly's husband ; whilst even old Aggie, who did not feel very friendly towards the doctor, was forced to confess that he looked " quite the gentleman," and that he and her bird " would make a fine couple, bless 'em."

Even Robert Brooke, selfishly as he was wrapt up in his own concerns, could not fail to notice what was become patent to all ; and, delighted at the prospect thus opened before himself and his sister, daily sounded the praises of their benefactor more, whilst simple-hearted Nelly listened and smiled, and agreed to what her brother said, and of all the world was the only one to remain blind to the fact which concerned herself the most.

CHAPTER V.

NELLY'S EYES ARE OPENED.

“MISS NELLY,” said Nurse Aggie, slyly, one day, as she and her young mistress were together in the little back kitchen which Mrs. Weston gave up for the use of her lodgers, “can you tell me for why that gentleman from Hilstone comes here so often? The Bickton folk is always enquiring that question of me, and I should like to be able to satisfy them, and you should know the reason, my dear, if anyone do.”

At this address Nelly stopped short in her manufacture of pie-crust, and looked up in the old woman's face.

“For what reason does Dr. Monkton come to Bickton, Aggie,” she said, slightly amending her nurse's grammar, “why, to see Bertie, to be sure.”

Aggie threw the peel of the potato which she had just pared, right away to the other side of the kitchen.

“ Lor’, Miss Nelly ! to hear you talk, if one wouldn’t think you was a mere infant. What, you mean me to believe that he comes all the way from Hilstone every week or ten days only for the pleasure of speaking with Master Robert ? Tut !”

At this display of impatience, Nelly laughed. “ Not only to speak to him, you silly old thing, but to see after his spine, of course, and his general health. Dr. Monkton is kind enough to attend Bertie professionally, you know, nurse, though I fear no one will ever be able to do him much good.”

“ And pray how many times have the doctor examined Master Robert’s spine, Miss Nelly, if I may make so bold as to ask ?” enquired the old woman.

“ Well, I don’t think he has really looked at it more than once,” replied Nelly, returning to her pie-crust, “ but he always enquires after it, and tells Bertie what is best to do to strengthen himself ; and I suppose that is all that is necessary.”

“ Necessary ! yes, I should think so, and a deal more, into the bargain,” was the servant’s reply. “ Dr. Monkton won’t never do your brother any good, my dearie, and for the plain reason that he can’t. If he’s the clever gen-

tleman they say, he must have known the first time he see Master Robert's back, that it'll never be cured in this world. I took him from the birth, Miss Nelly, as I did yourself, and, as soon as ever I see his poor body, I called to the doctor, and I says, 'this one will be a cripple,' says I; and the doctor, he says, 'so it will, sure enough,' and no one but yourself had ever a doubt on the subject from that hour to this. And if Dr. Monkton flatters Master Robert with the hope that it will be otherwise, he is doing of him a cruel kindness, and I should like to tell him so."

"But I don't know that he does, Aggie," said Nelly, carelessly, "indeed, from what he has told me I should think it very unlikely. He may not wish to tell dear Bertie for a certainty that he will never be strong, but I am sure he thinks so."

"Then for why do he come here a-wasting his precious time, Miss Nelly?"

"I really can't tell you, Aggie! I suppose he is interested in the case in a medical point of view. He may wish to try and do all he can for Bertie, however little chance there is of a cure."

"Medical fiddlesticks, my dearie!" exclaimed the old nurse, with bitter sarcasm;

“don't you go for to stuff such rubbish down my throat. Doctors may be very partial to their medical points of view, Miss Nelly, and it's quite right they should, considering it's their business, but when they're young and handsome, there's another point of view as they likes much better.”

“And what's that?” said Nelly, smiling.

“Why, making love, my dear! It's a much pleasanter point of view than looking at crooked backs, and you may be quite sure as Dr. Monkton is of my opinion.”

“Well, he makes love to no one here,” was the decided reply, “so that cannot be his object in coming.”

“May be not, but he wants to,” said the old nurse.

“Who says so?” enquired Nelly, quickly.

“Why, all Bickton, my dear. There's not one of us, from the vicar and Mrs. Weston, down to the servants about the farm, but can't see as it's yourself the doctor comes after, and not Master Robert, by no manner of means.”

Nelly grew scarlet.

“The vicar says so,” she exclaimed, “and Mrs. Weston?”

“To be sure, my dear, and a score of others

beside ; and how you've kept your own eyes shut so long, beats me altogether."

"Because it is not true," said Nelly, indignantly, "and if anyone dares to say it again, Aggie, you must tell them so. Dr. Monkton has never made love to me, and never will, for a very good reason, because I should not allow it. He is Master Robert's friend, and if he shews me any kindness it is for Master Robert's sake, and not mine. And I shall be very angry if you ever mention this subject again, or allow other people to do so." And Nelly held her head an inch higher for the remainder of the time she spent in the back kitchen.

But her eyes once opened, she found it difficult to close them again. She could not forget the conversation she had held with old Aggie, nor prevent herself from recalling it, at moments when she would least wish to do so. At first she quite believed that it was only the usual gossip of a little country village, but as the days went on, she made herself wretched by fancying it might be true. She could no longer disguise the fact from herself, that Dr. Monkton's attentions were becoming more marked, that he held her hand longer, and pressed it more warmly than he used to do, that there was a deeper meaning

in his lengthened gaze, and a softer modulation in his voice when he addressed her, than there had been at first. And the knowledge made her painfully shy of encountering him, and conscious when in his presence. She tried to avoid him as much as she could, and would steal away whenever she had intimation of his approach ; but as she was so constant an attendant on her brother, this was not easy of accomplishment. She grew very bashful of mixing in the general conversation ; would blush vividly when personally addressed, and evinced an evident hesitation in accepting any more offerings at the doctor's hands. The signs of conscious guilt or innocence in a prisoner placed at the bar, are said to be so similar, that it is difficult for an unpractised judge to distinguish between them ; the same may be affirmed of the symptoms in a young girl of unacknowledged love or dislike.

Nelly's heart shrunk from the mere idea of receiving Dr. Monkton as a lover, yet had she just discovered that he was all in all to her, she could not have oftener blushed beneath his glance, or been more confused and self-conscious when in his presence than she was.

And he, being like most of us, but too ready to believe what he desired, misinterpreted these

tokens, and pursued his suit with redoubled ardour. At this juncture, it will be as well to halt for a moment and analyse what were his own feelings and intentions in the matter. They are quickly told: Dr. Monkton was simply passionately in love with Nelly Brooke.

There is no other word by which his feelings for her could be properly expressed, for it alone comprises all that they were worth.

He was a clever and politic man; he possessed refinement and good taste, and his ordinary manner was so suave and gentle, that he was generally accredited with good nature; but he was narrow-minded, cowardly, and sensual, and the women who had baffled his pursuit of them, had had reason to rue the hour they did it.

He had been very much attracted by Nelly's face and figure from the first time he had seen them. What so particularly took his fancy in them, he would have been puzzled himself to say. He had known numbers more lovely, many as fresh and pure. Yet the memory of Nelly Brooke remained with him, whilst that of others faded away. Perhaps the secret lay in the fact that her appearance was eminently calculated to arrest the attention of anyone

who knew the value of perfect health, and could recognise the symptoms of it.

Bloodless hands, and pearly skins, and wasp-like figures, had no power to excite the admiration of James Monkton ; he felt no interest in hectic flushes, and feverishly brilliant eyes, or in any of the hysterical tremors, which attack young women with unhealthy organisations, except for the sake of affording them relief.

He had not studied disease under each of its hideous forms for nothing. However whited the outward sepulchre might be, he could detect at a glance what it contained.

But the free circulation and the elastic steps of the country-bred girl : the firm white teeth and the wholesome skin ; the clear, dewy eye, and the equal temperament, had charms for him which he felt to be quite irresistible. He had the same feeling regarding the possession of Nelly Brooke which makes one stoop to kiss an innocent child, or bury one's face in a bouquet of fresh roses ; there was such an atmosphere of milk, and dew, and cowslips pervading her, that he felt as if he should always have the country about him whilst she was by his side.

These were the only reasons for which he loved her ; he knew no higher, for her heart

and mind were a sealed book to him, and he was not the man to whom she would ever disclose them. He saw that she was simple and unaffected, he heard that she was devoted and self-denying, but whether she were intellectual or foolish, religious or profane, Dr. Monkton neither knew nor cared to enquire. If his opinion of her mental capacity had been seriously asked, he would probably have said that it was rather below than above the average, but this was no defect in his eyes, for he considered an intellectual woman as rather an anomaly in nature. In his idea, they were creatures, under certain conditions, to be caressed and looked after, but under none to be let out of leading strings. Had he been told that, hidden under the domestic bearing and the bashful rusticity of Nelly Brooke, lay the capability of experiencing emotions as ardent as ever woman felt, he would not have credited the information, still less that her brain was as strong as her heart, and that both slumbered simply because they had never met with the occasion which should rouse them. He was rich and he was independent, free to choose a wife according to his own taste, and bound to consult no one in the matter, and his choice had fallen upon Nelly Brooke. It was

on account of his anxiety to trace her whereabouts that he had quarrelled with Mrs. Brooke of Orpington, and when he came down to Bickton Farm, and found, as he thought, that the prey would be easy of conquest, he determined to follow up the chase. He was perfectly aware, from what he had seen, and Robert had told him, that he should not gain the sister without consenting to saddle himself with the brother also, but the thought troubled him little. Had he been thoroughly conscientious, he was too much in love to think any condition hard which should gain him Nelly for a wife ; but Dr. Monkton was not unused to play fast and loose with his conscience, and he knew that, should he ever come to feel the burden irksome, there were more ways than one of ridding himself of it. And things were at this pass when the first of June arrived.

“Nelly,” said her brother, abruptly, as she sat stitching by his side on the afternoon of that day, “we must leave Little Bickton.”

For a moment, his sister thought that she had mistaken his intention, for this was the first time he had ever mentioned the idea to her.

“Leave Bickton, Bertie ; what do you

mean? who have we to go to?" she asked quietly.

"It's not necessary to have someone to go to, in order to leave a place, I suppose," he answered.

The work fell from Nelly's fingers.

"But you don't mean that you wish us to go and *live* away from Bickton, do you?"

"Of course I do, what else should I mean?"

"But how can we? where shall we find lodgings at the rent we pay for these, or be able to live on the same sum? Think how poor we are, Bertie."

"Provisions are the same price everywhere," he answered, "and so is house-rent if one knows how to manage. I can't see that everything is so wondrously cheap here, as you try to make out, Nelly."

"But will Mr. Ray let us go?" she next enquired; "we must do as he says until we are of age, you know."

"Of course if you are determined to throw obstacles on the plan in every possible way," said Robert, testily, "it will never come to pass. If you go telling Ray a lot of nonsense about the expense and the impossibility of making the money do, he will put his veto on it directly. But if you persuade him a

little the other way, he would consent to anything."

"But supposing," said Nelly, timidly, "supposing, Bertie, that the money was sufficient, and that Mr. Ray approved of the proposal, where should we go to?"

At this question Robert slightly reddened.

"Oh, I don't know, it will be time enough to think about that when the other business is settled. To London, perhaps, or to some nice quiet town: anywhere but in the country. Why wouldn't Hilstone do? You said it was a jolly old place, didn't you?"

He had some idea that the mere mention of moving would bring Dr. Monkton's intentions to a crisis, and if not, that the daily sight of his sister, attired in all the glories of Hilstone millinery, would be certain to effect the same end. He began to be tired of the wooing, and to long for all the benefits which should accrue to him from Nelly's marriage. But at the mention of Hilstone, she blushed deeper than himself.

"Oh, no, Bertie, not there, anywhere but there."

"And why not?" he asked.

"It is so near Orpington," she murmured, unable to find a better reason.

“And do you think I should permit that to make any difference in my plans,” replied Robert, loftily, “the Orpington people can keep out of my way, I suppose, and if they did not, I should very soon teach them to act differently. It would be everything to me to be nearer Dr. Monkton; he says himself, that he could do twice as much for me if he had me under his eye, but I suppose my health is not of the slightest moment. I may drag on as now to the end of my miserable existence so long as you are not asked to leave your beloved Bickton.”

“Oh! Bertie! how very unkind of you to say so,” cried Nelly, biting her lip with vexation, “you know that I would go to the world’s end with you if it would do you any good: but notwithstanding Dr. Monkton’s kindness, I don’t see that you are any the better for his visits here.”

“And what should you know about it?” said her brother, in no way softened by her faltering voice, “you cannot tell how much my strength may be improving all this time, or what end Monkton has in view by pursuing a quiet treatment with me at first. Leave such things to men and doctors, my dear, and keep to your stockings and puddings. If you

don't, and on the contrary, attempt to set your judgment against mine in an emergency like this, you may be the entire ruin of my future."

"I shall never be that, darling," she exclaimed as she fondly clasped his hand, "you know that whatever is best for you will always seem best to me. But let us go to London, Bertie, (if we go at all). There are hospitals there, where you can have the best advice without paying for it, and after all that would be much better than laying ourselves under such a heavy obligation to one like Dr. Monkton, who is no relation to us."

"Never mind the obligation, little sister," said Robert, coaxed into returning her caresses, "we will find some way of paying him by-and-bye."

"I don't see how," she answered thoughtfully.

"But you will promise not to set yourself against this scheme of leaving Bickton, Nelly, won't you?"

"If you will promise to speak to Mr. Ray about it openly, Bertie, and not to conceal anything from him; I am quite ready to abide by his decision."

"I shall not mention the subject to Ray until I have settled it for myself. Why, the

man has only the charge of our money, and as long as we don't touch the principal, what business is it of his where we spend the interest? I shall not consult him at all, I shall only consult Monkton."

"Oh! not Dr. Monkton, Bertie! what *can* he know about our means? He is so rich himself, I daresay he scarcely thinks of the value of money. Pray don't speak to him until it is all decided. Let us go to London, darling! I am sure you will like no other place so well, we shall be so happy together in London, and you have always been anxious to visit it. Pray let us go to London."

So she implored, dreading the alternative of a residence in Hilstone, but although Bertie managed to soothe her with some excuse, he was determined to have his own way.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DOCTOR PUTS A QUESTION, AND RECEIVES HIS ANSWER.

TOWARDS the close of the next afternoon, as Nelly was about to emerge from her bedroom where she had been preparing for a stroll, she heard the now familiar voice of the Hilstone doctor conversing with her brother. She had left Thug in the sitting-room anxiously awaiting her promise to return; she had even grasped the handle of the door which divided the apartments when the sound made her pause and shrink backwards. He had been at Bickton only three days previously, and she had hoped that for a while he would leave her in peace; for being forced to acknowledge that his visits were to herself, she had begun to dread them, and on this particular evening she felt as if she could not meet him. So, regardless of Thug's disappointment, she gently relaxed her hold upon the door-handle, and slipping back again into her own room,

opened the window, and with the aid of a chair, escaped thence into the garden. It was a lovely summer evening : the lilacs and laburnums had already faded, but the air was filled with the scent of syringa and early roses ; and the borders of Mrs. Weston's strip of flower-garden were filled with pinks and sweet-williams, and candy-tuft, and all those old-fashioned flowers which are so common and yet so sweet. Nelly could not leave the Farm gates without passing in front of the parlour window, so she contented herself with creeping along the narrow thrift-edged gravel path, until she reached a planked summer-house, situated at its extreme end, and which was decorated with ivy and honeysuckle and monthly roses outside ; and with spider's cobwebs and earwigs in. This charming little retreat was furnished with an immovable bench, surrounding its semi-circular wall, which was the hardest to sit upon, being fashioned like a wooden gridiron, and the most impossible to lounge against of any seat yet planned by mortal. In front of which was a table to match : too small to be of any use excepting as a resting-place for a book or cup of tea, and yet quite large enough to cramp the legs of those who sat upon the bench.

In general, Nelly had a great horror of this summer-house, which was Mrs. Weston's pride, and dreaded nothing so much as being invited to take her tea out there ; but on the present occasion she flew to it as to a harbour of refuge. Its walls were impervious to the light, and she had caught up a book as she passed through her bed-room : here would she lie hid at all events until the period for their evening meal, and if the doctor stayed over that, he could not remain much longer.

So tucking up her dress with a view to cheating the earwigs, Nelly settled herself on the wooden gridiron and was soon deep in the study of Herbert's Poems. She had a great taste for poetry, as she had for music, and before long she had become so absorbed in the quiet beauty of the pages before her, that she forgot all about the doctor's visit, was even unmindful that the book she held was one of those which ostensibly he had selected for Bertie's use ; when she was once more recalled to the things of the outer world, by the abrupt and boisterous entrance of Thug, who overjoyed at finding his mistress again, and quite regardless of the moral of the jackass and the lapdog, leapt up on the bench beside her, and thrust his black muzzle into her face.

“ Oh ! my dear Thug ! ” exclaimed Nelly, as Herbert’s Poems was knocked out of her hands and fell upon the ground, “ now, just see what you’ve done to that nice book ! How often have I told you that you’ve grown a great deal too big to sit in my lap ? Well ! what’s the news, old doggie ? Has the doctor gone ? ” As she said this, laying her hand caressingly on the mastiff’s broad forehead, she heard a step which had followed the dog.

“ No ! the doctor has not gone yet, ” said a softly modulated voice in answer to her outspoken question, “ but he hopes that Thug’s mistress will not be very sorry to hear it, ” and at the same moment the man from whom she had run away stood before her. At his appearance Nelly, remembering her tucked-up dress, quickly abandoned her position, and the slight confusion attendant on her exertion and surprise, combined with the presence of Herbert’s Poems, a fact which Dr. Monkton was not slow to notice, emboldened him to advance into the arbour.

“ Pray do not let me disturb you, ” he said, “ I should like nothing better than to enjoy a few moments’ rest in this charming little spot. I had your brother’s permission to seek you, Miss Brooke, but I hardly think I should

have succeeded in my search, had it not been for Thug's sagacity."

"Oh! you wretched old Thug!" was Nelly's impatient thought, as, not knowing what else to do, she reseated herself on the arbour bench. "How I wish I had shut you up in the kitchen, instead of leaving you in the parlour." But all she said in answer to Dr. Monkton's address, was :

"But perhaps Bertie may want me."

"He does not, indeed," replied the doctor, with a lingering glance from his dark eyes, as he placed his hand gently upon hers, as though to detain her. "I have but this moment left him, and he was quite aware that I might not immediately return. Your brother and I have had the most interesting conversation together, Miss Brooke."

"Have you?" she said, carelessly.

"Yes! deeply interesting to myself, at all events. We have been speaking of the advisability of your moving from Bickton, and taking up a residence in some place a little less remote."

Nelly had almost forgotten the conversation she had held with Bertie the day before; but as these words recalled it to her mind, she looked visibly distressed.

“ Oh, I am so sorry—” she commenced.

“ Sorry ! for what ? not that your brother values my advice, I trust,” enquired the doctor.

“ Oh ! no—not that—but I thought—at least I had hoped !—that is to say—Bertie and I spoke on this subject yesterday evening, and I wanted him so much to consult Mr. Ray first. Mr. Ray is our guardian, you know, Dr. Monkton,” she added, fearing that her words might give offence, “ and we could not take any decided step without his leave, and I am afraid that Bertie does not think, that he does not know, what much greater expenses we should incur by moving from Little Bickton.”

“ And you think of all that for him,” said Dr. Monkton, admiringly.

“ I am obliged to,” she said, quietly, “ some one must do it, and perhaps you do not know how poor we are.”

“ Indeed I do,” he replied. “ Without wishing to be inquisitive, I could hardly have visited you for so long without at least guessing it. And I am quite of your opinion, Miss Brooke. In few places in England could you live so cheaply and so well as you do here, and in no town.”

“ Then I am right, am I not ?” she said,

looking up brightly at him, "and you will advise Bertie as I do, to try and be contented with his old home and his old friends?"

But the expression of Dr. Monkton's face was not encouraging.

"I hardly know what to say," he replied, musingly, "for your brother decidedly requires change; not so much change of air, as of scene and place. He wants more society and amusement; his state of mind is not healthy, and may become morbid if left to itself, and the health of his body in a great measure depends upon the state of his mind."

The look of alarm which Nelly's features assumed during this speech was just what the doctor wished to see upon them.

"Is this your real opinion of Bertie, Dr. Monkton?" she asked.

"This is my real opinion, I have thought so ever since I saw him."

"Then of course that decides the matter," she said, sorrowfully, "if it is necessary for Bertie's health, it must *be* at any cost, and I am sure that Mr. Ray will not oppose the plan, and we must manage the best way we can." And as if it were already settled that they should leave it, she gave a long sigh to the memory of Little Bickton.

“ Yet there is little doubt,” said Dr. Monkton, taking up the thread of his first argument, “ that London is a very expensive place, although it is said to be cheaper to live there than in a country town. But it is not only that the immense demand for houses and provisions causes the tradesmen to raise their prices and landlords their rents, but that towns abound with so many temptations to spend money on amusements and luxuries, which in the country we never dream of enjoying. An income which, in a place like this, would keep a family in comfort, would barely serve in London to supply it with the necessaries of life.”

“ But what are we to do, then ?” exclaimed Nelly, clasping her hands in despair at the picture conjured up by this assertion.

“ Your brother and I have quite decided what is best to be done, Helena !” replied Dr. Monkton, looking at her significantly, “ and we only wait for your consent to carry our plan into execution.”

She noticed neither the significance of his glance nor the fact that he had called her by her Christian name ; she only waited breathlessly to hear by what means he proposed to extricate them from their difficulty.

“Robert and I have been discussing this subject far more in detail than I have done with yourself,” continued the doctor. “I have given him my exact opinion respecting his health, and the difficulties which I foresee will beset you in moving from Bickton, and I have pointed out a way by which both ends may be happily accomplished ; by which your brother may leave this place, and have every comfort necessary to his condition, and yet be fearless of incurring either poverty or debt,” and as Dr. Monkton said this, he moved nearer to Nelly’s side.

“But how?” she demanded, “in what way?”

“In this way, Helena, that you should become my wife, and make your brother’s interests mine.”

He did not venture to touch her, and for a short time after hearing his words, she sat as quiet as though she were under a spell. She had expected this ; for days past she had watched and dreaded its coming, but, occupied with her own and Bertie’s troubles, she had not been thinking of it at that moment.

How often had she, girl-like, pondered on her first offer of marriage, and tried to fancy what the visionary lover would say to her,

and how she would reply to him. She had imagined that she would be sure to see the proposal hovering for hours on his lips before he dared to give his feelings vent, and that she would be blushing and trembling for the same period, under the consciousness of what was before her. And yet, here had the offer come; not quite unexpectedly, indeed, but when she was thinking of far different things, and at the hands of one from whom she shrunk to hear such words; a reality, but wondrously dissimilar to her girlish dream.

But she found no difficulty in answering him, she felt that to such a proposal for her there could but be one answer. Slowly and softly the words dropped from her lips as though it gave her pain to utter them, yet there was no trace of indecision in the tone in which Nelly Brooke replied :

“ I cannot.”

But Dr. Monkton had no notion of taking this refusal as final: he considered it but natural that when the thought of marriage was first presented to a young and unsophisticated girl, her feeling as well as her answer should be that she could not consent to it, and he did not doubt but that it only required a

little persuasion on his own part to reconcile Nelly to the idea.

“Think again!” he murmured rather than said, “I offer you, not only an establishment and fortune, the possession of which would satisfy any woman with moderate desires; but a home for your brother, where he will be surrounded by the luxury which in his sad state becomes necessary, almost, to his existence; where he will live under my own eye; watched over and cared for as he can be nowhere else; and within reach of the cheerful society and amusement without which I consider there is no hope that his condition will be improved.”

Still all that she answered was :

“I *cannot*, Dr. Monkton; pray don't ask me again: it is impossible.”

“I offer you more than this,” he said, warming with the subject. “I offer you an affection which has been yours from the first hour we met: which is as deep and ardent as ever woman inspired, and which is only waiting—longing—to clasp you in my arms.”

“Ah!——” and as the exclamation burst from her, Nelly bounded from her seat, and stood blushing and panting with the arbour table between herself and Dr. Monkton; for

in making the last declaration, he had dared not only to press towards her side, but to lay his unhallowed touch upon her waist. She would have sat quietly for hours to refute his arguments or parry his persuasions, but the thought that he had presumed upon their position, for a moment drove all the angelic out of Nelly's nature.

“How *dare* you?” was her first note of defiance, and then a remembrance of the obligations under which she and Bertie lay to the man whom she addressed, overcame her womanly indignation, and her next words were almost apologetic in their tone, “Pray don't touch me, Dr. Monkton; I will listen to you patiently as long as you please, but you must not touch me again: I cannot bear it;” and she extended her hand as though to ward him off.

James Monkton's face grew very dark. He might choose to mistake her confusion and timidity, and evident avoidance of himself, as so many signs of incipient love: but it was not quite so easy to mistake a woman's feelings towards a man whose mere touch made her shudder.

As the poor child whom he had offended watched his lowering brow, and found that he

made no answer to her appeal, she began to fear that she had sinned beyond forgiveness.

“I am very sorry, Dr. Monkton,” she recommenced in a faltering voice; “I am afraid that you must think me very rude, and very ungrateful, but I really don’t know what else to say to you. I am quite aware how much Bertie and I owe to your friendship, and that you have been kinder to us, and given us more presents than——”

“Pray don’t mention it,” he said coldly.

“But you must let me do so, please,” she implored. “Don’t think me worse than I am: I have felt all this very deeply, and the remembrance of it adds so much to the pain of being obliged to say what I do now. But what else *could* I say, Dr. Monkton?”

“That I must leave entirely to yourself,” he replied, “the question now is, what will your brother think of your decision?”

“Bertie would never wish me to be unhappy; he loves me,” said Nelly proudly.

“Which is evidently more than you do him,” was the rejoinder.

“Oh! no, indeed, it is not,” replied the girl, clasping her hands. “I love him dearly—God knows that I do—we have had but one heart between us ever since we were born,

and his happiness is like my own. I would cut off my right hand to-morrow, to do him any good."

"Yet you will not secure the happiness of his future by giving him the home and comforts which he requires. Well, remember that I have offered them to you, and you have refused. I trust you may never have cause to regret your decision."

But Nelly did not appear to notice the sarcasm.

"Dr. Monkton," she said thoughtfully, "is it necessary to tell Bertie this? It may distress him, and it grieves me so to see him unhappy. You have been very good to us both, but I should consider it the greatest kindness you ever did me, if you would keep this a secret between ourselves, and let everything go on as it did before. Don't let my brother suffer because I seem to be ungrateful or stupid."

As Nelly said this, and turned her moistened eyes like dewy violets, imploringly upon the doctor, she looked sufficiently interesting to have caused a harder-hearted man to abandon his purpose. But James Monkton had been wounded on his sorest point; the little country-bred girl whom he had expected

to prove so facile of conquest, had deliberately and unreservedly rejected his honourable proposals. Had she agreed to them, his passion probably would for a time have known no bounds: but as she had dared to make him feel, she should feel herself in return.

So he rose from his seat with a short and affectedly careless laugh:—"I am afraid that's quite impossible, Miss Brooke, for as I believe I mentioned before, I came straight from your brother's side to seek you, and he not only knew with what intention I did so, but is anxiously waiting to learn the upshot of our interview. So that I need not keep him in suspense any longer. Adieu," he continued in a light airy tone, as he left the summer-house without offering to shake her hand. "I fancy it will be a long time before you and I meet again (if we ever do so); but under the circumstances, I presume that you will not find it difficult to reconcile yourself to my absence. Adieu, once more," and waving his hand, Dr. Monkton passed down the narrow gravel path, switching off the heads of the flowers as he went, and left Nelly Brooke standing in Mrs. Weston's summer-house alone.

CHAPTER VII.

WHICH DOES NOT APPEAR TO GIVE GENERAL
SATISFACTION.

WHEN the suit of the wicked and powerful lord in a burlesque has been scornfully rejected by the virtuous peasant maiden, and he wrathfully informs her that she shall yet "tee-remble" at the sound of his name, the audience shout at the absurdity of the situation, and ascribe half its fun to its utter improbability, and yet there are gentlemen in this nineteenth century, capable in a quiet way of bidding the women who have dared to repulse them "tee-remble." Dr. Monkton did it to Nelly Brooke when he left her in the arbour with that nonchalant "adieu," saying that he fancied it would be long, if ever, before they met again.

It was his way of informing her that whether she suffered or not from her refusal of his offer, she would at least deprive her brother of the many advantages to be derived

from his friendship, and he was well aware that it was the best method by which to excite her fears lest she should regret what she had done. And so far he was successful. For a few seconds she stood still, quietly regarding the seat which he had vacated, and then, as the various ways in which Bertie would feel the change before him, came stealing, one by one, upon her memory, she sunk down upon the wooden bench again, and hid her face upon the arms which lay stretched across the little table. She was not crying : she was too hurt and proud to cry, but her heart beat faster and faster as a mighty fear lest she should have made a mistake surged in her breast, and she scarcely knew if she were glad or sorry for what she had done. Not for herself ; she never had but one opinion on that subject, but for Bertie.

She thought of what her life with him had been before the advent of Dr. Monkton : how cheerless the dark days during which he did nothing but complain, and how lonely the long evenings, when he would either retire in weary disgust to his bed, or lie on the sofa for hours without speaking a word to her.

With pain, she recalled his bitter sarcasms on the dulness and monotony of their exist-

ence ; how he had pined for more intellectual companionship than hers ; and a wider field for action than Bickton afforded : worse than all, how the doctor himself had affirmed that society and amusement were absolutely necessary for his health.

She wondered if all the misery of that time would come over again : whether Bertie under the knowledge that he must give up the company of his friend, would relapse into the old morbid tempers, which, although not cured, had been far less frequently indulged in, since he had enjoyed the occasional society of Dr. Monkton. She shuddered as she acknowledged the probability of all this, and yet she could not persuade herself that she had acted otherwise than she should have done.

“ I am very, very sorry that it has so happened,” was her inward conclusion, “ and I would give worlds, if I possessed them, to undo it ; but since that is impossible, what else could I have said to him ?”

How long she had remained by herself she hardly knew, but at this moment a cold nose was thrust against the only part of her cheek which her position left visible, and she raised her head to encounter the soft brown eyes of the mastiff, who was patiently sitting on the

bench beside her, until she should be pleased to notice him again. But to him, she seemed so lonely, inwardly as well as outwardly, that the animal's honest affection appealed to her as the sympathy of a friend.

“What else could I have said to him, Thug?” she exclaimed, clasping her hands round his thick throat, and looking him in the face as though he understood all she said: “how could I become his wife when I don't love him half so well as I do you? But *you'll* never forsake me, dear doggie, will you? you'll love me, and be my friend, whatever happens; oh! dear, oh! dear, I hope that Bertie won't be very angry with me.”

She loosed her hold of the mastiff, and looked up wearily into the evening sky. The sun had quite gone down by this time, and the early summer twilight was just a little chilly, and Nelly's limbs felt cramped with having maintained the same position for so long.

“I wonder if he has gone,” she thought, and her first idea was that if Dr. Monkton stayed till midnight she could not meet him again, but the next moment her native courage came to her aid.

“After all, I have done no wrong,” she

silently argued, "and Bertie must be waiting for his tea."

So she quitted the arbour, leaving Herbert's Poems lying forgotten on its sanded floor; and with Thug (who, feeling something was wrong, had assumed the appearance of a criminal) following close at her heels, walked slowly back towards the house. As she drew near the old parlour window, now wreathed with summer roses, she paused for an instant to see if she could catch the sound of conversation. But all was silent, and she crept past it and entered by their own door.

The room was nearly dark: no candles had been lighted, and Nelly could only just distinguish the form of her brother in his usual position on the sofa.

"Bertie, darling," she said as she saw the unspread table, "are you not ready for tea?"

There was no answer.

"Shall I ring the bell, Bertie? I didn't think it was so late."

Still her question received no reply.

"Bertie, darling, won't you speak to me?" imploringly.

The figure on the sofa neither moved nor spoke. Nelly groped her way to the fireplace with a sigh, and pulling the bell,

in another minute, old Aggie was in the room.

“Why, Miss Nelly, my dear, are you all in the dark? I thought you had fetched candles to yourself ever so long ago. Is the doctor gone?”

“I suppose so: I have been in the garden. Is Dr. Monkton gone, Bertie?”

“Of course he is.” This answer was extracted in honour of the presence of the servant, but it was delivered as rudely as it could be. Nurse Aggie perceived the temper of the speaker at once.

“Never you mind him, my dear,” she said, (she was often accustomed to mention Bertie before his face as if he were a dummy or imbecile), “I’ll light up the candles and bring in your tea at once, and you must make a good meal to-night, Miss Nelly, for it’s nearly an hour behind time, and I’ve got some of the most beautiful dough-nuts for you possible.”

“Thank you, nurse!” said the girl trying to speak cheerfully, though she felt as if her heart was breaking; “and make Bertie some nice toast too, and let us have the lights at once, for the room looks dreadfully dull as it is,” and in another minute she had bathed her face and smoothed her hair, and was making

things comfortable in the sitting-room in her usual manner.

When the tea was ready, and she carried Bertie his cup, she stooped and kissed him. He pushed her away coldly.

“Won’t you even kiss me, Bertie?” she said sorrowfully.

“I don’t wish to kiss you, or to speak to you.”

“But may I not explain.”

“Explain nothing, no explanation can alter my opinion of what you have done.”

She sat down to her own tea without another word, she felt that he was in one of those moods when it was worse than useless to contend with him. But when the meal was cleared away and the blinds were drawn down, and they were quite alone, Nelly approached her brother’s sofa again and knelt down by his side. His head was obstinately turned from her, but she placed a soft hand on either cheek, and with gentle force compelled him to look her in the face.

“Bertie, darling,” she said firmly, “there must not be this silence between us ; however vexed and disappointed you may be with me, you can at least do me the justice to tell me so. I can guess, of course, why you are angry, but even if you think that I have been wrong,

remember what we are to one another : own brother and sister ; almost like the same person, Bertie ; and remember how I love you, and—” He had tried to wrench his head from her hands, but finding that beyond him, he fixed his sternly-set features upon hers, and regarded her with a gaze of stone.

“ But *do* you love me ?” he said, incredulously.

Nelly started backward in her surprise, for never before had she heard him cast a doubt upon their mutual affection.

“ Oh ! don’t be cruel, Bertie !” she cried, “ you know I do, as much as you love me.”

He gave a short laugh, expressive of disbelief in her attachment or distress.

“ You have not given me much reason to credit it lately,” he replied.

“ But how ?” she demanded, “ tell me in what way.”

“ Why, in every way,” said Robert Brooke, his longing to accuse and condemn her getting the better of his unwillingness to speak, “ with regard to Monkton, you have done nothing but thwart and cross me. You have drawn back, and wished me to draw back, from receiving his presents ; you altogether opposed the plan of our going to live at Hilstone, and

now you have crowned your obstinacy by actually being insane enough to refuse his offer of marriage. I could not have believed it except from his own lips—your conduct is perfectly incredible to me. Why, do you know what you have done? I cannot imagine of what you can have been thinking.”

“But, Bertie, I do not care for Dr. Monkton, not in that way, he is not my choice.”

“Your choice! what business has a beggar with choosing in a matter like this?”

“I am a *woman*,” replied Nelly, her breast heaving with wounded pride at the contemptuous tone in which her brother had spoken, “and however poor, every woman has at least the privilege of rejecting the man whom she does not wish to marry.”

“The privilege of rejecting thousands a year, when you have scarcely bread to eat—a mighty privilege, truly—and one of which you have not been slow to avail yourself. Yes, you *are* a woman, and, like most of your sex when left to themselves, you’ve made a nice hash of your prospects. Only, unfortunately in your case, you have the ‘privilege’ of dragging me down with you. Here I am—a wretched cripple—with scarcely a pleasure left in life, and no money to procure the few

I might enjoy ; and you, my twin sister, who have it in your power, actually in your grasp, to give me all the comforts I need (to say nothing of having them for yourself also), and to gratify some absurd whim or scruple of your own, you throw the chance on one side as if it were nothing—absolutely nothing. And after that you expect me to believe in your *love* for me, faugh !”

The tears, which none of the afternoon’s events had brought to Nelly’s eyes, now rose thickly. Yet she was dignified throughout her distress.

“ Bertie !” she said solemnly, “ if my life—if the conduct of my whole life has not convinced you that I love you, nothing that I can say now would be of any avail, but I call Heaven to witness that your happiness is dearer to me than my own, and that I have always given two thoughts for you to one for myself.”

“ Pray how many thoughts did you give to me or my happiness this afternoon when you so decidedly refused Dr. Monkton’s proposal ?” he sneered.

“ Would it add to your happiness, dear, to see me married to a man for whom I don’t care ? I was exceedingly sorry that Dr. Monkton should speak to me as he did to-day. I

was afraid that he might do so, and that is the reason why I avoided his society, and felt shy of taking his presents. But it grieved me very much to have to refuse him, Bertie, more than I can tell you, particularly when I thought of what you would lose in his acquaintanceship."

Her emotion was now so evident, that her brother began to think that after all, perhaps, coaxing might have more effect upon her than anger or sarcasm. So he asked, in a gentler tone :

"What is your objection to Monkton, Nelly? You have always professed to like him."

"And so I have liked him, and so I do like him, as a friend ; but that is very different to liking him in any other way."

"What do you know about 'any other way.' You have not got a prior attachment, I suppose, for Tom or Jack Weston, or any of the plough-boys."

To this speech Nelly would not deign to make any reply, but she quitted her kneeling position, and took a chair by Robert's couch.

"What on earth can you find fault with in Monkton, I ask again ? He is young, clever, good-looking, and a perfect gentleman, besides being able to offer you such a position as you

will never have the chance of refusing more. Why, from your own description, his establishment in Hilstone must be conducted in first-rate style. You would have carriage and horses and men-servants at your beck and call, and yet you pretend that you prefer to remain in these poky rooms with old Aggie to wait upon you. I cannot understand it."

"No rooms seem poky to me, darling, when you are in them, and as to servants, Bertie, I ask nothing better than to be your own servant till my life's end, if I can only see you contented and happy."

"That's just like you," he replied, quickly, "you profess yourself willing to do anything for me, and when it comes to the point, you do nothing. You know that a life down here is killing me by inches, and yet you would prefer to see me die or go mad to making a little sacrifice for my sake. It ought not to be a sacrifice at all, but if it is, why can't you act up to your professions?"

At these words, the remembrance of what the doctor had said of Bertie's state of health and mind, flashed back upon Nelly, and she burst into tears. Would he die kept in the country, or become morbidly inclined? Was it possible that Heaven would force her

to accept either this alternative or the other?

“Come, Nelly, dear,” exclaimed Robert Brooke, holding out his arms to her, “I am sure that you will think twice before you decide this question. Monkton has not taken your answer as final, by any means; he is a great deal too fond of you for that, and requires but a hint from you or myself to bring him back again. I know you love me, you little silly,” he continued, kissing the tears from off her wet cheeks, and pressing her hands within his own. “I know you love your poor old crooked boy, and would be miserable to see him so.”

“Oh! I should indeed, I should indeed, Bertie,” sobbed the poor child, as she clung about him, “for who have I in the world to care for but yourself?”

“Well! then say that I may write to Monkton by to-morrow’s post, and tell him that you have altered your mind, and are ready to marry him.”

“To *marry* him! Oh! no, Bertie!” and a shudder ran through the form which he embraced. “Oh! brother, don’t ask me to marry him. I will work for you, darling, I will wait on and tend you all the days of my life, I will

go with you to London, or any where else you choose, but don't ask me to marry that man, for I can't do it."

His arms relaxed their grasp of her waist and shoulders, and she felt that he had thrust her beyond the pale of his sympathy again. It was in vain that Nelly took up the apparently lifeless members and replaced them in their former fond position. They fell to his side as often as she put them there, and tired out by the emotion, and excitement, and disappointment she had passed through, she laid down her head upon the end of the sofa, and cried bitterly.

"For God's sake, don't stop there making that noise," exclaimed Robert Brooke, impatiently, as he heard her, "if there is one thing above another that I hate, it is a woman's whining, and particularly when it is all put on for effect. If you can't be less of a hypocrite, Nelly, you'll drive me to bed."

She rose quickly, and drew her handkerchief across her eyes. She knew that her tears were not false; she knew that they had scalded her eyeballs as they rose, and had been only born of weariness to find she was fighting her battle so badly; but whatever it cost her, she would trouble him with them no

longer. The shadow had fallen between them again: and unless she could immediately refute what she had said, and give Bertie the promise he desired, she felt it would be lost time to try and raise it. As she sat a little apart from him, bending over her needlework, she asked herself over and over if it were possible that she should ever end by saying "yes." She pictured her brother's gratitude and thanks if she did so, and his subsequent happiness and improved health, and acknowledged that the vision was a tempting one—for *him*—but what for herself?

"Oh! if it had only been anything else," thought Nelly, "if he had asked me to cut off my leg, or my arm—how little it would seem in comparison—but to marry the doctor!"

She had thought of it so little, and wished for it so much less, that it almost seemed as if she had been desired to marry a stranger.

She was roused from her reverie, by finding that her brother was on his feet and ringing the bell. She started to her own.

"Why did you not ask me to do it for you, Bertie?"

He made her no answer; but sat down again upon his sofa, and when the old nurse appeared he said sullenly:

“Light a candle, and help me to bed.”

The candlesticks were placed on a side table ; Aggie lighted one, and stood ready to attend her master.

“Mayn’t I come too, Bertie ?” asked Nelly humbly, as he rose to leave the room : but he thrust away her proffered aid, and placed his hand on the nurse’s shoulder instead. But Nelly was not to be daunted, she sprang forward and placed herself in the doorway.

“Good-night, *brother*,” she said lovingly, as he approached her. She thought that the term would be sure to appeal to his affection.

“Good-night, good-night,” he said hurriedly, but without any attempt at a caress. “You have a wonderful faculty, Nelly, for doing the wrong things at the wrong times,” and he passed into his bedroom.

Nelly looked at the closed door for a second, as if she half expected it would re-open ; and then returned to her needlework, and finished the task she had set herself.

But after Aggie had fallen into her first sleep that night she was roused by a sound from the other bed which very much resembled quiet weeping.

“Miss Nelly, my bird, is that you ?” quoth the old woman.

There was no answer, and the sound was immediately stifled beneath the bed clothes, but so unsatisfactorily that Aggie struck a light and hobbled across the room to disinter her nurseling's face, hot and blurred with tears.

"Now, what's the matter with you, my pet?" enquired the nurse as she wiped the girl's wet eyes, and smoothed back her tossed and tangled hair. "Whatever's Master Robert been a saying, to make you take on like this?"

"Oh, never mind," said Nelly as she turned her head to one side, and tried to make light of Aggie's discovery, "it's nothing, I'm stupid, and cross, and tired, that's all. Now do put out that light and go back to your bed, and I shall be asleep in less than ten minutes."

"It's all very well to try and deceive me," muttered old Aggie as she obeyed orders, "but if that's not some of Master Robert's doing, I never see none. His temper's as crooked as himself, and he'll worrit my lamb into her grave before he's done with her, unless she finds a way to escape him. The Lord send that she may!" and with this pious ejaculation Aggie snuffed out the candle with her fingers, and once more retired to her couch.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. RAY IS ENLISTED INTO BERTIE'S SERVICE.

ROBERT BROOKE'S motive in persuading his sister to accept Dr. Monkton as a husband, was not entirely a selfish one, although at the first flush it may seem to have been so; he had been bitterly disappointed at the news with which his friend had greeted him after his interview with Nelly in the garden; but almost as much so for her sake as for his own. He had refused to believe that the hasty decision of so inexperienced a girl could be a final one, and he had resolved, by some means or other, to force her to change her mind. Knowing how potent his will usually was with her, he had dismissed Dr. Monkton with a confident prophecy that in the course of a week or ten days, he would receive a letter to say that Nelly had repented of her thoughtless answer. And the doctor being very much enamoured, had assured Robert Brooke that at the first intimation of such a fact, he would

see him at his sister's feet again. Thus the men had parted : each resolved that, whether by fair means or foul, if it lay in his power, he would bring the girl to reason.

As has been recorded, the brother commenced his tactics at once, and was exceedingly annoyed to find that the warfare was likely to prove a harder one than he had anticipated. In his pragmatistical ignorance he had not been used to give women credit for much strength of purpose : but he knew that the sex had a name for obstinacy in respect to its love affairs ; and Nelly must not be obstinate in this case : there was too much at stake for both of them, for her to be able to afford to indulge in such a luxury.

In thinking and acting in this manner, it did not once occur to Robert Brooke that he was trying to make his sister sell herself.

Had there been near him at that time any right-judging person, bold enough to place the matter before him in this point of view, he would probably have been as shocked at the notion of sacrificing Nelly in marriage, as if it had been proposed to him to offer her fair flesh as a holocaust. But there was no such friend at hand, and Robert's selfishness would not permit him to view the future in

any light but his own. He knew that Nelly was young and very ignorant : that she had rusticated in Little Bickton until she had grown to wish for nothing better, and he believed that she was quite unaware of the harm she was doing herself and him by refusing so advantageous an offer : that she was in fact like the cock of the fable, who found a pearl on his dung-hill and sighed for a barley-corn instead.

He had always had a great ambition that his sister should marry well ; but he had entertained little hopes of it until Nigel Brooke visited them at the Farm Cottage. When that hope died away, his depression visibly increased : when it was revived in the appearance of Dr. Monkton, it was as though the blue had once more broken out through his gloomy sky. To be disappointed a second time, and for no stringent reason, appeared to Robert Brooke too hard to be borne. Apart from all the advantages to be derived from such an union, he had a great wish to see Nelly married to the Hilstone doctor. The fact of the proximity of that place to Orpington Chase instead of being a detriment, but served to heap additional fuel on the flame of his desire. They who had actually made his sister

and himself what they were, should see them placed in a position of importance; far above the reach of all necessity, even revelling in the same luxuries as themselves, and that without the smallest aid on their parts, without taking a tithe of charity from their hands.

He had dreamt of himself, sitting in a carriage by Nelly's side, and seeing her pass the inmates of the Chase without the least sign of recognition: he had fancied her pretty figure (and Robert with all his faults, fondly admired the outward charms of his twin sister) clothed in stuffs, as rich as those worn by the mistress of Orpington, and far richer than any which she had presumed to bestow upon her orphan niece. He had thought of the dinner parties which "Mrs. Monkton of Hilstone" would be expected to give, and how much her sweet blushing face and the native grace of her manners would be admired, notwithstanding that ignorance of the ways of society which her country education had given her no chance of correcting.

And mixed up with all this splendour had been a vision of himself; not so much partaking of it, (for he still shrunk from the idea of publicity) as viewing it and glorying in it from a little world of his own—a little world,

which comprised not so many intellectual pleasures perhaps as the means of locomotion and attending public entertainments, with more pocket-money than he at present enjoyed, and an unlimited supply of brandy and cigars. And now this pretty dream was all dashed to the ground : and for what ? The whim of a girl who did not know her own mind ! He was certain that Nelly had no previous attachment, and that whatever she chose to say now, she had had at one time no hesitation in confessing that she thought Dr. Monkton both handsome and agreeable. From what then could her refusal of his offer arise but some childish wayward fancy out of which she must be reasoned.

For it was not only the personal qualities or the superior position of the Hilstone doctor which made a marriage with him so desirable a thing for Nelly Brooke. It was not only that her lot was cast where such another chance might never be presented to her : had she lived in the gayest of towns, and been surrounded by admirers, there still remained sufficiently good reasons in Robert's eyes to render her rejection of such an offer, madness. She might be ignorant of these reasons, he knew that she was ; but he had no such ex-

cuse, and his mind dwelt upon this fact until he had persuaded himself that he was performing a sacred duty instead of merely following his own inclinations, in using all his endeavours to bring his sister round to his own way of thinking. It is so easy to persuade ourselves that what we wish is right. When he rose on the morning after the conversation between them, detailed in the last chapter, he was determined that either by stratagem or otherwise, he would make her yield to what he considered advisable, and he had come to the conclusion that it would be best to try the straightforward system first. Poor little Nelly had not much chance against either plan! When she entered her brother's room that morning, half expecting to be ordered thence again, she was fairly melted by the willingness with which he accepted her timidly-proffered aid, and the oblivion into which he appeared to have cast their difference of the night before. The simple fool was almost ready, at such condescension, to fall upon his neck and tell him to order the goings of her life for her, and had the stakes been less heavy, after some such fashion, the whole matter would doubtless have been settled. But her nature recoiled too much at the

alternative to permit her to yield so easily. She was very grateful though, for Bertie's renewed affection, and they went lovingly into the breakfast-room together, and spent a happy hour, during which no allusion was made to the topic under dispute, before Nelly's household duties called her away to help old Aggie with the preparations for dinner.

"And what will you do, darling, till I am back again?" she said before she left her brother.

"I should like to go out on the common for a little while, if you can get a boy to push the chair for me, Nelly."

"Shall I come, Bertie?" she said eagerly, "I daresay Aggie will be able to manage the dinner alone."

"No, thank you, my dear; don't trouble yourself; I would rather have a boy. I have not passed a very good night, and should like to be alone and quiet for an hour or so."

A cloud passed over her face when he refused her services and alluded to his need of rest, for she felt herself to blame that her brother had not slept well. But she procured the services of one of the farm lads, and seeing Bertie start in his bath-chair, with a cheerful

farewell, returned contentedly to her household labours.

This was at ten o'clock in the morning, but half-past one sounded, and two was on the point of following suit, and still there were no signs of the return of her brother's chair.

"Hadn't I better dish up, Miss Nelly?" enquired Aggie, not pleased at the delay in the dinner, "that steak will be as hard as wood, if I keep it on the fire any longer, and the potatoes is all of a mash, as it is."

"Well, I really don't know what to say, Aggie; it will be no use putting it on the table till Bertie is back. I wish we had stewed the steak as you proposed, instead of frying it. However, just wait a minute, and I'll run out on the common, and see if I cannot catch sight of him anywhere."

But the precaution was of no avail—far and wide as Nelly could look, the common presented no object less familiar than the flocks of geese with their callow broods, waddling about the pond in its centre; or the village children trooping back to afternoon school. She waited for another half-hour, and then, with Aggie, made an uncomfortable meal on the toughened steak and watery potatoes, and began to con-

sider what she could best get ready to await Bertie's uncertain return.

"Can anything possibly have happened?" she said to Mrs. Weston, about four o'clock, as she entered the farm-kitchen. "Bertie has never been so late before; I am getting quite uneasy."

"Then you may spare yourself that trouble, Nelly," was the smiling rejoinder, "for I hear the wheels of his chair grating on the gravel at this moment."

She flew to the front door, and was waiting on the steps to receive him.

"Bertie! where have you been? we thought you were lost; why, you must be perfectly famished."

"Neither lost nor famished," he said, cheerfully, as she helped him to leave the chair, "and I had half a mind not to come home at all, until to-morrow morning. What would you have said to that, Nelly?"

She had very seldom seen him so gay in his demeanour; his voice and manner were almost merry, and she caught the welcome infection.

"I'm sure I don't know. Run about, I suppose, like the old woman in the song, crying out, 'I've lost my chee-ild.' But where *have* you been, Bertie, I am really anxious to hear?"

They had passed into their room by this time, and old Aggie had followed them, clamorous to ascertain if Master Robert would have his chop at once, or wait till tea-time.

“Oh, no! hang your chops!” he replied, “I want nothing—I have been to the vicarage, and had luncheon there.”

“To Mr. Ray’s,” exclaimed Nelly, “not really?”

Her brother and his guardian’s family had usually so little in common that to volunteer a visit to Bickton Proper, was an unprecedented occurrence on Bertie’s part. But he did not appear, or choose to appear, to share her astonishment, for all he replied was,

“Yes, really, and a first rate luncheon into the bargain. I was quite delighted to be able for once to cut Aggie’s hashes.”

At this old Aggie, deeply offended, turned abruptly, and marched back into the kitchen.

“You shouldn’t speak so, dear,” said Nelly, gently; “she does her best for you. But why did you go to the vicarage, Bertie? what made you think of it, and why did you not tell me of your intention beforehand?”

She had guessed intuitively why he had gone there, directly she heard the fact; and,

as she put the question, brow and bosom became ruddy with expectation of the answer.

But she need not have dreaded an immediate explanation. Her brother was too wary to frighten her before it was necessary.

“Simply because I did not think anything about it until I found myself on the road, and it was such a beautiful morning that it lured me on. Come, Nell! help me off with this coat, and let me lie down for awhile. I am quite stiff with sitting upright so long.”

She did as he desired her, and was silent, but she could not accept the excuse which he had made. She was sure that his visit to the vicarage had been premeditated, and concerned herself and Dr. Monkton; and the more cheerful Bertie appeared, the lower her spirits ebbed: until the dusk of the June evening had fallen, and a familiar footstep in the passage was followed by the entrance of Mr. Ray. Then all Nelly's vague doubts resolved themselves into a certain dread; and she knew that her guardian had been enlisted into Bertie's service, and she had two opponents to contend with instead of one. She did not even seek to postpone or avert a fate which she felt to be inevitable, but sat alternately blushing and paling beneath the vicar's glances; and only

felt a little more nervous and uncomfortable when Bertie made some frivolous excuse to leave the room, and she knew that the moment had come.

“ Mr. Ray,” she exclaimed, with a scarlet face, directly the door was closed, as though to anticipate an attack were the best mode to withstand it, “ I know quite well what you are going to say to me—but it is of no use.”

“ And what may I have been going to say to you, Nelly ?” asked the vicar, gently.

Then the girl felt that she had done a very silly thing, and she stammered as she attempted to reply to her guardian’s question—and from stammering she broke down—and from breaking down it was an easy transition to cry. All Mr. Ray’s fatherly feelings were excited by Nelly’s tears ; he changed his seat to the one next her own, and took her cold hand in his, and stroked her pretty bowed-down head.

“ My dear little girl,” he said, kindly, “ you may be quite sure that if I can help it, I shall never say anything to vex you. If, as I conclude from your words, you think that my intention in coming here this evening is to remonstrate on your refusal of Dr. Monkton’s proposal, you are quite right. Robert has

told me all about it (and to your guardian he was justified in doing so) and I cannot help agreeing with him that it will be most injudicious if you show any haste in deciding on so important a matter. It is part of my duty, Nelly, to look out for your interests, and to reason with you when you will not consult them for yourself. You have received an offer of marriage such as any girl might be proud to accept, and such as (if you have no other attachment) you will be very foolish, not to say wrong, to refuse."

"But I don't—I don't think I care about him—so very much," said Nelly, between her sobs.

"What did you say, my dear?" enquired the vicar, bending close to her.

"I don't think—I am afraid—I'm not in love with him," she repeated, amending her sentence.

As he caught the phrase, Mr. Ray smiled.

"And what do you know about love, my child?" he asked, quietly.

He was thoroughly good and honest, and kind, this vicar of Bickton Proper; but he could not boast of a romantic temperament, having married at an early age (simply because he was told that it was proper a clergyman should

have a wife) a young woman whose sole attraction consisted in her indomitable virtue, and her disbelief in the existence of the Divorce Court, except for such as were utterly lost and depraved, and unlike the rest of mankind, in any of their thoughts or feelings. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Ray had much faith in the power of temptation, because it had never been thrown in their way.

Mildly and equably, and prosaically had their lives glided on, and they had reared their children, and revered each other, and could not believe it possible that there were married couples less happily and safely situated than themselves.

The vicar did not deny there was such a thing as love, and often misdirected ; but he held a doctrine very common amongst men, namely, that a woman who does not grow to love the husband who treats her with consideration and respect, must be worse than the generality of her sex ; and he knew that Nelly Brooke was better than the generality ; and so he was satisfied that he could not be doing very wrong in persuading her to take a step which would add so greatly to her own and her brother's advantage.

Whereas, so little has consideration and re-

spect and all the other hum-drum duties to do with it, that love itself is of no avail, unless a corresponding feeling has spontaneously sprung in the heart it labours to attract.

We soil, and degrade and villify it! trample its pristine purity beneath the dirt of our human nature, but do what we will, we cannot unmake Love. It still remains the one free, unapproachable passion of the universe!

But Nelly Brooke was too ignorant to be able to laugh at the vicar's honestly put question, and tell him that in such a matter her heart could direct her more efficiently than all his middle-age wisdom. She had a great reverence and respect for Mr. Ray's opinion, and the knowledge that he thought she would be foolish to reject Dr. Monkton's proposal, made her tremble, but not smile.

"You can't know what you are talking about, Nelly!" continued her guardian, gently. "You have had no experience of love; and the idea of it to be derived from books of imagination is always exaggerated. The only lasting and true affection is that which is based upon esteem. Do you not agree with me that Dr. Monkton possesses all the qualities best calculated to make a woman happy. Is he not agreeable, and kind and benevolent?"

Added to which he is rich and handsome— young and clever! Good heavens! what can the girl want more? I only wish there were five other such suitors waiting for admittance at the vicarage, at this present moment. I'd engage they wouldn't wait long;" and the vicar chuckled over the mere idea. "But there are other and stronger reasons even than the attainment of your own happiness, Nelly, which should make you think twice before you reject Dr. Monkton," he resumed more gravely, "there is a weighty cause—"

"I know it!" she said quickly, raising her weary face, and staring at the vicar through the fast increasing twilight. "I know it, Mr. Ray, well, and it has haunted me ever since. Is it—can it be sufficient—do you think I should be doing wrong for that reason alone, if I persist in refusing this offer?"

She was thinking of her brother's state of health, but though the vicar could not see the imploring eyes she directed towards him, he could hear the anxiety which her voice expressed, and he mistook the meaning of it.

"Have you guessed it then, my poor child?" he said, more tenderly than before, "Well, in my mind, that reason should be sufficient of itself to balance your choice."

Nelly's heart grew suddenly chill—what could the vicar mean except that Bertie's death might otherwise some day lie at her door. With each word he uttered the hedge which was growing up around her, appeared to gain in height and substance. Was she to be hemmed in on every side? Was there no outlet by which she could conscientiously escape?

“We do not wish to hurry or distress you, Nelly,” continued her guardian; “but it is right that these things should be put before you, and that you should be encouraged to consider them.”

“Yes! yes! I understand,” she said, in a voice too calm to be natural, as every moment increased the dull sickening pain which encircled her heart.

“And you will promise me, Nelly, to think over your answer again?”

“Yes, Mr. Ray, I promise.”

“Well, let us talk no more of it at present,” he continued, cheerfully. “Suppose you ring for candles, and call Bertie back, and let us have a rubber at whist together before we separate.”

She rose at his bidding, and did as he desired her, and took her part in the game which

followed with forced quietude, as though no troubling doubts disturbed her spirit ; but when she lay her weary little head down upon her pillow that night, Nelly Brooke almost wished (or she would have done so had it not been for Bertie's sake) that the question which vexed her might be settled by her death.

CHAPTER IX.

NELLY IS BESET ON EVERY SIDE.

“ARE you unhappy, my dear?” said Mrs. Weston, two days after the vicar’s visit, as she laid her hand kindly upon Nelly’s shoulder.

She had met her by accident in the kitchen, and been immediately attracted by her heavy eyes and pale complexion. The days were gone by when Nelly flew to Mrs. Weston with all her little troubles, but the touch of the farmer’s wife seemed so familiar, and her voice and manner so kind, that the girl’s heart, sore and perplexed with its inward trouble, responded at once.

She had no woman friend but this, in whom she might confide, and though she knew that Mrs. Weston’s wisdom was more of the heart than the head, she believed in her sympathy and craved for it. And she answered her question eagerly.

“Oh! *indeed* I am, Mrs. Weston, not only

unhappy, but miserably worried and uncertain about something! How I wish I could tell you all! perhaps you would advise me what is best to do."

"Of course I would, my dear, to the best of my ability, and if it will in the least relieve your mind to confide your trouble to me, I see no difficulty in your doing so. Mr. Weston will be out this evening, and I shall be alone in the parlour. Come to me for an hour after your own tea. It is long since you and I have had a talk together."

Nelly acceded to this proposal, almost gratefully. It was a comfort even to look forward to the prospect of such a relief, for her perplexities were increasing. She had had another stormy interview that morning with Bertie, who, having imagined that the vicar's opinion must be omnipotent with his sister, chose, after she had been made aware of it, to consider her continued opposition to their mutual wishes, as a fresh grievance. He had accused her of selfishness and folly before; but wilful obstinacy was now added to the category of her sins. It was in vain that Nelly told him she felt no inclination for a marriage with Dr. Monkton; she could not honestly say that she hated or even disliked

the man, and nothing short of such a confession would have silenced her brother.

He had only ceased from his vehement attempts at making her change her mind, to relapse into one of his old fits of sullenness, in the midst of which he had ordered his bath-chair to be brought round, and left her to go she knew not whither, perhaps again to consult the vicar.

Abandoned to her own thoughts thus, Nelly hardly knew what to think of the matter, or how it would end. She fully acknowledged to herself all the advantages to be derived from such a match ; she felt how nice it would be never again to have to consider twice before she laid out an extra shilling, or to see Bertie's face grow dark, and hear his peevish remonstrances when she had no money which she could possibly spare him.

She felt, as other girls, reared in poverty, would feel at the idea of possessing a house and carriage of her own, and of being well-dressed and well attended for the first time in her life.

She was not even free from the childish ambition to wear a wedding-ring, and to be addressed by the honourable title of "Mrs.," nor from the womanly one of filling the place

for which God had designed her, and of seeing a child of her own upon her bosom.

And above all, she longed for these anticipated comforts and pleasures, not for herself, but for Bertie. And yet, when she considered that in order to obtain them she must first become the wife of Dr. Monkton, they all seemed to fade away as if by magic, and be nothing, whilst she could hardly say why. She did not dislike him, on the contrary, she considered him (in her girlish language) to be very "nice" in every respect; but still, whenever she thought of him as a husband, something invisible, yet to be felt, seemed to draw her backwards. An instinct which her nature confessed, but could not account for, urged her to turn away from the mere idea; but since, search as she would, Nelly could find no good reason why it should be so, she despaired of persuading herself that it would be right to follow it. When she entered Mrs. Weston's parlour on that evening, her spirits were still very low. She had not seen her brother then for several hours, and had taken her tea alone, and had full leisure for pondering over her puzzle, which seemed more intricate the more she examined it. She had a piece of work in her hands, for Nelly Brooke was a woman who

never permitted happy or sorrowful thoughts to interfere long with her occupation. Her active mind made employment a necessity rather than a choice, and the greatest cruelty one could have inflicted on her, would have been to force her to be idle.

Mrs. Weston, as she had promised, was quite alone. Nelly sat down quietly on a low chair by her side, and went on with her stitching, waiting for her friend to make the first allusion to the purpose of their meeting.

“Well, Nelly! are you no better since I saw you?” enquired Mrs. Weston, breaking the ice at once.

Nelly shook her head mournfully.

“Tell me all about it, dear girl. It would ease your mind to talk it over, and I can half-guess it has something to do with the handsome doctor and his frequent visits to Bickton. Eh, Nelly, am I not right?”

Thus encouraged, and believing that Mrs. Weston must already have divined the truth, Nelly, amidst much blushing, poured forth her tale. But the reality was very different to what the farmer's wife had imagined it to be.

She thought that the girl had fallen (or fancied herself to have fallen) in love with Dr.

Monkton, and was miserable in consequence ; and was quite prepared to revive her drooping spirits with the assurance that the attachment was evidently mutual, and that everything would come right in time. She had never conceived it possible that the doctor could have made Nelly a proposal of marriage, and that her unhappiness arose from the fact that she did not wish to accept it ; and as the marvellous account was brought to a conclusion, Mrs. Weston put her hand under the narrator's chin, and turned the flushed face up to meet her own, which was full of serious surprise.

“ If you were given to joking, Nelly, I should think you were joking with me now. Are you really in earnest ? ”

“ Yes, really, Mrs. Weston, and I can't think why people should consider it strange. Everyone has not the same taste.”

“ But why do you dislike the doctor, Nelly ? ”

“ I never said that I disliked him,” was the quick reply.

“ Or have such an objection to him, then ? it is much the same thing.”

“ I have no objection to him either, that I know of.”

“ You do not dislike him, or know of any

particular objection," said Mrs. Weston, with solemn astonishment, as she released Nelly's honest face, "and yet you wish to refuse such an establishment as he offers you? My dear child; you must be silly. Have you examined your own heart well on the subject. Are you sure that you know what you do feel about it?"

"I am not sure of anything," said Nelly, impatiently, "except that everybody is against me. I don't even know that I've got a heart, or if I have, it must be Bertie's, for I care for no one else; and cannot imagine I shall ever do so."

"Oh! my dear," exclaimed the matron in a voice of genteel horror, "if you are going to compare the affection which you may expect to feel for a gentleman who honours you by the offer of his hand, with that which you naturally entertain towards your brother, of course you will be disappointed. You know nothing about love, yourself, Nelly, remember, but *I* can tell you that it is a very different thing to that."

"So Mr. Ray said," remarked the girl, thoughtfully, as she gazed upon the ground through her long, black eye-lashes, "he said I could know nothing of love, and no more I do."

I wonder if I am deceiving myself, and if what I feel for Dr. Monkton is really *all*——”

She was speaking more to herself than to her friend, but Mrs. Weston caught up the words.

“How *all*, my dear ; what do you mean ?”

“All that a woman can feel for a man,” replied Nelly, in the same voice. “I have thought it would be so much more than liking, or even loving a person. I used to dream, that when it came, it would be *everything*.”

“It is very well there is no one but me to hear you talk, Nelly,” said Mrs. Weston, goodnaturedly, although her prudery was really a little startled by her young friend’s words. “Of course, it is more than mere liking or loving a person *after* you are married to him. It is quite right and proper, that a husband should be everything to his wife ; but we don’t talk of such things beforehand, my dear. Such ideas are what constitute boldness and forwardness in a young woman.”

“Well, perhaps I *am* bold,” replied Nelly, ingenuously ; “but do you really think, Mrs. Weston, that they come afterwards ; the love and the clinging, I mean, will they come after marriage if I do not feel them before ?”

Mrs. Weston glanced round to see if the door were securely shut.

“My dear child, you have such strange ideas, you make me feel quite nervous lest anyone should overhear us! Yes, of course, Nelly; if it is necessary for a young woman to experience such feelings, they will be sent her in good time. But if a girl respects and esteems the man whom she marries (as I am sure you have every reason to do with regard to the doctor) she has a better foundation for happiness than any such romantic sentiments as you mention. When I was about your age, Nelly, I happened to be placed in very similar circumstances.”

“Oh, do tell me all about it, Mrs. Weston, from beginning to end,” exclaimed the girl, turning impulsively to clasp the hand of her friend. “I think if I heard other women say what they felt in such a case, I should be better able to judge of my own state of mind.”

“I was one of fourteen children,” replied Mrs. Weston, as she caressingly handled the mass of rust-coloured hair which lay across her knee, “and my father was a country clergyman who had hard work to provide us all with the necessaries of life. I was reared in as secluded a place as you have been, although at the other side of England, and in much poorer circumstances. My sisters and

I had seldom sufficient clothing during the cold weather, but we had been brought up like cottage children, and were used to privations, and we had been taught that so long as we had enough to eat we must be content. There was a celebrated trout-stream running through my father's parish, which used sometimes, during the fishing season, to attract gentlemen anglers from the nearest town. One summer, a gentleman from London, of the name of Elwood, accidentally made our acquaintance whilst he was fishing in this stream, and of his own accord, he followed it up. He used to ride over from Juxbridge (that was the name of the market town where he was staying) continually, and spend his afternoons at the parsonage, and after he had done so for about a month, he asked my father's leave to pay his addresses to his fourth daughter, meaning myself. My poor father was elated at the idea of such a marriage for me, he had ascertained that Mr. Elwood was a rich merchant in the city, and bore an excellent character, and both he and my mother seemed to consider I was the luckiest girl possible.

“ But I was young at that time, Nelly, just eighteen; quite disregarding of poverty and its many evils, and full of hope, and vague, misty

dreams of a rose-coloured future. And Mr. Elwood was nearly forty, and seemed an elderly man in my eyes, and he was stout besides, and had a red face, and I was obstinately determined not to marry him. It was in vain that my parents argued with me, and pointed out all the advantages I was throwing away. I was sure, in my own mind, that the fairy prince who was to give me all such, and more besides, was coming some day, and decided that I would rather wait for him. So I dismissed Mr. Elwood, or rather, my father, with many an honest regret, dismissed him at my request: and shortly afterwards we heard that he had left Juxbridge."

"But surely you did quite right, Mrs. Weston," exclaimed Nelly, with sparkling eyes, "it is just what I should have done myself. You did not love Mr. Elwood, and how could you have married him?"

"I did what I bitterly regretted for long afterwards, whether I loved him or not, my dear. In a few months from that time my father died, and my mother was left with her fourteen children to struggle through life as she best might. Then it was that I felt the effects of my hasty decision. They all turned round upon me, I heard nothing, from morn-

ing till night, but what might have been done for the whole family if I had only married Mr. Elwood, and had been sufficiently unselfish as to consider others' interests as well as my own. Even my mother joined in the general hue-and-cry, until at last I was thankful to leave home and escape from their reproaches."

"Was it for that reason then that you became a governess?" inquired Nelly.

"No! I can hardly say that; for anyway I should have been obliged to earn my own bread; but I would rather have gone out to service as a menial than have longer endured the persecution I met with from my own people."

"Or to have become the wife of Mr. Elwood?" interposed her listener quickly.

"I cannot agree with you there, Nelly, although it sounds very unromantic to confess it; but by that time I was almost as sorry for my thoughtlessness as my family could be. You must experience *real* necessity, my dear, and *real* sorrow in this world, before you are fit to decide how much you can willingly relinquish for the sake of independence. I had reason, and not long afterwards, to believe that had I not been so hasty, in

rejecting Mr. Elwood as a husband, I should have grown to love him dearly, notwithstanding his stout figure and red face. And it happened thus, Nelly. After I was deprived of my first situation, which was in London, I suffered for a time great privations. I could not find employment, and I was too proud to go home and be a burden on my mother, or to ask her for any assistance. So I lived on a mere crust, just dragging out my life from day to day. At last I heard of another situation, and was likely to obtain it ; but more references were required than I could produce, and I had not a friend in London. Suddenly I thought of Mr. Elwood : I knew that he was married by that time, and I felt sure that he would at least have no objection to attest to my respectability. I had no difficulty in finding his address, for he was well known in the City ; so I summoned up courage to go and ask for him. What a beautiful house it was, to be sure, Nelly ! I had never been inside one so grand in my life before ; and the furniture and the servants were all in keeping with the house. When I found myself there I was half frightened at what I had done ; but I need not have been. Poor dear Mr. Elwood was so kind to me. He came

running down stairs directly he heard my name, and led me into a beautiful dining-room, and when he learnt the business upon which I had come, the tears came into his eyes—they did, indeed. He promised to do all that I required, and then he took me up and introduced me to his wife, and they showed me their baby—how proud they were of it!—and made me stay to luncheon with them, and were both as kind as they could be. But what I particularly wanted to tell you is this: I had partly informed them of my circumstances, and I suppose they guessed I must be very poor, for as I was going away, Mr. Elwood followed me downstairs and putting something into my hands, said that for my dead father's sake I must not deprive him of the satisfaction of assisting me. I knew that it was money, and so it was—a note for fifty pounds. My foolish pride rose at that, and I told him that I could not and would not take it from him. And what do you think he said, Nelly? ‘I do not think you need hesitate to oblige me in so small a matter, since you refused to accept all that I possess.’ And the tears came into his eyes again. I thought it so generous of him to remind me of it at such a time, and when most men would

have felt ashamed of the remembrance ; but he was not."

"And did you take it, Mrs. Weston?"

"Yes! dear, I did, at last, to avoid giving him pain; but of course it prevented my applying to him for assistance again. I have often heard of him since, though, and I know that he is happy and prosperous, and has a large family of children. I don't wish to complain of my present lot, Nelly, but I am sure I should have been a fortunate woman if I had trusted to my parents' judgment, and married Mr. Elwood."

"And what next?" demanded Nelly, with interest.

"What next, dear child? Why such a weary length of uncomfortable years, that I do not even care to look back upon them. When I think upon my life, I pass over the interval between my father's death and my marriage with Mr. Weston; for it was not living—it was barely existence."

"But when you did meet Mr. Weston?"

"Oh! I can't make any romance for you out of that incident, Nelly," said her friend, laughing. "I met him, and he asked me to be his wife, and I consented, and that's the whole story, except that I have been very

comfortable ever since, and led a peaceful and contented life. The fairy prince in whom I believed, never came, as he never does come to nine out of ten of the romantic young hearts who expect him. And that is what I want to impress upon you : that, too often, in this world, we throw away the substance for the shadow, and are left desolate. Don't you be like me, and turn your back upon the best chance that may ever be offered you, until you are thankful in your middle age to become the wife of an old farmer, and rule over his pigs and poultry."

"But you are very happy, Mrs. Weston," said the girl, as she gazed dreamily into the matron's face.

"Yes, I am ! my dear," was the brisk reply, "and that is another proof of the folly of thinking that in order to be so a woman must first fall desperately in love with the man she marries. Do you think I fell in love with Mr. Weston ? Why the first time I met him cheapening oats in the market-place at Red-dington, I thought him the queerest old figure I had ever seen. But I don't think so now, Nelly, and it would fare very badly with any one who dared to laugh at him in my presence. He is as good a husband as ever a woman had,

and a great deal too good for me. And I wouldn't change him now, not for the fairy prince himself!"

Nelly rose from her position with a sigh. The story was ended—it was all very true, perhaps ; in fact she had no doubt of it ; and yet somehow she felt sadly disappointed.

"I have not said anything to vex you, Nelly, have I ?" inquired Mrs. Weston, rather anxiously.

"Oh, no ! dear Mrs. Weston, how should you ? I am sure that it is all very true, and very sensible ; only I wish that I could *feel* it as well as know it—everybody seems to think differently to myself. I suppose it is because I am so foolish."

"Not foolish, my dear girl, but thoughtless and ignorant of what will be for your own good. You see I was the same ; but what is the use of any of us suffering in this world, Nelly, if others are not to take warning by our mistakes ? I refused to listen to the counsel of my father and mother, and you have heard what came of it ; but though you have no parents you have your good guardian's advice to guide you, and your brother's welfare to think of, as well as your own, and it is not yet too late to consider both. So I trust I

shall see you 'Mrs. Monkton,' yet," continued Mrs. Weston, laughing, "or hear of it, if I don't see you, for you are very dear to me, my child." And as she spoke she rose and placed her arms about Nelly's shoulders, and kissed her cheek.

The girl turned round and hid her face upon the friendly bosom ready to receive her.

"Dear Mrs. Weston, I *will* think of it!—I will think over all that you and Mr. Ray have said, and I will pray to be guided to do what is right and best, both for Bertie and myself. And now, let me go, please, without any more talking, for I would rather be alone. I would rather be quite by myself, whilst I try to make up my mind about this matter."

CHAPTER X.

SUBDUED—NOT CONQUERED.

IT was with a slow step and drooping figure that Nelly Brooke, after her conversation with Mrs. Weston, returned to the solitude of her own room. The candles had been lighted and placed on the table half an hour before, but no one had attended to them since, as was plainly evinced by their long wicks, flaring in unsnuffed misery. But the girl seemed to notice neither the emptiness nor gloom of the apartment, as she sunk down on Bertie's vacated couch and buried her face in her hands. She was not more reconciled to the prospect before her than she had been two hours previously, but she no longer felt uncertain how the matter would end. Everyone was against her : everyone thought differently to what she did : and the experience of her past life taught her that she would not long be able to hold out against the wishes of her friends. In some respects she was

strong ; but her strength was utter weakness when opposed to the advice or persuasion of those whom she loved. She was like a captured animal that watches the net by which it is surrounded draw closer and closer together, and knows that in another minute it will be hopelessly entangled in the meshes. And Nelly Brooke was not one of those wild impetuous women who will fight like a trapped tigress rather than yield to an untoward fate. She was far more like some timid brute that will dare to stand forth in defence of its home or young, and trembling with mortal fear the while, defiantly stamp its impotent hoof, or shake its harmless head, but which will passively endure any amount of personal molestation. She was brave and spirited when the rights of others were concerned, but she had resigned her own from the moment of her birth.

Her nature in fact, though noble, was far too gentle and yielding to contend with the things of this rough world, where the more a person quietly receives from his fellow creatures, the more will they force him to accept.

As she now sat pondering over Bertie's persuasions, Mr. Ray's advice, and Mrs. Weston's warnings, instead of ascribing selfish

or worldly motives to them, she blamed herself for being so hard of heart and difficult of conviction, for since they were both hurt and astonished at her decision, it must be her judgment that was in fault, and not theirs.

She thought of Mrs. Weston's story ; of the blame she encountered from her brothers and sisters, for having acted selfishly, and considered her own feelings before theirs : and of the many evils which followed her hasty step : and then, wondering if the day would come when Bertie would so reproach herself, she remembered with a shudder that it had already arrived ; and that the question at issue had provoked more bitter words between them, than perhaps had ever passed before. It was hard enough to bear now ; what would it be when Bertie was an old man, and she an old woman, and they still dragged out their lives in those dull rooms ; and no one more to her taste had appeared to renew the offer which Dr. Monkton had made her ?

Would her brother refuse to forget that she had been selfish and obstinate then, or would he continue to reproach her, till life became unbearable, and she was glad to lay it down ? or would she even come herself to regret that she had been so quick to refuse all this world's

goods, and to choose a life of dull poverty before one of affluence and pleasure ?

Nelly thought not, but she could not tell ! If it were only—if it were *only* for herself it would not take a minute to decide ; but there was Bertie—her dear Bertie's good to think of, and had not each of her advisers urged that as possessing the first claim upon her consideration.

She recalled how, when they were little children at play together, her grandfather had once cautioned her not to be too rough with her brother in these words : “Remember, Nelly, that you have all the strength and Bertie has all the weakness, so you must be extra gentle with him on that account.” How often had she felt since then, as if, though innocently, she had stolen half her twin brother's life, and was in a measure, responsible for his deformity, and that when he saw her leap, or run, he must think the same himself. And she had made a silent vow, registered not once but a thousand times over, that as far as it lay in her power, she would devote her existence to repairing the deficiencies in his. And was the first sacrifice which she had been called upon to make for his sake, to prove too hard for her acceptance ?

“Surely,” thought the poor child to herself, “since everyone says it is the right thing for me to do, God, who is all-powerful, can make me think the same, if I only ask Him.”

Thereupon she crept into her bedroom, and, falling on her knees in the dark, prayed for guidance and direction. But whilst she prayed, although she fully believed that she was addressing the Almighty with no desire but to learn His will concerning her, her thoughts were intermixed with what Mr. Ray had said and Mrs. Weston had said, and she was expecting every moment to see a miracle performed, and to find that her opinion had veered round to theirs. She was ready like many of us, to do what Heaven willed, but she wanted to be made to like to do it at the same time ; and as such conformity is but the work of time she remained at the close of her prayers as comfortless and undecided as before.

But suddenly a thought of her cousin Nigel crossing her mind, roused her from her half despairing state. Not that it was an unusual occurrence for Nelly to think of him, and the days which she had spent at Orpington, but she had not yet done so in immediate reference to a contemplated marriage with Dr. Monkton.

Though it could scarcely be with reference to marriage that a vision of the scene which she had had with her cousin in the corridor on the last night she had slept at the Chase, now rose up before the eyes which were hidden in the bedclothes.

Yet, as it passed before her mental vision in all its minutiae, and her cheeks grew hot again in recalling the kiss which he had left upon her lips, the memory appeared to have some effect upon her wavering judgment, for she sprung to her feet as if she had been stung, and clasping her hands together, exclaimed with energy:—

“I *can't* do it, indeed I *can't* do it! no! Bertie, not even for *you*.”

Her words, though full of decision, had been uttered beneath her breath, yet, had they been rung out upon the evening air, and received an instantaneous disclaimer, they could not have produced a more powerful effect than they seemed to do to Nelly, when they were answered by the sound of her brother's footstep.

Bertie's—of a surety: for whose else could it be, moving heavily about in the adjoining room; yet very unlike his usually cautious tread in its stumbling noisy uncertainty.

Nelly flew to the door which divided them, eager, notwithstanding the coldness of their parting, to express her pleasure at his return, and to offer him her assistance.

“ Bertie !” she was about to ejaculate, “ how is it that I never heard the wheels of your chair ?” when she was struck dumb upon the threshold by the strangeness of his appearance.

With one of the flaming, unsnuffed candles in either hand ; a face as white as chalk ; and hair straying over his eyes, Robert Brooke turned at his sister’s approach and confronted her with a sickly leer. Nelly’s heart nearly stopped beating with terror : she could not imagine what had happened to him, the only idea which struck her was that he had been suddenly taken ill.

“ Bertie !” she gasped, “ Bertie, what is the matter ?”

Still he made no answer, but stood in the same position, swaying backwards and forwards whilst the lights he held cast a green shade over his pallid countenance, and a weak foolish smile played about the corners of his mouth. She ran up to his side and took the candles from him, and shook him almost impatiently in her unknown fear.

“Speak to me, do speak to me. Are you ill? are you in pain? You terrify me, Bertie, with your looks.”

Released from the candlesticks, and somewhat roused by the energy of her demand, her brother fell back into a chair and mumbled a few incoherent words.

Then Nelly did what she was very seldom guilty of. She lost her presence of mind. All that she had ever heard respecting the symptoms of impending paralysis or epilepsy, rushed upon it to increase its terror, and without another words he ran quickly through their own apartments into the Farm kitchen, on one side of the ample fireplace of which, Aggie was privileged to keep her chair. There she found the old nurse as usual, dozing over her knitting and—since it was not quite time for the farming-men’s supper,—alone. The suddenness with which Nelly roused her, was sufficient to send Aggie into a fit if no one else had one.

“Aggie! Aggie!” she exclaimed, violently shaking the woman’s arm, “get up, Aggie—get up quick, Bertie is ill, he is dying.”

Old people sleep lightly, and the nurse was wide-awake in a moment and trembling with the shock.

“Dying ! lor ! Miss Nelly—when—where ? How did it happen ? You’ve given me that start, I don’t know how to stand.”

“I know nothing, except that he is ill. Come with me, Aggie, come at once, I cannot stay here.” And the next moment she was flying back along the whitewashed passage, with the old woman hobbling after her, and “blessing and saving” herself at every step.

But when, breathless with haste and fear, they reached the apartment of the man presumed to be dying, he did not appear to have become any worse during his sister’s absence. On the contrary, he was sitting on the chair, just as she had left him, and with his eyes very open, and his legs very far apart, was apostrophising the candles, which Nelly had placed upon the chest of drawers, in a cheerful, not to say, jocose manner.

“Oh ! is he going out of his mind ?” cried Nelly, drawing back as she caught sight of him, and clinging to the arm of her nurse.

The old woman paused for a moment, and regarded him steadfastly : noted his rolling eyes, listless arms, and vacuous look ; and then, drawing a long breath as though she were greatly relieved, her own expression quickly changed from fear to one of contempt,

and she limped up to the side of the chair, and grasped her master's shoulder firmly with her hand.

“Now then, Master Robert!” she said angrily, “what is all this about? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, sir, to go frightening your sister after this fashion.”

Nelly had watched the change in Aggie's face with the utmost curiosity and surprise; and when she saw her thus lay violent hands upon her suffering brother, she thought everybody was going mad together and flew to the rescue.

“Aggie! for shame! how dare you speak to him so? He is ill—he is in pain. I am sure he is. Oh! good heavens! what can I do for him?” and she threw her arms around Bertie's neck, and cushioned his head upon her warm heart, whilst his eyes rolled upwards to meet hers, and he babbled out some incoherent stuff which was intended to express his opinion of Aggie's conduct.

But the old nurse pushed her away.

“Come now, Miss Nelly, don't you do none of that until he deserves it. The best thing for you, my dear, is to go into the next room and bide there a bit, till I've put Master Robert into his bed.

“What, and leave him alone to you, when he is ill, and you speak so crossly to him ; no, never, nurse.”

“Ill ! my dearie ! he ain’t no more ill than you are, take my word for it and ask no questions.”

To this, Nelly was about to make an indignant rejoinder, when she raised her eyes and encountered those of the old woman. There was something in them which revealed the truth. Slowly but surely, beneath the shame of that discovery the colour mounted into the poor girl’s cheeks, until her whole face was one burning blush, and yet she would not utter a syllable that should betray that she was cognisant of Aggie’s meaning. She only caught her breath once or twice as if she were choking and pressed the heavy head which she still held, closer to her faithful bosom. And then when she felt able to speak, she said very quietly—

“If Bertie is not ill, nurse, I can attend to him as well as you, and I would rather do so by myself. I am sorry that I disturbed you for nothing.”

Old Aggie was immediately all penitence.

“Lor, my blessing, what’s the good of me, if not to be disturbed according to your liking:

But there, Miss Nelly, I won't speak another hard word to him, and that I promise you, if you'll only let me stay a bit and help him into his bed. You'll not be able to do it alone, my dear, and 'tisin't fit as you should.

So together, the women assisted Mr. Robert Brooke into bed, where he soon sunk into a heavy slumber.

It was not likely that the news of his supposed illness could be kept entirely secret from the household, particularly as the boy who had pushed his bath chair, appeared at the Farm supper to relate how the "young master" had got out of the conveyance, and desired him to take it back to the house "better nor two hours" before he was said to have returned there himself.

Where he had spent the intervening time, no one knew or had any likelihood of ascertaining.

But the occurrence had so alarmed Nelly, that she refused to retire to rest herself that night, but kept a weary watch (which Aggie in vain asked to be allowed to share) in her brother's room, where she remained, hour after hour, wrapped in thought, as she reviewed with idly clasped hands, the events and feelings of the past day.

Of what the poor child dreamed, as Bertie slept heavily on the bed beside which she crouched, whether she really persuaded herself that her judgment was the only one at fault ; or whether a fearful and shameful future seemed to open before her with the bitter knowledge she had attained that evening ; a future which she might avert, or not averting, might feel laid at her door, was best known to herself, for she revealed the truth to no one.

Only when the day dawned, and her brother, roused from his slumbers, found that she had been watching the livelong night beside his pillow, he was so filled with shame and contrition, and self-reproach, that the real love which united the twin children, poured forth in an unchecked stream, and they revelled in a burst of mutual confidence, in which, though plentifully mingled, the sweet so predominated over the bitter that it was felt, on Nelly's side, at least, that life was too short and empty of such joy, to permit of anything which was preventible interrupting it again.

When old Aggie had the opportunity to observe her nurseling on the following day, she was surprised at the calmness which her features had assumed, and concluded in conse-

quence that she must have failed to understand her hints respecting the cause of her brother's mysterious illness.

“And I'll bite out my tongue before I'll be the one to tell her the truth,” was the nurse's mental ejaculation, “though it be easy enough to deceive her, bless her innocence. But if it go on at this rate, a blind man will be able to see it for himself before long, so I needn't trouble my old head about the matter ;” and then, addressing the object of her thoughts. “Well, Miss Nelly, my dearie, and where may you be going so early ?”

“Only to the post office to post a letter for Bertie, nurse,” replied the girl with a plaintive smile which ended in a plaintive sigh. “He was up the first thing this morning to write it, and is very anxious that it should go to-day. He is asleep again now, so I think you had better not go in for fear of disturbing him, for he is rather feverish, and rest will do him good.”

“And how may his head be by this time, Miss Nelly ?” the old servant could not resist enquiring, as she glanced mischievously up into her young mistress's face.

The cheeks grew crimson again, and the soft eyes sought the ground, but the voice in

which Nelly answered, though subdued, was womanly in its dignity.

“It is very painful, nurse, as you may guess ; but I don’t suppose that talking about it will do it any good. The best thing to be done now, I think, is to keep Bertie quiet ; and ourselves too.”

From the way in which Nelly uttered the last words, Aggie perceived her mistake in deciding that she had been less mindful of the truth than herself, and laying her wrinkled hand upon the girl’s arm, she hastened, in an indirect manner, to apologise for her insinuation.

“Don’t you be vexed with me, my dear ! I didn’t mean nothing, you may be sure, and if I’d thought that things had made themselves as plain to you as they have to me, I wouldn’t have mentioned nothing, neither. But all I say is,” continued the old woman, with a happy disregard of her first assertion, “that she had meant nothing—all I say is, that if that fine doctor friend of Master Robert’s can’t do him more good than this, why he’d better stay away from Bickton, and that’s the truth, for he’s making matters worse for us instead of better.”

At this contemptuous mention of the “fine

doctor friend," the ready flush again mounted to Nelly's face.

"It's not Dr. Monkton's fault, nurse," she answered, quickly, "no one can say but that he has done all that is possible to improve dear Bertie's health and add to his comfort."

"Well, but it don't add to ours, Miss Nelly, for him to come here putting fine ideas in the poor lad's head, which won't never come to pass, and only render him ill-contented with his home. The doctor's at the bottom of this, you may rest assured. I never liked him overmuch from the first time——"

"Hush, hush, nurse," said the girl, laying her hand over the woman's mouth, whilst the colour flew from her face as rapidly as it had appeared there. "You mustn't say a word against Dr. Monkton, or any of his doings, because—because——"

"Because what, my dearie?" enquired Aggie, unsuspectingly, as Nelly removed her hand from her lips to press it over her own heart.

"Because,—stop a minute, nurse, and I'll tell you, because I'm going to—to marry him."

The murder was out, and the girl and her nurse, the one, trembling from the agitation of telling the news, the other from that of

hearing it, stood for a few moments, gazing steadily in each others' faces.

At last Nelly said in a very low voice—

“And don't you wish me—joy—Aggie?”

“Joy, my dear bairn, I wish you every blessing that the Lord can shower over you, both here and hereafter,” exclaimed the old woman, whilst the drops ran down her furrowed cheeks; and holding out her arms, Aggie took her “child” into her embrace, just as she had been used to do in the days of old; and the nurse and nurseling mingled their tears together.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CATHEDRAL TOWN OF HILSTONE.

HILSTONE was one of those somnolent places (not singular amongst the county towns of foggy and respectable England) which, going to sleep six days in the week, wake up on the seventh, namely, their market day, to make an extraordinary fuss over the most trivial topics and events of a commonplace existence.

But, added to being a market town, Hilstone could boast of a cathedral! and the cathedral towns of our native country possess an individuality exclusively their own, for which all those who do not dwell therein, may be thankful.

Why, in order that a collection of bricks and mortar may attain the height of respectability, it must be endued with the extreme of dulness, no one has yet been able to determine, but the fact remains, and Hilstone was no exception to the general rule. In vain had a charitable government, in pity for its

stagnant condition, established a military depôt on the outskirts of the town. The proximity of the red coats had produced no better effect than to put the ecclesiastical party considerably out of temper, and to cause the magic upspringing of half-a-dozen new public houses, to meet the increased demand for liquor.

“Sword and Gown” would not fraternise, and only maintained the peace on protest, whilst at every turn they interfered with each others’ amusements, and if by chance they agreed to mingle and try to enjoy themselves together, the influence of the Cathedral, like an austere matron clothed in black, with a rod of iron in her hand, kept guard over them, and put an effectual stop to anything like frivolity.

If the 40th Bays (which was the regiment then stationed at Hilstone) got up a dance or a pic-nic, or anything to promote a little gaiety, the clerical party thought it altogether beneath their dignity to attend it, whilst their subordinates sued the military to purchase tickets for amateur oratorios and charitable bazaars, with the same want of success.

Yet, strange to say, the feud was not between the men of each profession, for although

their avocations led them into widely different paths, they could manage to meet without clashing. Neither did the ladies of the Cathedral systematically frown upon the owners of the moustaches, as how should they do, when Captain Herbert Filmer, own grandchild to the Dean of Hilstone, and the son of Mrs. Filmer, who lived at the Deanery, and "led" the town, not only honoured the 40th Bays by belonging to it, but was as often to be met in his mother's drawing-room as in the mess-room of his regiment. Indeed, nothing pleased Mrs. Filmer better than to see the Deanery table or concert-room filled with officers, and she was always especially gracious to the young, unmarried, rich colonel of the Bays, and was known to look with a very lenient eye upon his undisguised flirtation with her only daughter.

But it was the regimental ladies to whom Mrs. Filmer and all her satellites bore so unmitigated an aversion, that it was only on one or two of those whose husbands were highest in the service, that they had even left their cards. They were the obstacle which would ever prevent the black and scarlet from mingling as freely as they should have done ; for although a few of the bachelors of

the corps ignored the party spirit which divided them, the husbands of the slighted women were compelled to take up arms in their defence, and to refuse to partake of any gaiety in which they were not included, or were likely to be brought in contact with those who had affronted them. It is hard to say why this female feud existed, or when it had begun; but the ladies of the Bays had been heard to affirm that the occurrence was by no means an unusual one in military experience, and that they would rather be stationed anywhere than near a Cathedral town.

Perhaps they dressed a little too smartly and fashionably to suit the quiet ideas of Hilstone, or, perhaps they had been indiscreet in averring their distaste to the place and its inhabitants, and in comparing its dullness with the remembrance of former gaieties.

For although the dullness of Hilstone was an indisputable fact, the natives refused to believe in it, and nothing offended them more than that a stranger should dare to express an opinion in the matter.

To them, the old town was a paradise; they revered its shops, its institutions, and its society; it was the healthiest place in the world, the most scientific and the most popu-

lar. Nothing that happened in Hilstone could be wrong.

They lifted up their hands at the bare idea of its sharp, cold climate disagreeing with any person, whatever his complaint ; were incredulous on the possibility of procuring articles better or cheaper elsewhere, and if any one moved from Hilstone who was not absolutely compelled by his evil fortune to do so, they simply considered that he must be insane. How far they were justified in their opinion, perhaps no one could judge who had not lived there. For on a first inspection, Hilstone did certainly appear to be a very charming old place. It possessed some great advantages, and might have possessed more had its townsmen been less arrantly conceited with respect to it and themselves. It is not unusual, in this world, to see a person with good natural abilities stop short on the road to success, because he has not sufficient discrimination to distinguish encouragement from admiration, and fancies he has arrived at the end of his task, before he has mastered the beginning. So it was with Hilstone, or rather with its inhabitants. They rested its claims to notice upon the fame which it had acquired in bygone days, and were content to let them rest

there. Was it not one of the most ancient towns in England? were not kings and queens buried in gilded coffins in the cathedral, and did it not possess some of the finest antiquities in the country? What could people want more? This was all very true, and had modern attractions been added to its ancient interest, Hilstone might have been transformed into something more like the earthly paradise which its faithful natives believed it to be. But the ordinary soul of the nineteenth century is corrupt, and cannot be content to derive all its pleasures from contemplating the dry bones of Saxon kings, or stone effigies with their noses ground off; nor rest satisfied with the excitement attendant upon the examination of curious monuments and buildings, because they were erected some hundred years before. And the error of the Hilstone people lay in the belief that nothing more was necessary to render the place a pleasant habitation, and the idea of any innovation, however slight, was put down with zeal worthy of a more deserving object.

Was it proposed by some enterprising member of the Town Council to build a public concert room? What could they want better than the Mechanics' Institute, in which the

concerts of the Choral Society had been held for so many years? To widen the principal street, and erect new shops? Would they destroy the appearance of a thoroughfare which had stood in its present condition for hundreds of years? To enclose a public field and turn it into a subscription cricket ground! What, deprive the national school children of their right of way, even though it were as easy for them to go by the road, and the proposal was made for the benefit of the town? Never! the whole place would rise at the mere attempt; and, indeed, on the last occasion the "place," represented by all its worst characters, did rise and threaten to burn down the house of the person who had been so unfortunate as to think of the plan. Hilstone wanted more shops, more gas, more laying on of water, and more carrying off of drains; but the Hilstonians were perfectly contented to let things remain as they were; they liked being cheated, and walking home in the dark, and having a fever break out periodically in the back slums of the town, and refused to believe that any of these evils required remedy.

The members of their Town Council and Board of Works, being invariably also mem-

bers of their own families, they always got their own way with them, and the tradesmen ruled the place and did with it as they chose. For it was a remarkable fact about Hilstone that all the so-called gentry bore the same names as the shopkeepers, although they steadily ignored any relationship between them. Thus, the five Misses Harley, daughters of old Harley the retired solicitor, who occupied one of the best houses in the town, quite tittered at the absurdity of their papa signing the same name as Harley the pork-butcher, although the pork-butcher's girls bore a striking resemblance to themselves. And the same peculiarity being traceable through several other families, the shopkeepers of Hilstone gave themselves great airs, and charged double the price they should have done for their goods on the score of their grand relations. The ladies of the 40th Bays had tried all the shops in Hilstone and come to the conclusion that it would be more economical to send for what they wanted to London; which decision being rumoured about had given great offence to the townspeople: "Not good enough for them, I suppose," had been the general remark, delivered with much acerbity and elevated noses.

It was said that the military ladies upon arrival had visited the cathedral, inspected the crypts, read the inscriptions on the tombs, tipped the verger, and then turned away to enquire who was considered the best milliner in Hilstone and when the next ball was expected to take place? expressing general dissatisfaction on being told that it was seldom thought worth while to get up a public ball there, as it would be sure not to be patronized by the cathedral party. They had attended the cathedral service every Sunday afternoon since, but openly confessed they did so for the sake of the anthem, for they greatly preferred hearing their own chaplain read and preach; a piece of heresy which, being quickly repeated into the ear of the Dean's daughter-in-law, caused her to "sniff" palpably whenever the military ladies passed her pew, and to make whispered comments on their appearance to her daughter, or any female toady who might be in waiting on the occasion. For Mrs. Filmer was surrounded by toadies, ever ready to run messages for her, or to retail gossip: she considered herself the principal person in Hilstone, and as far as the cloisters were concerned, perhaps she was so. She was the widow of the dean's eldest son, and with her

daughter Laura, had lived at the deanery ever since her husband's death ; not only lived but ruled, making as free use of her father-in-law's purse as of his house. Some people might have considered this rather a dependent position in which to be placed : but no Hilstonian presumed to link the ugly word "dependence" with the sacred name of Filmer. The reverence due to the dean reflected itself on his daughter-in-law, and had she been his wife she could not have met with greater respect and honour, a homage which in her own person she was by no means entitled to, for, stripped of her temporary importance as mistress of the Deanery, Mrs. Filmer was simply a coarse-minded, ill-bred, and ill-tempered woman. The cathedral of Hilstone was so situated in the centre, or rather to the back of the town, that nothing but its spire was to be seen from the High Street. It was surrounded by the lowest and poorest habitations of the place, which clustered about it like rabble thronging a monarch ; and the occupants of which defiled the iron railings guarding the graveyard by hanging out wet garments upon them to dry and permitted the sanctity of the cloisters to be outraged by the noisy shouts of children at

play. Moreover the cathedral yard was a thoroughfare, and passengers might be seen traversing it at any hour of the day, from the butcher-boy with his tray and the nursemaid with her perambulator, down to the itinerant organ-grinder with his detestable instrument. The cathedral itself was approached on every side by heavy archways, forming the termination to high walls, and was not to be seen until the last of them had been traversed and the visitor was stepping beneath the lime avenue which led up to its massive door. It was in one of the narrow well-guarded streets leading to the cloister, that Dr. Monkton's house was situated, causing Nelly Brooke to think it looked like a prison, and that it must be difficult to breathe there.

The deanery adjoined the cathedral, and seemed almost like a continuation of it, whilst the other large houses in the cloisters, eight or ten in number, though close at hand, were disposed here and there in that fanciful bo-peep fashion in which the architects of older days loved to place their buildings, and all bore a certain similarity in being very large, draughty and damp, and covered with ivy, which rendered the low-pitched rooms still darker than they need have been. These

houses were not all occupied by people attached to the cathedral, for the next in size to the deanery was rented by the Honorable Mrs. Allondale, whose three daughters, although far less attractive, and more "fast" and flirting than any lady in the 40th Bays, had been pronounced to be "dear girls," by Mrs. Filmer, and were recognised accordingly by the Hilstone public as models of fashion and propriety.

Everybody connected with the cloister was sacred in the eyes of Hilstone, even down to the twenty decayed widows of the twenty deceased canons who lived in a set of alms houses within the sacred precincts, built after the same pattern, and not much better than those provided for the poor. But there were three especial planets round which the lower satellites revolved, and from whom they derived half their effulgence. The first of these was, of course, Mrs. Filmer; the second was Dr. Nesbitt, the cathedral organist; the third was Mr. Rumbell, a bachelor canon with a bass voice, which all the spinsters declared to be marvellous in its perfection, and who was president of the Choral Society of Hilstone.

Of the character of Mrs. Filmer sufficient has already been said to account for any future

actions of which she may be guilty. That of Dr. Nesbitt was a far deeper one, though in its way, scarcely less unpleasant. He was a man of powerful intellect, and great musical ability, but with an uncertain and violent temper, and a reserved disposition which forbid his opening his heart to anyone. He was very much courted and deferred to in Hilstone, but everybody was more or less afraid of him. On his part, he treated the townspeople with politeness because it was his good will and pleasure to retain his appointment as organist amongst them ; but there was ever a cynical look to be discerned lurking behind his readiest smile, and in his heart, he hated and despised them all. The town called itself a musical one ; it had placed itself under the direction of one or two favourite canons, and half a dozen choristers, and considered the Hilstone Choral Society, and the Hilstone Glee and Madrigal Union, to be two of the best organised and conducted amateur institutions of the kind.

Dr. Nesbitt had been asked to accept the conduct of one, or both of these societies, but had steadily declined to have anything to do with them. He carried on a secret feud against all the musical canons, but especially

against Mr. Rumbell with his bass voice, and Mr. Pratt with his tenor voice, who had both attempted to interfere with the instruction of the cathedral choir. Dr. Nesbitt would laugh in his sleeve at the mere notion of either of these men knowing anything of music; a first rate musician himself, and with the capability of making the splendid organ under his charge sound in such a manner that all England would have been glad to crowd to hear him, he would yet on occasions mount the loft stairs in so bad a humour, that neither choristers nor canons could by any possibility follow the chords struck by his wayward fingers. And then Dr. Nesbitt would be delighted at the public failure, and before he had given the cathedral authorities time to reprimand him, would lull their anger by such exquisite music as is seldom heard upon this lower earth. He knew, too well, that however Mr. Rumbell might puff with indignation, or Mr. Pratt weep with chagrin, all Hilstone would vote against his dismissal. His fame was too wide spread for such a step to injure anybody but themselves; he would at once be gladly seized upon and engaged by some rival cathedral town, and they would have lost the glory of being able to boast that

they had not only the finest organ, but the best organist in England.

And so Dr. Nesbitt played just as he liked ; and even Mrs. Filmer reserved her most gracious smiles for the occasions when she asked him to take part in the private concerts at the deanery ; and the Honourable Mrs. Allondale, and the Misses Harley (who, although not at all honourable, were very rich,) thought when they had managed to secure the attendance of Dr. Nesbitt at their musical parties, that there was no one else in the room worth entertaining. And yet Mr. Rumbell enjoyed almost an equal share of attention, for he possessed the extra advantage of being a bachelor, which Dr. Nesbitt was not, having an invalid wife who never went into society, stowed away somewhere in the recesses of his dark, damp house. Mr. Rumbell was fancy-free, and being president of the Choral Society, which met once a week for practice, and to which every single lady in Hilstone belonged, he had great opportunities of becoming known to the female members of his congregation.

He was fat, it is true ; and pale and puffy, and his figure looked more like a pincushion stuffed with bran than a muscular living

body ; but still he was a canon, and single ; and had a voice with such splendid low notes in it that the ladies of Hilstone declared that it almost made them cry. Dr. Nesbitt, on the contrary, affirmed that he could not hear the canon sing without laughing ; but as he always played his accompaniments when asked to do so, with the utmost gravity, the Hilstone virgins could not guess that he held such heterodox sentiments regarding their favourite, and it was only to a chosen few that he had revealed them. Such were the luminaries round which the Hilstone satellites revolved adoring ; such the society to which Nelly Brooke, as Dr. Monkton's wife, would be introduced.

The doctor was a great favourite with the cathedral party, and consequently with all the town ; and although the news of his contemplated marriage had cast a gloom upon the unmarried portion of his female patients, Mrs. Filmer (having higher views for her own daughter) saw nothing objectionable in the idea, and therefore his sister, Mrs. Prowse, tried to put a good face on the matter, and make the best of it.

For Mrs. Prowse, who had hitherto resided with her brother, was the wife of one of the old-

est canons in Hilstone, and went hand-in-glove with Mrs. Filmer, in all her likes and dislikes, however unreasonable they might be ; acted chief jackal, in fact, to the cathedral lioness, and was therefore thoroughly opposed to the ladies of the 40th Bays, and generally speaking to most new-comers. It was mainly through her influence that her brother had obtained the principal practice of the town, for she was older than himself, and had lived in it many years before he thought of settling there ; though fortunately for him, soon after his arrival, the medical practitioner then most in favour, having been foolish enough to risk his popularity by helping the surgeon of the regiment then occupying the barracks to pull an officer's wife through a difficult case of fever, and found himself banished from several houses in consequence, James Monkton had nimbly stepped into the vacated position, and taken good care to maintain it since.

Mrs. Filmer had been one of those who most strongly condemned old Dr. Nash's misplaced philanthropy, and her patronage of the new candidate for Hilstone favour had established his fortune at once. Mrs. Prowse, although she had never seen Nelly Brooke, and was not acquainted with the people of the

Chase, considered that with such advantages, her brother should have looked higher for a wife ; but Mrs. Filmer, only anticipating another addition to her list of worshippers, elected to pooh-pooh the fears and doubts of her jackal, and to assert that Dr. Monkton was in a position to marry whom he chose.

And so, pending the appearance of my heroine, the matter rested.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. FILMER'S JACKAL.

It was market-day in Hilstone—a bright glorious Thursday in August—and the High Street had wakened up, and looked quite gay. Mr. Jenkins, the principal linen-draper, had dressed his windows with gold and silver-spotted tarlatanes, surmounted by gorgeous wreaths, and chalky white kid gloves; for though there were few respectable public balls held in Hilstone, the tradespeople occasionally indulged in capers by themselves, and there was no saying what attraction the flimsy materials might not have for the many young ladies who came in from the surrounding country to adorn the town on market-day, and who were much in the habit of congregating round Mr. Jenkins's shop, in consequence of which well-known custom a knowing seller of gingerbread and sweet stuff had pitched his tent just outside the linendraper's door.

This pitching of booths in the public road,

as if for a fair, appeared to be a legal institution in Hilstone, for no less than six or eight blocked up the High Street alone.

Near the entrance to the grain market, itinerant vendors were selling leather gloves and gaiters, and canes and driving whips, and vociferously pressing their wares on the stout, red-faced farmers who passed continually in and out of the building, conferring together on the price of oats and barley, and enforcing their arguments by two fat, outstretched fingers, laid cunningly across each other.

In the stable-yards of the two principal inns, ostlers were every minute being shouted for, to take the horse of some new arrival, whilst the savoury fumes of hot soups and pasties, which proceeded from the open doors of each establishment, proved that good entertainment was preparing for man as well as beast.

The confectioners, attempting to outwit the innkeepers, had decked their windows with the most tempting hams and tongues, and delicate French rolls, and the masters of such shops as could not hope for any increase to their business on account of its being market-day, stood on their thresholds deliciously idle but beaming with smiles, as though they drove so thriving a trade during the rest of the

week, that it was rather a comfort than otherwise to have nothing to do.

The sun shone powerfully, and everybody looked happy and gay.

The ladies of Hilstone, although they complained greatly of the "awkwardness of being looked at," and the "inconvenience of being elbowed," always turned out in large numbers on Thursday mornings; and there they were as usual on this particular occasion, sauntering up and down the High Street, stopping every now and then to examine some novelty in a shop-window; or rushing together in a terrified group, as a drove of dusty bullocks or unruly cart colts came lumbering down the hill on their way to the cattle market. Conspicuous among them, more on account of her sharp voice and decided manner, than of her imposing appearance, was Dr. Monkton's sister, Mrs. Prowse, and walking with her was Miss Fanny Clewson, the daughter of one of the twenty decayed widows of the twenty deceased canons, who occupied the almshouses in the cloisters.

Mrs. Prowse was a small woman, not so short as extremely narrow, and for her sex, illshaped. Captain Herbert Filmer had emphatically described her as "two planks lashed

together," and there was not much more to be said for her figure. The style of her face was prim and old-maidish; few strangers would have taken her for a wife, none for a mother; and in this last conjecture they would have been right, for Mrs. Prowse was a childless, and a child hating woman.

Her eyes were large and dark, like her brother's, but they never wore the soft expression which his, at times, assumed; her nose was a small aquiline, and her mouth was hard and inflexible, with straight, thin lips, and over-sized teeth.

Whenever Mrs. Prowse made a remark there always seemed to be something more behind.

She would deliver her opinion, and apparently without reserve; but then the thin lips would resolutely close over the large teeth, whilst a look remained in the eyes which was intended to indicate that she knew more on the subject than she chose to divulge.

No one really liked Mrs. Prowse; even her brother, although he permitted himself to be much influenced by her, was rejoicing in the prospect of getting her out of his house, whilst her poor husband would have been only too thankful could he have entertained any reasonable hope of the same contingency.

Mrs. Filmer chose to make use of her ; and therefore all Mrs. Filmer's cronies and toadies were compelled to accept her snappish remarks with as good a grace as they could muster ; but it was only on sufferance that she maintained a circle of friends in Hilstone. Herbert and Laura Filmer were rude to her openly ; most people abused her behind her back ; even Fanny Clewson, who was a very snake for subtlety, could not always resist shewing what she thought of Mrs. Prowse's insinuations. Miss Fanny Clewson was of the pussy-cat order of women, soft and velvety in the extreme to all outward appearance, but possessing very sharp claws, which she could unsheathe when she thought fit.

She had been a pretty girl, and was still a pretty woman, but although evidently not young, no one knew her real age. It might have been anything from five-and-twenty to five-and-thirty, but being unmarried, she still passed in Hilstone as a girl.

She had large, sleepy, bashful looking eyes, which were generally cast upon the ground, but which could, on occasions (particularly such occasions as encountering a gentleman) glance upwards through their long lashes with

the slyest look imaginable. Besides these attractions, she possessed a small, straight nose, a pursed-up rose-bud mouth, a bright complexion, and a profusion of silky hair, which she wore in long, soft bands on either side of her face, like a spaniel's ears; and when it is added that her voice (at least the voice she kept for the public) was low and sweet, and most oily in its tone—Miss Clewson's portrait is completed. She had lived alone with her mother in the almshouses before mentioned, for any number of years, and was one of the standing dishes of Hilstone. Of course she was, or professed to be, strictly ecclesiastical in all her tastes, and totally opposed to such frivolities as bands, and balls, and uniforms; nevertheless, it had been whispered, by some of rumour's hundred tongues, that more than one imprudent subaltern had got into a scrape through Miss Fanny's bashful eyes, and only been able to wrest his billets-doux from the knowing clutches of old Mrs. Clewson, in consideration of a *quid pro quo*.

However, whether in this instance rumour spoke truth or falsehood, it is certain that such knowledge could never have reached the ears of Mrs. Filmer or her jackal, or Miss Fanny Clewson would assuredly not have been per-

mitted to walk up the High Street by the side of a canon's wife. Yet here they were, proceeding leisurely together, and talking alternately of Dr. Monkton's marriage, which had taken place some weeks previously, and Mrs. Prowse's new house.

"I *wonder* you didn't go to the wedding," said Miss Fanny, twisting herself round so as to face her friend, (Miss Clewson never walked arm-in-arm with any one, it prevented her moving her body about in those snake-like evolutions with which she loved to wriggle up the High Street.) "A wedding in the country is generally such a charming sight."

"I can't say I agree with you," replied Mrs. Prowse, in her peculiar voice, the tones of which, although not loud, were yet all treble, and never fell at the conclusion of a sentence. "I think all weddings are dreary affairs, and this one must have been especially so, because the young lady's grandfather has not been dead a year yet; and my brother tells me that it was a stipulation that the marriage should be strictly private. So I was not likely to trouble myself to go all that distance for nothing."

"Has Miss Brooke no parents then?" enquired Miss Clewson.

“No, she is an orphan. Her only near relation is her twin brother.”

“A brother! oh! dear!” exclaimed Fanny Clewson, as a vision rose up before her of six feet of manly beauty, furnished with moustaches. “Then I suppose we shall see the gentleman down at Hilstone also.”

“Scarcely likely, I should think,” was the disheartening response, “for he is a great invalid, and has never moved out of his native village. He could find no enjoyment in the bustle of a town.”

“Then he has property of his own?”

“Oh, yes, he is quite independent, he has a country place or something of the sort in Kent, which of course he will continue to reside on.”

By this it will be seen, that Mrs. Prowse was not very enlightened on the subject of Nelly and Robert Brooke; indeed, her greatest private grievance was, that her brother had been so reticent with her regarding his new connections; but she was too cunning to confess this openly. It sounded well to speak of a “country place,” and as if the newly made Mrs. Monkton had money; and Fanny Clewson was too great a gossip not to repeat she heard.

“Are not those rich people who are renting Orpington Chase some relations to Mrs. Monkton?” again asked the latter, who was anxious to worm out all the information she could respecting the doctor’s bride.

“I believe they are; distant cousins, or something of the sort; at least James first met Miss Brooke at their house; but he has no communication with the Chase now. Mrs. Brooke was rude to him, and he very rightly refused to visit her again. James stands a great deal too high to put up with nonsense from anyone.”

“Of course,” was the sympathetic rejoinder; “but, dear me, then Mrs. Monkton and her cousins won’t be able to associate together; that will be a pity, won’t it?”

“I’m sure I don’t know. I suppose Mrs. Monkton will choose to think the same as my brother does on the matter. From his description, she is quite a child, and will of course be guided in all things by his wishes. I dare say they will be more like father and daughter together, than husband and wife.”

“Father and daughter, he, he, he,” tittered Miss Clewson. “She must be very young indeed, if Dr. Monkton is old enough to be her father.”

“How foolish you are, Fanny Clewson,” was the snappish reply ; “it’s not likely I was alluding to their respective ages. I mean that my brother is too clever, and has too much knowledge of the world to permit any woman to take the rule over him.”

“And they are really to be home to-day ! Is she very pretty, Mrs. Prowse ? Do tell me all about her. How anxious you must be to see her. It will be so charming for you to have a sister.”

“I’m not at all anxious to see her,” replied the canon’s wife, who prided herself on always saying exactly what she meant ; “I’m not like some people, who are afraid to say what they think. I don’t see what difference her coming will make to Hilstone ; but that is James’s concern and not mine.”

“But you have made your own house so comfortable, and have arranged everything in it so tastefully, that I am sure it must be a pleasure only to look at it. I was saying to Miss Harley, only yesterday, that yours will be the most elegant house in Hilstone, and you will make us all jealous, though I am sure no one has a better right to be surrounded by every elegance than you have.”

“There is not much difficulty in choosing a

few tables and chairs, if one were only permitted——”

“Ah, not to *you*, perhaps, who have such exquisite taste,” interposed Miss Clewson.

“I wish to goodness you’d break yourself of that habit of interrupting people,” said Mrs. Prowse sharply; “it’s shocking bad taste, particularly in a girl. I was going to observe, that if Mr. Prowse would only allow one to ——Who’s that coming towards us now?”

“Mrs. Roe, dear Mrs. Prowse, and Miss Hammond,” replied Fanny Clewson, eager to atone for her error; and the next minute the four ladies had met and greeted one another, and formed a cluster on the pavement which ejected the passing passengers into the road.

Miss Hammond was a very skinny old maid with a yellow face and an undeniable wig, Mrs. Roe was a married lady, verging on middle age, with a pair of spectacles placed across her prominent nose, and a huge roll of music beneath her arm; and both ladies talked very fast and very animatedly, as though they were a couple of frolicsome girls who had no business to be taking a walk on their own account.

“Well, dear! and how are you after your

fatigues of yesterday evening, and how did you manage to get home at last?"

The speaker was Mrs. Roe, and she addressed Mrs. Prowse—her query alluding to the meeting of the choral society which always took place on a Wednesday evening; and at the termination of the last one of which, Mr. Prowse had proved delinquent, and not appeared to convey his spouse home again.

"Oh! I did very well, thank you," replied the neglected wife. "Mr. Rumbell would not permit me to wait for Mr. Prowse, but took me home himself."

"Oh! he did—did he—you naughty thing?" exclaimed Miss Hammond archly, as she playfully tapped Mrs. Prowse with her parasol. "Well! I shall take care to tell the canon next time I meet him that he had better come next Wednesday, and look after his wife himself. But what did you think of the practice? Did not the soprani go well together? and was not Mr. Pratt's solo lovely? You came in finely, too, with your recitative, and quite took the room by storm."

Mrs. Prowse had a voice something like that of a singing mouse; but in consideration of the favour in which she stood with Mrs. Fil-

mer, the president of the society gave her a solo part whenever it was possible.

“Now, do hold your tongue, Susy,” interposed Mrs. Roe. “I have something of importance to tell Mrs. Prowse. What do you think, dear? I am afraid our good president wants a little talking to from you. Mrs. Clarence has been granted a member’s ticket.”

Now Mrs. Clarence was the wife of Captain Clarence of the 40th Bays; a very nice-looking woman of five-and-twenty, with a splendid soprano voice; and although the choral society was a public one, its members had as yet been strictly confined to the cathedral party.

“Never!” exclaimed the other ladies in a breath.

“It is true, I assure you. Wright told me so himself. She was at his shop this morning with a written order from Mr. Rumbell for a soprano’s ticket; so of course he sold it her. But what can Mr. Rumbell have been thinking of?”

“But it is impossible! it must be a mistake,” exclaimed Mrs. Prowse with excitement; “the list is closed, and has been for two months past. Did not Mr. Rumbell give it out publicly?”

“Of course, he did. I remember it per-

factly, and Miss Green wished so much to enter afterwards, that she cried when she found she was too late to obtain a ticket. Oh! there's something behind this, you may depend upon it. It should be looked into."

"It *shall* be looked into," replied Mrs. Prowse, energetically. "Mrs. Clarence must have been up to some of her nasty military tricks—I hate such chicanery;—and, by the way, here comes Mr. Rumbell himself, so I'll just put the question to him at once."

The ladies stood a little to one side to make way for the burly canon, although they had no intention that he should pass them, nor had he apparently any wish to do so. Mr. Rumbell was in a cheery mood, consonant with the weather, but that he usually was with his female acquaintances, on week days. He stopped short on perceiving them, shook hands heartily with Mrs. Prowse, Mrs. Roe, and Miss Hammond, and would have done the same by Fanny Clewson, had not her blushing bashfulness prompted her to draw a step backwards, from which position she timidly proffered a set of trembling fingers.

"Well! ladies—how are you?" he exclaimed, not noticing that the usually beaming looks of Mrs. Prowse were overcast.

“You do not seem to have suffered from your exertion of last night. A capital practice, was it not? If we had a little more strength in the soprani we should do. Have you heard from your brother, Mrs. Prowse? When is he expected to return? Hilstone misses him sadly.”

“Dr. and Mrs. Monkton will be home, I believe, by this evening, Mr. Rumbell,” was the measured reply.

“Indeed! So soon—that’s better than I thought. And so, I suppose you and Prowse have cleared out, bag and baggage. How do you like the change?”

“We are quite satisfied, I thank you, with our new abode.”

Mrs. Prowse uttered these words so stiffly, that Mr. Rumbell began to suspect that his presence was not indispensable.

“Well! I mustn’t detain you this beautiful morning. I am glad to hear we are to have Monkton back so soon. Good-day, ladies.” And raising his hat he essayed to move on.

“Stay! Mr. Rumbell,” exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, suddenly regaining her animation. “I wish to ask you a question before you go. Is it true that Captain Clarence’s wife is to become a member of our choral society?”

The tone and the look were unmistakeable, and the unfortunate canon at once perceived the reason of his cold reception.

“Well! I believe so,” he half stammered in his confusion; “at least, Mrs. Clarence asked me for an order some little while back. Has it been presented?”

“The order was dated last week!” remarked Mrs. Roe, maliciously.

“And the list was closed two months ago,” continued Mrs. Prowse. “Miss Green could not obtain a ticket, although she works exclusively for the cathedral ladies; and that outsiders should be admitted when our own people are excluded seems very strange.”

“Miss Green, if you mean the dressmaker,” replied Mr. Rumbell, “has no voice, Mrs. Prowse, as you must allow, and has had no instruction, and one of our first rules is that no one shall become a member who has not some knowledge of music. The room is small enough already, and we must not fill it with useless voices. I have closed the list, as you say, to all ordinary candidates, but we can’t afford to turn away a Jenny Lind or a Grisi, you know, should they make an application for admittance.”

“And you mean to insinuate that Mrs.

Clarence is a Jenny Lind, then !” wrathfully returned Mrs. Prowse.

“ I mean to say that she possesses a very beautiful voice,” replied Mr. Rumbell, who could hold his own when he chose, and had to do so occasionally, amongst the Hilstone females, “ and that I did not grant her the order for a ticket until I had consulted the vice-president and others ; but we were all unanimous on the propriety of admitting her as a member.”

“ Oh ! of course, if you’re all agreed, it must be right,” said Mrs. Prowse, tossing her head, “ but I think the other members of the society will require some explanation on the subject.”

“ Which I shall be most willing to afford them,” was the canon’s reply, as he again bowed and passed on.

“ Now, what can be the meaning of that ?” exclaimed Mrs. Roe, as soon as he was out of hearing.

“ I can see the meaning of it, well enough,” replied Mrs. Prowse, indignantly ; “ I heard last week, that he had been dining more than once at the Clarences’. It’s just like those military women, they don’t care what they do or say in order to attain an object. But don’t let us talk of it any more. There’s Dr. Nes-

bitt ; I daresay, if the truth were known, he was one of Mr. Rumbell's advisers, for he is always dining up at the barracks, and I wonder dear Mrs. Filmer allows it—but she is so lenient and good-natured.”

The cathedral organist came shuffling down the street as she spoke, and passed through their midst, with his eyes abstractedly fixed upon the ground. The ladies all bowed to him—some spoke ; and the simultaneous greeting arresting his attention, he raised his head, started, and then, without removing his hat, gave them a rough nod, and shambled on.

“ Dear Dr. Nesbitt is *so* absent !” murmured Miss Clewson, plaintively.

“ Thinking of Mrs. Clarence, perhaps,” suggested spiteful Mrs. Prowse.

“ Well, Susy ! we must be trotting on,” said Mrs. Roe, beginning to tire of standing still. This was the signal for breaking up the party. The friends separated, and Mrs. Prowse and Fanny Clewson were about to resume their promenade, when the younger lady observed :

“ Dear me ! here comes Mr. Brooke, of Orpington.”

“ Are you acquainted with him ?” enquired the canon's wife.

“ Oh ! yes ; I have met him several times.”

“Well, I have no wish to know him—certainly not, after his mother’s rude behaviour to the doctor; so if you intend to speak to him, Fanny Clewson, we had better separate at once.”

“I can’t very well pass on, if he chooses to stop,” returned Miss Clewson. She had but faint hopes, if any, that Nigel Brooke would desire to do more than bow to her, but faint as they were, she had no intention of resigning them for the sake of Mrs. Prowse.

“You can do as you please,” was that lady’s tart reply; “but, when I was young, it was considered right that a girl should try to elude a gentleman’s notice, instead of courting it. However, here is a shop at which I have business to transact, so that you can have your own way with respect to Mr. Brooke. Good-bye:” and Mrs. Prowse disappeared beneath a confectioner’s doorway, just as Nigel Brooke’s quick step had brought him face to face with Fanny Clewson.

CHAPTER XIII.

NIGEL BROOKE THINKS THERE IS SAFETY IN FLIGHT.

THE Brookes of Orpington knew very few of the Hilstone people. The Chase was too far from the town for intimate intercourse, and Mrs. Brooke was too indolent to go out of her way to seek society, so she confined her hospitalities to the few families living near, who had called upon her. Her son was better known, perhaps, being familiar at the barracks, whence he had found his way into several of the best houses of Hilstone ; but he cared as little for what is termed society as his mother did. He was not a " party-going " man ; his long absence from England had destroyed his interest in the fashionable topics of the day ; and when he found himself in the presence of ladies who wanted to be amused with small talk, he felt like a fish out of water. It had never been his element ; it was less so than ever now. Even in Calcutta, where he knew

everybody, he had always tried to avoid, rather than court, gaiety, and his chief reasons for making Orpington Chase his temporary abode, were the country pleasures which it promised him, and the distance which lay between it and the town.

He might have commanded a good establishment in London had he so chosen ; and indeed his mother had never cease to rail at him during the dark winter days that were past, for having brought her down into the cold and desolate country instead ; but Nigel Brooke could scarcely have lived elsewhere. Without his accustomed business he found time hang heavy on his hands ; without his hunting and his shooting, his horses and his dogs, it would have hung still heavier. He told his mother and his friends that it was the lack of regular occupation which thus fretted him ; but to himself he was forced to acknowledge there was another and a weightier reason for the languor of mind which he experienced. He had but to glance back to the first visit he had paid to Little Bickton, and the weeks spent in Nelly Brooke's society, by which it had been succeeded, to be convinced of the truth of his suspicion. Since the event of his grandfather's death, and the insults which he had

then received at the hands of his cousin Robert, he had borne about with him in philosophic silence, a very heavy heart. After his mother's first outburst of indignation had subsided, and his own discussions with Mr. Ray had been closed, Nigel Brooke had never voluntarily mentioned the subject to anybody. So reserved, so silent was he upon this one topic, that even Mrs. Brooke had come to perceive how painful it was to him, and ceased to speak of the delinquencies of either the brother or sister. Yet day after day had the generous heart of her son pondered if there were any possible means by which the quarrel between his cousin and himself could be made up without compromising his own dignity. But he had found none.

The wound had been given and received ; nothing could unmake it, and the pain must either be borne in silence, or suffered to heal itself.

And so had Nigel borne it, with a noble absence of complaint, but instead of healing it had festered, and was eating into his very heart.

For he never disguised to himself that he loved his cousin Nelly. He loved her so much that he could not bear to think of her ; that

he put the thought of her sweet fresh face away from him whenever it arose, with a strong resolute hand that seemed as though it must crush out what could scarcely be more than a passing fancy. Nigel Brooke was not like poor little Nelly herself, ignorant of the reason why he suffered; he had experienced the symptoms of love before, though in a less degree, and he knew that the passion must either be his master or his slave. And since it could not be the one he would make it the other. But this resolve was only in regard to himself. He had not forgotten the earnestness with which he had vowed to be his cousins' friend, and he was ready, only too ready, to help and succour Nelly at all times, and even Robert, for her sake.

He had not been much affected, as may be supposed, by his mother's rupture with her favourite doctor, which had taken place on the occasion of the latter demanding the address of her niece in Bickton, and declining to give his reasons for the demand.

He had not even connected the fact of Dr. Monkton wanting that address with the idea that the man he so much disliked had fallen in love with the same girl as himself.

And even, had he done so, Nigel Brooke

would still have failed to feel alarm, lest any persuasion should tempt Nelly to become the doctor's wife. He had so high an opinion of her straightforwardness, so low a one of her suitor's, that he would have been ready on demand, to take his oath that his innocent little cousin would prefer to remain single all her life to purchasing wealth and luxury upon such terms. He little knew the home influence to which she was subjected; nor the strength of the cords of that love which drew her into a path directly opposed to her own inclinations.

When the final arrangements for the marriage were completed, Mr. Ray, without consulting either Robert or Nelly, had written to inform Nigel Brooke of the contemplated event.

He had had no particular object in doing so; he had simply considered that the attention was due to a relative who had expressed so much interest in his wards, but he had little notion what a blow for his correspondent was contained in the few words in which he stated the fact.

For a second, Nigel Brooke had felt quite stunned by the shock which this news conveyed to him; but then he had roused himself, he had determinately shaken off the de-

spair which was beginning to creep into his heart, he had boldly spoken out the intelligence which was the death-blow to all his hopes : not only spoken of, but discussed it : not only discussed, but courted discussion on the subject.

Once convinced of the truth, he was resolved so to familiarise himself with the fact that when Nelly came back to Hilstone as Mrs. Monkton, he should be able to meet her, without shrinking, if not without pain.

He had answered Mr. Ray's letter, and sent his congratulations to his cousin, in hopes they might be accepted : he had even renewed his offers of assistance in case it should be needed : he had listened patiently to Mrs. Brooke's tirades upon the " iniquitous proceeding," as she termed the marriage of her niece with the discarded doctor : he had done all this, and suffered so much in doing it that the sense of suffering seemed almost past, and he began to fancy that his powers of feeling were becoming blunted.

Yet he could not but confess the awkwardness of the chance which had thus cast his cousin's lot, under present circumstances, so near to Orpington : and he often meditated how he could best get rid of the Chase again,

so that he might take his mother away to some place where they should not even run the risk of meeting Mrs. Monkton of Hilstone. He was thinking of something connected with the same subject as he walked down the High Street on the Thursday morning alluded to, and came across Miss Fanny Clewson as she emerged from the confectioner's shop.

He was so deep in thought that he might almost have passed without noticing her, had she not said, "Good morning, Mr. Brooke," in her soft blandishing tones, as soon as he reached her side. Then he started; and in another moment he had raised his hat, and accepted her proffered hand.

"Good morning! Miss Clewson, what a beautiful day! are you alone?"

Miss Fanny, from beneath her long eyelashes, cast a deprecating glance at him.

"Now, Mr. Brooke, how unkind! when you know what a poor solitary creature I am, and that if I did not sometimes venture to take a little stroll by myself, I should seldom get one at all; everybody has not horses and carriages at their command like your mamma, remember. But I suppose you think it very wrong that a young lady should be seen walking in the town by herself."

Unused to the devices of modern young ladies to extract a compliment, Nigel Brooke appeared quite taken aback by this unfounded accusation.

“I beg your pardon,” he stammered, “I assure you I had no ulterior motive for asking the question, excepting that were it the case, I might hope to have the pleasure of strolling a little way by your side.”

He had just as much wish to stroll by her side as he had to marry her off hand, but it was the only method that occurred to him by which he could extricate himself from the difficulty her words had plunged him in, and Miss Fanny seeing nothing extraordinary in his desire, smiled a gracious acquiescence on the proposal, and commenced to saunter with him down the High Street.

“I should be more disposed to blame the lady who could be content to remain indoors during such glorious weather,” he continued, accommodating his pace to hers, “the town looks quite gay, does it not?”

“It is right it should do so to-day, Mr. Brooke, for this will be an anniversary for Hilstone, you know. Of course I need not tell *you* who are expected to arrive at home this evening. You have come over yourself probably only to welcome the bride!”

She was perfectly aware, as was proved by her conversation with Mrs. Prowse, that the disagreement between Dr. Monkton and the people at Orpington would prevent any such friendly greeting passing between the cousins, at all events at first; but she longed to find out from Nigel Brooke's face whether the story, as she had heard it, was really true. To watch a family quarrel through all its phases, and gather interesting details wherewith to regale her friends' curiosity, was as exciting a pastime to Fanny Clewson as bull-baiting is said to be to the ladies of Madrid.

"Bride! what bride?" enquired Nigel Brooke.

The question was unaffected, for at that moment he was not thinking of his cousin Nelly; and at no time would he have given Miss Clewson credit for even knowing that they were related: so entirely had his interests been separate from those of his Hilstone acquaintances. But he was quickly undeceived.

"Why, your cousin, Mrs. James Monkton, to be sure; Miss Helen Brooke that was. She is your cousin, is she not, Mr. Brooke?"

As Fanny Clewson put this enquiry to him, her sly eyes glanced furtively upwards to watch

the effect of her words, and if her desire were to read Nigel Brooke's feelings on the subject in his face, it was amply gratified.

She had great satisfaction afterwards in being able to assure her cronies that she was certain he felt the estrangement dreadfully, and was altogether opposed to his cousin marrying Dr. Monkton, for that directly she mentioned her name, he "went as pale as a sheet."

And so far she was correct; for an instant the pallor of death almost seemed to cross Nigel Brooke's countenance, and his resolute mouth was set more firmly than before, but his pride forbid his shewing any other marks of concern at the intelligence which had come to him from so unexpected a quarter. He had forgotten that whether he avoided Nelly's actual presence or not, he would be liable at every turn to hear of her sayings and doings from their mutual acquaintance. Yet so it was, and he met the first instalment of his trial bravely, for if there was any difference in the voice in which he answered Miss Clewson's question, it was rather more lively than usual.

"My cousin! to be sure she is; why it was at our house that Monkton first met her. But your news took me rather by surprise,

Miss Clewson. Are you quite sure that they return to Hilstone to-day?"

"I am quite sure that they are expected to do so, for dear Mrs. Prowse was just speaking to me about it, and she has had to turn out of her brother's house, you know, to make room for the bride. But of course you are acquainted with Mrs. Prowse, Mr. Brooke? a charming person is she not?"

"I have not that honour," he quietly remarked, alluding to the alleged acquaintanceship.

"No?—really—why how is that? You are connected now, are you not? though I'm no judge, being very stupid about relationships. But let me see! How will you and Mrs. Prowse stand with regard to one another? She being sister to your first cousin's husband, why you'll all be cousins together, won't you? How charming that will be! I suppose we shall see a great deal of you in Hilstone now, Mr. Brooke?"

There was no mistaking the intense curiosity which lurked beneath Miss Clewson's apparently innocent question, and Nigel Brooke put himself on his guard. He had no wish that the estrangement between his cousins and himself should become a topic for general

discussion in Hilstone; at the same time he hardly knew how to conceal the fact and yet answer her enquiries truthfully. He began to think it was time for him to go home.

“I am afraid I have never been a great patroniser of the town, Miss Clewson; and must confess to the open country possessing more attraction for me. However, I daresay I shall be here as often as before.”

“Oh! oftener, surely! now that your cousin will be settled here. And her house is sure to be a most charming resort, for Dr. Monkton is such an *immense* favourite with all the cathedral party that I am certain dear Mrs. Filmer will call upon her directly she arrives, and then of course, everyone will follow suit.”

Nigel Brooke felt his lip curling at the idea of Mrs. Filmer's powerful patronage being extended to Nelly; but the thought possessed too much real pain to lose itself in sarcasm. For added to the burden of his misplaced love, he experienced a terrible feeling of soreness and jealousy whenever he remembered on whom Nelly's choice had fallen. And the remembrance caused his present answer to be delivered with much bitterness,

“Doubtless, Miss Clewson, and also that

the fact will be so grateful to my charming little cousin, that she will find quite sufficient to engross her attention on first arrival, without *my* intruding myself upon her presence ; besides, newly married persons are generally supposed to wish to see no one but each other. and I conclude these will be no exception to the rule ; eh, Miss Clewson ?”

At this, Miss Clewson giggled tremendously, declaring that she knew nothing at all about newly married people or their wishes ; and must leave Mr. Brooke to decide the matter for himself.

The next minute she was heartily regretting that she had not made a better use of her opportunities, for Nigel Brooke had hastily bidden her farewell, and left her, asserting that a forgotten engagement called him at once in the opposite direction. Fanny Clewson would have given much to be admitted on visiting terms at the Chase (and once admitted, they would never, without a downright quarrel, have shaken themselves free of her again), and she had fully intended, before the conclusion of this interview, to secure Mr. Brooke’s promise to spend an evening in the almshouses with herself and her mamma. However, he was gone, and this time there

was no help for it. She could only look after him with wistful eyes, which, unfortunately, were lost upon him, as he never turned his head in her direction : and as soon as he was out of sight, she resumed her way with a sigh.

As for Nigel, he strode on without stopping until he reached the inn where he had put up his horse, when he mounted and rode straight home.

As he did so, he was angry with himself ; he thought he had possessed more moral courage, more strength to encounter what was unavoidable. He had known, a month ago, that Nelly, as Dr. Monkton's wife, must come home to live at Hilstone. He had tried to realise what it would be for him to meet her under this new aspect ; to see her and hear of her in the position which she had chosen for herself, and he had arrived at the conclusion, that since she had so chosen, it would be bearable. For in this fact, lay almost the bitterest portion of the cup he had to swallow. He silently argued, that if Nelly had voluntarily fallen in love with, and accepted a man like James Monkton, he must part with his own preconceptions of her purity, and candour, and simplicity. He had loved her so much

for all this ; he loved her still so much for all he had believed her to be ; and yet he could not reconcile the two ideas. He could not imagine her willingly becoming the wife of the man whose first looks upon Hilstone Downs had made her shudder ; and yet remaining the lovable girl who had so charmed him with her winning, childish ways. He would have given his life to possess the one ; he felt as though he could care nothing for the other.

Satisfied with regard to the latter contingency, he had believed that, however much he might suffer through resigning the visionary Nelly, he was sufficiently schooled to meet the real one (should chance throw him in her way) without any inconvenient amount of mental disturbance.

And it was aggravating to find, that at the first mention of such a probability, he had felt as decided a twinge of cowardice as it had ever been his lot to experience.

Through all the midday heat of the fierce August sun, he rode on, bending beneath this weight of thought, and having reached the Chase, he threw his reins to a groom, and entering the house by a side door, locked himself up in his bedroom.

He did not emerge thence the whole after-

noon; even his mother knew nothing of his return. Thinking that he was detained in Hilstone, she had ordered her carriage after luncheon as usual, and proceeded with one of the Miss Johnstones to take a country drive, on returning from which, she was vastly surprised by the appearance of two portmanteaus which, strapped ready for travelling, stood in the hall.

“Has anyone arrived during my absence?” she demanded of the servant who let her in.

“No, madam, no one. These portmanteaus belong to Mr. Brooke.”

“Mr. Brooke? impossible! he is going nowhere.”

“These are my master’s portmanteaus, madam,” was the man’s decisive rejoinder, and she flew past him to demand an explanation of her son.

“Nigel, are you going anywhere?”

He was in the library, listlessly examining the newspapers, and the eyes which he raised at his mother’s breathless enquiry, were very languid ones.

“Yes, mother; I am—I intend to run up to town to-night for a few weeks.”

“Have you business there?”

Nigel did not always approve of the sharp

manner in which Mrs. Brooke would question him respecting his comings and goings ; she was too apt to forget the age he had attained, and to speak to him as if he were still a boy. He was accustomed, on such occasions, slightly to put her down, although he never forgot the respect due to her as his mother.

“ Well, none of which it would interest you to hear, or that concerns you either. It will not detain me long, I daresay, and I do not wish to be absent after the thirtieth.”

He had no business, except to try and get rid of his aching heart, but he thirsted to get away from the place which perhaps, at that moment contained his cousin Nelly. He felt that he needed still further preparation before he could breathe the same air, with the indifference which he coveted. What was she after all, this little rustic beauty, that he should not find it possible to forget her amid the excitement provided by a town life. London need never be quite void to the mere pleasure seeker, and Nigel Brooke had no higher motive in going there. He wanted to forget, and he could not forget while sitting still at Orpington. Although he so seldom left home for his own amusement, his mother seemed, in

this instance, to suspect that his plea was a feigned one, for she answered sharply :

“ Well, it seems strange to me that you should choose to spend half the season down at this place, and then go up to London when there is nothing to be done there. What am I to do if Captain Pooley and Mr. Maxwell, and any of the other gentlemen whom you have invited for the shooting season, arrive before you return ?”

“ They are not likely to be here before the thirtieth,” he replied, quietly, “ and I have told you that I will be home by that date. This is only the fifth of the month.”

“ It must be very important business to detain you for three weeks.”

“ It is important.”

“ And it seems to have come upon you very suddenly.”

“ Yes, mother, it has done so,” he returned, with an inward sigh as he recalled how sudden the intelligence had appeared to him.

“ Well, Nigel,” resumed Mrs. Brooke, with an air of dissatisfaction, “ I cannot make it out at all, I am sure you are hiding something from me, and all I can say is, that, if it is business connected with the house, I think you are very wrong. Your poor dear father

would never have done so, not even when we were first married ; and of late years he was wont to say, that he could not keep so much as a thought from me.”

Nigel, having been much in his father's confidence before his death, fancied that he had heard him give vent to a very different opinion concerning the trust he reposed in his wife, and say, that if he wanted a thing proclaimed throughout Calcutta, he had but to give her a hint of it ; but the remembrance had no power to provoke a smile from him now.

He merely answered :

“ And he was quite right to do so, mother, and if the house is ever threatened with any crisis, in which your circumspection and advice can be of aid to us, you may rest assured, it shall not be kept from you. But in this instance, my business has nothing to do with our commercial affairs, nor could it be benefited by any counsel, even from so clear a head as your own ; else I should be thankful indeed, to anyone who could help me to accomplish it.”

The last words were uttered in so low a tone, that Mrs. Brooke did not catch their import, but her self-love had received suffi-

cient gratification from her son's previous compliment to render her indifferent to anything further, and it was with a smile of intense satisfaction that she linked her arm in his, saying that, since he was probably in a hurry to start, she would dispense that day with dressing for dinner, and join him as soon as she had laid aside her bonnet and shawl.

Nigel thanked her for her complaisance ; and longed then, and several times before he left Orpington, to tell her of her niece's expected arrival in Hilstone, and ask how, in the event of their meeting, she intended to act.

But he dared not.

Middle-aged man, as he styled himself, he was too shyly ashamed of this, sweet, secret love of his, to be able to mention its subject with any shew of interest, even before his mother. He was so terribly afraid that she would link his sudden departure with Nelly's sudden arrival ; and guess how deeply he was wounded. So he left the Chase, without provoking further comment on the reason of his flight.

CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. PROWSE FINDS HER REIGN IS OVER.

As soon as the figures of Fanny Clewson and Nigel Brooke had repassed the confectioner's shop, Mrs. Prowse thrust her head from the door to gaze after them.

"The forward thing," she inwardly ejaculated as she watched the twists and bends of the lady's body, and could imagine the smirks by which they were accompanied. "I do believe she considers herself a beauty. However, I'll take care that Mrs. Filmer hears of this ; for if she only half knew the way in which Fanny Clewson goes on, I am sure she would never let her be so intimate with her dear Laura."

"A seed-cake or a plum-cake, did you say, ma'am ?" enquired the mild voice of the confectioner's wife, recalling Mrs. Prowse to a sense of her position.

"Oh ! a seed-cake, if you please, Mrs. Pridings, and a pound of mixed biscuits, and

half-a-dozen Abernethys. for 15, St. Bartholomew's Street, you know," with a meaning smile, "and the Abernethys must be quite fresh, because the doctor won't touch them unless they are so."

"Oh, certainly, ma'am. I will send up some of to-day's baking, and very glad to hear that they will be required," with a half curtsey, and a look intended to indicate that Mrs. Priddings knew all about it. "And I trust that I may be fortunate enough to keep the custom of No. 15, ma'am, now that you've left it; for we've always tried to give every satisfaction, and——"

"There is little doubt of that, Mrs. Priddings," returned her patroness, "and considering that you serve the deanery, and every house of any consequence in the cloisters, I should be very much surprised if Dr. Monkton expressed any wish to change."

"Yes! that's true, ma'am," said the confectioner, doubtfully, "but still ladies have their fancies, you see; and Mr. Muffet has some very powerful friends on his side."

"I beg you will not name Muffet in connection with my brother's house, Mrs. Priddings," exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, decidedly. "Even if he did wish to make a change, it is not in the slight-

est degree likely that he would consent to deal with a man who exclusively supplies the barracks. Dr. Monkton belongs to the cathedral, Mrs. Priddings, and will only deal with the cathedral tradespeople."

"Of course, ma'am, and I'm sure it's very kind of you to say so, and very considerate of the doctor, too; but still as his lady may have her fancies, Priddings and me, we should feel much obliged if you'd be so good as to put in a word for us when there's an occasion. For the cook from No. 15, did send to fetch French rolls from Mr. Muffet's only this morning, for my little boy see the girl both going in and coming out, and not for the first time either."

"Emma dealing at Muffet's without my orders," exclaimed Mrs. Prowse with horror. "I shall inquire into this immediately, Mrs. Priddings, and you may depend it will never happen again. But are you sure it was not a mistake."

"Dear me, ma'am—quite sure! Billy knows the girl Martha as well as he do his sister, and she nodded to him from across the way, too. I must say I felt it, and our own windows blocked up with French rolls the while."

“I am *astonished*; I can hardly *believe* it,” said Mrs. Prowse indignantly. “Dealing at Muffet’s, and directly my back is turned! However, she must give me ~~very~~ good reasons for doing so, or I’m afraid she will have cause to regret it. Good morning, Mrs. Priddings. You will send the cake and biscuits over in the course of an hour, please, as I can’t be spared from the Deanery to-night, and I wish to see everything in readiness for Dr. and Mrs. Monkton before they arrive.” And away bustled Mrs. Prowse to St. Bartholomew’s Street, followed by the envy of such of Mrs. Pridding’s customers as had heard her last words, which was only due to the fortunate woman who could not be “spared” from the sacred Deanery table.

Arrived at No. 15, Mrs. Prowse turned the door-handle with a decision that seemed to say, she still considered herself regnant there; and passing through the hall into the dining-room, enthroned herself in an arm-chair, and authoritatively rang the bell.

It was answered by a man in plain clothes, who was half a butler and half Dr. Monkton’s confidential servant.

“Long!” said the canon’s wife sharply, “desire Emma to come here at once.”

The man bowed and disappeared, repeating Mrs. Prowse's order the next minute to the cook in these words: "Here, Emma! the cat's in the dining-room, and wants you immediately."

Emma was a smiling, round-faced woman by nature, but the expression with which she greeted her late mistress was gloom itself.

"What will you please to be wanting, ma'am?" she inquired with an air which seemed to add, "You've no business here now, and I have not the least intention of attending to anything you may say."

But the manner, if it attracted Mrs. Prowse's notice, only served to increase her determination.

"I wish to know, Emma," she commenced in the most dignified tone, "if it is true that since my departure from this house, you have been dealing with Muffet the baker. Now! don't tell me a falsehood, because I know all about it already."

"Well! if you know all about it, ma'am," replied Emma, doggedly, "it can't be any use my telling you."

"Don't dare be impertinent to me, Emma," cried Mrs. Prowse in her shrill voice, "or I shall complain to my brother about you. You

have not answered my question. Have you sent for bread to Muffet's during Dr. Monkton's absence?"

"Yes, ma'am, I have," the servant said, firmly.

"And pray, why? Don't you know that I never permitted anything from that man's shop to enter this house whilst I was in it?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do," was the laconic reply.

"You *do*?" exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, in a tone of the utmost surprise. "You acknowledge that you remembered my orders, and yet you disobeyed them. What can you be thinking of?"

"When you was mistress in this house, ma'am," said Emma, who because she dared not show the rage she felt, had commenced to whimper, "I never disobeyed one of your orders, as I'm aware of; but I never understood, nor would anyone else, as they were to continue after you'd left the house. We've a new mistress now, ma'am, and we shall be laid under new orders; and till they're given I don't hold myself responsible to nobody. As for Mr. Muffet, he's quite as good a tradesman as Mr. Priddings, any day, and better; and the Doctor's written orders are, that we're to lay in everything of the very best; so, till he, or his

lady, gives me directions to the contrary, I shall continue to deal with Mr. Muffet. And I'm quite ready to take the blame, ma'am, for anything I do." And here the cook paused to hear what her late mistress had to say in reply to her speech.

Mrs. Prowse had turned white with indignation, but she felt that her day in No. 15 was over, and that perhaps it would be better to compromise matters a little.

"But, Emma, Muffet is essentially a military baker. He serves no one of any consequence in the cloisters, and I think the cathedral gentry are bound to keep to their own tradesmen."

"That's for the new mistress to decide, I suppose, ma'am, and of course, as I said before, if she likes to deal with Priddings, I've nothing to say for or against it; but I know good bread when I see it, and Muffet's bread is by far the best, and always has been. And no wonder, too, for the military knows what they're about, and always deals with the best shops in the town. And as for that there Priddings, they wouldn't take his bread from him, not as a gift."

This heterodox speech savoured so strongly of rebellion against the powers that were, that

the canon's wife deemed it advisable to change the subject.

“Well! cook,” she replied, rising from her throne and looking far more like the conquered than the conqueror, “I suppose we had better leave it for the present, and wait till we hear what your master has to say on the subject. Have you heard from him to-day?”

“Mr. Long have had a letter by the morning's post, I believe,” replied Emma, not much more pleasantly than before, “which said as they'd be home this evening to a seven o'clock dinner precisely.”

“And have you everything ready for them?”

“Everything, ma'am.”

“Well, that is sufficient then. I shall go upstairs now, and see what Elizabeth is doing with the rest of the house.” And the cook, only too glad to close the interview, let the lady pass her in order to gain the staircase, whilst she escaped to her own regions.

The large square upper landing peculiar to old-fashioned houses, upon which Mrs. Prowse emerged, was blocked up with bedroom-chairs and tables, and towel-horses, indicative of a general cleaning. Yet not so much so, but

that her quick eyes at once discerned the form of a tabby cat, which was lazily sunning itself in the broad window-sill before which there usually stood a stand of flowers. Now, if Mrs. Prowse hated children, she hated animals still more. She was used to say that though the first were a necessary and unavoidable evil, no one but a fool would needlessly endure the presence of the last, and during her residence in her brother's house not a cat or a dog had dared to show itself above the kitchen floor. She would even drive the sparrows from her window-sill, and go out of her way to crush with vicious pleasure the beetles or other insects which she encountered in her walks. The sight of the rebellious tabby, thus calmly washing its face within forbidden precincts, roused Mrs. Prowse's ire. She had not dared resent the human opposition with which she had just met below; but she flew at the unconsciously offending animal, as if it had been Emma herself she was about to chastise, and brought down her closed parasol with such force upon its round soft head and shoulders that the handle snapped in two. The cat flew, with a squall such as cats alone can give, across the landing and down the stairs, and the upper housemaid, whose especial pet

it was, rushing from the bedroom to the rescue of her favourite, encountered Mrs. Prowse, pale with passion and panting from exertion, with the broken parasol, telling its own tale, in her hand.

“Oh! I beg your pardon, ma'am,” said Elizabeth, with scarlet cheeks; “but I thought I heard the cat cry out,” and she looked about, as if for some traces of her tabby.

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Mrs. Prowse as soon as she could speak, “what do you mean, Elizabeth, by allowing that brute up on this floor when you know, the only condition on which it was permitted to remain in the house, was, that it never left the kitchen?”

“It doesn't do any harm,” replied the woman, her face clouding over at once, just as the cook's had done, “there couldn't be a cleaner animal, and she's never jumped on a bed since she's been here.”

“I don't care whether she jumps on the beds or not, Elizabeth! my orders are that she is kept in the kitchen, and I'll have no animals of any sort about the upper floors,” and then, remembering that she had no longer the right to issue such commands, Mrs. Prowse

judiciously added, "at least, it is nothing to me now, of course, whether it is so or not, but I am quite certain that your new mistress will wish to be as particular as I am."

"Well! ma'am, my mistress will be home to-night, and then I can ask her," returned the housemaid, with anything but a good grace, as she glanced at the broken parasol and remembered the treatment to which her cat had been subjected.

"What are you turning out both the bedrooms for?" next enquired the irate lady; "there is no occasion for it whatever, the spare room was thoroughly cleaned not a month ago and no one has slept in it since."

The two principal bedrooms in the house, with dressing-rooms adjoining, stood on opposite sides of that floor. One was destined as the apartment of Dr. and Mrs. Monkton: the other had always been reserved as a guest-chamber: Mr. and Mrs. Prowse, even whilst they lived in St. Bartholomew's Street, having occupied a room on the upper storey.

"We had orders to do so," returned the housemaid sullenly.

"Orders! from whom?"

"From the doctor, ma'am."

"And who is to sleep in it, pray?"

“Mr. Brooke, I believe, the new mistress’s brother.”

“Mr. Brooke? but he can’t be coming here yet awhile.”

“The young gentleman’s coming to-night, ma’am,” here put in Martha, the under housemaid, delighted with the prospect of seeing Mrs. Prowse’s discomfiture at the news. She was not disappointed. The face of the canon’s wife, which had at first only expressed incredulity, now turned grey with the knowledge that the servants of the house had been better informed with respect to her brother’s intentions than herself.

“Who told you so?” she demanded sharply.

“’Twas writ in the letter that Mr. Long received,” replied the girl.

“Go down at once and fetch it. I am surprised that they should have presumed to keep such intelligence from me.”

The letter was produced, and Mrs. Prowse convinced herself that she had not been misinformed. The doctor desired that the guest chamber should be thoroughly prepared for the occupation of Mr. Brooke; and further intimated that Mrs. Monkton would be accompanied by an attendant who would require a bedroom to herself.

Mrs. Prowse was confounded. She knew that men were generally rather insane at such times, and disposed to do very foolish things; but she had given James credit for more sense than this. To bring home a brother-in-law the very day he returned himself—and to permit his wife to keep a maid who was too fine to sleep with the other servants, appeared in her eyes the very height of folly; to say nothing of her never having been consulted in the matter.

She could have forgiven anything sooner than this; but she could not bear to feel that she was nobody in the establishment where she had reigned supreme. She was so indignant at the way in which everything had been arranged without the slightest reference to herself, that the daring insolence of cats and cooks alike faded from her mind, and nothing was worth mentioning in comparison with the best room (which had been considered too good for her and Mr. Prowse,) being set in order for a young bachelor's use. But her great desire was, that the servants should not guess she felt thus affronted.

“Take this back to Long,” she said with a lofty air, extending the letter to Martha, “and tell him that I see there is nothing in it but

what Dr. Monkton has already written to myself. As for Mr. Brooke, he may, or may not arrive with them to-night. The room is only to be prepared in case he does do so. And it is right it should be ready to receive guests at all times. And he can tell his master from me that I am sorry I shall not be able to look in upon them this evening, as they have a dinner-party at the Deanery, and Mrs. Filmer cannot do without me; but that I shall be sure to step over the first thing to-morrow morning;" and so saying, Mrs. Prowse, securing the fragments of her parasol, left the house with what she intended to be a very dignified demeanour.

"And a good thing, too," said Mr. Long, when the housemaid flew down to the kitchen to deliver the message which ended with the intimation that the doctor's sister would be seen no more that day. "She's no business to come here bothering and poking her nose into everything, and I hope the new mistress will put a stop to it."

"She's got her own servants to bully now," remarked the cook, "to say nothing of the poor dear canon to worry and hustle as she chooses. Why can't she leave us alone, we're none of hers, be thankful!"

“I’d half a mind to let her know *my* opinion of her,” said the housemaid as she caressed the tabby cat, “a going and hitting a poor defenceless hanimal like this. She ought to have a stick over her own back, ’Twould do her a mint of good.”

“I was so glad she broke her parasol,” giggled the girl, Martha, “she’s that stingy, that it ’ll quite go to her heart to pay sixpence for its being mended.”

“Yes! if she have a heart,” interposed the footman, who had not, as yet, joined in the discussion, “but I don’t think we saw much of it whilst she was here, nor yet no one else.”

“But she’s precious hartful, all the same,” remarked the cook delighted at her own wit.

“Now, I’ll tell you what it is, young women,” said the butler, thinking the conversation had lasted long enough, “until the doctor comes home, I’m master here, and my orders are, that you all go about your business, or neither house nor dinner will be ready against they come. And if you consider, John, that reading that there newspaper will clean your plate, it’s more than I do, so I’ll be obliged if you’ll go into your pantry and finish your morning’s work.”

Whereupon the group dispersed laughing,

and telling Mr. Long that he was a regular "old woman," and "every inch as bad as the cat herself."

Meanwhile "the cat," blissfully ignorant of the comments so freely passed upon her behaviour, was returning to her own house, whence she issued in gorgeous raiment to adorn the Deanery dinner table just about the same time that Nelly Monkton crossed the threshold of her new home ; and Nigel Brooke entered the railway carriage which was to put half a hundred miles between his cousin and himself.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MEETING OF THE SISTERS-IN-LAW.

THE principal reason for which the canon's wife was so frequently asked to the Deanery, was, that she might be seated for the greater part of the evening behind an urn, at a side-table, pouring out tea and coffee for the guests; from which position she was probably released only to take a hand at cribbage with the dean; or planted by his side, to amuse him by shouting a summary of the local news into his ear, whilst the rest of the visitors were at liberty to entertain themselves. All Hilstone knew the secret of her constant appearance there; even Mrs. Filmer did not hesitate to confess that the reason she found it so difficult to spare Mrs. Prowse from her dinner-parties, was the use the woman was to her: only Mrs. Prowse herself refused to see the indignity to which she was subjected; and firmly believed that she was not only the faithful coadjutor of the dean's daughter-in-law, but her most

valued friend. On the present occasion she must have been blind indeed, and deaf into the bargain, not to see the shrugged shoulders with which Captain Herbert Filmer saluted her entrance to the drawing-room, nor to hear the half tones, too loud to be called a whisper, in which he uttered the words—

“ Good heavens ! that detestable woman here again ? When are we to be freed from her presence ? ”

“ Hush ! Herbert ! pray ! ” his sister had replied ; “ if she were to overhear what you say, and take offence at it, I don’t know what mamma would do—she’s her right hand.”

“ Her toady—flatterer—fawner—spaniel—you mean,” he answered ; “ why don’t you call things by their right names, Laura ? ”

“ Any way mamma couldn’t get on without her,” said his sister, laughing ; and there the dispute had ended.

But even had Mrs. Prowse overheard Captain Filmer’s uncomplimentary remarks, they would have been more than outbalanced the next moment by the familiar manner in which his mother called her “ Matilda ” before the assembled company, and enquired if her brother and his wife had yet arrived in Hilstone.

“ You must tell the doctor to call round and see me in the morning,” said Mrs. Filmer, in her hard, unmodulated voice, “ we can’t do without him any more than we can do without you ; and I shall go and see his wife after a day or two. She’s fresh from the country—isn’t she ? Well, don’t let her frighten herself about receiving me—tell her I sha’n’t eat her !” and the mistress of the Deanery finished up her speech with a coarse, grating laugh which was appreciated by no one but Mrs. Prowse.

“ If my mother doesn’t eat the bride, she bids fair to break the drums of her ears, if she salutes her after that fashion,” remarked Captain Filmer, professing to shudder beneath the infliction ; “ shall you call with her, Laura ?”

“ I suppose I shall be obliged to do so, whether I wish it or no.”

“ Oh ! well ! that’s all right, then ; because you can report on the lady’s appearance, before I decide whether to follow suit ; for if Monkton has chosen a wife anything like his sister, I know it will be a long while before he catches me within his doors.”

But Mrs. Prowse was enchanted with the condescension of her dear Mrs. Filmer. She was certain that her sister-in-law would be

fully alive to the honour of the intended visit; and if she were a little shy and overcome at first, she trusted that Mrs. Filmer would excuse it, on the score of her youth; and the great trial it must be to a young girl so quietly brought up, to find herself all at once transformed into the mistress of an establishment like her brother's, and called upon to receive such honoured and distinguished guests.

“Pooh!” was Captain Filmer's irreverent exclamation, upon the conclusion of the above speech; “Mrs. Monkton must have been reared deep in the country indeed if she has never seen an old woman before. Now! I'll wager a hundred to one, that I'd make her more shy and confused by looking at her for half an hour, than my mother would by jawing at her for six.”

“Oh! Herbert! I wish you wouldn't talk such nonsense,” rejoined his sister, with a warning pluck at his sleeve, as she observed more than one young lady giggling at his wit, who would be sure to repeat it directly she reached home.

But his remarks were not overheard by his mother, or Mrs. Prowse; and the latter spent an evening of such unalloyed content that it

totally erased the memory of the unpleasant scene which had preceded it.

She returned to her own house, full of stories of her friend's condescension and amiability, which she volubly repeated to Mr. Prowse, a mild, inoffensive looking man, who had not accompanied her to the Deanery. Indeed he never went into society unless he was absolutely obliged to do so, and was wont to say in private to his familiars, that where his wife was, she left no room for him, and therefore it was little use their going to the same house.

“And where do you think I have been, my dear?” he ventured to ask at the conclusion of one of her lengthy eulogiums.

“How should I guess?” she replied, sharply. She could not help speaking so, even when best pleased, for there was no softness in her nature. “Puzzling your head over your next sermon, I suppose, or moping about the garden. You had much better have come to the Deanery. I never spent a more delightful evening.”

“But I fancy I have spent quite as delightful an evening, and perhaps even more so,” returned canon Prowse, who could sometimes be bold, even in the presence of his wife.

She looked up at him ; her large black eyes dilated with surprise, and he continued—

“I have been over at your brother’s, my dear, and introduced to his wife.”

“Oh ! is that all ?” replied Mrs. Prowse, who was nevertheless not over pleased that her husband should have been the first to see the new-comer. “Well, what is she like ? I had no idea you thought of going there so soon.”

“No more I did, my dear !” said the canon, almost apologetically, “but the doctor came over here, in hopes I suppose of seeing yourself, and finding I was alone, made me return with him. Oh ! such a fresh, charming young creature, Matilda, she will be quite the glory of Hilstone.”

“Are you speaking of James’s wife ?” demanded Mrs. Prowse, affecting to misunderstand his allusion.

“Of course I am, my dear. She has the sweetest face, I think, I have ever seen ; and her poor brother, although otherwise much afflicted, is, in respect of feature, scarcely behind herself. They both appear to be most interesting young people—but I was not prepared, from your account, to find that your brother had married a beauty !”

Now Mrs. Prowse was not readily disposed (what woman would be?) to sympathise in such rhapsodies regarding the stranger from her usually sedate and apathetic husband.

“Well! I always knew that men are fools when they’re in love,” she retorted, “but I must say I thought James had more sense than to be led away by mere beauty. A girl who has a very pretty face is generally good for nothing but to be looked at, though it remains to be proved,” she added, with a spiteful glance at the offending canon, “whether she *is* such a beauty, after all! *Some* men are fools, whether they’re in love or out of love; and I prefer to decide the matter for myself to taking an opinion secondhand. So I shall go over the first thing to-morrow morning, and see this paragon, who is to set all Hilstone on fire by your account, when I shall be better able to judge of the truth of the assertion. Meanwhile, I hope I sha’n’t sleep any the worse for the delay of a few hours in the introduction;” and seizing the bedroom candlestick, with a look of supreme contempt for the weakness of her husband’s sentiments, Mrs. Prowse with a jerk, preceded him out of the apartment.

The unfortunate canon, condemning his folly

in having betrayed his admiration for the doctor's bride, and fearful lest he should not yet have heard the last of it, followed her with downcast looks.

When his wife had reached the middle of the staircase, she turned and addressed him so suddenly, that in his fright and surprise he nearly fell down the remainder of the flight.

"Why has the brother come down with them?" she demanded with asperity.

"I'm sure I don't know, my dear," he falteringly replied; "how should I know?—it is no business of mine; I never even thought of asking."

"You never think of anything," was the uncomplimentary reply; "but I consider that it *is* my business, and I shall make a point of putting the question to James directly I see him. I never heard of such an arrangement in my life before, and the young man himself ought to have had too much good feeling to consent to it, whoever the proposal came from. However, it's quite plain to me that it's some of your 'paragon's' doings; men are not usually so attached to their brothers-in-law that they can't part with them for a day; but the manner in which James has behaved altogether concerning his marriage has been extraordi-

nary—most extraordinary, indeed!—and I think he must be going out of his mind.”

“I know nothing about it, my dear. I really know nothing but what I have told you—it is of no use your speaking to me like this,” repeated her husband plaintively, as they reached the top of the staircase.

“Bah! whoever said you did?” exclaimed the lady angrily, as she bounced into her dressing-room and slammed the door in his face.

The canon heaved a sigh, and sought the shelter of his room, wishing from the bottom of his heart meanwhile that French customs were English ones, and that he might have been permitted to remain there altogether. But he was destined to suffer no more martyrdom that night, for Mrs. Prowse’s excitement, added to the exertions of the evening, fortunately for him, had tired her out; and when he rejoined her she was not only too sleepy to scold him any more, but rose so late the following morning, that it was nearly one o’clock before she found herself at the door of No. 15, St. Bartholmew’s Street.

She entered the house, as usual, without knock or ring; and searched the library, (which was also her brother’s consulting-

room), the dining-room and the drawing-room, all three of which apartments were on the ground-floor, without success.

They were all empty, with the exception of the last, where she encountered the housemaid Elizabeth, carrying off an old-fashioned table from one of the recesses.

“Why are you moving that table?” demanded the visitor, forgetting her lesson of the day before.

“It is my mistress’s orders,” replied Elizabeth with a look of triumph as she left the room bearing the article in question.

Mrs. Prowse, too ruffled by the servant’s manner to stoop to further parley, permitted her to go in peace, and rang the bell for Long instead.

“Where is your master?” she asked, as the man appeared.

“My master was obliged to go out this morning, ma’am, to take over his practice from the gentleman who has been acting for him; but he desired me, if anyone called, to say that he hoped to be back to luncheon.”

“But Mrs. Monkton?” snapped the canon’s wife.

“I believe my mistress is upstairs, ma’am: I will inform her that you are here.”

“Tell her, if you please, that Mrs. Prowse, Dr. Monkton’s sister, is waiting to see her,” returned the lady, drawing up her small person on the sofa with all the dignity it could assume.

She did not half like being thus treated as an ordinary visitor at No. 15, but if it was to be so she would exact all the attention due to a stranger.

So Long departed, leaving her seated in solitary state in the large formal drawing-room, in which no sound was audible save the buzzing of a huge bumble-bee which had been attracted by the boxes of mignonette standing outside the windows.

All this appeared very unorthodox and irregular in the eyes of Mrs. Prowse.

Her notion of a bride was of a blushing, bashful young lady, robed in a silk, both bright and tight, with a gold watch chain tastefully disposed across her bosom, and sitting stiffly up to receive her visitors from after breakfast until nightfall. She felt that if her brother James’s wife had known the proper etiquette to be observed upon such an occasion, she would not have been left for so long a time to the resources of her own imagination; whilst all the pretty things she had in-

tended to say upon first meeting, were evaporating one by one beneath her sense of neglect. But if to find the state-room empty shocked Mrs. Prowse, how much more were her ideas of propriety outraged when (the doors being left open on account of the heat,) she distinctly heard Long's arrival on the upper floor and announcement of her august presence followed by the words—rung out in a clear girlish voice—

“ Mrs. Prowse ?—Oh, please ask her to walk up here.”

Her flimsy dignity was so much wounded by this fancied affront, that she was very nearly leaving the house then and there, and refusing to return without an apology from her unknown sister-in-law. But she had hardly had time to settle the point, before Long re-appeared with a request that she would follow him upstairs, and she found herself on the upper landing before she well knew what she was about. Once there, all other feelings were banished by the astonishment which she felt at the scene which it presented. The corridor was even more blocked up by boxes and articles of furniture than it had been the day before, whilst servants were busily engaged in re-arranging the order of the apartments ; and

from the midst of the confusion came forward with shyly-extended hand a girl, simply attired in a brown muslin dress, with violet eyes set in a broad white forehead, and a profusion of sunny hair falling about her shoulders.

Mrs. Prowse, like most dark women, was extremely envious of a fair skin, and she took a jealous dislike at first sight to her brother's wife.

Nelly was, indeed, looking her best ; for a month of sequestered life had removed much of the healthy but unbecoming tan from her face and hands, whilst her hair arranged in a more fashionable though not less graceful manner, and the extra attention which she had been compelled to pay to her dress, all tended to improve her personal appearance.

"I hope you will excuse my asking you up here," she said, with a courtesy rendered perfect from being genuine, and quite unconscious how nearly she had affronted her new connection by doing so ; "but we are very busy arranging my brother's room, and as he likes to be much by himself, he will not feel quite at home until it is completed. Pray walk in." And shaking hands with the canon's wife, (Nelly was not a woman who could embrace a perfect stranger) she essayed to lead her into

what had been the dressing-room of the guest-chamber. But directly Mrs. Prowse had crossed the threshold, she started back with an exclamation of almost childish terror, for close to the sofa occupied by Robert Brooke, with heaving flanks, red eyeballs, and tongue lolling out of his mouth from the heat, lay extended the huge mastiff, Thug. As Mrs. Prowse cried out, Nelly thought she must have hurt herself; and could not imagine why the two housemaids should smile and furtively nudge each other's elbows; but a solution of the mystery was soon afforded by the frightened visitor herself.

"Oh! I couldn't go in there," she exclaimed. "I really couldn't sit in the same room with that animal. Do you mean to tell me, Mrs. James, that my brother permits such a creature to roam about the house?"

"What, Thug!" said Nelly, infinitely amused at the idea of anyone being alarmed at the appearance of a dog. "Oh, he is the most harmless fellow possible, Mrs. Prowse! I assure you there is nothing whatever to fear; I have had him from a little puppy; he wouldn't hurt a fly unless he were told:" and she knelt down by the mastiff's side as she spoke, and squeezed his broad head confidently beneath

her arm, a proceeding of which Thug appeared greatly to approve, if his loving, grateful glance might be accepted as a token of his pleasure. But Mrs. Prowse would not be reasoned out of her aversion to enter the room whilst the animal remained in it. She was not really afraid of Thug, but she disapproved of the presence of any of the brute creation about a dwelling-house; the principle was a bad one, and though her brother might be so foolish, in the first flush of his wedded happiness, as to allow such a thing without reproof, she considered it was her duty to put a stop to it for him, and to see that his wife was as particular about his comfort as she had been. So, notwithstanding Nelly's renewed persuasions, and Robert Brooke's look of amazement, and the housemaids' delighted titters, Mrs. Prowse obstinately remained in the doorway holding up her silken skirts, and maintaining that it was quite impossible she could sit down in the same apartment as a dog.

"If you are really afraid of him," said Nelly, after a while, "I will send him away," and then addressing her favourite, "Come, Thug, you must go for the present; good dog, go and lie down," and shutting the mastiff into the bedroom, she redirected her attention to her visitor.

“Now that the enemy has been put to flight,” she said smiling, “you must let me introduce my brother to you.”

The young man returned Mrs. Prowse’s stiff bow from his sofa; but the looks which the new acquaintances interchanged, were not very cordial ones; he despising the lady for her affected terror and snappish voice, and she hating him simply for being there.

“I am not fond of animals,” she said as she seated herself, feeling her late conduct required a little explanation, “and I especially disapprove of them about a house; I never allowed them upstairs whilst *I* was my brother’s housekeeper, and I hope, Mrs. James, that you will pursue a similar course of action, for I am sure, that in reality, he dislikes them as much as I do.”

“Dr. Monkton dislike animals!” exclaimed Nelly, “oh! I am sure he does not. He is almost as fond of Thug as I am; and there was a beautiful tabby cat came up to breakfast with us this morning, and he nursed it on his knee nearly all the time. I love animals, Mrs. Prowse, I shouldn’t mind if the house were full of them, both birds and beasts. I left three dear cats behind me at Bickton; but only because I knew they would be unhappy

if I brought them away, so I mean to make a great pet of the tabby, and have been teaching Thug to be friends with her already."

Nelly's enthusiasm was so genuine ; and the maids were looking so pleased at the open avowal of their new mistress's tastes, that Mrs. Prowse deemed it advisable to change the subject.

"What are you doing to this room?" she enquired presently, "you seem to me to be pulling it all to pieces."

"And so I am," laughed Nelly, "I am turning it into a smoking and sitting-room for Bertie. We have given him the bedroom next to it, and as he does not need a dressing-room, this will be very convenient for him to sit in. He is not able to move about much, you know," she added, with a glance of fond compassion towards the recumbent figure on the sofa.

But at this first piece of news, Mrs. Prowse almost felt her breath taken away. Not only was her brother James reported to have sat down to breakfast with the kitchen cat upon his knee, but the guest chamber and its dressing-room, the apartments which were considered too good for the use of the canon and herself, were destined to be defiled by the tobacco smoke of a bachelor.

“But doesn't it seem a pity?” she almost gasped in her indignant surprise, “a great pity to you, Mrs. James, that all this nice furniture, and the curtains and carpet, should be spoilt by the fumes of tobacco. My brother never smokes, he considers it a very bad habit, very injurious to the health, and quite unfit for a domestic character.”

“I wish he did smoke,” returned Nelly, carelessly; “I think every doctor should do so, because it is said to prevent infection. Anyway, Bertie couldn't live without it. But he never smokes a cigar in the house; and pipes can't do any harm, you know.”

Mrs. Prowse did not “know” anything about it, for though her poor, patient canon did occasionally indulge in a forbidden weed, it was without her cognisance, and always far enough removed from any chance of discovery. Yet, unwilling to dismiss the grievance without another attempt at its remedy, she continued:

“But surely it is taking a great deal of trouble to move the dressing-table and washing-stand, and all these other articles for so short a time. It would be different if it were for a permanency.”

But Nelly was perfectly innocent of comprehending the conveyed insinuation.

“I should never think any trouble too great to take for Bertie,” she answered simply, “and I have no doubt that this arrangement will be a permanent one, for I do not see where he could change to, or what other room in the house would suit him so well.”

“But this is the guest room,” returned Mrs. Prowse, almost panting with suppressed excitement.

“Oh, I hope we shall not have any guests for a long time,” said Nelly, laughing, “and when they do come, they must go upstairs. I could not have put Bertie there, because moving up and down is such an exertion to him. Besides he would not have been near myself, and we have never been separated, even by a floor: and never shall be, as long as I can help it.”

At this moment the sound of a gong reverberated through the house.

“That is the summons to luncheon, I suppose,” cried Nelly, starting from her chair. “You can leave these things for the present, Elizabeth, and tell nurse to come and wait upon Mr. Brooke. You will stay and take luncheon with us, Mrs. Prowse, will you not? and then, I daresay, you will see James. As for you, darling,” stooping to kiss her brother,

“I will send yours up by Aggie, and you must be sure and eat it all. And I shall be ready to go out with you, either in the garden, or elsewhere, as soon as ever you wish it yourself.”

“But, Mrs. James, shall you not wait luncheon until my brother returns?” enquired Mrs. Prowse, as Nelly stepped over the threshold and invited her by a sign to follow.

“What! wait until Dr. Monkton comes home?” exclaimed the girl, with elevated eyebrows; “but he may not be back for another hour, Mrs. Prowse, and I’m as hungry as I can be. And *pray* don’t call me ‘Mrs. James,’” she added, in a pleading tone as they descended the staircase together. “It is such a hideous name, and I do dislike it so.”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FIRST BITTER DROP IN NELLY'S CUP.

THE feelings experienced by Mrs. Prowse, as she followed Nelly into the luncheon-room, are better imagined than described. The coolness with which her new sister-in-law expressed her wishes and opinions, struck the canon's wife almost speechless with surprise. She had positively nothing to say in answer to such fearless frankness. She had understood from her brother, that his wife was a young girl who had been reared in the utmost seclusion ; and had expected, in consequence, to meet a blushing, timid child, who would not dare to think for herself, but be entirely subservient, not only to her husband, but to her husband's sister, looking up to them both, indeed, as to a superior order of beings.

Over such a subject, Mrs. Prowse would have completely tyrannised ; but she would have liked her, after a fashion, all the same. She would have derived such keen satisfaction

in arranging all her household affairs for her, from ordering the dinner and scolding the servants, to directing the choice of her acquaintance or her dress, that in sheer gratitude for so much pleasure, she could not but have set some value on the person from whose weakness she derived it.

Had she, on the contrary, discovered she had been deceived with respect to the appearance of her brother's bride, and instead of a mere girl, encountered a woman of her own age and experience, who was resolved to stand up for herself, and rule her house as she chose, Mrs. Prowse would have silently acknowledged her right to do so, and shrunk into her proper position of her own accord.

But to find that the mistress of No. 15, was really almost the child she had been described, and yet in full possession of a woman's knowledge of the privileges acquired by her marriage, was too much for the canon's wife. She looked at Nelly's sweet sunny face, (not without a malicious remembrance of her own husband's admiration of it the night before) with its innocent eyes, and artless expression ; at the simplicity of her dress (so much too simple, according to Mrs. Prowse's idea, for her brother's wife), and the unstudied grace

of her manner ; and contrasting them with the decision of her words and the freedom with which she accepted all the good things bestowed on her with her new name, was fairly puzzled what to think of her. Was this a child, or was it a woman ? Certainly not a woman to increase the weight and respectability of her brother's establishment in Hilstone ; still less a child who would consent to be tutored and trained, turned this way or that, according as the Monktons chose to guide her. And feeling this, Mrs. Prowse almost hated Nelly, as, without hesitation she took her seat at the head of the luncheon table, and motioned her visitor into a chair at the side. She was only doing what she had been accustomed to do, all her life at home, and that was to take the entire management of the establishment : to rule, came easily and naturally to her ; but Mrs. Prowse, unaware of the circumstance, mistook the girl's simplicity for audacity, and chose to believe that she assumed the freedom, merely in the pride of her new possessions, and for the sake of " shewing off." Although it was the last thing she would have acknowledged, Matilda Prowse became jealous, even during that first interview, of Nelly's freshness and beauty ; still

more so of her apparent contentment and independence; and finding that, according to her own creed, she could neither hope to respect, nor influence her, she took to hating her instead; a feeling which is not uncommon between relatives thus violently brought together, and which was religiously fostered in the present instance till the end of the chapter.

Nelly, meanwhile, perfectly unconscious of the thoughts which were then passing through the mind of her sister-in-law, chatted away at the luncheon table as though they were destined to become the best friends in the world.

“Yes! we went to Paris,” she said in answer to some formal question from Mrs. Prowse relative to the wedding tour, “but only for a fortnight; and to tell you the truth, I grudged even that, for my brother is miserable without me, and so am I, without him. We had never been separated before—at least, only once,” she added, correcting herself with a blush.

Mrs. Prowse noted the blush, and it awakened her curiosity.

“And when may that have been?” she asked.

“When I went to Orpington Chase: when

I first met your brother," replied Nelly, still colouring ; but, under the circumstances, the colouring was not out of place, and Mrs. Prowse thought no more of it.

" I liked Paris very much," continued Nelly, anxious to change the subject, " but I have been such a rustic all my life, that I have seen nothing, and any place is new to me. Little Bickton is such a tiny village that even Hilstone appears quite a grand town after it."

" *Even Hilstone !*" repeated the canon's wife, not over pleased with the depreciatory term. " Why, Mrs. James, Hilstone is considered one of the finest towns in England, as it is one of the most ancient. It has not its equal anywhere : and in point of advantages it is quite unrivalled."

" Is it ?" said innocent Nelly.

" It shows in what a very secluded manner you must have lived to put the question," replied Mrs. Prowse with a thin smile. " Why our cathedral is perfect, but I suppose you have never even seen a cathedral, so that you will not be able to judge of its merits by comparison."

" Oh ! yes, I have," said Nelly eagerly, " I saw Notre Dame in Paris, besides several beautiful churches and abbeys. In fact, I

think James took me to everything worth seeing ; but I was very glad to get home again. It was all bustle and confusion, and I was longing for Bertie and Little Bickton, and so we spent the last week there. I cannot be happy away from him."

"Your brother appears to have been a great charge to you," observed Mrs. Prowse.

"A very welcome charge, excepting for his own sake, Mrs. Prowse. I could not let anyone look after him except myself. Our old nurse Aggie and I have waited on him ever since he was born."

"But surely that cannot last for ever," exclaimed the doctor's sister, determined to learn the truth respecting Robert Brooke. "It has been all very well hitherto, Mrs. James, I dare say, but now that you are married, you will have other duties to fulfil besides waiting on an invalid."

"Never any that will prevent my looking after Bertie, Mrs. Prowse," was the energetic answer, "or I am afraid they will run a chance of being neglected. Why, he is my own twin brother, you know, there were only seven minutes between our births, and it is so sad to think that he should have been afflicted, and I escaped without anything," and Nelly's

eyes moistened as they generally did when she mentioned her brother's deformity.

"But what will Mr. Brooke do, when he returns to the country, Mrs. James?" pertinaciously demanded her listener. "He will be forced to resign your attentions then; he cannot expect to keep you always by his side."

At this question Nelly was so astonished that she laid down her knife and fork.

"To the country, Mrs. Prowse, to what country?"

"To Little Bibbling, or whatever you call the place you come from. Your brother has property there, has he not? a house and grounds, or something of the sort."

At this suggestion the bride, to the indignation of the canon's wife, burst into a most indecorous laugh.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, Mrs. Prowse," exclaimed the offender as soon as she could speak, "but I cannot help laughing at the idea of Bertie with a house and grounds. What would he do with it, poor darling, if I were not there to order it for him? It is quite a mistake, I assure you—we have nothing—and never had, except the lease of grandpapa's cottage, which we disposed of. And even were it the case, Bertie would never

leave me for Little Bickton or any place. I would never have married, if our separation had been the consequence ; we could not live without each other."

At this speech, which so evidently betokened what were at least the bride's intentions with respect to the length of her brother's visit, Mrs. Prowse waxed very wroth, and she was just about to say something cutting relative to the strangeness of such a proceeding, and the talk it would create in Hilstone, when her good intentions were frustrated by the appearance of Dr. Monkton.

He entered the room with a furtive glance, as though he almost hoped that his sister might either have not yet arrived, or taken her departure again ; but on perceiving her stiffly sitting by his young wife's side, he very properly assumed a look of gratification, and hastened to greet her. The Monktons were not a demonstrative couple, at all events towards each other, and Nelly, who so ardently loved her brother, was astonished to see the formal salute which, after more than a month's separation, passed between the doctor and Mrs. Prowse. She would have given Bertie double as much after the absence of an hour,

or after no absence at all, but for the pleasure of expending some of the affection upon him with which her warm heart was overflowing.

Yet after Dr. Monkton had thus calmly greeted his sister, he passed on to his wife and kissed her warmly ; and although Nelly did not know what it was to be placed in such a position, she instinctively felt that this was what she could never have done, and left the other undone.

She shrunk from the kiss so publicly given, and coloured as sensitively as though it were something wrong. Mrs. Prowse noticing both the action and its result, sneered at her brother's infatuation, whilst she gave Nelly credit for being "absurdly affected, considering the open way in which she had gone on with Mr. Brooke upstairs."

Dr. Monkton sat down to the luncheon table and commenced to talk volubly ; but he did not appear at his ease, and every minute his dark eyes roved from his sister's face to that of his wife, as if he could discern what the women thought of one another.

Nelly was as calm and collected as usual, but there was a nervous manner about Mrs. Prowse, as if she burned to disclose some hidden wrong, which did not tend to re-assure

her brother, and he spoke of anything and everything rather than give her an opportunity of doing the same. But in the midst of one of his descriptions of Paris, there was heard a melancholy howl.

“Why, what’s the matter with Thug, Helena?” he said, addressing his wife. He always called her by her full name, and she was glad (although she scarcely knew why) that he did so.

“He smells the luncheon, I suppose, and is impatient,” she replied. “I shut him up in the bedroom, because Mrs. Prowse is afraid of him.”

“Afraid!” echoed the doctor; “why how long is it since you have become afraid of dogs, Matilda?”

“I do not know that I am exactly *afraid* of him,” replied that lady, “but I certainly object to sit in the same room with an animal who appears to me more fit for a stable than a house. You know, James, that I never liked to see dogs, even small ones, about the sitting-rooms, and consider that nobody with cleanly habits would approve of it; but I never saw such a huge brute as this admitted there before. I should as soon think of keeping a donkey in my drawing-room, myself.”

“Thug is certainly a good size for a lady’s lap dog,” remarked the doctor, laughing, “and is fitter as you say for a kennel than a sofa, but he is a great pet of Helena’s, so we mustn’t say anything against him here.”

Nelly’s colour had been rapidly coming and going during this discussion, and she only waited till the last word was out of her husband’s mouth, before she eagerly interposed her claim to a hearing.

“I know, properly speaking, that he is not a dog for the house, James, but he has always been in it, ever since I first had him; and he is as gentle with those he knows as the tiniest spaniel could be. He sleeps on the mat outside my bedroom door,” she continued, addressing herself to Mrs. Prowse, “and you would not know that there was anything there, he is so quiet. And he has never been tied up, ever since he was born; we tried it once and he fretted so dreadfully that he got quite thin. He howled the whole time, and refused to eat his food.”

“He would soon get over that,” said Dr. Monkton, as if it were a matter of little consequence whether he did or no.

“Oh! but I am sure he wouldn’t,” exclaimed Nelly with a look of distress, as a vague fear of some future opposition with

respect to her favourite, flitted across her mind. "He is so very fond of Bertie and me. He would be miserable if you took him away from us. So it is no use talking of it, James, for I won't even hear of such a thing."

They had not been married more than a month then, and he smiled at her earnestness, and said she was a little goose and wanted to spoil the dog as much as she was spoilt herself; and so for the present her heart was reassured, notwithstanding that Mrs. Prowse turned down the corners of her mouth at the display of so much weak folly on the part of her brother.

As soon as the meal was concluded, Nelly jumped up and said she must go to Bertie, as she had promised to accompany him whether he sat in the garden or was wheeled out for a drive.

"Tell him the garden will be best," shouted the doctor as she left the room, "at all events till after dinner. It is too hot for you to be out, until the sun has gone down, Helena."

When she had disappeared he turned to his sister, and, as though making up his mind to something disagreeable, asked abruptly:

"Well, have I said too much or too little, Matilda? what do you think of her?"

“I’ve thought very little either one way or another,” replied Mrs. Prowse in the most disheartening and unpleasant tone. “I have been too busy listening to all she has to say. She seems to be a great talker.”

“It is the vivacity of youth,” observed the doctor, “and the result perhaps to-day of having a little nervousness to conceal. I have not found Helena very talkative since our marriage.”

“Oh! I shouldn’t say she was *nervous*. That is the last thing I should ascribe to her,” tittered Mrs. Prowse. “But with regard to this brother, James! how long do you expect him to stop with you?”

At this question Dr. Monkton positively coloured. It was the one which he had dreaded most; which he knew sooner or later he should have to answer; and for which he should incur most blame. He had not expected it to be put quite so early; but it would be all the same in the end. Yet, the answer to it was not one to be given in public, and the servants were already clearing the luncheon table.

“I should like to speak with you about that and several other matters, Matilda,” he replied. “Suppose we go into the garden

for a while. You have your parasol and we shall not find it too warm beneath the trees."

So they passed out of the French windows on to the terrace, which although not long, was broad and well-sheltered, and paced up and down beneath its foliage, conversing together.

"The fact is," observed Dr. Monkton in reference to his sister's query, "it is quite impossible for me to say for how long Robert Brooke may or may not remain here. You see the case is rather a peculiar one. They are orphans without a home, and they are twins who have never been separated, and all this, added to the boy's infirm condition, renders any proposal for their living apart rather difficult of suggestion. In short," he continued, "it was an understood thing, that if Helena married me, her brother was to accompany us to Hilstone. They are very much attached to one another, as you can see, and I first won her regard by the attention I paid her brother, and so for the present the matter must rest there."

"But for a permanency," exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, "to have him here always; whether you have a family or whether you have not: to have that young man a fixture in your

house, and occupying the best bed-room too, will be most inconvenient ; and I must add, most unprecedented."

They were walking up and down, up and down, beneath the windows of the two dressing-rooms which stood on the first landing, and over-looked the garden.

"I said, Matilda, that for the *present* the matter must rest there," repeated Dr. Monkton, with some emphasis on the words he wished to impress upon his sister, "but whether Robert Brooke remains with us or not, will entirely depend upon his future conduct—and my wishes."

Upon leaving the dining-room, Nelly had run up to Bertie, as she intended doing, but finding that he was not quite ready to go out into the garden, had waited his royal pleasure. To beguile the time she leaned out of the dressing-room window, about which twined clusters of the noisette rose ; and on seeing her husband approach, had plucked a blossom with the childish intention of throwing it on him as he passed. But as he came within reach, he spoke the words above recorded, and she guessed their import at once. Sick with the impression which they conveyed, Nelly leaned back against the window sill, whilst

as their meaning fully sunk into her mind, large tears gathered in her eyes, and rolled slowly down her cheeks.

It was the first time she had ever had the slightest doubt—the faintest notion, that her brother's residence with her was not to be a permanent one ; permanent—beyond the possibility of a change. She did not fear—she could not as yet entertain a fear that her husband's words meant more than that, if it was agreeable to all parties, they were not bound to keep by one another ; but the possibility of such a contingency was sufficient to make her wretched.

It was the first note of distrust which she had heard sounded in her married life ; the first taste of the bitter cup which she was afterwards called upon to swallow.

Bertie did not see her thus, but old Aggie did, and, as usual, was vehement in her anxiety to know what had happened to affect her young mistress. For the nurse had already heard sufficient at the kitchen table, about the doctor's sister, to make her suspect that her visit had had something to do with Nelly's tears.

“ Now nurse, it is really nothing of any consequence,” said Nelly, in answer to the old

woman's reiterated entreaties that she would confess, "it is all my own stupidity. I overheard something which worried me a little, and that is positively all. Remember, I have been married for a whole month last Saturday, and I have never cried once, from that day to this, so it was not to be expected that I could go on like that for ever. Fancy *me!* whom you have so often called your 'cry-baby' going for a whole month without one tear! Why, I wanted something by this time to freshen me up.—And it's all over now, Aggie, so do trot along, and get Bertie to come into the garden, or—or—perhaps I may begin again!"

CHAPTER XVII.

WHAT THE TWINS THOUGHT OF THEIR NEW HOME.

NELLY was perfectly correct in affirming that the first month of her wedded life had been spent without shedding a single tear. When she had once made up her mind that for Bertie's sake as well as for her own, she would be wrong to refuse Dr. Monkton's proposal; or rather, when she had once given him her hand in the parish church of Little Bickton, she had found the sacrifice not so great as she expected. For although there have certainly been cases in which wretched girls, frightened or persuaded into unions the mere thought of which they detested, have been dragged half fainting to the altar, they are the exceptions, not the rule; and their heroines have not been women of the same order of mind as Nelly Brooke. Far oftener, in this world (if not in that of romance) have marriages which ended in the depths of despair and shame, com-

menced with a very fair promise of domestic happiness. We have but to search the records of the Divorce Court to prove this truth. There are few English maidens who will be forced into marriage against their will ; few English men who would care to accept a hand thus reluctantly given. But there are hundreds, aye, thousands, of maidens, who listen to the voice of the first tempter who presents himself, and refuse to be undeceived as to his personal merits ; and thousands of men who persist in marrying for the sake of a pretty face alone. And these are the unions which so often end in misery instead of happiness.

If Nelly Brooke had positively disliked Dr. Monkton, she would not have married him, even to save her brother's life. She was too pure and upright for that ; she would rather have watched Bertie die, and died herself for grief afterwards. But she was dazzled by the many advantages which the marriage offered her ; she was bewildered by the advice and persuasions of her friends—coming from such various quarters, and yet all tending to the same end—and she was puzzled with regard to her own feelings respecting her lover.

She could not help acknowledging that he was exceedingly kind and pleasant, and well-

looking ; and she kept on asking herself where she could find fault with him and what she required more ; and because no settled answer came from her heart, and her objections seemed vague and undefined, she concluded that she must be too exacting, and that in her ignorance she required more than any woman had a right to expect or receive. She felt that something urged her against the marriage, but yet she could not give that something any name ; it was a shadowy and intangible feeling which might simply be the result of contemplating so great a change in her life, and shared in common with every girl under the same circumstances. And then had been thrown into the scale Mrs. Weston's arguments and Mr. Ray's advice ; and, to crown all, that dreadful, never-to-be-forgotten fall of Bertie's, and thereupon the balance had turned ; and Nelly yielded. But she yielded of her own free will—if a will that had been thus tampered with can be called “ free ”—at all events, she did not consent to marry Dr. Monkton until she believed that it was the right thing for her to do. She was not a lamb dragged to the sacrifice ; she was a lamb who saw with the eyes of him whom she most loved ; and thought that to view him happy

and contented would be sufficient reward to her for any amount of self-denial.

This remembrance did not make her after-burthen any less weighty to bear; on the contrary, it increased the load. The wretchedness which others bring upon us, is at least entitled to the consolation of self-pity, but the trouble entailed by our own blindness or wilfulness has no right to such a plea; and all we can do is to curse our folly, and suffer in silence.

But Nelly had not yet arrived at cursing—she had not even had an idea of regretting the step she had taken: on the contrary, she had more than once congratulated herself that she had followed the advice of her friends. All had been so very bright and pleasant since her wedding day. Dr. Monkton has already been described as a passionate and pleasure-seeking man, who had fallen in love with Nelly Brooke for no better reason than the freshness of her face and manners. So long, therefore, as he remained unsatiated with these attractions, he would be sure to treat her kindly, and during the month that they had been left to each other's society, and he had been subjected to no influence but hers, nothing had occurred to check their happiness, nor to rouse the tem-

per of which she had not yet seen a specimen. His young wife had proved all that he could desire ; she had soon lost her shy reserve, and the artless wonder she expressed at all she saw, and the frank comments she passed upon it, had served to amuse and interest him ; whilst if she did not yet readily respond to his affection, she had at least learned to listen to its protestations without impatience, and to bear its signs without shrinking. And in return for her forbearance James Monkton had lavished such gifts upon his bride as Nelly had not only never received, but never dreamed of in her life before. Articles of dress, of jewellery, and such knick-knacks as girls delight in, were, during her sojourn in Paris, showered upon her daily ; whilst every evening her husband would take her to some fresh place of entertainment where he would derive his whole pleasure from merely watching the varied expressions of childish delight and surprise which, one after another, flitted across her open face.

Nelly had lived a fairy life in Paris, until she had almost begun to believe that hers must be the acme of wedded happiness. She had been so little used, poor child, to receiving any attention, or exciting any admiration,

that it is not to be wondered at if her husband's warm rhapsodies upon her beauty and his anxiety to give her pleasure, or to lavish gifts upon her, appeared, in her unsophisticated ignorance, to be the very height of devotion. She had yet to learn that men can love unto death, who have never dared so much as to offer a flower to the object of their affection, nor to breathe a word into her ear which related to themselves.

But, after a while, notwithstanding her pleasures and her presents, Nelly began to pine for Bertie. She longed to tell him of her unexpected content, and to shew him her store of treasures, many of which had been selected for himself; above all to see his face again, to hear his voice, and hold his hand in hers. Her love for her twin was not only faithful, it was so sympathetic, that it was physically impossible that she should be long at rest without him. Dr. Monkton did not entirely believe in the strange sympathy said to exist between some twin-children; he only attributed his wife's anxiety to rejoin her brother, to the fact that they had been so accustomed to live together, that she missed him as she would have missed any other familiar thing, and as she would have done if there had been

seven years between their births, instead of seven minutes.

But he was not in the mood to ridicule her attachment for Bertie, or even to dispute its source ; and when Nelly began to lose her interest in the sights of Paris, and to sigh for the time when she should meet her brother again, he offered to take her home at once.

Robert Brooke, delighted at his sister's compliance and the marriage by which it had been so shortly followed, (for there had only been a month between the engagement and the wedding,) had consented to be left until their return under the charge of old Aggie and Mr. Ray, and had removed to the vicarage as soon as the bride and bridegroom had left Little Bickton. Thence Nelly had almost daily received letters from him, which sometimes detailed the kindness he was experiencing at the hands of the vicar's family, but oftener enlarged on the pleasure which he felt in the prospect of seeing them again, and the day when he should for ever exchange Little Bickton for a residence in Hilstone. These letters had afforded Nelly intense gratification, and reconciled her to remaining in Paris as long as she had done ; for, contrary to his usual moods, everything was rose-coloured now to Robert

Brooke, and in his delight at her marriage, and the future before them, she received the first instalment of the payment of the debt he owed her. The original plan had been that Dr. and Mrs. Monkton should go straight from Paris to Hilstone, and that Robert Brooke, with old Aggie, and Thug, should join them there ; but when her husband proposed to take her back to Little Bickton for a week before they entered their new home, Nelly gladly consented.

To see Mrs. Weston again, and little Tommy Dobbs, and the Rays, seemed almost as if she had never been married at all ; and during the few days she remained in her old quarters, Nelly's spirits were so high, and her excitement so unbounded, that her friends congratulated themselves on the wisdom they had displayed in advising her to act as she had done ; and her brother was more than ever convinced that both their fortunes were made. And next, they had all returned to Hilstone together ; and this brings the narrative of their lives down to the moment when Nelly overheard the words which her husband used concerning Bertie, and suddenly woke up from her brief dream of contentment to remember that nothing is certain in this world—nothing,

indeed, except that once married we cannot with credit or ease unmarry ourselves again !

It was a shock, but only a passing one ; for her husband's manner towards her was unaltered, and the young and flattered are too much engrossed in the present to permit a visionary future to disturb them overmuch. Besides, Nelly's fears,—if Dr. Monkton's remark had left any behind it,—were too vague not to be dispelled by the cordiality with which the brothers-in-law behaved to one another, and the good understanding which seemed to exist between them. With Robert Brooke, the doctor was infallible ; he quoted him constantly, and referred to him on every occasion ; seeming to think there could be no end to his generosity, or limit to their friendship. He called him by his Christian name whenever he wished to mention him, whilst he was “ Bertie,” and nothing else with Dr. Monkton ; and Nelly was charmed to think how soon the two men had adopted one another as relations.

Mrs. Prowse took her departure before the dinner-hour, and (not over pleased apparently with her first visit) did not reappear during the whole of the succeeding day ; and the intervening time, which was passed by the brother and sister in examining the comforts and

conveniences of their new abode, and summing up its luxuries, was one of unalloyed content.

Nelly flew from one chamber to another; now exclaiming with delight at the beauty of a picture, or calling to Bertie to come and try the ease of a spring-cushioned chair; anon, bending enchanted over the stands of hot-house flowers which adorned the sitting-rooms, or busily engaged in examining the books of engravings which stood on the shelves of the doctor's library.

Every article of furniture in Dr. Monkton's house was of the best—every ornament in good taste, and it contained much to be admired even by those that were accustomed to such luxuries; but to these young people who had been used to the mere necessaries of life, and not always to them, it was like an enchanted palace of delight! There was a seat on poles, in which Bertie might be carried up and down stairs whenever he felt too lazy to walk; and there was a wheeled chair always awaiting his pleasure in the hall, in which he could either sit at the table or be taken out into the garden. And he had a spring mattress on his bed, which he declared had afforded him better nights than he had ever passed

in his life before, and a soft couch with piles of cushions in his little sitting-room, and a bell close at hand, which rung right into old Aggie's ears and would summon her to his side in a moment.

Added to which, Dr. Monkton had informed him that the footman was always to be at his service, from luncheon till dinner-time, and after dinner for as long as he chose to employ him ; so that, with his invalid chair he was to make himself quite independent of the other inmates of the house, and to go just where he listed. And Bertie was so pleased at this latter intimation, that Nelly had not the heart to put a check on his delight, even by expressing a hope that he would not often wish so to absent himself. It was happiness to her only to watch his face as he dilated on the kindness with which the doctor had made all these arrangements for his comfort, or to hear the tone of his voice as he contrasted their present life with the one they had left in the dull past behind them.

“ And he says, Nell,” he remarked gaily in allusion to some conversation which had passed between himself and his brother-in-law, “ that as soon as ever the people of the place have called upon you, which they are all sure to do

before long—you will have more invitations to parties than you will care to accept. And then you will be obliged to give them some dinners in return, and you will sit at the head of your table looking so pretty and jolly, and with every one paying you compliments and saying what a darling you are—and, I shall be so proud of my sister. I shall never go down, you know, when you have company. I shouldn't care about it if I were well, and in my present state it would be out of the question. But I shall hear almost all about it from you, and fancy the rest for myself; and you must run up once in the evening, or so, just to take a peep at me, and let me see how handsome you can look in an evening dress. My dearest Nell! I am so glad to think that you are in your proper position at last."

But Nelly looked more perplexed than pleased at the prospect of giving dinner-parties.

"I daresay it will come naturally to me after a few times," she said, "but I hope it won't be necessary to give any for a long while, Bertie. You know I have never done anything of the kind before, and I am sure at first that I shan't know in the least, what to do or say."

“What nonsense,” laughed Bertie. “All you’ll have to do is to put on your most becoming dress, and look as pretty as you can. What a blessing it is that you’ve married a rich man who can afford to pay servants to arrange all such things for you. Oh! Nelly, what a curse poverty is! I wonder we can have borne it so long, that it has not killed us both before now.”

Nelly sighed and looked grave.

“There are worse curses than poverty, darling, though happily neither you nor I have known them. But if I could not appreciate the value of all this comfort for my own sake, Bertie, I should do so for yours. It is positive bliss to see you so happy. I hardly know you for the same brother that I had at Little Bickton. What a little time—” and she might have added, “what a little *thing*”—“to work such great changes, but I am very thankful that it is so.”

What Nelly said was true. A stranger who had only seen Robert Brooke in his discontent at Little Bickton, would scarcely have recognised him as he appeared in Hilstone. His face, which then had never changed its fretful and moody expression for anything brighter than the sickly look of gratitude with

which he would occasionally reward his sister's efforts for his comfort, was now irradiated with smiles ; and his voice, the weariful cadence of which used to go to her heart, had regained much of its boyish tone, and was becoming cheerful like her own. His sister's marriage and his change of residence seemed to have put new life into him ; he appeared to have lost that painful sense of his deformity which erst-while had made him shrink from any encounter with his kind : and was eager to go out and see everything there was to be seen in Hilstone. He had ceased to grumble too at the hardness of his lot ; but would speak with hope and cheerfulness of the future, as though he believed there might be happiness contained in it for him as well as for other men.

Had her husband never shewn her any individual kindness or attention, Nelly must still have been grateful to him for the mighty change which he had worked in her brother's mind.

She lived in Bertie's life, and as James Monkton treated one, so would he save or destroy the other.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DEAN'S DAUGHTER-IN-LAW IS HIGHLY
OFFENDED.

“ I have good news for you, Helena,” said Dr. Monkton, about a week after their arrival in Hilstone, as they sat together at the breakfast table.

“ What is that ?”

“ I am summoned to a consultation in London, which will certainly detain me till the evening ; and perhaps over the night.”

“ And, why should that be good news, James ?” she enquired.

“ Because the carriage will be at your service for the whole of the day, and you can take Bertie over to Coombe Wood, or Stackley Abbey ; or any of the places about here, which I have described to you.”

“ Oh ! that will be charming,” exclaimed Nelly, as the vision of a whole day spent in driving about the beautiful country with her brother, rose up before her, and then she added

with a degree of compunction, "but I wish you could go also, James."

"You must learn to be thankful for small mercies, Helena! If I were here, and able to go with you, that would be the very reason that you could not go yourself. You don't know yet what it is to be a doctor's wife. However, take my advice, and enjoy yourself when you can, for it is not often that you will get such an opportunity."

And shortly afterwards, he rose, and bidding her farewell, proceeded to the railway station, whilst she flew up to Bertie's room to consult him with respect to the intended expedition.

They had been so equally unused to anything like novelty or pleasure, that the anticipation excited him almost as much as herself, and after a brief colloquy, it was agreed that they should partake of an early dinner, "in the dear old way, you know, Bertie!" and drive out to Coombe Wood afterwards, where the coachman was to put up his horses, and allow them a couple of hours or so, for wandering about the beautiful place of which they had heard so much.

"And we will take my large plaid, and your air cushions, Bertie," exclaimed Nelly, her face rosy with excitement, "so that you

can sit down if you feel in the least bit tired, and we will walk, very, very slowly, just loiter about, in fact, and look for all the wild flowers which James says, grow there ; and if we stay late enough, perhaps we may hear the nightingales. There were no nightingales in dear old Bickton, were there, darling ? at least I never heard any, but James says there are hundreds in Coombe Wood, and that they sing so beautifully directly the sun goes down. But now I must run down and speak to cook about the dinner, or we shall not have it in time."

The servants, who had already taken a great fancy to their girlish mistress, at once became eager to assist in her plan, and the cook proposed that she should pack up a basket of good things to put in the carriage, that, if so inclined, the brother and sister might take their evening meal in the wood.

" Oh ! yes ! do, cook," replied Mrs. James Monkton, clapping her hands in the most undignified manner, " and now, if I could only manage to persuade my dear old Thug to go too, it would be a perfect party."

Here, the footman, who had been listening from his pantry, ventured to suggest that the mastiff and himself were already such good

friends, that if he were on the box, he felt confident that the dog would follow the carriage.

“No doubt he would, John,” replied his mistress, “with you on the box, and me inside. Oh! we certainly must try it. Thug should learn to follow the horses.”

“I can keep on a whistling to him, ma’am; and if he shouldn’t quite understand at first, ’twill be easy to jump down and coax him on a bit.”

“To be sure,” cried Nelly, to whom, in her present state of excitement, it would almost have appeared easy to drag the carriage to Coombe Wood herself, “and I can put my head out of the window too, and call him; and so between your whistling, John, and my calling, I think it will be very strange if he prefers to stay behind,” and with a laugh still upon her tongue, Nelly ran up the kitchen-stairs into the hall, and almost into the arms of prim Mrs. Prowse, who, accompanied by a sly-looking lady with mock-modest eyes, had entered the house in her usual familiar manner. Nelly had been running and talking so fast that she was rather flushed and out of breath, and struck her sister-in-law as looking more like a schoolgirl fresh from a game of romps,

than the mistress of a household, from the important duty of giving directions to her servants.

“Oh! how do you do,” exclaimed Nelly carelessly, with a broad smile upon her face, “I am *so* busy! we are going over to Coombe Wood directly after dinner,” and then she had time to glance towards the stranger, as though demanding an introduction.

“I am quite well, I thank you, Mrs. James,” returned Mrs. Prowse with a severe propriety, intended to discountenance the other’s frivolity, “and have just stepped over with Fanny Clewson—this is she;” intimating her companion by a movement of her head, “everyone in Hilstone knows Fanny Clewson—to tell you that I have just heard that Mrs. Filmer intends calling upon you this afternoon, so I thought it best that you should be prepared.”

Nelly thought the mere statement that everyone in Hilstone knew Miss Clewson was a strange mode of introducing her to one who did not; but as the lady herself appeared to take it as a matter of course, and not to be in the least offended, she only bowed in return for her deep curtsy; and then answered Mrs. Prowse’s announcement with the irreverent enquiry,

“Mrs. Filmer!—who *is* Mrs. Filmer?”

Miss Clewson looked at Mrs. Prowse, and Mrs. Prowse looked at Miss Clewson, and for a moment neither of them seemed able to speak for surprise.

“My *dear* Mrs. Monkton!” at last drawled the unmarried lady in a voice of incredulity.

“Your ignorance must be affected,” now put in the canon’s wife. “Surely my brother James has told you of Mrs. Filmer; the *daughter-in-law* of the Dean of Hilstone! *mistress* of the deanery at the present moment! and *mother* of Capt. Herbert and Miss Laura Filmer!”

“No, indeed he has not!” replied Nelly, laughing at the comical look of consternation which her sister-in-law’s face had assumed, “or if he has I have forgotten all about her, which comes to the same thing. But pray don’t stand here; let us go into the drawing-room, and then you can enlighten my darkness,” and she led the way as she proposed. But Mrs. Prowse was not to be appeased by Nelly’s cheery tone. Levity on such a subject became sacrilege, which, as a staunch upholder of the ecclesiastical party and all its members, it was her faithful duty to put down.

“I have nothing more to say upon the matter, Mrs. James,” she gravely remarked as they seated themselves, “and am only surprised to find that you need any information on what so greatly concerns us all. Mrs. Filmer is *the* lady of Hilstone; she ‘leads’ the town; and all those whom she has hitherto honoured with her acquaintance have been only too grateful for her notice. She has a great regard for myself, and also for my brother James, in consequence of which, and with the evident desire to shew *us* attention, she has been good enough, thus early, to signify that she will call upon you. She will be here this afternoon. Having no wish to ruffle or discompose you, she has been so kind as to prepare you for her visit, by sending an intimation of it through myself. I am not sure at what hour she will be here, but of course you will hold yourself in readiness to receive her directly she arrives. And I wish, Mrs. James,” continued Mrs. Prowse, becoming more confidential, “I hope that you will put on a silk dress for the occasion. These muslins and prints are all very well for the morning, but they are not suitable to a visit of ceremony—and I observed the other day that you wore one all the afternoon—Mrs.

Filmer knows that you come from the country, and will be ready, I am sure, to make every allowance; but still, I think it right to tell you these things, else people may suspect that you have not been used to any society, and in a place like Hilstone, we cannot be too particular."

Nelly's disposition was naturally forbearing, but her spirit rebelled at the tone of dictation and patronage which Mrs. Prowse had taken up, and which was doubly irritating before a third party. She thought of the proposed scheme of pleasure being abandoned, and could not see the necessity of disappointing both Bertie and herself for the convenience of a stranger. So that her answer had more decision in it, than in her new position she had yet dared to express.

"I do not think that it will signify much to Mrs. Filmer, whether I put on a silk dress or a muslin one, to-day; for as I told you at first, Bertie and I are going to Coombe Wood this afternoon; and shall most likely have started before Mrs. Filmer arrives."

"But you must put off going; you must defer your expedition, Mrs. James!" exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, horrified at the light manner in which the bride spoke of missing the promised

visit. "Mrs. Filmer sent over Fanny Clewson to inform me of her intention, simply that I might prepare you for receiving her, and you talk of going out for a drive instead. I never heard of such a thing! Mrs. Filmer would be deeply offended at such an unwarrantable slight—she might never call on you again."

"But surely," argued Nelly, "Mrs. Filmer can never have expected that I should put off all other engagements only just to see her. Bertie and I have made all our arrangements for passing the afternoon in Coombe Wood, and I can't put it off for anyone, because he would be very much disappointed and so should I; we are going to dine early on purpose. If Mrs. Filmer comes before we start I shall be very pleased to see her—if she's nice—else, any other day will do as well, I suppose."

"Where is my brother James?" exclaimed the canon's spouse, looking about the room in a vague manner, as if she was faint and wanted more air. "I *must* speak to him. He will never allow this."

"He is gone to London for the day," returned Nelly, quietly, "and may not be back until to-morrow morning. It was he who

proposed our going to Coombe Wood ; and told us to be sure and make the best use of our time, for we might not have such another opportunity."

"But he did not know that *Mrs. Filmer* was coming to call upon you," panted Mrs. Prowse, "he would be the first to desire you to make *any* engagement succumb to this."

"Would he really, do you think?" asked Nelly, reflectively; and then she turned suddenly to Mrs. Prowse and said: "Well, look here then. I will put off starting for an hour later—that will not be until four—and if you see Mrs. Filmer, you can just ask her to come before then."

Ask Mrs. Filmer—who, in her coarse patronage, was accustomed to outrage all etiquette with regard to visiting her humbler neighbours—to pay her respects to the doctor's little bride before a certain hour, or not at all. The mere idea of taking such a liberty was enough to petrify Mrs. Prowse. She rose from the sofa whereon she had been seated, and followed by Fanny Clewson, prepared to quit the room.

"Very well, Mrs. James, I have warned you, remember," she said indignantly, "and now I must beg to wash my hands of the

whole affair. *Mrs. Filmer is coming to call on you this afternoon.* I have delivered the message with which I was entrusted to you, and I have pointed out the necessity of your attending to it. My brother James being unfortunately absent, I can do no more, but must leave you to act as you think proper," and she swept out of the door as she spoke.

"Oh! I am *sure* Mrs. Monkton will do just as you wish, dear Mrs. Prowse," murmured, more than said, Miss Fanny Clewson, looking at Nelly from beneath her drooping eye-lashes, as she wriggled after her friend. This species of address was still more impertinent in Nelly's ideas, than the former had been; she dropped the hand she was about to offer Miss Clewson at parting, and merely bowed to her instead.

"I understand perfectly, Mrs. Prowse," she said, as she stood on the doorstep and witnessed the departure of her visitors, "Mrs. Filmer is coming here this afternoon, and if I should be at home at the time, I shall be very happy to receive her. I have put off my engagement for an hour, solely on her account, and I think she could hardly expect me to do more."

Mrs. Prowse and Miss Clewson left her

without further parley, and Nelly returned into the hall. As she did so, she felt very discomposed at what had just passed. She knew that she was young, and ignorant of the ways of society, and had only been used to country life; but that was no reason, she silently argued, that Mrs. Prowse should treat her as if she were a child, to be ordered about and dictated to. She had already seen enough of her sister-in-law to make her sincerely regret there was any connection between them, but since that misfortune could not now be remedied, she had no inclination to be made to submit to an authority so unlawfully exercised. Nelly had always been mistress in her grandfather's house, and interference from strangers was a thing she had not been used to, and could not brook. She was a lamb, it is true, but only according to whose hand pulled the reins that checked her. She could be a very spirited lamb when occasion demanded, and this was an occasion which seemed to call up her most rebellious feelings. She did not tell Bertie of the interview she had had with Mrs. Prowse. She feared it might vex him, and she was accustomed to shield him from little annoyances by keeping them to herself. So she made no alteration in their plans, except that when

four o'clock struck without any sign of Mrs. Filmer's approach, her natural goodnature and wish to oblige, caused her to loiter about for half-an-hour longer in hopes of seeing her expected guests before she started.

But at the end of that period Bertie grew impatient, declaring the best part of the day was already gone, and they should have no time at all in the wood at that rate.

"What on earth are you waiting for, Nelly?" he asked rather fretfully, "the carriage must have been at the door for an hour."

"Not quite so long as that, Bertie, but we will keep the horses standing no longer. I expected some ladies to call here this afternoon, but perhaps they have changed their minds about coming, so let us start."

She slipped her brother's arm through her own as she spoke, and led him into the hall, but just as Long had thrown open the front door, and signified to the coachman that they were ready, their own carriage was forced to move on to make way for that of the dean; from which with a vast amount of pomp and banging of steps, alighted the high and mighty Mrs. Filmer. She was followed by her daughter and Mrs. Prowse (whom she had

ordered to accompany her) and was just in time to meet the brother and sister on the threshold of the doctor's house.

It was an unfortunate encounter, and all the more so because Nelly, with Bertie hanging on her arm, was powerless to do more than smile and half bow in acknowledgement of the presence of her visitors.

Mrs. Filmer, rustling in a plum-coloured brocade, just glanced at the girl in her simple robe and bonnet, and then without the least suspicion that this was the bride she had come in state to visit, was about to pass on without further notice, when Mrs. Prowse ventured to touch her elbow :

“Mrs. James Monkton,” she said, as she indicated Nelly with her eyes, and gave a frown of displeasure at her homely appearance.

“Who?—what *that*?” rudely exclaimed the lady of the Deanery, as she turned completely round to stare at poor Nelly. “Didn't you tell her I was coming?”

Mrs. Prowse was about to make some abject apology, when her sister-in-law, perceiving the awkwardness of the situation, came to the rescue. Addressing herself to Mrs. Filmer, she said :

“I have much pleasure in seeing you. If you will kindly allow me to put my brother in the carriage I will return to you at once. Mrs. Prowse! will you take these ladies into the drawing-room?” And she passed on with Bertie, whilst Mrs. and Miss Filmer, followed by their jackal, were compelled to do as she desired them.

“Well! this is most extraordinary behaviour,” said the female dignitary, as she ensconced herself upon the sofa. “Can you tell me the reason of this, Matilda? Did you inform the young woman that I was going to call on her this afternoon?”

“I did, indeed, Mrs. Filmer,” replied the hapless jackal, who, pert and snappish with everyone else, was always abjectly humble before the dean’s daughter-in-law; “I did indeed, most particularly, and quite fancied that she understood my wishes; but——”

“I said, mamma, that you had better wait till to-morrow,” exclaimed Miss Laura Filmer, who was arranging her bonnet-strings at the glass over the mantelpiece; “but you would come to-day. Mrs. Prowse said Mrs. Monkton had some previous engagement.”

“But she should have put it off,” interposed the canon’s wife; “I fully thought she had

put it off—everything should have deferred to your mamma's goodness !”

“Of course she should have put it off!” echoed the dean's daughter-in-law. At this moment the subject of their argument entered the room.

“I am afraid we are detaining you, Mrs. Monkton,” continued Mrs. Filmer with frigid politeness—“you were going out.”

The girl was too truthful to deny the fact.

“I can easily wait a few minutes,” she said, with a quiet smile ; “the days are so long now, that time is not of so much consequence.”

“It's a pity such a mistake was not prevented, though,” returned her visitor. “I told Matilda Prowse, here, to let you know in good time, that I was coming this afternoon ; but I suppose she delayed till 'twas too late to alter your plans.”

To this accusation Mrs. Prowse attempted a piteous denial ; but though Nelly had little sympathy with either her feelings or herself, she could not hear her wronged without refuting it, and her eager reply came first.

“Oh ! no ! indeed, Mrs. Filmer—you are quite mistaken. Mrs. Prowse was over here directly after breakfast, to tell me of your in-

tention, and had it not been for her doing so, we should have started more than an hour ago. But the fact is, Dr. Monkton has gone to London for the day, and left us the carriage, and we are anxious to make the best use of such an opportunity by exploring Coombe Wood, of which we have heard a great deal. If it had been only for myself, I should not have minded so much, perhaps, giving it up, but my brother had set his heart upon going, and I could not have him disappointed."

At this avowal, Laura Filmer looked round, interested, but her mother, unaccustomed to such candour, tossed her head with indignation at the "young woman's" presumption.

"A most unusual attention to a brother," she said, as though doubting the truth of Nelly's statement. "There are few young women, Mrs. Monkton, who are so ready to sacrifice their own interests for their relatives."

"But I assure you I am sacrificing nothing," replied Nelly, laughing, and thinking that Mrs. Filmer alluded to some self-denial on her part. "I love driving about quite as much as Bertie does; and I'd rather be with him than with any one in the world."

At this additional piece of boldness, the

august mistress of the Deanery was too affronted to make any reply ; Mrs. Prowse looked at the offender, as if she wondered that the earth did not open and swallow her where she sat ; and even Laura Filmer, who could not help feeling interested in the sweet, girlish face and figure before them, seemed to think it would be advisable to create a diversion by starting another subject of conversation.

“ I suppose you will join the Choral Society, Mrs. Monkton. Every lady of any standing in Hilstone belongs to it.”

“ I have not heard of it,” said Nelly ; “ what is it like ?”

“ It is a society of ladies and gentlemen for practising concerted music—chiefly sacred. We meet once a week, in the Mechanics’ Institute, and have concerts every quarter. You must take a ticket, Mrs. Monkton, for even if you do not care to sing, it will admit you to the concerts, and we shall want your subscription.”

Miss Laura Filmer was one of the most active members of the Choral Society, which was as much in want of funds as it was of voices.

“ Oh ! I know what you are alluding to,

now!" exclaimed Nelly, "only I had not heard it called by that name. A gentleman, who was here, the other day, was trying to persuade me to belong to it—a Mr. Rumbell, I think—a white, fat man—"

"A white—fat—man!" slowly repeated Mrs. Filmer, "is your sister-in-law alluding to the *Reverend Mr. Rumbell*, Matilda?"

"I should scarcely think so—I can hardly believe so!" gasped Mrs. Prowse, in her horror and agitation lest the repeated delinquencies of her brother's wife should by any means return on her own head.

"Yes! that is he!" replied Nelly, nodding her head to Mrs. Filmer, "one of the cathedral canons, I think Dr. Monkton said—a very ugly, pale man. He sat here a long time, one afternoon, and did all he could to make me take a ticket for this society; but I had just promised Dr. Nesbitt that I would not. I told Mr. Rumbell that I should be no loss, for I know scarcely anything of music—but I shall be very happy to subscribe all the same, if that will do any good."

"Do you mean to tell me, Mrs. Monkton, that Dr. Nesbitt, our cathedral organist, has already called upon you?" now solemnly enquired Mrs. Filmer.

Now Dr. Nesbitt was a man who never called on any one, especially a stranger, and even those ladies with whom he was most familiar (including Mrs. Filmer herself) had the greatest difficulty in luring him to their houses, for, added to his eccentric and reserved habits, he was exceedingly shy.

“Oh! yes!” replied Nelly, laughing, “twice, I think—or three times, and what a funny old man he is! He came in first one evening, when I was sitting alone at the piano, and trying to sing, and he made me go on, although I was horribly frightened. He says I shall be able to sing and play both, if I practise, and he is going to teach me. He has spoken to Dr. Monkton about it, and he is to come here three times a week, to give me a lesson. And how beautifully he plays, himself! he sat here for nearly two hours, yesterday evening, playing to us until I could hardly bear to listen to it. It made me feel so glad, and yet so miserable!”

Mrs. Filmer could hardly believe her ears.

Dr. Nesbitt—who, although in the pay and employment of the church, had actually refused to give lessons on the piano to her own daughter, on the plea that he had given up teaching—to offer to instruct this stranger in

the elements of music! Dr. Nesbitt, who could hardly be persuaded to touch the instrument for the amusement of herself or her friends, to sit for a couple of hours playing to a raw girl, who acknowledged that she knew nothing about the science! It was impossible—Mrs. Monkton must be either mistaken or wilfully deceiving them. Dr. Nesbitt would never so risk his interests in Hilstone.

“If this be true,” she said, with the utmost rudeness, turning to Mrs. Prowse, “I don’t think, from what *we* know of Dr. Nesbitt, that it is very likely to continue—it must be a mere freak on his part; but I shall mention it to him all the same. However,” rising from her seat, “we have, doubtless, detained Mrs. Monkton quite long enough from her anticipated pleasure. For all the good it has done, my dear, I might have saved you the trouble of giving her any intimation of my intended visit. But the doctor will be sorry when he comes to hear of it. Good morning to you, Mrs. Monkton!” and with merely a bow, Mrs. Filmer swept grandly out of the drawing-room, closely and obsequiously followed by the canon’s wife.

Laura Filmer was more polite than her mother; she stayed behind to bid farewell to

her new acquaintance, and to repeat her request that she would join the Choral Society. "If Dr. Nesbitt says you have a voice, you may be sure you have, and we want good voices very much. My brother says there are several ladies in his regiment, who can sing, but mamma is so bigoted against the military. Do join us, if you can."

"But I promised Dr. Nesbitt I would not," replied Nelly. "He declared the choruses would pull my voice all to pieces, and he wouldn't teach me if I did. Besides, he said they all quarrelled so—there was hardly any time for practice."

"And so they do—he is right there," returned Miss Filmer, "but mamma is waiting, and I must go;" and then she added, hurriedly, "I wish you hadn't said quite so much, just now, and affronted her; I should have liked you for a companion, I am sure I should. Good-bye!" and with a friendly shake of the hand, she ran after the other ladies. The comments almost immediately passed in each carriage upon the occupants of the other, were not dissimilar in character.

"What is your friend like, Nelly?" enquired her brother, as she took her seat beside him.

"Perfectly insufferable, Bertie! both in

speech and manner. Pray don't mention her again, or you will completely spoil the pleasure of my drive."

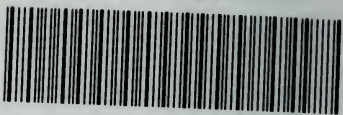
And in the dean's carriage it was—

"Well, Matilda! all I can say is—I am sorry for your brother—extremely sorry. I had thought better of him, and of his wish to advance instead of lowering the interests of Hilstone! A more forward young woman, both in manner and speech, I think I have seldom met."

And the jackal could only bemoan the family misfortune, and trust that her dearest Mrs. Filmer would visit the offences of the new comer on neither her brother nor herself.

END OF VOL. II.

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