

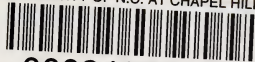


QUEEN
COPHETUA

By
R.E. FRANCILLON.



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QUEEN COPHETUA

BY

R. E. FRANCILLON

AUTHOR OF 'OLYMPIA' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1880

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QUEEN COPHETUA.

CHAPTER XXIV.

She's mine—mine—mine!—her heart, her life, her soul:
She's mine, from head to foot, and through and through.
Have I not won the guerdon of the game?
Are not its forfeit tokens, coin by coin,
Obverse and reverse, image, legend, mine—
By code and compact mine—mine, mine alone?
Call *me* no cheat, if losers will not pay.

‘HOME!’ said Helen to her coachman, and then threw herself back into the corner of her carriage, and sobbed terribly. She was not struck to such utter stone by the news she had heard as to have lost the relief of tears. Whatever had happened, she could never forget how to weep, as a child might, for him who stood for the whole of her childhood and for all the happiness she had ever known. It was the Helen Reid of long ago, not Mrs. Gideon Skull, who was weeping for Alan.

But there was hardly a trace of tears left when she reached home. She did not even wait to collect herself or her thoughts, but walked straight into the room where her husband used to smoke and plan whenever he was at home—work, one can hardly call it, for the greater part of Gideon Skull's occupation, like that of Mr. Aristides, consisted in thinking about the work of others. But even that is very hard sometimes; and if Helen had not been so full of her own thoughts she must have noticed that this evening, which he had spent at home and in solitude, had been unusually severe. He was not, as usual, lounging in an arm-chair, and apparently letting the smoke of his cigar do his thinking for him. Though there was neither book nor paper upon his writing-table, and though his hands were empty, he was seated at it in the attitude of a man who is deep in some absorbing labour, with his eyes fixed on the spot where one would have expected to find at least a sheet of note-paper. He was not even smoking, for, though he held a cigar between his lips, it had

burned out without his noticing the change of flavour.

But Helen noticed nothing of all this. 'Gideon!' she said, suddenly and sharply. He turned round on his seat as abruptly; and, without rising to welcome her home, looked heavily, almost stupidly, at his wife—or rather, as it would seem, at some indifferent woman, or at a still more indifferent bulk of black velvet, that happened to fill the doorway. He did not remove his forgotten cigar-stump even then. The contrast between them did not need strengthening by that between her black robes and pearls and his shabby smoking-jacket, unbuttoned waistcoat, loosened collar, and tumbled hair.

'Gideon!' she said again, as she closed the door behind her; 'why did you marry me?'

'What the—what on earth do you mean?'

'I want to know. Why did you marry me?'

'Do you want me to tell you again?' A sort of change, though equally unnoticed by Helen, came over both his voice and his eyes.

Both were still heavy and sullen ; but, if it be lawful to rival Walter Gray in the art of look and voice reading, it was rather the passive sullenness which comes of weariness and long waiting, and there was an under-note of pleading in his voice, and an under-glow of admiration in his eyes. ‘ Well—I *will* tell you again, and a thousand times again. It was because I loved you—more fool I, I suppose. I only wish to God it was one of the follies that can be cured. You know as well as I do that if I were free again I would marry you again. Put it, if you like, that I married you because I was a fool. And, if you like it better, put it that I am one still. That’s why.’

‘ I have never thought you a fool, Gideon.’

‘ You think a great many things about me, I know, that are not true. I had another reason.’

‘ Well ? ’

‘ I thought I loved you so much,’ he said, slowly and still more heavily, ‘ that I should be able to make you give me some of it back—in time. Why shouldn’t I do what hundreds of men, as unlikely as I am, have done? One

must invest the principal before one can look for the interest—love is very like the rest of life, I suppose. I thought that when a man loved a woman as I loved you—like a man, and not like a boy, or an idiot, or a poet, or a slave—he couldn't manage to throw his whole life away even if he tried. I didn't think it possible that a man could care about a stone as I did for you: I thought that when a man loved, it stood to reason that what he loved was a woman.'

'Have I been a bad wife to you? Have I——'

'You have been just the worst wife, Helen, that a man could find if he were to search the whole world round. I'm not angry with you for it: I'm not quite such an imbecile as to be angry with facts; but it's true.'

'I have not meant to be a bad wife. God knows, I have meant to be a good one. I meant it from that terrible day when I married you. Till to-night, I have meant it always. What one thing have I done or left undone that——'

'Nothing—no thing except one. Only,

that happens to be the only one that matters. I'm less to you even than I was on that day which you call terrible, and when I didn't even dream that you cared for me. I didn't marry you to be my partner, or my housekeeper, or my nurse if I chanced to fall ill—did I?—or my representative at calls and crushes. I shouldn't call you a bad wife if you hated me—as wives go. Hating is being one's wife, in a way. But you don't even do that ——'

'Did I ever promise to love you, except in the form which you agreed with me, when it was made, should bind me no more than I might feel myself bound? I never pretended to give you more than just my hand and my duty—my duty to you only in the second place. You freed me from my formal promise in church before it was given, so that it meant—nothing. I have fulfilled my whole bargain, every jot and every tittle. And now—why did I marry you?'

'Because——'

'You know what people say—because you were rich and I was poor. *You* don't believe

that, I know. You know that I married you for the sake of my brother—Alan. Of my mother, too; but even on our wedding-day it became for his sake alone.'

'By Heaven, Helen, you must be mad yourself, or trying to make me so. Have I not done for him all that one man *can* do for another? Can I give him brains and ears, and hands and eyes? I have given him every chance of using them all, but I can't use them for him. We don't even know if he is not using them. If he is, he will come back a millionaire. With his chances, I—he *is* doing well because he must be doing well. Nobody, even without brains, can help doing well in—in Arizona. If he had been my own son, as well as my brother, I would have sent him there.'

'It is so strange that he never writes to me. For aught I know, he thinks his mother still alive.'

'Why strange? He is a young man.'

'He is Alan.'

'That is to say, a very young man—younger than most young men. That's always the way

with women. They think nobody is ever to change, and that if a thing has ever been done once, it has got to be done always. He got out of the way of letter-writing at the siege—Are you cold, Helen? Put on your shawl—It is a habit soon lost and never recovered. He did not write before he left for Arizona, for the very good reason that he had to leave Brest at an hour's notice, and—— But he telegraphed when he reached the States, as you know. I am a man, you see, and know exactly how a man would act and feel. You are a woman, and can't know—not even how the man would feel to whom you give what you call your duty, and think it ought to be enough for him. . . . Well, perhaps it ought to be enough for him. . . .'

'Are you sure Alan is not *dead*, Gideon?'

'Dead? No.'

'"No"? You mean you are not sure?'

'How could he be dead? Nonsense, Helen! Something has made you nervous to-night—it is not like you. I was telling you that I know just what a man would feel. He has vowed not to return home without a fortune

and a name—a name of his own, a name that he has a right to bear. He is just one of those sensitive, romantic natures who would feel like that, and act like that, too. He knows you would hear soon enough if anything happened to him. Of course he will have made his will. I know what I should have done if I, like him, had ever had the good luck to have anybody in the world who would care a straw whether I was dead or alive. I should take all precautions; but I would swear to myself, I will not even think of home till I can return as I ought to return. I will not weaken myself, and give nothing but suspense and disappointment to all who care for me, by sending home chronicles of the hundred failures which form the details of the struggle. My first news home shall be “Victory”—and may-be I will give myself the pleasure of being my own despatch-bearer. Something very like that I did, Helen. I swore most solemnly, as a man can swear to none but himself, that my Uncle Christopher, my only relation on earth, should never hear of my existence until I could force him to be proud of me. I

kept my word. And so will he keep his, you may be sure.'

'Perhaps he died even before he reached Arizona?'

'Helen! late as it is, I have something to say to you——'

'About Alan?'

'Conf—— No. You are mad about Alan. He is all right enough—but——'

'But I must first know if I am mad about Alan or if I am perfectly sane. Perhaps he died before he reached Brest, Gideon?'

'He telegraphed me from there. What in Heaven's name can you mean?'

'Then—you say—I need have no fear—that Alan, my own brother Alan, does not write to me because he—because *he* is like *you*; that he is no doubt prospering and conquering in Arizona; that he sailed from Brest; that he hurried there from Versailles——'

'Of course I say it——'

'Then, you are a liar, Gideon!'

Gideon Skull almost sprang from his seat, flushing burnt crimson. She read his flush and his silence in her own way.

‘Yes,’ she said—but not quite so calmly—
‘I know now, as well as you know it, that every word you ever told me has been a lie. I learned to-night that he *is* dead, and that you knew it before what I *did* call that terrible day. I know that he never left Paris alive, much less Versailles! You forged that telegram from Brest; you wanted me—God knows why!—and you knew that, if Alan was dead, and if I knew it, I would have said “No” to you at the altar. And you have kept up the lie, day by day, because, if I ever came to know the truth, you knew what that would mean to me; and you cared about what I might think of you—God knows why, again! . . . And I wronged my mother on her death-bed for Alan; and I have lived with you and put my neck under your foot for Alan; and he was dead, and I know it now;—and I know you.’

All the calmness with which she had led him on to his crowning lie had left her now. She did not give way to the cry of her deeper self, but stood before him breathing scorn; Victor Waldron himself had never seen her as she was now.

Gideon, after the first instant, became the calmer of the two. 'On my honour as a gentleman,' he said, without heeding the scorn that came into her eyes at the word, 'I have no reason on earth for believing your brother not to be alive. Helen, as surely as that I am idiot enough to love you——'

'Love! you told me you—loved me—on the day when you told me Alan lived and was well—and what sort of love—why should one thing be a lie and the other not a lie?'

'Helen, if you have been told to-night that your brother is dead—well, I can bear all you say. For you are bound to speak madly. But what makes you believe such a thing?'

'Why should I prove what you know as well as I? But—yes, I ought to give you my proof; I want to be fair even to you; it is right for you to see that I *know*—I should like to spare myself the shame of seeing even you defending lies by lies. I have seen to-night the man who saw Alan Reid die—who saw him killed in the streets of Paris, and who sent the news home——'

'I heard of no such news. Do I look as

if I were lying? Should I dare to look you in the face if I were? Do you suppose I went to those Spraggville people on my wedding morning, or ever again? You know that. Who is the man?’

‘His name is Walter Gray. He says he has known you.’

‘I never heard of the man. I am sorry to hear of this, Heaven knows. . . . But, on my honour, Helen, it is news to me. Who is this man—Walter Gray?’

‘I was left to learn of my brother’s death from a stranger, who told me the story to amuse me in the middle of a waltz——’

‘You were dancing?’

‘When have I disobeyed you?—But he was with my brother when he died.’

‘It is terrible. But, still, it does not follow that it was before we heard from him at Brest—he may have missed the ship—he may have gone back to Paris before leaving—there may have been reasons——’

‘So, that is what Alan’s death means to you—an unlucky chance, that obliges you to make disagreeable excuses! You need not

trouble yourself to find any more. I remember the date of the telegram as if it were yesterday. It was the 15th of February. And Alan was dead on the 29th of January. Yes ; I have the telegram still. And you were at the office daily, and you married me—for Alan's sake—on the 31st. Gideon, there was nobody to get that telegram sent from Brest but you. You would not have dared to send it had you not believed that no living man could return to convict you. And you must know that he never went to Arizona—if there be any such place in this world.'

Had Gideon lied? If so, it was the first time he had done so, even to himself: for it was his pride to be the only man who was not a liar. Even when he happened to deceive people, it could not be called his fault, for it was by telling the truth, either as it actually and literally was, or as he believed it would prove to be.

'I will tell you the truth, and the whole truth,' said he. 'And then—you will listen to me, in my turn. Yes, you must listen to what concerns us more than even your

news. For your brother is dead, and we are alive—and together for better or for worse, whatever else we may be. Sit down and listen.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I have obeyed you for the last time. You have broken your bargain, so mine is at an end. You have no rights left over me. But I will listen, not because you bid me, but because I will.’

He bowed his head gloomily, and did not raise it again. Clearly, his love for Helen, unlessened by any return of it by her, had turned into some sort of heart-hunger, for which he half despised himself, but which he never sought to conquer. It was the desire of Tantalus for the stream. And he knew not how to win her, and knew that he knew not how, while something told him that it was not because she was a woman who had to be won in some undiscoverable way. How should he not be jealous of every stranger who might chance to touch her hand?

‘The telegram from Brest *was* from me,’ said he.

‘And you dare to tell me——’

‘The truth? Is not the truth what you asked for? I knew why you married me, Helen. I had no occasion to go near the “Argus” people after a day or two before. No matter why. That belongs to business purely. I supposed that, after we married, some letter would come from Alan for you. You must have been expecting one yourself for a long while. None did come. As soon as we came back to town, I went to the “Argus” for news. Well—the war was over, Crowder and Sims had fallen out as to which was to have the credit of the German victory, and had been recalled to fight the question out in Spraggville, and the office was shut up to wait for another war. I searched for news of your brother everywhere, high and low. At last I began to think—well, that he might be living; but as I could get no proof of it, how was I to know? He was most likely alive, after all. It is when people live that they leave no traces; it is not the dead who disappear. . . . Why shouldn’t he be in Arizona? All life, all belief, Helen, is but a balance of the probabilities for and against a thing. In the same spirit that a

racing man backs a particular horse, a Christian backs heaven and hell against annihilation—it's all the same system ; nobody can do more, nobody ever does more. You thought just now it was more likely that I should lie than that you should misjudge me. And so I, weighing the chances—which my whole life has been spent in learning how to do—I judged that Alan was more likely to be alive than dead. Being alive, more likely to have strong reason for disappearing than to have none. Being young, and not rich, the reason was more likely to be a woman than money—one or the other, of course, it was safe to be. There are lots of scrapes of every sort that a man can get into after a war ; and Paris, while a brick of it is left standing, will be the place for them. And where do men go when they disappear and leave no traces in the old world ? It was more than a chance there. America is the limbo of the people that can't be found. And not the Eastern but the Western States ; and, in the case of a man like him, not the best known and the tamest, but the wildest and roughest, where a man can live like a

savage if he likes, and find adventures and big game—and Arizona may stand for them. Helen, when I think of it, what a life it was that your poor dev—your poor brother had to lead here! It was all very well while there was war; but nobody can settle down again after he's had a fit of that fever—and to settle down again to be bullied by his mother because he couldn't get seventy pounds a year, or be Lord Chancellor in a week, or whatever she'd set her heart upon! No wonder he took a good dive under water, and came up well on the other side, and took to his heels and ran—to Arizona or anywhere.'

'I am listening,' said Helen, as he paused.

'Any lad with an ounce of spirit, scrape or no scrape, would have done the same. But was I to see your life spoiled, and make you feel that you had nothing more to get out of me, before I had time to make you know me, when a word from him would content you and give me—I thought so then—a thousand chances to one of winning all? In a very real sense, that telegram *did* come from him. Assuming that he had gone to Arizona, he

ought to have sent it; and if any man was ever likely to wish to do what he ought, it was Alan Reid. He must therefore have forgotten to send it, or he must have sent one which had gone wrong. In either case, he would thank me for doing what he had forgotten to do, or had been unable to do. Practically, therefore, that telegram came from him through my hand. As to the rest, I knew that in Arizona he could not fail to do well, and that all his plans and views would be just what I have told you. But since he was dead I reckoned the main chance wrongly—that is all. That might happen to any man. . . . And if I mistook more deeply—Helen—you are not a woman if you call a crime or a sin what a man who loves you does for love of you, and because he loves you, and wants to keep your strength and hope alive, and to spare you pain. You see, I have *not* lied.’

‘Is that what you have to say?’

‘You are satisfied, then, at least with me? And now for what *I* have to say.’

‘I think you have said enough.’ She could hardly control her immeasurable scorn; but

she feared lest he should suspect her of stooping to be angry.

‘I think you will learn—a little—how much I care for what *you* think of me, Helen, when I have sat here quietly and argued coolly about what can concern us no longer—when—what else did you hear at that accursed den of thieves where you have been? No Walter Gray sat out a waltz with you by talking of a fall in Kamschatkans? Helen, those two Greek brigands are the most infernal liars on the face of the globe. There isn’t a Yankee who isn’t an angel to them. There’s only one comfort—in doing me, they’ve done themselves too. I don’t think they’ll be quite so proud of their cleverness as they are now. I must tell you what has happened before I tell you what will have to be. In my own name, as usual, but really for them, I bought twenty thousand of Kamschatkans at forty, and sold for the account; you know what I mean—if they went up as much as I knew how to make them, there would have been a thousand at least in my pocket to-morrow morning, and twice as much for them. By some amazing trickery that’s

been puzzling me all the week, Kamschatkans have been flying down, and down, and down—nothing I could do would make them go up. Instead of receiving a thousand to-morrow I shall have to pay five thousand—it sounds wild and incredible, but it's true ; and to whom? I've found *that* out—to Aristides and Sinon. Do you see? I buy *for* them—*from* them. They—keeping it dark from me—sell me their worthless shares, shamming that they are to back me in return for my running the shares up ; then, behind my back, by some Greek devil's trick, they run them down ; and then they come forward as the buyers and leave me in the plight of the seller—why we were asked to their robbers' den to-night only to keep us blind.'

'Well,' said Helen, determined to let him feel that he had put himself beneath her slightest scorn, 'I suppose it will not ruin you to pay five thousand pounds instead of receiving one ; though of course I quite understand how much more important a money loss must be than any other.' She did not quite succeed in her endeavour to be scornful beyond

the reach of open scorn; but Gideon Skull was less sensitive to shades of tone than Walter Gray, and he noticed nothing but the strict letter of her words. Had he not satisfied her—nay, had he not satisfied himself, that she had grievously misjudged him?

‘The thieves had got it somehow into their heads that I was a rich man—and they knew I betted on stock; and the two things put together come to the sheep made for fleecing which they thought me. They used me and paid me as long as they found me useful; and then, when there is no further use to be made of their goose, they kill him. Asses themselves—as if I should have worked with such knaves if I had had five thousand sixpences of my own, let alone five thousand pounds—they’ve sheared the pig that the devil sheared; that’s all. . . . Helen!’

‘Well?’

‘What with Yankee cads like Waldron, and Greek pickpockets like Sinon and Aristides, there is no place in London for a commonly honest man. I don’t pretend to be better than my neighbours, but—we must begin things

over again. I've begun often enough to know the way pretty well by this time. Everybody must lose a game now and then before he wins. We won't stay in this house another day, nor in this country; there are plenty of others. Get all the packing done overnight, if you can. Do it thoroughly; don't let the thieves get hold of so much as a pennyworth that you can carry away. And then, whom have I but you in the world, and whom have you but me? You have no brother to put first now—and your mother is gone—and I don't count my Uncle Christopher. Let us truly begin again. Try, Helen, for your own sake to see me as I am to *you*——'

'I see you perfectly,' said Helen, her determined calm beginning—but only slightly as yet—to give way. 'I don't understand, quite, the beginning of your story; but I see, in the end, that you have induced Mr. Aristides and Mr. Sinon to employ you as their jackal and false newsmonger, in the belief that they, when they required it, might make you pay for the place smartly. I see that they thought they had cheated you, and that you thought you

had cheated them, and that both sides have got what they deserved. I see you have been living on the credit which they gave you under the false belief that it was not required. And now I see that you are going to run away from your tradesmen with all the property of Mr. Aristides on which you can lay your hands. I would have returned Madame Aristides her own pearls to-night if I had known. And I see that you dare—that you are so kind as to ask me to share your flight, and to—oh, I cannot think of your last offer—it sickens me. Do you know—or have you forgotten—that I married you because you said you had ten thousand a year? Do you suppose I should have married you if you —— Was that a lie, too?’

It was not exactly anger which reddened the forehead of Gideon, and made his voice at the same time both louder and deeper. One cannot call by the name of anger the just indignation of a man who hears himself unjustly accused, and the passionately real desire of his heart treated with scorn.

‘It is unbearable, Helen!’ he began,

pacing backwards and forwards across the room. 'I am not answerable for the ways of business—they are not my making. It is not my fault that people have insisted on believing me a rich man; and I never told you, or any human being, that I had so much as a shilling a year. No, not once. On the contrary, I have always let people understand that I was actually poor, whatever I might be going to be. When I married you, the chances were ten thousand at least to one that, in a week or two at furthest, I should have ten thousand a year—probably more, but so much beyond question. Ten thousand chances to one is a practical certainty. It isn't more than ten thousand chances to one that the sun will rise to-morrow. When one talks of a certainty or a fact, one always takes for granted a contrary chance or two. And what is a week or two? Practically, I *had* ten thousand a year—then. It was as true as anything on earth can be. I didn't know then as much of Aristides and Sinon as I do now. I knew they were Greeks, but I didn't know they were brigands. Why, when you tell me

your brother is dead, you imply a chance, though it may be one in a hundred thousand, that he is still——’

All of a sudden he paused abruptly. What is one chance in a hundred thousand? Practically, as he would put it, Alan Reid *was* dead; and he was the husband of the sole heiress of Copleston. His heart must indeed have been absorbed in deeper things for his head to have taken ten minutes, slow as it was by nature in shifting its grooves, not to have leaped to that fact as soon as he had assurance of the death of Alan Reid. His knowledge of the will no longer merely put him in the position of being able to sell his secret to the rightful heir so soon as he might turn up in Arizona or elsewhere. Why, with that will in his hand, he could take just vengeance on Victor Waldron, snap his fingers in the face of Aristides and Sinon, and build his fortune, no longer on the quicksands of speculation, but on the solid rock which underlies the earth of English counties.

‘Fortunate’ seemed too commonplace a word to give to the combination of chances

which had enabled him to put off considering what he should do with his knowledge of his uncle's secret until Alan's death made it impossible to entertain the least question of what he could do. He paced the room more and more quickly, till he became nearly as unconscious of his wife's presence as if his need of wealth were really greater and stronger than his hunger for what wealth could not buy. There was surely nothing over-sanguine here. No more than the commonest common-sense was needed to make the chances in his favour a million to one; and who need mention one chance against a million? It was good enough on the part of his brother-in-law to die at all, but it was admirable in him to die in such a manner that the news of his death had been kept back till now. He had excused his heart to his head on the ground that he had married Helen solely for Copleston's sake, and he now found himself more than justified. Why, if he could not gain what he wanted most, he could no longer call himself a fool for having married the heiress of Copleston.

‘Have you done with me?’ asked Helen.
‘Have you anything more to say?’

‘What? Oh, yes, I remember. Don’t pack up to-night. I have been thinking, and I have changed my plans. . . . Yes; you are right in some things, though you are wrong in the main. Why can’t you take me as I am, Helen, and make the best of me? If you hated me—what do you think it means to me to feel that you married me only for what you thought you could get by it, and to feel your touch grow colder and colder? But I am not at the end yet of what I can do for you. If I were to get back Copleston——’

‘If you were to get back Copleston! What is Copleston to me? It was Alan’s—not mine. I would not take it as a gift—least of all from you. I hope you understand that I am your wife no more, and shall henceforth lead my own life in my own way.’

‘Helen, have I not explained——’

But she had left the room.

Gideon drew a deep sigh. A short time ago he would have given all that somebody

else was worth in the world for news of the death of Alan Reid. Now he had got the news for nothing. He meant to take the fullest advantage of his unquestionable rights; but, though he found Law, Justice, Interest, and Conscience for once fully united on his side, and though a near view of Copleston, with its future income and mesne profits, reduced to insignificance his debt to Messrs. Aristides and Sinon, he was disappointed to find in himself none of the elation which should accompany so swift and sudden a turn of Fortune's wheel. He knew in his soul that he would have sold all Copleston—with glad shame for his folly—for some touch of his wife's finger in which he might feel that he was more to her than a ladder which had broken down. He was in the condition of a merchant lost in the desert, who for one drop of water would give his whole caravan.

It was as if his brain were feeling and his heart thinking. No human being could have told which of the two it was that was trying to find its way into the safe in the bank where old Harry's will was sleeping and waiting to be

called, or which of the two made him stoop down and pick up a white glove that Helen had dropped, and put it to his lips before throwing it upon his writing-table as if it were nothing but a stray envelope. He lighted another cigar. 'She might at least throw me as much as one does to a dog,' thought he 'It's not my fault if I've made a few blunders—any other man would have made a hundred where I've made one. Well, I suppose it's human nature for a woman to be cut up when she finds she hasn't married ten thousand a year. I can't blunder in this, though. Perhaps when she finds I've got back Copleston for her, after all, and revenged her on that swindling Yankee scoundrel—I wish women weren't made so that one is bound to buy them if one happens to be ass enough to want them—perhaps she may throw me a bone in the shape of a thank-you. Anyhow, it will be better to live like a cat and dog at Copleston, with enough to do it on, than like dog and cat without enough to keep a puppy or a kitten. I wonder if I only fancy that I want her, and whether all that I really want of her isn't just

to wring her neck and have done with her. If I could only be sure that I hated her, it would be a weight off one's mind. It isn't much like me to be troubling myself about a woman, and a woman whose best word for one is "liar" and "jackal." The devil take her! And yet I believe I'd have my head cut off, long ears and all, if that would make her care. . . . No, I won't write a single word to those brigands. They may make whatever row in the City they please—not that they *will* please. I mustn't rob them of the pleasure of their feelings when they find they've been in a conspiracy to rob a man of straw on whom they dare not lay a finger. Well, I must get some sort of rest, I suppose, and I shan't get much to-night if I go upstairs. . . . I'm just sick of thinking. Sleep wouldn't be enough just now. Yes—I'll go in for a dose of dying. It saves the bother of dreams.'

He locked the door, and turned the gas very low. Then, taking off boots and arranging his clothes loosely and comfortably, he lay down on a sofa, on his back, with his legs stretched out and his arms straight by his sides.

He closed his eyes, dropped his head backwards over the flat single cushion that he had taken for a pillow, and let his mouth fall open. He drew one deep breath, and, at the end of a minute, fell into a condition that might have been taken for death indeed. Every sign of colour left his face; his chest did not rise or fall; he did not seem to breathe so much as a sleeping child, or even at all. It was a strangely corpse-like condition, less like sleep than a trance; if he wished to escape from everything for a time, even from dreams, he could have taken no likelier way.

CHAPTER XXV.

Yonder is where—(to-day
Learned I the tune)—
Things that are gone, they say,
Hide from the noon ;
There must we find thee, May,
Follow thee, June—
Up in the turned-away
Face of the moon.

THERE was Hillswick Church, still standing as it had stood through generations of Waldrons and Reids, changing so slowly that old Grimes himself could not recall the day when it was more rat-eaten, moth-eaten, and weather-beaten than now. The very graveyard showed but few signs of life, or rather of death, since the putting up of old Harry Reid's tomb: for people die slowly at Hillswick, and there was nobody to die at Copleston. For that matter, there was nobody to live there. It had been closed since the Waldrons had come to their own again so completely, and now for so long,

that the Hillswick people in general had almost come to look upon the emptiness of Copleston as part of the natural order of things.

One fine summer afternoon, when Hillswick was looking its laziest and its best, old Grimes happened to be in the belfry. He was not ringing or tolling, because, as usual, nobody was either entering into or departing from what, at Hillswick, was called life; he was simply doing nothing at all, because he had nothing to do. It was a pleasant place for the old man to pass his time in, so long as he did not feel thirsty, for the church was nearly as much like home as the 'George,' and there was never anybody about on week-days to prevent his doing what he liked with his own, as the church had become in something more than in his own mind. Nor was his usual occupation the worst way of time-killing that a man of far greater personal resources than old Grimes might find. There were open lights round the steeple from which, piece by piece, the whole surrounding country was to be seen. But, better than this, it put the clerk and sexton into a better position for knowing all

that went on in the world than if, with his deaf ears, he had spent all his days as well as his evenings at the 'George.' Nobody could pass through the churchyard without being seen by old Grimes; and many other meetings had he seen there besides that half-forgotten one between Miss Reid and the old squire. Through one of the lower lights he could see up the street as far as the market-place; from another he might learn who went in and out at Dr. Bolt's; from a third he had a bird's-eye view of the country lane that led to the Vicarage. If his ears were hard his eyes were still clear. On this particular day he saw nothing of any public or private interest until he saw Gideon Skull walking along the lane towards his uncle's. He had seen the same thing before, but it was a very long time now since Gideon had come to Copleston, and he made a note of it as a piece of news for the 'George.'

Gideon was scarcely less conscious of sentiment than even old Grimes. His singular method of taking leave of himself for a while instead of merely sleeping had done him good, and his exchange of London for

Copleston felt like an escape from his troubles, his wife included. He had left home without seeing her, merely leaving word that he was going out of town on business, but would certainly be back before next morning. An understanding with Helen seemed by no means such an impossible thing as it had appeared a few hours ago. Surely she would be impossibly unwomanly if she did not feel touched by his laying Copleston at her feet, and thus proving that he had done all things for her, after all. What had once seemed more impossible than that Copleston should be recovered from the heir-at-law? And why should he despair of such an infinitely smaller possibility as the gain of a woman's heart when the greater had come to pass with ease?

Having run the usual gauntlet of his aunts, he found his Uncle Christopher in the study as usual.

‘Come down on a holiday, eh?’ asked the latter. ‘I wish we could offer you a bed, but you see——’

‘All right, Uncle Christopher. I see the

“George” is still where it was. I’ve come to talk business. When did you last hear from Mrs. Reid?’

‘Why—what? Mrs. Reid? Why do you want——’

‘Never mind why, for a minute. I’ve got some good news for you. When——’

‘I should like to hear some good news, if it means a little money, Gideon. None of it ever seems to come my way,’ sighed Uncle Christopher.

‘It doesn’t mean a little money—it means a great deal. And some of it *will* come your way. When did you last hear from Mrs. Reid?’

‘Oh—not for a long while! Not for more than a month, I should say.’

‘Then you don’t know she’s been dead over a year?’

‘God bless my soul, no! It can’t be, Gideon—it can’t be true!’

‘It is, though. And now about that will.’

‘So Mrs. Reid’s dead! Well, we may say indeed that in the midst of life—and she such

a girl when she first came here! I can't realise it, Gideon; I can't indeed—and that she never sent me word of such a thing—but of course she couldn't do that. No. I only mean it's very dreadful, and very, very strange.'

'And that makes you sole executor now, and answerable for everything—suppression of that will and all. I don't want to frighten you, Uncle Christopher—there's not the least occasion for being frightened—only——'

'Only—what, Gideon? I wish to Heaven I had never touched the will. And there it is still, for nearly six more years before——'

'Before you can act like an honest man and a man of common-sense?' asked Gideon sternly. 'Is that what you mean, Uncle Christopher? Do you know that you have been exposing yourself to penal servitude by aiding and abetting that old fool? If you don't know it, I do. And a nice mess you have made of your playing at providence between you, you and she! I've just got proof that that poor young fellow, Alan Reid, is dead too——'

‘ Good God ! ’ Uncle Christopher started from his chair, forgetting even himself and his troubles in the news. Not that the tidings could mean the same thing to him as those of the death of Mrs. Reid. He was old enough to think the death of the young common and natural, while that of one nearly his own age, whom he had known all his days, struck him as against the laws of nature, and to belong rather to the dim region of conventional theology.

‘ Yes, he is dead, ’ said Gideon. ‘ And a bad time of it he had, thanks to you. He was killed in Paris, after the war. You’ll have to give up that will now. You won’t be able to find even a good intention now for keeping it dark any more. ’

‘ It is not my fault that Alan Reid is dead, ’ said Uncle Christopher ; ‘ it is not, indeed ! Nobody can say that I am guilty of the death of Alan Reid. Death is the common lot, and it comes to the young as well as to the old—more often to the young. Half the human race dies under the age of five, so the older we grow the fewer of us die. It has been shown by

statistics over and over again. Well, I needn't be anxious any more, that's one thing. And I hardly see how, even though they're both dead, Mr. Waldron can quite overlook my claims to the living. I suppose,' he said, with a sigh, half of relief, half of a very mixed regret, 'that the best thing that I can do is to put that wretched will behind the fire. Not that I can quite perceive the goodness of your news, Gideon. But it *is* a relief from a singularly and painfully embarrassing position, all the same. Yes—so true it is that even death is an instrument of comfort, Gideon.'

'What?' cried Gideon. 'You will burn a will!—you will commit felony, Uncle Christopher?'

'A useless will? Why——'

'Useless! Thank your stars that the matter is in *my* hands, that's all! I am come to demand of you the will of the late Henry Reid, of Copleston, on the part of his heiress, Mrs. Helen Skull.'

'Helen Skull! Excuse me, but I am getting a little bewildered, Gideon.'

'Yes—Helen Skull; my wife, Uncle Chris-

topher—Alan Reid's sister, and now heiress of Copleston. Do you understand now? . . . Do you understand that by delivering that will into my hands you'll not only keep yourself clear from every chance of criminal proceedings, but become uncle to Gideon Skull, Esquire, of Copleston? Why don't you jump out of your skin, Uncle Christopher, and dance round the room?'

'Because—because I can't, Gideon,' said Uncle Christopher. 'Because—— Will you ring the bell and ask them to bring you a glass of sherry—for *yourself*, Gideon? They'll do that—for you.'

'I suppose you think it odd that I married Helen Reid without letting my relations know? I suppose it wasn't dutiful, and all that; but circumstances, you know—anyhow, it's a fact, and my wife's rights are my own. Vicar of Hillswick? Why, we'll make an Archdeacon or a Vicar Choral of you before we've done. Come—toss off your sherry, and we'll drive over to the bank at Deepweald this very afternoon.'

'But—we take tea at six—and your aunts——'

‘ Hang my aunts! We’ll dine at Deepweald, and you *shall* dine. How long is it since you tasted champagne, Uncle Christopher? We’ll put some colour into your cheeks, if we can’t all at once put a little flesh on to your bones. Let us be joyful together, and let our enemies be scattered—Yankees who swindle us, and break our reading lamps, and—yes, we’ll have that will in our hands before bed-time. We’ll go and look for some other document, and find the will—quite by chance, you know—tied up inside. We’ll take it to the best lawyer in the town, and Mr. Victor Waldron shall have a letter before morning. Put on your hat, and we’ll get the fly at the “George.” ’

‘ But—we needn’t go to Deepweald. It’s in a better place than the bank, Gideon. I can get it in half an hour. And I may really expect to have my claims acknowledged when the time comes—and Mr. Waldron will take no steps——’

‘ Your claims? Oh, the living? Consider it yours. And what can Waldron do? Where’s the will? Here?’

‘ You see, Gideon, after you left me, when you came down before, certain things you said made me feel that, after all, the bank at Deepweald was not the safest place to select for the custody of a document on which—I may say without exaggeration—so much may be asserted to depend. It might be burned—it might be entered by thieves. It might be that circumstances, such as illness, or any other accident of life, might make it necessary, or obligatory, that the safe should be opened by other hands than my own. I assure you, Gideon, that I have lain without sleep all night, with that safe weighing on my chest, till I have positively groaned. Suppose any of the clerks at the bank should have skeleton keys, and be in the habit of amusing themselves with opening the safes to see what was inside?’

‘ Well—where is it?’

‘ Ah, I don’t think even *you* would guess that, Gideon!’

‘ In your breast-pocket, perhaps?’

‘ No. I have reason to believe that breast-pockets are not altogether secure from scrutiny. I thought of that; but it occurred to me that

I might catch some portion of my coat on a particular nail in the reading-desk, which has been an anxiety to me for many years. And in that case I should inevitably have to send the garment to the tailor for repair, and, being subject to a certain inconvenient, but not wholly unscholarly, absence of mind, I might forget to transfer the document from one coat to another. And the curiosity and gossip of this town are a notorious scandal. No——’

‘Where is it, then?’

‘It is in a place which cannot by any chance be burnt, where nobody goes, where no thief has cause to enter, where, in short, the lost books of Livy themselves might remain for ever without being found. Nay, where, when it is wanted, the merest accident will be the most reasonable reason for its unexpected discovery.’

Gideon looked at the old gentleman with new eyes. ‘He’s not quite such a fool as he looks,’ thought he. ‘Upon my soul, I believe he thought I wanted to steal the will, and so took care that any burglary I might com-

mit in the Deepweald Bank should be in vain.'

. . 'I think you did quite right, Uncle Christopher. But the question is——'

'Exactly so, Gideon. The question is, Where? And the answer is,' said Uncle Christopher, 'that I congratulate you on a marriage, socially unexceptionable, creditable to your own family, and which—which, in short, appears likely to be advantageous to you, certainly from a worldly point of view, doubtless from a higher aspect also. I need not say more, except that I shall be heartily glad to welcome as my niece the daughter of my poor dear old friend. You spoke of money coming *my* way, Gideon. It is needed sorely. I need many little comforts which your aunts, good women as they are, fail to see. I can put the will into your hands in half an hour, if you please.'

'Bless your heart, uncle! do you want me to buy the thing down on the nail? Don't you know that, if you don't give it up, I can have you sent to gaol? and that if you do, you'll be the Vicar of Hillswick as sure as my name's Gideon

Skull? I shouldn't send you to gaol, of course, being my own uncle, but I can force you to give up that will. Do you suppose I carry a cheque-book about with me? Come!

'You needn't be so impatient, Gideon. You will receive the will in less than half an hour. Well, man does indeed propose!'

The Rev. Christopher Skull put on his hat and coat, and led his nephew down the lane till they reached old Grimes's cottage, where they got the church-keys from the nail where the sexton hung them when he went to the 'George.' They went into the old church, where Gideon had not been since he was a boy. He ought to have felt a great many appropriate sentiments on seeing the old familiar pews and windows, and smelling the old familiar smell; but the truth is that he felt none; and that was the better for him, for his old sensations would not have been edifying to recall. They went into the belfry where Victor Waldron had first seen Helen. Gideon had never been there before, not even as a boy.

'There,' said his uncle, unlocking and

slowly lifting the lid of a huge and heavy wooden chest, 'There is the will.'

Gideon's heart beat a little. It was the eve of his grand victory. Might it not mean Helen? It certainly meant Copleston.

He saw a mass of parochial lumber in the shape of old account-books, registers, and other contributions to obscure history. 'Out with it,' said he.

'In half a minute, Gideon. I must pull out a book or two; it was under the fourth from the top, in the south-east corner. One, two, three, four—why—what—where——'

Gideon held out his hand.

'Bless my soul, Gideon! It's not there!'

'Perhaps it's under number five,' said Gideon. But he felt his heart beat not quite so triumphantly as before.

But it was not under number five—nor under number six—nor under number seven. The Reverend Christopher rubbed his eyes till he filled them with dust from his fingers. Gideon clenched his teeth, threw off his coat, and threw out everything in the box one by one. But nothing came.

‘Was this the box?’ he asked, almost savagely.

‘Most assuredly,’ faltered Uncle Christopher.

‘And you were sure it was there?’

‘I put it there with my own hands.’

‘But you didn’t, you see. Are there any other boxes like this in this lumber-hole?’

‘There are three or four.’

‘Then here goes for them all. . . . Uncle Christopher,’ he said, ‘if you are so crazy as to be hiding this will—I swear to you that you shall take the consequences, be they what they may.’

Every box had been emptied, and no will had been found.

‘On the word of a gentleman and a clergyman,’ said his uncle, ‘I did as I told you; with my own hands I placed the will in that chest, locked it, and have never parted with the key. Why should I hide the will from you? Is it more important to you than to me? Would I have kept it for an instant, except for the sake of my pledged word? Has it been any pleasure to me? I can do

nothing—there it was, and there it is not now.’

‘Of course. . . . It *is* as important to you as to me. Sit down and think—think what it means; the loss of a will trusted to your care—the title to an estate worth thousands and thousands a year!—Do you ever dream?’

‘Gideon—I did with that will as I told you, as surely as I am standing here. There are some things, Gideon, that cannot be dreamed.’

Gideon sat down on the chest, and rested his chin on his hands. This was a thing of which *he* had never dreamed, and which found him unprepared. At first he almost fancied that the responsibility of the will had turned his uncle into a monomaniac; but that was unlikely, and, if it were, to hide the will in this particular place in this particular way would be exactly what a monomaniac would not do. The whole affair was almost too cruel to be true.

He set to work again, and returned every scrap of paper to its box, examining each as he put it back carefully, unfolding each, and shaking every book on the chance of seeing

the will fall from between the leaves. It was all in vain.

‘Give me the key of the chest. I must think over this,’ said he quietly—almost as if speaking in a dream. He locked the chest. ‘And now,’ he said, ‘I will keep the key. You would swear—in a court of justice, if need be—that in this chest you placed the will of old Harry Reid with your own hands?’

‘I would swear it before Heaven,’ said Uncle Christopher.

‘Before a jury would do,’ said Gideon, with what was almost a sneer. ‘I am not going to rest till I have won back my wife’s rights. If you placed that will here, here it must be, and here it *shall* be. What was the will like?’

‘I—I don’t know, Gideon,’ said Uncle Christopher dismally. ‘It was in a blue envelope, sealed with the poor squire’s own seal—his coat of arms. Poor Mrs. Reid did it up when she gave it to me.’

‘How was it endorsed?’

‘There was nothing. We—she—thought it best——’

‘The old maniac—but she had cunning

enough ; more than you Uncle Christopher, with all your wisdom. . . . By——’

‘ You are in church, Gideon. . . . ’

‘ Uncle Christopher,’ said Gideon, suddenly changing his tone, ‘ I don’t believe that swearing in a church is as bad as trying to hide a will in one. I’ve not meant to be a bad nephew to you, though you have been a particularly bad uncle to me. You turned me out of doors when I was a lad ; you wouldn’t have given me a crust if I’d come home to beg for one ; you’ve made up to me because you thought me a rich man. I hate humbug ; and I don’t see how the chance of your being my grandfather’s son should make any difference between you and me. I’m going to make a search for that will—a real search and not a sham. If I have to give it up, I’ll get the law to help me. You’ll have to go in the witness-box, and swear that you hid that will in this place ; and, as it can’t be found, you’ll see what people will say. It was to your new squire’s interest to get that will destroyed ; and you’re a poor man, not above being bribed. Perjury sha’n’t help you.

Good-night; think it all over well. If you want to see me, I shall be at the "George," and I'll keep this key.'

'I put it there—that's all I know—and it's gone,' said Uncle Christopher. 'I put it there—and it's gone.'

He said nothing more till he and Gideon parted at the gate of the churchyard. Gideon leaned on the turnstile and pondered. 'I believe in my soul he *has* destroyed that will,' thought he. 'That pretending to lose things that one has never hidden is a trick as old as the hills. He got the will out of the bank, and burned it out of sheer fright. But, by Heaven, lost or burnt, I've had enough of being trumped by knaves. And if it's only for Helen's sake—confound her!—I'll win.'

Q

THE END

BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE HISTORY OF THE

REIGN OF KING CHARLES THE FIRST."

AND "THE HISTORY OF THE REIGN OF KING

CHARLES THE SECOND."

AND "THE HISTORY OF THE REIGN OF KING

CHARLES THE THIRD."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Three Flavours of Folly : A Sour Thought, a Bitter Heart, and a Sweet Desire.

Three Songs of Sorrow : Will without Might, Love without Right, Day without Night.

Three Sayers of Sooth : A Dull Ear, a Sharp Eye, and a Rough Tongue.

WALTER GRAY—as he called himself—had grasped at the opportunity which chance had given him of making Alan Reid his friend. Alan would never recognise, under the disguise of a false name, a man whom he had never seen, and who would be, as a matter of course, the very opposite of what he would imagine him to be. It would never come into his head that a greedy adventurer, fresh in the possession of a great estate, would be amusing himself, as an amateur, with the discomforts of war. Victor Waldron—to call him once more by his true name—had felt few emotions stronger than that wherewith,

among the Bats, he had for the first time grasped in comradeship the hand of the man who would have refused the grasp had he known his comrade's name. He was claiming friendship and brotherhood on false pretences ; but better on these than on none at all. It was intolerably infamous that Alan should go through life believing the man to be his unscrupulous enemy who would have given a hundred Coplestons to be openly his friend. After all, it was the false name that would represent the inward truth of the matter, since the true name belonged to a lie. Under a false name, and in a false guise, Alan would surely come to know him, and to see that he was incapable of the meanness and treachery with which he had been charged ; for he believed in himself as thoroughly as a man can, and could not conceive that anybody who really knew him could fail to believe in him too. He was conscious, too, that the personal liking he had taken to Alan at first sight was quite sufficiently returned to make a good beginning. One can tell so much by the feel of a man's hand ; one can even mea-

sure the degree, so long as one can keep the folly of reason from intruding. Victor felt that he and his cousin were made to be friends; and, if only for his sake, friends they must become. When that came to pass, he could say some day, ‘I am Victor Waldron, who robbed you of Copleston—what do you think of me now? and will you be so contemptibly and abjectly proud as to refuse to take an unbearable burden from the back of a Friend?’

The friendship had grown: the time was very near when Victor might think of claiming his reward. And then—but why tell the story of Alan’s end over again? Helen herself could not feel Alan’s death more bitterly than he. He began to feel as if there were a curse upon him, as if he were doomed to be the instrument of death as well as of ruin to all who bore the name of Reid. It is true that he once coveted his neighbour’s land; but surely the punishment should have fallen upon the covetous man himself, and not upon his neighbour. Hatred is too weak a word for his feelings towards Copleston. To have seen a friend and comrade whom he had

grown to love struck down by his side would have been shock enough at any time, without having to feel that it was his own hand which, by no means indirectly, had dealt the blow. Had he never come with Gideon Skull to Copleston in the hope of recalling to life a long-buried claim, Alan Reid, instead of dying in Paris, would even now be living at Copleston, rich and happy. 'Why are men always thinking of their rights instead of their duties?' thought he. 'One's own rights always seem to mean somebody else's wrongs.'

So he had not returned when the war was over, but had gone on travelling about, something in the spirit of a Wandering Jew. He knew that he might as hopefully and as wisely contrive plans for flying from place to place as for helping Alan's mother and sister in despite of their pride. And even if he could, what fresh evil might he not bring down upon them—he, who had already robbed them of land, life, home, hope, brother, and son? Hatred would be their least return for all he could try to do. He could never have imagined a network of circumstances under

which a man could be so utterly helpless to do right and justice as he was with regard to the Reids. If they had been commonplace people, with commonplace views about the inherent rightness of their own rights, nothing would have been more easy than to know what to do. They would have taken all Copleston because they wanted it, and there would have been an end. But these uncomfortable people would refuse the offer of a grain of its dust as an insult, if it came from him.

But now it seemed as if there were a destiny deeper than destiny, since almost the first day of his return to England had brought him into the presence of his friend's sister. He could not help being glad that caprice, or habit, or the general use of it among new friends, had let him retain his new name. Could it mean that friendship, above and outside circumstances, was possible between her also and Walter Gray, while Victor Waldron must still remain an enemy? It was not strange that she had not recognised him, though she had the advantage over her bro-

ther in having seen him twice, while Alan had never seen him at all. For when she had seen him, he had been on the first occasion frankly light-hearted, almost her playfellow, in the church tower; on the second, they had been engaged in a duel, wherein she was not careful to study his face, but trying to crush his spirit, if he had one. There was no reason why she should look for an enemy and a coward in her brother's friend—for Victor Waldron least of all: and, as all the world knows, no eye sees what it does not look for. On both occasions, too, there had been the absence of beard and sunburn, which were the best reasons of all for failure to recognise him; while there is little distinctive individuality in foreign voices to English ears. He was not likely to repeat a single phrase to her now that he had ever said to her before. No—there was no reason why Walter Gray should not become the friend of Helen Reid.

Yes, but there was, though. There was Gideon Skull.

How had that come to pass—that Helen Reid, in any shuffling of the cards of life,

should be the wife of Gideon? It seemed the very wildest of mysteries: it felt to Victor like some horrible sort of profanation, though he could not, for the life of him, have told himself why. Alan, he knew, would have revolted at the idea of such a marriage. 'Well—there is no accounting for what women do,' he said to himself, with that everyday philosophy which so admirably accounts for everything by accounting for nothing. After all, there have been many much stranger matches in the world, so far as she was concerned. But that Gideon should have married for love alone—that was the arch-mystery of the whole world.

Nothing was more natural than that he should drop in, during the course of the next day, upon his and Alan's old companion in arms, Dr. Dale; it was clearly his best way of learning more about Helen and Gideon. He made his call prepared with a string of questions, and was anything but prepared for his greeting.

'You haven't heard the news? No? Didn't you say last night you knew Skull?

‘What of him?’

‘I hope you didn’t know him as your debtor, like Aristides, and I don’t know who besides. I thought it would happen at last—and when I saw his wife out without him—well, that comes to the total of two and two. He’s blown up—bolted—I don’t know the proper slang, but that’s what it comes to. I was attending little Themistocles Aristides, who’s down with the measles—and there’s a panic in Greece, I can tell you, to-day.’

‘Good God, Dale! What do you mean?’

‘You *are* a creditor, then? Well, there may be something in the pound, after all. Take a glass of sherry. You can trust that, anyhow—I know where *that* came from, which is more than one can say of the Skulls. Yes, he’s another bubble gone. It seems that our Greek friends went on the faith that he was a pigeon instead of a hawk, and he on the same faith about them. He bought on their credit, and they were the sellers; they sold to him, and he couldn’t pay—or else the other way round. Any way the end of it is that they’re left with a lot of worthless stock on

their hands, and he with nothing at all. They can stand it, well enough, but he's off to Boulogne.'

'To Boulogne?'

'So they say. So probably it's not really to Boulogne. That isn't the only place in Europe and America where the dogs live, and where Gideon Skulls go. But it's usual to say Boulogne.'

'And his wife—has she gone, too?'

'That woman in black velvet? I don't know, but I should say it depends. He may have to cut off unnecessary expenses, you see. What makes you think about her?'

But Victor did think about his friend's sister, far too much to notice the way in which the Doctor persisted in speaking of any woman who bore Gideon's name. He invented an appointment as an excuse for not staying to lunch to be introduced to Mrs. Dale, and left the house as soon as he could in order to think over this new chapter in the history of Copleston. To think of Helen, Alan's sister, as the wife of Gideon Skull, rich and prosperous, was bad enough; but to picture her as

the wife of the very Gideon whom he remembered—always fighting tooth-and-nail with fortune, always on the point of winning, always losing, the Lord Adventurer of millions in the air of which he never realised a single dollar, and now driven into the maze of his shifts again—that was a great deal worse than bad to think of for any woman of the commonest spirit and pride. Perhaps it was not true that she had not left London with him; she might have gone out last night to blind the public eyes while Gideon was on the road to Boulogne. If so, what a flood of mean and sordid troubles must be upon her! He almost hoped it might be so, so that the plain duty of helping her to face them might be forced and thrust upon any man who had ever taken her brother by the hand. There could be no difficulty about his calling upon her; indeed, seeing that she must needs wish to see the man who had been with Alan when he fell, his not going to see her would be worse than discourtesy. But, if she had gone—well, he could do nothing, then.

‘I have heard the news. . . . Your brother Alan was my dearest friend. . . . Is there anything I can do for you?’

He had found Helen at home; she had received him, and these were his first words. But he had no sooner spoken them than he found them less sufficient than he had looked for. He had expected to find her either crushed or defiant; he found her quiet and composed; but still there were signs enough that she had been passing through no common trouble. She was very pale, and her eyes were bright rather with the effects of fever than of tears.

‘It is good of you to come and see me, Mr. Gray,’ said she. ‘I wished to see you—for my brother is still everything I have in the world. I was very foolish last night—but your news was sudden. I see now that death was the best thing for him. He was not like us—too bad for anything but living. When I say “we,” of course I have no right to mean you.’

Bitterness and coldness were the last things he had ever associated with his memories of

Helen Reid—memories that were reviving in proportion as her reality had changed.

‘I came to be of service to his sister, if I could,’ said he. ‘There are many things—small enough to me, I dare say, but great to you—that a man can do for a woman, and that I shall be too glad to do for you, till you can join your husband——’

‘You can tell me of Alan, if you please——’

‘I am told that a heavy trouble has fallen upon you. Is it true?’

‘I suppose so. Mr. Skull has been trying to cheat, and has been cheated—that is all I can make out of what has happened. The same thing once happened to me. Let us talk of better things.’

Victor had no word to say. That she did not love her husband, he being Gideon and she Helen, seemed in no manner strange; and besides, such relations were common enough in his outside experience of the married half of the world. But that she should openly speak to a stranger of her husband with scorn, as if scorn of him were a matter of course, not

worth her while to hide, could only mean some deeper tragedy than bankruptcy could be. It was more than he could understand. He would have pictured Helen as hiding in the most secret corner of her heart every least feeling that no stranger ought to guess or share. If she could not love her husband, the Helen whom he remembered would have gone to the stake rather than let her dearest friend guess at her trouble. If he did evil, she would stand between him and justice, even if she could not help hating him ; if the whole world were against him, she would stand by him ; and if she hated him, would stand by him all the more. He had looked upon her as a She-Knight ; that is to say, as a Lady of Ladies. And here was this Helen, doing the very opposite of all these things—the first to call him cheat, the first to desert him when he was down. He recoiled from her as if he had mistaken a snake for a bird. Helen Reid *had* been a Lady ; this girl was none.

How could he tell how little of ladyhood was left to Helen in her own heart and in her own eyes ? Very little blame lay in the word

‘cheat’ when she gave it to Gideon Skull. As he had played with Messieurs Aristides and Simon, even so had played he and she. She had married him for money; he had married her for Copleston. All she could do was to humiliate and degrade herself to her true level, which was his, by calling him by his right name, and herself by the same. She had spent the whole night in thinking of all these things. But how should a stranger know?

‘Alan often spoke of you,’ said he. ‘He made me feel as if I had known you long before—yesterday——’

‘And I suppose you did not expect to see *me*——’

‘I expected nothing,’ said Victor suddenly. ‘But I did not expect’—he went on, feeling as if some other and uncontrollable self, reckless of formal courtesy and reserve, were speaking—‘I did not expect to find his sister so unlike him. Of all the men I ever knew, he was the most ready to take life as it was given to him, with all its good and all its evil, and the most earnest to do his duty in whatever state of life he might find himself called to. You

have as much as told me that you are not a happy woman. Alan could never have become an unhappy man, because he did not look upon happiness as the end of living, or as worth going out of one's main road to look for. He taught me a great many lessons during the little while we were together. And, somehow, I had taken it into my head that he had learned the best of them from you.'

'Were he and you very dear friends?' asked Helen.

'Very dear friends. I know at least that he is very dear to me. Did he never mention me in his letters home?'

'He never wrote home.'

'Why, to my own knowledge, he never wrote a letter to his newspaper without sending at least a line to his mother or you. Do you mean his letters never reached you? How could that be?'

'They never reached us. Not one.'

'But that sounds impossible. Surely they would not neglect to forward his letters to you? They knew your address, I suppose?'

'They were asked for constantly by——'

Ah, I see!' she exclaimed. 'After all, what harm can there be in robbing a mother of her son's letters, when it may be the means of getting a little more money? However—it is as well to know everything. . . . I was asking if you and Alan were very dear friends, and you were telling me that you were. Did he tell you any part of his story—what he had lost, and how?'

'Yes: I know all that. Nobody better than I.'

'And you tell me that he was not even unhappy?'

'He was not the man to sit down and cry over a lost fortune. No.'

'A fortune!—who *would* cry over the loss of such a thing? Of course, I don't know how far men tell one another things that girls talk over. Did he never speak to you of what losing Copleston meant to him? Did he never tell his nearest friend that he lost the love that would have made up for all, because he was too proud to tell a lady that he loved her, for fear she should throw herself away upon a nameless and penniless man?'

‘ I never heard him speak of that—is that true ? ’

‘ So, you see how much you know about whether he was unhappy or no. Perhaps you don’t know much more about him than you know of me, Mr. Gray. That he hid his secret in his heart, I can well understand. He would not wear his heart upon his sleeve. It is not hard, I should think, for a man to whom every day brings new duties that concern his head and his hands, to fill up his whole time with them, and to carry a brave face to the world. I am only a woman. No day brings me any small duties : and a duty can’t mean something to be borne : it must mean something to be done. You expected to find a happy, contented, energetic woman in one who is fatherless, motherless, brotherless, nameless, with nothing left for her to do, with no means of doing it if there were, without a friend or a belief in friends, with no faith in herself, who has thrown away all the little good there ever was in her for the sake of—nothing. You were good enough to ask if you could help me. I believe you mean what you say—for to-day ;

and there is certainly nothing that *you* can expect to gain by me. But what can you do?’

‘Nothing great, I fear. But—for Alan’s sake——’

‘For Heaven’s sake, say anything but that! You don’t know what *that* means!’

‘I don’t know what *you* mean. But when I say “for Alan’s sake” I know what *I* mean. For Alan’s sake—there must be many little things I can do, in the merest business way, while you are still in London alone. You will be joining him, I suppose—your husband, I mean?’

‘I don’t even know where he is gone. But I should not join him, even if I did know. I married Mr. Skull because he was rich; it is not to be supposed that I should go to him when he turns out to be poor. Surely you, as a man of the world, would not expect a woman who is not an idiot to do anything so absurd.’

‘Mrs. Skull,’ said Victor, slowly and deliberately, ‘I was only introduced to you yesterday, so that I owe you, I suppose, the usual

courtesy that is due to a stranger. You are also a woman, so it is doubly hard to say to you any but smooth things. Nevertheless, I will be uncourteous enough to tell you, a woman and a stranger, and my friend's sister, that I do not believe one single word you say.'

He gave every word its full weight, for he meant to strike fire out of her if he could, and to provoke her out of her impracticable and cynical mood. He did not believe that she had married Gideon Skull for money; and he was quite sure that, if she had, she would not have made a point of telling a stranger so, as if to take a man for being rich and to desert him so soon as he became poor were matters for boasting over. But he was to be mistaken once more.

'Thank you,' said Helen simply. 'Why should you believe anything I say? Why should you speak as if unbelief in a strange woman were anything strange? I should think it very strange indeed if you did believe.'

'Very well—since we are to talk as plainly as we like,' said Victor, a little hotly, 'I do

not mean to be played with in that sort of way. You know perfectly well that you did not marry—your husband—because you wanted to be a rich woman : and if you don't know it, I do. And you know perfectly well that you do not talk of your husband like that because he is poor. And you know just as well that if you said to me what was really true, or in any way likely to be true, I should believe your words just as if they were Alan's or my own : just as I expect you to believe me, whatever I say. I was your brother's friend, and therefore I want to be yours. Are friends so many that you can afford to play with them like that, and then toss them away? I don't want to know the whole truth about your life—that is no business of mine unless you like to make it so ; but nothing but the truth I will have, for it is my due as the last man who heard your brother speak or held him by the hand.'

Assuredly Helen had never been thus spoken to since she had been born : never had Victor been driven to speak thus to any woman. To all seeming he was im-

prudently intrusive, rough, and rude, and with no shadow of real reason for interfering with her concerns. But though the real motive of his interest in her was hidden from her sight, it was as real, even in expression, as interest could be; and no one could look for an instant at Victor and suppose that he would forget the most conventional deference due to a woman without ample cause. He looked like a knight—no longer like the mere carpet knight of Hillswick Bell-tower—and he spoke like one, for all that his were not knightly words. He was in earnest, at any rate: for to make Alan's sister find her knight in her supposed enemy had grown from a wish and a dream into an eager desire—and how could he be a knight of this new Helen, unless he could unmask the old?

‘And do you know,’ said she, ‘how good it is to find somebody alive who is determined to believe in one, without knowledge and without cause? Yes, there is something that—for Alan's sake—you *can* do for me: something worth doing. Believe that I meant to do right, for his sake, once upon a time; and

that if I do nothing now but sit down and drift—anywhere or nowhere—it is because there is no right left me to try to do.’

‘There is always right left,’ said he. ‘But that does not concern to-day. What are you going to do—now, I mean?’

‘Indeed, I don’t know.’

‘You will be hearing from your husband, I suppose? And meanwhile——’

‘Whatever I hear from him will be nothing to me——’

‘But it *must* be something to you.’ Somehow he felt as if, in this second passage of arms between them, it was he who had got the upper hand, and as if he might reckon upon keeping it so long as he dispensed with formal courtesies. ‘Of course, I don’t know what has happened between you, and I don’t want to know. But it is clear that you must wait to hear from him; you must not leave this house; perhaps he will come back to it, and is not really gone. Whatever you feel about him, his affairs are in your hands until you hear from him. Perhaps the remains of his credit depend upon your remaining here.’

Don't trouble yourself about business ; I will see to that, so far as *you* are concerned. I am an idler in London, with nothing on earth to do——'

A servant came in with a note, which had never been through the post, and gave it to Helen. She read it, and handed it to Victor. He read—

' I meant to have been back to-night, but am detained. I have my reasons for not wishing you to know where I am until I return with *good* news. You will not be troubled while I am away. I have communicated with those Greek scoundrels, and they, for their own sakes, will hold their hands. It will pay them better to put me on my legs again than to throttle me while I lie with empty pockets on the ground. I wish I had seen you before leaving ; but it is better so. I may be back any day, but it depends on many things. I have only now to tell you that I was never so certain of *everything* as I am now. Go on in all ways as you are ; and if anybody inquires after me, refer them to Messrs. Aristides and Sinon.—G.'

‘What ought I to do?’ asked she.

Victor hardly noticed her question or its change of tone. He felt himself to be so much in the right that her sudden trust in him seemed less like the result of a battle without smoke or fire than the most right and natural of relations between him and the sister of Alan Reid.

‘As he tells you,’ he said. ‘There is nothing else to be done. Stay here, and make no change. Evidently something has happened that may make matters less bad than they seem. Though it is true that Gideon Skull was always a sanguine man—at least, so I have been told by those who knew him in America. You must stay here, anyhow. There is nothing else you can do. If you are troubled about anything, send to me; you have my card. When he comes back, or if he sends for you——’

‘If I would not go to him when he is poor, do you think I would go to him when he became rich?’ asked she.

He made his parting a pretext for taking and bending over her hand. He might be the knight of the true Helen, after all.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Julian.—I scorn such dull, cold prating—Dust that's rasped
 By saws, harsh grinding on the shuddering heart
 Of tortured saplings, when their sap is dry.
 Prudence!—Fiends take the word, for 'tis their own
 Whereby they conjure. In the larger scale
 Lowest is Prudence, Law one breadth above,
 Loftiest is Liberty,
 Who knows no Prudence and transcends o'er Law
 As Heaven transcends o'er Earth and sees not Hell.
 Such is *my* creed.

Andreas.— Ay: Thine and Phaëton's,
 Who, scorning Earth, set Moon and Stars on fire.

NEVERTHELESS, it must have been either a very wilful instinct, or else a miraculously keen one, that enabled Victor Waldron to recognise any traces of Helen Reid in the wife of Gideon Skull. As for her, she did not even comprehend, when he left her, that she had been brought into contact with a visitor from a new world. She could only know that she was utterly worn out with a lost battle, the course of which she was too tired to try to under-

stand. She fancied she had scarcely energy enough left wherewith to loathe the man who had tricked her into the sacrifice of all that a woman has to give, knowing all the while that he for whom she made it was beyond the reach of its good and of its evil alike, and only—as it seemed to her—that another might through her step into her dead brother's shoes. How could she dream that Copleston had hitherto been but an excuse for passion? And, if she could have known it, it would only have given her almost enough energy for loathing him even to the fulness of her heart's desire.

Victor could not guess how much of mere weariness there was in her final submission to him at the close of their interview, nor she that there could be anything more. She could understand that Alan had been really dear to him, and this was enough to give him some sort of place apart from the rest of the world. He could not, therefore, be quite on the level where men think of nothing but getting the better of their neighbours. For she believed in Alan still. A man whom Alan had taken for a comrade would not have

robbed widows and orphans like Victor Waldron, or have trafficked in a woman's soul like Gideon Skull. Such a man would probably draw the line somewhere before quite reaching such things as these—at least, unless the temptation to do them became exceptionally strong. But, after all, except as having been the last to take her brother's hand, he was nothing to her. When a swarm of hungry flies are in full buzz, it can matter little that one of them has a somewhat smaller appetite than the rest, or a shorter sting. She had to think of herself and for herself for the rest of her days. One must think of somebody; and nobody but herself was left to her. She was still too young to give up the need of living.

How should she live? Only one thing was certain—richer or poorer, it could not be with Gideon Skull. No reason could convince her that she was bound to a man who had, morally speaking, tricked her into a false marriage. She fancied herself arguing as fairly and as logically as if she were another woman when she told herself that she was in

no respect bound to Gideon Skull, and that she had only imagined herself married to him. She might remain in his house as a guest for a few hours, if she could so far reduce the time, or for a few days, if she could not make them hours, without much new shame, so long as he stayed away; but to make any further use of his roof or his purse would be nothing less than infamy. She was less a wife, she thought with bitterness, than even her mother had been. She had lost her way in life, and was wandering towards that land of promise, that earthly paradise, wherein some place Love before Law, others Avarice, others Gluttony—in short, whatever passion or sentiment may best please them: only, Love has the best sound.

She was ceasing to be a girl, and had been a wife, and was friendless, and childless, and could not exercise the spirit of life, and had never known—except in her dreams of others—what Love means. Her heart was so utterly empty as to be famished, and open for any spirit which chance might bring to dwell therein. When all is said that anybody can find to say, one *must* live until one dies.

She was not surprised to see Victor Waldron, or rather Walter Gray, again. Whoever and whatever he might be, Alan's death was the most natural of bonds between them—it was the only bond, except of loathing and contempt, that linked Helen with another living soul. Indeed, without giving a conscious thought to the matter, she was not displeased to see him; for she was alone. Not only alone in every common sense, but in every sense that can be conceived. Had she known him to be as evil as she believed him not to be, it would have made but small difference to her. He must in any case be the best man she knew; for she knew nobody now except Gideon Skull.

‘Have you heard anything yet?’ asked he. He named Gideon as seldom as he could, and had caught from her the trick of never speaking of him as her husband. So that ‘Have you heard anything?’ came to mean, ‘Have you heard anything yet from Gideon Skull?’

‘Nothing worth mentioning,’ said she.

‘Only that usual word about whatever he calls good news. I cannot wait any more.’

‘What can you do but wait?’

‘I mean—How *can* I wait? Every mouthful of bread I eat in this house is choking me. I do want advice about how I ought to do things—not about what I ought to do. And I don’t mind asking you for what advice I want, because what I do cannot concern you—so, you can judge fairly. I am not passionately eager to live, but I don’t want to starve while I do. I once before asked what I can do for a living. Now I ask you.’

Had Victor Waldron been asked, by way of a general question, what a sensible man ought to do when another man’s wife comes to him for counsel, he would certainly have answered, ‘Say good morning after as few minutes as may be, and don’t call upon the same lady again.’ But of course, in the particular instance, there were many reasons to his hand for acting otherwise. Helen was really in trouble, and had nobody else to advise her. Secondly, she was his friend’s sister; and a friend’s sister is in some sort

one's own. Thirdly, everything he could do would be all too little to make up for what he had cost her. All his faculties of counsel and of action were in some sort debts due to her. Chivalry is a dangerous quality for its owner; but it compels—especially when its owner is willing to be compelled.

‘Before I can answer that,’ he said, ‘if I can answer it at all—is there such an estrangement between you, for good and real cause, that you can never be reconciled, come what may? I’m not much of an adviser, I’m afraid; but the best would have to know how things really are.’

‘Then, I will tell you how things really are—don’t think I am going to betray the secrets of man and wife—I am no more Helen Skull than—than—I was Helen Reid. Don’t look alarmed. I was christened Helen and called Miss Reid, and I suppose the law would call me Helen Skull. But I married—as they call it—under the bargain that he was able and willing to make up to Alan for the loss of his inheritance, so that none might suffer but I.’

‘ I won’t—I can’t believe that you—you, of all women in the world—would fail in your part of the bargain ; for it was a bargain, and a bad one. Would Alan have let himself gain by your sale?’

‘ He would never have known it was a sale. He believed Gideon Skull his friend. Why should not his sister marry his friend? And how have *I* failed?’

‘ Was it his fault that he was mistaken in thinking himself rich? That has been always his very nature—so I have always heard. If he loved you so much that a man like Gideon Skull would——’

‘ Mr. Gray, Gideon Skull knew that Alan was dead ; he knew it before he married me. It was through you I learned that, at our first meeting ; and first he lied about it, and then he admitted it to be true. It is he who suppressed Alan’s letters home ; I learned that, at our second meeting, through you. Heaven knows why he wanted me. But he knew from the first why I married him—and he knew that—now tell me if I am married to him!’

‘Good God!’ cried Victor, without any thought but one. ‘Why, he must be the most infernal scoundrel unhung! No—I do *not* know what a scoundrel like that could want with a woman like you, except what all scoundrels——’ He rose from his seat, and walked up and down the room in a state of boiling indignation. ‘No,’ he said fiercely—‘no woman could be bound to such a man. There *is* something above law.’

‘You see!’ said Helen quietly. ‘And now you can tell me what to do.’

‘But I cannot—nobody can. At least, not while one can only think in heat and anger. I *will* think for you, if I can. You are in the power of a wild beast, and you must be saved from him, law or no law. Alan shall not be dead, while I am alive. I was wrong when I told you to stay and wait. You should not have remained under his roof for an hour.’

‘I knew that I was right—for once. I will go. *Now.*’

‘Yes—now. But we must think first of what is to be done. What friends have you

with whom you can stay till we have had time to think a little?’

‘Friends—I? None. But I don’t want friends——’

‘Who wants them more? You know of absolutely nobody——?’

‘Absolutely nobody.’

‘“Now” does not mean this moment. Let me see. I am much like you—I am but just in town myself, and have no lady friends. If I had only known—wait a minute, though—I know of one good fellow, who has got a wife, and though I don’t know her, I should think that, under the circumstances, there isn’t a woman on earth who wouldn’t stand by you. From this moment you must put yourself into my hands—and you may. I am going to leave you now, but I shall be back within two hours. Spend them in packing.’

He hurried off without another word, or giving her the chance to answer him. He was on fire with her wrongs, of which he himself had been the cause. With impulse hot upon him he knocked at Dr. Dale’s door, whom he expected to find, and found, at home.

“Are you inclined to do the kindest thing you ever did in your life, Dale?” asked he; —“you, or any man?”

“Very much indeed, Gray. But one needn’t be in such a hurry to do it, whatever it is, as you seem to be. It’s never too late to do a kindness, you know. And you can tell me about it sitting as well as walking, I suppose.”

“No, I can’t. I’ve got to walk off a rage. And this must be done now or never.”

“Well?”

“If I knew Mrs. Dale, I’d go straight to her instead of coming to her through you. Has she got a spare room for a night or two?”

“You want to pay us a visit? Come, and welcome; only remember that we put down rather an expensive new carpet when we set up house, and don’t want it walked into holes.”

“I want Mrs. Dale to offer it to Mrs. Skull.”

“Mrs. Skull! What the d——”

“Yes; it’s a matter of life and death—at least, of real charity. I have found out that

Skull is a scoundrel, with whom—and under more circumstances than I can tell you—no woman with a grain of self-respect would go on living for a day. She can't, and she mustn't, for an hour. But she's got no friends, and I'm afraid no means, and——'

'Hold hard, Gray! I must understand all this a little better, if you please. You seem to take uncommon interest in the affairs of Mrs. Skull!'

'I do, and good reason why. I knew her and all about her years ago. I can answer for her. Leave Skull she must, and she knows nobody to go to, and I nobody but you. I'd take care she shouldn't be your guest more days than would have to be.'

'The deuce you would! Take care what you're doing, Gray. It's uncommonly easy to get one's head into a halter, but I never heard of but one man who ever got it out again; and he wasn't a bit like you.'

'I tell you——'

'Clearly a case for dry sherry. Sit down, for once, and listen to me. You're actuated by chivalry, and pity, and honour, and all

that, of course ; that I perfectly understand. It's wonderful what a lot of all that one feels about a pretty woman who thinks her husband a brute, and tells one so. Confidences about one's husband's faults—and all of us have our faults—are the most telling form of flattery all over the world. I believe it is practised even among the Esquimaux. It is among my patients, I know, every day. And Skull is a scoundrel, no doubt ; everybody has found that out since he turned out to be the cheated instead of the cheat, or to be a little of both mixed, any way. But what would my patients say, of whom some are quite respectable people, and what would Laura's relations and friends say, of whom *all* are something more than respectable, if we took to aiding and abetting a bankrupt's runaway wife—even supposing her ring to be of good metal—under the charge of a knight-errant like you, whom I know to be a good fellow, but of whom nobody else would know anything except that he is an American whom nobody knows? Scandal is bad enough for a woman, but for a physician it is——Ugh ! It

is not to be thought of, kind or unkind ; it can't be. You might as well ask me to do you a kindness by jumping down Mount Etna. It might help you, but it would kill me.'

'What! *You* are afraid——?'

'Mortally afraid. I'd rather perform a delicate operation in the hail of a *mitrailleuse* than receive Mrs. Skull within my doors. And, Gray, I'm afraid for you, too. I've seen all this sort of thing before. If she's a bad woman, all the worse for you ; if a good one, all the worse for *her*. You won't take my advice, of course ; but I'll give it all the same. Go back to Astrakhan.'

'Then you say—No?'

Most distinctly—No. Of course I am very sorry, but it can't be helped. Take some sherry, and see it for yourself, like a sensible man of the world.'

'Then I think,' said Victor hotly, 'that you have shown more courage in saying "No," than if you had even been brave enough to give a few hours' shelter to an unhappy girl who has fallen among thieves. I always

thought the Levite was a braver man than the Samaritan. I suppose I am a coward where a woman is concerned. Good day.'

'Won't you stay and see Mrs. Dale? Well,' said the doctor to himself, as soon as he had seen his visitor clear of the front door, 'I don't like to see a fellow running his own head foremost against a stone wall. Only, I can't let him use *me* for a battering-ram.'

It had been all very well for Victor to speak, and to feel, scorn of the world while in presence of the Philistines. But the doctor's words had nevertheless come upon him with more effect than upon Don Quixote used to come the prudent counsels of Sancho. He had not realised the nature of his own impulse when he left Helen; he had been forgetting, for a whole hour, that he and she lived in a world mainly composed of less tolerant Doctor Dales, who act according to the social statutes enacted by their wives. Nor could he tell himself that the world was wrong. He could not help knowing what he himself would think were he to know no more of a like case but that a young wife had left her husband,

and had put herself under the protection of a young man and his friends. He knew what he would think of the wife, of the man, and of the friends of the man ; and on whose side, if things came to a public scandal, public opinion would lie. To be told that he stood in any sort of danger from her, or she from him, was an insult to them both ; but how should people know any more of her than they knew of him ?

He went back to her from Dr. Dale's, indignant with circumstances and with his own helplessness, and trying to think both of what could be done for her and of what ought to be done. He found her dressed for out-of-doors, ready to go anywhere that he or anybody else might please, so long as it was from her husband's home.

‘I have been obliged to put on these things,’ said she, ‘though it was he who bought them—I was going to say, who paid for them ; but I suppose that would not be true. However, I will get others, and send these back to him. As for the rest—I have not carried off so much as my wedding-ring,

she went on, holding out her left hand. 'From this time I am Helen Reid again—I have no business even with a name; but, at least, it was never given me by him. Where am I to go?'

'I—I don't know. I have tried to find you a place where you might remain as a guest for a time but I have failed. I could cut off my right hand, I am so disappointed and troubled, but——'

'It doesn't matter. Thank you for anything you have tried to do. But I can't go upstairs and take off my things again now they are on. I must go. There are inns and lodgings still in London, I suppose.'

'And how could I call upon you and see after you in lodgings and inns? And what means have you, if you leave this house with nothing but your clothes?'

'What does it signify to me who calls on me, and whether they call upon me in a lodging-house or an inn? And why need you call, unless you please? As to means, I am not quite so poor as you suppose. I have some bank-notes that were in my poor

mother's desk when she died, and that I meant never to touch ; but this is a case of need. I suppose they are his, according to law. But that is nothing to me. The law says I had no father, and that I have a husband ; when I had a father, and have no husband. It says that my mother was not a wife and that I am.'

'That certainly does get rid of one difficulty—for a time ; but——'

'For all time. When that is spent, I can make more. Before I knew him, I wondered what a penniless woman could find to do. I know better now, since there is nobody left to care what I do. There is some use in being one's own mistress, after all.'

There was a recklessness in her tone that alarmed him. 'What can you mean?' asked he. 'If you care for yourself——'

'What do *you* mean? I have told you already that I don't care about living, but that I do care very much about not dying for want of bread—so long as the bread is not Gideon Skull's. For example, I might do like the rest of the world, and cheat, or forge, or

steal. I once had an idea, when I was a girl, of going down to Hillswick, and of making Victor Waldron marry me, instead of Gideon Skull. You see that I am not likely to starve for want of ideas—though it is too late for that now, and, after all, I am not sure that it would suit me to change even Gideon Skull for him. Why do you look at me like that? Are not such things done by the best people every day?’

‘You *shall* not talk like that. When you are in that mood, it is some demon speaking with your voice; it is not you. I am learning to know you a great deal better than you know yourself, I believe. You simply don’t know what to do, and you talk all this odious and unworthy rubbish. Forgive me; but I am in a state of helpless rage with the whole world. To feel helpless is not a pleasant thing for a man.’

‘Is it much better for a woman? But—forgive *me*. It was rubbish, and it does me a little good to hear it called so. I only mean that I am my own mistress, and may do what I please. Of course, if I were in a novel,

everything would be easy. I should have a glorious contralto voice, or be a born violinist without any teaching, or have a genius for painting, or poetry, or poison. I should have nothing to do but to take one leap into fortune and fame. As things are, I have no voice, not even a soprano; the fiddle is a mystery to me; I can't draw. But when I was living alone with my mother I had to study dressmaking, and I think I know something about it, so I might keep myself that way. Or I could find a place behind a counter. Or, if the worst came to the worst, there's always the stage——'

'The stage! Why——'

'Why not? I have met a good many actresses at the Aristides' and elsewhere, and I don't see that most of those who do very well are a shade more fit for the stage than every woman is by the time she is one-and-twenty. I could go to Mr. Sinon—he has to do with half the theatres, I know.'

'Are you in earnest, or are you talking as you did before? Do you understand one single word you say?'

‘Most seriously I mean every word. I know I could act a little if I tried; and I know that many who are quite famous can’t act at all. And I should not want fame.’

But he could see for himself that she was in thorough earnest this time.

‘And do you mean that you don’t know,’ he asked eagerly, ‘*what* it means when a girl who has never gone through years of drudgery gets a salary, as soon as she wants one, through the good offices of a Sinon, or of the scores like him? You don’t seem to believe in novels—and yet you take your ideas of the stage from them as simply as if you believed in the fiddler and the contralto. You are wrong in every way. There have been those great geniuses who have done the wonders in which you don’t believe—except upon the stage. The stage is a good calling for thousands, but less for you than for any woman in the world. And when you talk of a man like Sinon—well, you show how much you know of the world.’

‘You mean to tell me,’ she said, with

sudden heat, 'that there is no calling on earth fit for an honest woman! Well, then, there is nothing to be said. We are no better off than men are, after all. I must do what I must, if I cannot do as I will.'

'You will do what you ought,' said Victor, with a frown.

'And starve?'

'And starve. Yes—starve rather than think as you are thinking now. It is only in your own fancy that you are not as good and pure in heart as a woman can be. Keep so——'

'And starve—in body and in soul too!'

'If I were a minister, I would preach; and you know what I would say. I'm not good enough to preach, and besides, I don't know how. . . .'

'Mr. Gray, do you know what it is to care for nobody in the whole world?'

'No, I don't. It's impossible. Everybody cares for somebody. One would have to care for nobody but oneself next, and that would never do. I care for you.'

He spoke quite simply, with no thought, and scarcely with a feeling, that did not lie upon the surface of his words. It was the need to be cared for, rather than to care for others, that he read in her words and in her tone. He could feel that she was being driven to devour herself for want of better food. What was there but one incessant 'I' and 'Me' in all she said, and thought, and seemed to feel? It was natural, as things were; but 'I' and 'Me' are demons whose greed grows with feeding. And he did care for her. Nobody but she had been in his mind for many months, and in his heart for many days.

She did not answer him. Perhaps her inner ears had become dull. She only said:

'What *ought* I to do?'

'Heaven knows,' said he. 'But——'

'Ought I to leave this house?'

'That, surely—yes; though I am advising a wife to leave her husband's house. I will risk that—that does seem to have a right and a wrong of its own. But, for now——'

'If it is wrong to remain till to-morrow, it

is wrong to remain now. I have money, as I told you, and that is lucky ; but if I had none, it would be the same. I will go. There is a house where my mother used to live, and where they know me. I will go there.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

How many ways is Love begun?
In forty score and in forty-one—
 One new way for each new-lit moon
 Till seventy Junes fall sere.
How many ways doth Love make end?
How many lives hath he leave to spend?
 One new way for each new-born June
 That comes in a single year.

WALDRON did not feel by any means satisfied with himself when he, having seen Helen to her old lodgings, had gone back to Gideon's house to let the servants know that their mistress had left home on an urgent summons, and to leave a written message for Gideon where his wife was to be found. He could not tell whether he had been acting on an impulse that he would regret to-morrow, or on reason of which he was only doubtful for to-day. Impulse had urged him to hasten Helen's escape from Gideon; reason could only, so far, tell him that he had acted like a

madman. On the other hand, it was an opposite impulse, very like a selfish one, that now warned him with the voice of Dr. Dale against folly; reason said loudly that had he acted otherwise he would have been thinking of prudence first and of Helen afterwards. 'Look before you leap,' and 'Second thoughts are best,' were not maxims that could commend themselves to one who felt that, with the heir of Copleston, Helen should come first, and all other things nowhere. Only, was it Helen whom he had been putting first, or a mere impulse of pity, chivalry, and indignation? Gideon Skull was Helen's husband, after all; and it is ill to come between the bark and the tree.

He had gathered a great deal of her story by now. He had scarcely gone beyond literal truth when he told her that she was not known to herself so well as she was to him. The very bitterness of her self-accusations, and her apparent eagerness to act in accordance with what she thought of herself, told him more of her than facts could tell him. Hers was not the honest cynicism of Gideon Skull,

but a state of rebellion against all the conditions and circumstances of life, and the protests of a strong spirit against them. 'That girl could love ten thousand times better than she thinks she can hate!' thought he, a hundred times. 'And it is through me that Gideon Skull has become part of her life. What can *I* do for her? Only look on with a stare of pity, and put my hands behind my back when she is holding out hers.'

And how was she to live? It was he who had advised her to trust herself to the open sea of the world, without oars or sails; and how could he, being rich, let her struggle and starve? And yet, how could he help her with money or without her knowledge? while, how, without her knowledge, could he contrive to help her at all? Could she only have painted, however badly, he could have spent Copleston in buying her daubs through other hands. But since she could do nothing, what was there for him to do?

If she were only free! She had become his one thought; and he would have found none of the coldness of duty in taking her

whole life into his own. It seemed to him now that, when he had first seen her touching the silent keys of the organ in Hillswick Church, she had played herself into some deeper life of his than he had dreamed of owning until now. He remembered how, when she declared war upon him in the churchyard, he had thought how dear a friend such an enemy might be. Her full power of living was displayed to him in every word she spoke, in every breath she drew, in every look of her eyes. She could not lose a battle without making a point of losing as thoroughly as she would have won; she could not find fault with herself without rushing into a reckless extreme of self-scorn. That such a life should be spent in beating against the bars of a cage seemed to him to be nothing less than horrible.

He thought of himself as little as any man can. But he also had his needs and his desires. For he was no longer satisfied with himself; he was drifting, and he could not drift with an easy mind. He was longing to grasp the rudder and to tug at the oars. If

Helen were only free, he knew well enough what he would do. He would not rest until he could claim her as Victor Waldron who had won her as Walter Gray. Chivalry would serve him for the self-excuse that interest and Copleston had been to Gideon Skull.

And was she not free? His whole heart drifted out into the sea of the casuistries of our time. What sort of a marriage was that which had been on both sides, admittedly and without concealment, a gross bargain of purchase and sale? Is not love the essence of marriage? so that, without love, what marriage can there be? How can laws and forms affect souls? If he needed her as much as she surely needed him, were they to be slaves to the existence of a Gideon Skull? And so on and so on he travelled, through all the jargon of logic with which simple passion tries to justify its birth and its growth in its own eyes, until at least one thing, and one thing only, was clear to him—that he did not care for Helen, because ‘care’ was all too weak a word. Against his will she had come into his life; but, being there, no will could

thrust her out again. Nor, in such cases, are men particularly apt to will.

Love—well, however it comes, it is all the same thing when it has come. Since the word has been written, let it be written, once for all. The idyllic road to it may be the best, but it is not the only road. Could Victor have dreamed out his first dream, and have made friends at Copleston with his far-off cousin Helen, and after a short and no more than pleasantly roughened love-course have married her in Hillswick Church—and all this might have been—it would all have been a pleasanter story: but the end would have been the same as this, when, her disguised enemy, he knew that he loved her whom it was not lawful for him to win. Love would have been born in pleasant fancies then, but it would have become passion: and neither more nor less than the same passion was it now that it had been born, not in fancy, but in pity for a most unhappy woman, and in revolt against her wrongs. It is desperately hard to tell from the look of a blossom whether the flower was planted by good or

evil hands. Some, indeed, hold that, whatever hands may have planted it, the flower is the same.

Helen had not been so deaf as she had seemed to the words 'I care for you.' She had never heard them before: and not even she, with all her desperate determination to disbelieve henceforth in all things and in all men, could fail to feel how much they meant—to her. That they were meant was as plain as that they were spoken. Do what she would, she could not feel alone. She knew nothing of this Walter Gray but that he had said 'I care for you,' and had meant his words. But that meant that she knew him enough—for in these words he had given her more than any human being had ever given her before. After all, he had been Alan's friend.

As a matter of course, he came to see after her next day, and to consult with her as to what she should do when her means were gone. He had called at the house on his way, and nothing had been heard of Gideon, who had now been absent many days.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Is there grave too low and lone
For the clouds to rain upon,
So that he who passeth by
Meets not e'en a Daisy's eye?

Him who lies there lovedst thou?
He will give thee flowers enow;
If no more than Daisies be,
They are white to comfort thee.

Who shall call a life that's sped
Vain, which speaketh being dead?
Who shall say the grave's in vain
Where grow Daisies after rain?

MANY more days passed by, and still Gideon Skull did not return. Habits soon grow, and no day passed without Helen's seeing Victor. He was beginning to understand his heart at last, and she had nothing to do but to look for his coming. She would not put his care for her into a conscious thought, but she knew it in her heart, and her refusal to look the fact in the face did not weaken its influence

over her. She felt by instinct that she must make herself deaf and blind to any hint of sweetness in her life, lest she should recover her waking senses and find it gone or turned to bitterness, like all the rest of the things that life had given her. She feared nothing more for herself than this, because this alone was quite enough for her to fear. Nay, if she thought—so she felt—her half-known friend might turn out to be merely as selfish and as self-seeking as his fellows : and she clung to her last illusion, telling herself that it might be no more, but refusing to part with it while a thread of it might hold together.

At first Gideon's prolonged absence seemed natural enough, considering his character. His grand *coups*, as Victor knew even better than Helen, had often been preceded by a long course of swimming under water. Before coming to the surface he had always dived. After a while, however, it began to wear something of the character of a mystery. Could it be that he had meant to desert his wife, as well as to slip away from his strangely indifferent creditors? He must be conscious

of her want of love for him ; he could not—so Victor fancied—have loved in any sense a woman whom he had won by deliberate treachery : she could only be a burden upon him in any new adventure. If he had deserted her, the last link that bound her to him had surely gone. What was left but a shadow—so Victor argued—between her and any true marriage that might come to her ? Surely life, peace, comfort, not impossible happiness, were never meant to be baulked because there was a Gideon Skull alive in some unknown part of the world. Reason itself had turned traitor, and had gone over to the other side.

Victor knew now that he neither merely pitied nor only sympathised with her any more, but that he simply loved her with all his heart, as surely as that he breathed. He desired her good above all things ; but it was now in the way that makes us desire the good of another because hers, or his, is our own ; and which, moreover, makes us but too often mistake what we fancy to be our own good for theirs. He still knew he was drifting ; but

the shoals ahead looked green and fair, and he no longer felt his own need to shape his own course with sail and oar. How could he leave her now, he asked, when she needed him, without being the most selfish of cowards? But he knew all the time that he would have found some equally good reason for not leaving her, even had she not needed him. Only, to this last piece of knowledge he blinded his eyes as much as she, to another piece, was blinding hers.

Love was surely not the less because it had come into his heart like the consciousness of thunder before the storm. One day he came to her as usual, without any sort of word to say to her after he had taken her hand. Everything seemed to have been said that could be said, except the first and last word of all. Nor did she break the silence. She never had the heart to speak of small things, and even she was wearying of her own eternal 'I' and 'Me.' Nothing was to be said of every-day matters that had not been already said a hundred times. And he felt as if, were he henceforth to call upon Helen

every day for fifty years, his power of speech would grow less and less, unless some sudden moment were to strike from him the one word which alone he had to say to her. It was strange to him that all the self-consciousness should seem to be on his own side, and that silence did not seem any burden to her. He had come to her, as usual, without any plan of speech, and he could form none now. But something he must say. Silence itself began to feel too much like the speech which he had not planned.

‘I was thinking’—he said at last—meaning both much and nothing.

‘Of what I ought to do?’ asked she. ‘I must do something soon.’

‘Yes and no I was thinking of that and of other things besides. One thinks of what can be; but one can’t help thinking of what might have been, too.’

‘Of what might have been? No. There is no use in thinking of anything but what *can* be.’

‘We can make the two agree, though, sometimes . . . if we are not afraid. It

seems to me that nothing can ever be, unless we take our own lives into our own hands, and do not let ourselves be blown about by other people's lives, like straws by the wind. I was wondering, and I was thinking too.'

'I have given up wondering long ago.'

'I was wondering—for example—if Victor Waldron is quite so black as he is painted: if you and he had met as other cousins meet, both free and both heart-whole——'

'I am wondering what would happen if the skies were to fall. I dare say, if he had wanted to marry me, I should have married him for the sake of Copleston, just as I married Gideon Skull——'

'For the sake of self-sacrifice for others. Helen, never let me hear you speak of yourself like that again. And as for this Waldron—how do you know that you judge him rightly when you judge yourself so wrongly? How do you know that he may not be feeling Copleston a curse, since it came to him by another's wrong? I know how I should feel——'

'I don't think I misjudge him. I did

once, because I did not know what men are when there is a chance of their getting money or land. Gideon Skull would have done just the same. Why should I think worse of Victor Waldron than of others? I don't, indeed.'

'And you think there is nothing I would not do for money or land?'

'How can I tell till I have seen you tried?'

'You are frank. . . . Well, let it be so. Helen—I believed in Alan; and I believe in hundreds, thousands more. What would you say if Victor Waldron implored you to relieve him of Copleston as from a curse?'

'If he found it a curse, I should think justice had for once been done. But I would not take what is not my own. I could do so much for Alan still.'

'Yes—Alan. There is one man, you see, who put a great many things before gold and land. And, if one, why not many more?'

'Alan died young.'

'Helen! For God's sake, whomever you wrong, don't wrong *him!*'

'And whom am I wronging?'

'Him, and yourself, and me, and half the

world. You think that your life is broken, and you show how strong it is by exaggerating everything you think and feel. You fancy you are coldly logical, and you judge of a whole world, where no two men or women are alike in anything, from the one or two who happen to be nearest you at the time. You commit follies like the rest of us, and imagine them to be sins. You are quivering with life, and mistake for death the pains that can only be felt by nerves that are intensely alive. Your heart is hungry and thirsty, and you try to cure famine by starving. Your——'

'Why are you always so hard on me?'

'Why? For the best reason on earth—because you are dearer to me than the whole world. That is why; and you know it in your heart as well as I do in mine. But—hard on you—when I love you! Oh, Helen, don't you understand?'

Helen turned white and crimson, hot and cold.

'You—you—say that—to *Me*?'

'I, to you. Yes, with my whole heart and soul. I did not mean to say it to you to-day.'

. . . . But it must have come to-morrow, or next day, or in a year ; it must have come. . . . How can I help loving you ? If you don't believe that, there is nothing left you to believe. Love *may* help you, Helen. If it is only for that, I am glad I love you ; but it is not for that—I love you because I do, and I am glad because I am.'

He did not approach her, or even hold out his hand for hers. He only stood before her, pale and still, and with eyes that seemed defying fate, with the look that went straight from his to hers. He was desperately in earnest, and he had made her trust him long ago—for what had come to seem, to both of them, ages ago. As for her, she *could* believe her ears. She felt life melting back into her. She had never known love ; yet Love did not come to her as a stranger comes.

'I don't ask you for your love,' said he, 'but we can't go on playing the farce of my being only your friend. I am tired of all the lies we are living—every one of us, all round. I want to claim the right to help you in all ways, great and small. A woman may take

all things from a man who loves her, as I love you. Yes, if it is only in the name of what might have been,' he said, putting his hand out for a semblance of reason, and catching hold of some sort of a straw. 'I have said it. No—don't say one word to me, unless you please; except "Help me; for, since you love me, you can."'

Helen's throat swelled, and her eyes filled with tears. She felt that her woman's fate had come—and Now.

Not for one instant did she feel that there was room for unfaith towards Gideon Skull. She had thrown off her marriage with her ring. She could not think of herself as otherwise than free. Something had been saved out of the wreck of life; if nothing more was to happen to her until she died, she had been told that she was loved in the very voice of Truth itself, and had therefore not been made a woman altogether in vain. But her first conscious thought was a strange one, nor can any pretend to tell how or whence it came. 'Would Bertha have felt like me, if Alan had lived to tell her he loved her? Poor girl!'

‘Show that you forgive me,’ said Victor, ‘by saying “Help me all you can.” For I can, now.’

He held out his hand at last, but almost humbly, and scarcely as if seeking hers. But the very reticence and reserve of his gesture had a dignity of its own, and made it seem a command rather than a doubtful prayer. Hers went to it as naturally as to a home, but with a trembling touch that thrilled him through. ‘Yes—help me!’ said she.

He scarcely knew what was happening any more, now that he was holding her hand and could read her soul in her eyes. This was infinitely more than he had ever dreamed—and yet, was it not the only natural end? He stooped and kissed the hand that trembled in his; though it trembled hardly more than his own. He even forgot that she did not know of him so much as her lover’s name.

‘Helen, dearest Helen,’ he said at last, as he still held her hand, ‘there is one true, great thing in life for you now. . . . And for me! . . .’ There was no need to speak now; and a

whirl of plans rushed through his mind, or rather through his heart; for his mind had little to do with his will any more. She was thinking him strong and brave, as a woman always thinks that man to be who is weaker than water, so long as his weakness is for her. And he was thinking himself no less; for what does any man believe more strongly than a woman's thoughts of him, so long as they flatter him? She should never learn that he was Victor Waldron instead of Walter Gray. He would sell Copleston. He would begin life again, with new aims and under a new name. He would take her anywhere she pleased, so long as it was neither to England nor to America. There were twenty countries where they, whom nobody knew, could live in all honour. If Gideon choose to sue for a divorce, all the better; if not, Helen had divorced herself already. They could live in Venice, or in Vienna, or even in Paris, where Alan had died——

All at once there rose up a ghost from the grave. Was this the life he was planning for the sister of his dead friend—for whose sake

he had sworn himself her true brother and knight for ever?

The hand turned cold and dropped hers, and his heart felt numbed. There she stood before him, ready to come into his arms, if so he willed. And he knew that his whole life had turned into love for her. But what sort of love was it that was preparing for Alan's brotherless sister a life of shame and sin? He could only turn aside and bury his face in his hands to shut out the sight of the accusing ghost that stood between him and her, and was saying, 'Victor—I trusted you!'

'What is it?—what has happened?' cried she. 'What have I said?—what have I done?'

'Helen,' he said slowly and sadly, as he lifted his eyes again to hers, 'I *do* love you. That cannot be unsaid or undone. . . . Oh, to think of what might have been! You are a wife——'

'No!'

'You are Alan's sister—and mine; for he was my friend. Oh, Helen, don't you see what stands between you and me? . . . I can-

not help loving you, it is my fate; but you have no right—I have none. . . . Helen, there was one man I once knew who put duty before all. You have told me that he gave up *his* love, *his* life, and broke his heart simply because he fancied that he would do a girl harm by speaking of love to her—and she was free. I say he was a fool. But he was the fool of strength, and of duty, and of honour. . . . Helen, whatever we may say; you have sworn before God to give your mortal life, all but your immortal soul, to the service of one man on earth, be he what he may. If he deceived you—well, marriage is not a bargain, to be set aside by fraud. If it were, if the husband's failure to perform his whole part set free the wife, or the wife's failure set free the husband, there would be few enough marriages, Heaven knows. . . . I knew all this ages ago; for letting Love make me forget it, forgive me. . . . I think even Alan would, if he knew. . . . If I speak strangely—. . . .'

Helen's heart seemed to freeze within her. Could this be the great love of a strong man, who had dared to tell her that he loved her,

and had then recoiled at the first sound of his own words? Had he put the cup to her lips, only to dash it away? She could only stand in dumb amaze, that felt like despair.

He himself felt as if he were playing the part of a coward; for who is so brave, or so cold, as to feel no shame in making a woman feel that he is less weak than a man ought to be? Even now, he longed to dare all for love, even what would be enough to make the spirit of her brother, and of every gentleman as dead and as true, rise in scorn and anger from the grave.

‘Be you true to your duty, for Alan’s sake and for God’s sake,’ said he. ‘Your duty? A lady does not desert a man because he is poor—that is nothing; a woman does not desert a man because he does wrong, or because *she* is unhappy. The worse he is, the more he needs the help none can give him but she. . . . She is all he has left; the worse and the falser one is, the better and truer the other must be. Oh, if you could only know the thousandth part of what I feel for you!

If I loved you less, it would be so easy to say, "Come, and let duty go." It would be so easy, for me, to turn my love into your shame. . . . Dear, I can help you still. Don't be surprised if you don't see me or hear from me for a day or two. I must be alone. . . . Perhaps I shall write to you before I see you again. Say you forgive me—for saying I love you. Not for loving you—there is nothing to forgive there.'

She might have felt humiliation at his assumption of her readiness to give up what he now called duty for him. She felt none, for she had been ready, and she knew that he knew it as well as she. But though she felt, instead of shame, the loss of her last dream, and though her heart was aching, pride forbade her to show how much her life had gone out towards him, and how bitter was the pain with which it had to shrink back into itself once more. She could not say 'I forgive you.' But, though he could not enter half-way into all she felt, he could not press her for a word. He could only go, not daring to look forward to when he should see her again.

He put her frozen hand to his lips, and was gone—more self-scornful than ever. For the hardest part of doing what is right is the shame instead of the pride which it so often brings—which is so terribly often the *Vienne que pourra* of *Fais ce que tu dois*.

Helen had not yet roused herself from her last cruelly broken dream, had not yet comprehended the meaning of Victor's last words, or of what love means to man or woman, or if it means anything at all, when she was startled by a thundering rap at the door, and a heavy but quick tread on the stairs—the step of him whom the man who professed to love her had bidden her to honour and obey. She could not rise when he came in, but she felt no fear.

‘What is the meaning of all this?’ said Gideon sternly. ‘How is it I find you here? I go away, and I come back to find that you have left your home, and have been living in this wretched dog-hole for days. What fool's prank are you playing now?’

‘Nothing,’ said she. ‘I don't know what it means——’

‘By—Helen——’—he paused—‘it seems to me that we have not been understanding one another very well, you and I. I’m not a good hand at courting my own wife; I wish I were. I suppose—well, I suppose you have been making up your mind that I am a black-guard whom no decent woman ought to live with, and have been—well! I don’t like you the less for having a temper of your own. Won’t you even shake hands? Well!’ His new softness seemed to her like a new insult; but she felt herself growing callous to all things now. Perhaps Walter Gray had been right, after all. She was certainly blind to the dog-like devotion with which Gideon’s eyes, and most when he was at his roughest, never failed to follow her. Quicker ears would have heard more in his ‘Well!’ than he himself could have known was there.

‘I wish I’d found you at home,’ said he. ‘But as you don’t like that house, you shall go to another. It’s not for nothing that I’ve been away; and I’ve let those Greek brigands know enough to prevent their troubling you. I can’t find it in my heart to

scold you, even for running away ; I think we shall get on better together now, in time to come. I have done for you more than any Don Quixote of them all. I have that swindling Yankee, Waldron, on the hip ; and you have in your hand—Copleston ! See here !’

She read :

‘ *This is the last Will and Testament of Henry Reid—*’

Her eyes swam. ‘What is this?’ asked she.

‘It is your Father’s Will. Copleston is yours !’

CHAPTER XXX.

I found none good, save her. The world was darkened
With breath from evil hearts, yea, through and through :
I, even I, who saw her eyes, who hearkened
Unto her voice, I did—as all men do.

But o'er my nights of travel she, above me,
Shone—a lone star from out a moonless sky :
And, since she shone there, should she fail to love me,
To wander and to wait content was I.

Save her, good found I nought, divine or human :
She was my hope, my faith, by sea and land :
Swift shot the star to earth—and she was woman,
And I the man who built his house on sand.

ONCE upon a time, Helen's heart would have leaped with triumph at sight of the parchment that her husband spread open before her. It would have meant for her that Alan had come to his own, that the usurper would be overthrown, and that law and might were on the side of Right and Wrong, after all. But now what signified Copleston—what signified anything in the world? The parting words of

Walter Gray had not as yet so much as taken root in her; far less had they had time to grow. She could only feel that the man to whom, in the name of friendship, she had given all that she believed to be left of her heart, had deserted her in her utmost need in the name of a duty that she was unable to recognise. Alan was dead. What could *she* want with Copleston? It was not for herself that she had married Gideon Skull.

‘You have found that my father made a will?’ she asked mechanically and coldly, with all her real feelings far away—mostly in the grave, but not all.

‘Found that he made it?’ said Gideon impatiently. ‘Found the Will! What has come to you? Don’t you understand? Ah, I thought I should win your battle at last—and it’s won! Do you understand me a little better now?’

‘No,’ said she. ‘I don’t understand anything at all. . . . How can Copleston be mine?’

‘Of course it’s yours. It’s left first to Alan; and, in case of his dying without issue,

then to you—in both cases as freely and absolutely as can be. Your father has put you in the same position as if he had died intestate, being your father according to law. Under all the circumstances, it was the best thing he could do. It wasn't drawn by a lawyer, I'm told. Naturally. Of course he wasn't the man to tell even a lawyer how things really were between himself and Mrs. Reid.'

A hot light came into Helen's eyes. But he did not see it—he never could understand why plain facts should not be recognised. Had he been born out of wedlock, he would not have minded—so, why should she? A woman is but a woman; and her chancing to be one's own mother cannot, in reason, make her different from the rest of such things.

'So, no doubt, he wished Alan to succeed him as if in due course of law, and you to succeed Alan in the same way; and made the will himself to make everything square in case of need. I always thought it impossible that he, under such circumstances, should let himself die without some sort of a will. Luckily,

it's a good sort—signed, witnessed, everything in form, beyond the chance of a flaw.'

'And how came it to be lost—and found?' asked Helen, with the heat still in her eyes, but in a frozen voice that Gideon must have been dull indeed not to have felt as well as heard. But then he was far too much interested in his triumph to notice shades of tone, however marked they might be.

'Ah—how! He had to put it somewhere, you see; and I suppose he took it for granted that my reverend uncle was a man of business, instead of a—the other thing. Any way, my uncle had charge of a certain document in a foolscap envelope, not to be opened till a certain time after his death.' Gideon had never told an untruth, nor was he telling one now. 'Well, it would have struck any baby that it contained a will. My uncle had hidden it away in some rat-hole in the belfry—no, I won't say hidden; that sounds ugly—had put it away for safe keeping. When I heard of that blue envelope, I looked for it, I need not say. And there it is, with Uncle Christopher for witness—and Copleston's yours!'

She was not struck with the strangeness of the story. And, though her eyes were resting upon her father's name written in his own hand, her thoughts were very different indeed from what Gideon supposed.

‘Well—have you recovered your breath yet?’ asked he. ‘If I didn't know what you must be feeling about it all—why, one would think you were disappointed to find yourself mistress of Copleston and thousands a year!’

‘Disappointed?’ asked Helen. ‘Yes. I am.’

‘In the name of ——’ began Gideon, simply bewildered and amazed.

‘Alan is dead,’ said she. ‘Let us say no more.’

If she was misunderstood by Gideon, what was he by her? He had come up from Hills-wick, with Copleston in his hand, to win her by a *coup de main*. Had not the recovery of Copleston been the object of her life?—must it not needs be the highest bribe whereby the heart of woman might be won by man? Why, he had known hundreds of women sell themselves for a hundredth part of the worth of Copleston. A duchess would have been

cheaper. And now, instead of reading in her face the joint triumphs of possession and revenge, all due to him, he saw—only a blank, and nothing more.

He had been looking forward with such sanguine confidence to finding something so very different to welcome his return, that he had even been able to overlook her mad whim of escaping from his house while he had been gone. He wanted Copleston for its own sake as well as for hers; and now he had to learn that he would tear up the will if such surrender would give him the food he needed to satisfy the later hunger that had been growing up in him. But such sentimental follies were not to be put into words. His only excuse to himself for feeling such things about a woman was that she was the road to Copleston. Self-respect forbade him to put things to himself in any other way. Another sort of hypocrite would have said, I want Copleston because I want her. He said to himself, I want her because I want Copleston. Since the first would seem to him like the hypocritical humbug he despised, he took the second form.

Only a fool could prefer a woman to her land ; and he could not admit the possibility of Gideon Skull's feeling like a fool.

'Of all the perverse, incomprehensible things on the face of the globe,' he cried out, without a sign of his characteristic calm, 'women beat them all ! But this beats—yes, even women. Here have you been waiting for Copleston, working for Copleston, living for Copleston, marrying—yes, if that's true—marrying for Copleston ; and when at last I come to you with it in my hand, and you have nothing to do but take it—then you turn up your nose and make a face as if I had been offering something too unpleasant to touch with your finger ! I should have thought you might have said thank you—you used to say that when I had done nothing. . . . Upon my soul, I sometimes think something must have turned your brain. I have heard of babies crying for things so long as they think they can't get them, and then, when they do get them, throwing them away, and crying for a new moon. . . . Shall I try and get you the moon, Helen ? But if I did,

I suppose you'd only begin to cry for the sun.'

'I said, let us say no more. You know why I wanted Copleston——'

'Yes, Alan *is* dead, as you say; at least, I suppose so. Do you want to make me hate his very name?'

'I did not mean to quarrel with you again,' said she. 'If—if—we must go on living together—if that is my duty ——'

'Helen, *what* has happened since I have been gone?'

'I have something to say. I will be to you everything I *must* be, if you say I must; but I will not take Copleston now, since it is mine to take or leave.'

'You are stark staring raving mad, Helen. Or perhaps you only want to escape from gratitude; for you must know perfectly well you can't do any such thing. Copleston is yours.'

'No,' said Helen, with an air of quiet indifference under which her heart was beating angrily; 'if I don't choose to claim it, you can't call it mine. I am perfectly serious—'

every word. I could not bear even to see it again.'

'Serious! Do you forget to whom you would leave Copleston—in *whose* hands?—To a scoundrel, a swindler, who cheats widows and orphans, and throws over his friends——'

'He is, after all, a Waldron. It would all have been his, if—if——'

'If there had been no will—found by me.'

'I cannot argue; but I cannot take Copleston.'

'You cannot?'

'I will not, I should say.'

'Then, *I* will! Yes—I. I am your husband, and I will not let my wife rob herself with her own hands. I told you Copleston is yours. You won't take it; then I must, that's all. In law, you see, Copleston is not yours, but *mine*; and as sure as I live, justice shall be done.'

'Yours?' asked Helen, with a voice in which, at last, her trouble made itself heard.

'Yes; mine. It was left freely and absolutely to you. Your marriage therefore gave Copleston to me.'

‘Is that true?’ she asked, suddenly turning faint and pale.

‘Absolutely true. Ask any lawyer you please.’

‘And—’ she said in a very low, quiet voice, that gathered new strength and fire as she went on—‘and—you propose—you dare to hint—that Copleston, my father’s house, should be taken away from any sort or kind of Waldron and given to *you*?’

‘I—’ He stopped short in real amaze.

‘Hear me out, Gideon Skull. You say that Copleston shall not go to one who cheats orphans and widows, and is a false friend—and I say so too. You say it shall not go to Victor Waldron. I say it shall not go to *you*. In what way are you more fit to be master of Copleston than he?’

He clenched his fist and swore deeply. He did love her; he had never loved her more than now, when she was treating him with something more than scorn. *He* false and a cheat? *He* to be named in the same breath with Victor Waldron? He was provoked into the mood wherein men have been

known to strike women, and the harder the more they loved them, according to what love means to them. But, for the rest, an oath was all he could find to say.

‘I told you,’ said Helen, ‘the last night I saw you, all that I mean; how you concealed Alan’s death in order that you might drive me into being your wife. I am not sorry now that my mother died before she knew all—how you have made me what I am. . . . You understand why, so long as it is mine, Copleston shall not be yours. I said, let us say no more. It was you made me speak——’

‘I am not going to submit to childish whims. I tell you again, Copleston is not yours to keep or give away. Your own words show how much you know me. I shall reclaim Copleston for myself, under your father’s will, and you will live there as my wife, until you are tamed. . . . There! we *will* say no more. We will go home.’

Gideon felt, with his usual honesty, that it was the first duty of a husband to be his wife’s master as soon as she showed herself hopelessly and helplessly beyond the pale of reason.

He felt, with repentant weakness, that things might have been better between them if he had only asserted the full masculine strength of his authority from the beginning, instead of drifting on in the hope that deference and indulgence might soften her heart towards him. It is true that his indulgence and deference had always been somewhat invisible to any eyes but his own, and had looked more than anything else like sullen acquiescence in an inevitably uncomfortable situation ; but there is a villanous tradition about—learned, Heaven knows how—that if you wish to make the best and utmost of your wife, you must let her feel that you are her master. As women are not ashamed to publish the theory to their own disgrace, it is not wonderful that men should believe them : it is only a little more than strange that men should not despise them. Gideon Skull did, on principle, despise women in general, though he had learned to hunger for the heart of one ; nor did he feel that he needed her heart the less because of his disappointment that, in so important a matter, she had proved herself no better than

her fellow-women, after all. He had thought her one to brave, dare, and do all things for great objects—to gain Copleston and to crush Waldron; and that she should fail when the cup was at her lip—it seemed incredible, monstrous, worse even than womanish, if such a thing could be.

It was clear that he *must* master her, then. And since—as he kept assuring himself with exaggerated persistence—he had married her for her lands, those lands he must have, whether her heart came with them or no. He had never felt so near being angry since he was born.

Well indeed was it for Mrs. Reid that she could not live to see the day when, by the act of her own hands, Copleston would pass into those of Gideon Skull!

Helen could only see the outside of her husband's life; could she have seen to those very inmost depths which, even to himself, he was so incapable of expressing, she might have felt somewhat less hardly: though even then she could scarcely have been more disposed to pardon. His love could not have

touched her heart, or his views of right and wrong appealed to hers. To forgive, one must comprehend; and the gulf between them was not to be passed, either by him or by her. Nor had she by any means consciously submitted herself to the counsel of Walter Gray, who had gone to work so much more like a surgeon than a physician in trying to mend her life—perhaps he believed it to be only his own right hand he was cutting off when he maimed hers. But some sort of outward guidance had become necessary to her; and, as all the direction she had received from without was, for the present, to submit to her conventional duties, she made no resistance to the order to return home. It is always easy to obey a command; though no doubt she would have found it far easier to disobey had Walter Gray remained by her side. Deserted by him, as powerless to keep Gideon's hands from Copleston as to recall the dead to life, she could only resign all effort and let everything go. Why did Gideon wish to keep her, when she could not imagine that he could care for her, and could now get all he wanted

without her? Why had Walter Gray given her up to such a man, when he had told her he loved her? Hate acted like love; and love like hate, it seemed to her. At last she was fairly baffled and beaten down—as likely as thousands of her equals in spirit to become a mere piece of wax in her husband's hands. She had shot her last bolt, and it had been shot in vain.

She knew nothing of her husband's daily business, of which he left off speaking to her. No doubt, with the will in his hands, he had nothing to fear from Messrs. Aristides and Sinon, who would prove themselves only too ready to forgive and forget their mistake of a hawk for a pigeon. Nor would Gideon find it hard to forgive men whose backing would be useful—indeed, necessary—in taking proper measures to secure Copleston. In business, as all the world knows, a man has neither friends nor foes; and, in the commercial decalogues, the ready forgiveness of injuries, when their remembrance is inconvenient, is one of the foremost laws. But, still, all these matters implied a good deal of absence from home on

Gideon's part; and he and Helen saw but little of one another even when he was indoors. She hardly observed a change in his manner towards her; a new roughness and imperiousness taking the place of his former sullen, or patient, reserve. But then she had become of late very inapt to observe anything. That episode of Walter Gray had left her heart dead a second time. She had but one fear left—that she might hear, any hour, that some first step had been taken towards gaining possession of Copleston.

One day, about a week after her return to the roof she had been so desperate to leave, Gideon, on returning from the city, found a very little boy trying to reach the knocker of the house door.

‘Who are you, and what do you want here?’ asked he, with the bluff and surly good-nature which was his principal characteristic out of doors.

‘I'm Billy Green,’ said the boy, making another failure at the knocker. ‘That's who I am.’

‘And what do you want with my knocker?’

I can't let you stay on my doorstep all the time you're growing.'

'I'm from my mother's, where Mrs. Skull was living; that's where I live myself, too: only our knocker's not so tall as yours. You knocked ours quite easy when you came to see Mrs. Skull, and the other gentleman, too.'

'Well, I'll save you the trouble of knocking at my door, and you shall save me the trouble of knocking at yours when I call again. Do you want Mrs. Skull?'

'Not particular. I've got to give her a letter, mother says, from the postman. I wish I could knock like him!'

'Then I'll give it to her, if you'll give it to me.' He took the letter from the boy, who went off whistling, and examined the postmarks in order to guess who could possibly be writing a letter to Helen, who neither wrote nor received such things. It was evidently from the country, and was directed in a hand that did not seem unfamiliar to him.

'Hillswick.' What might that mean?

Gideon was not a man to strain at gnats to make up for swallowing camels. The

letter, being his wife's, was his, no less than Copleston. Since there can be no sort of dishonesty in doing what one likes with one's own, he made no scruple of tearing open the envelope as soon as he was in the hall: Helen herself would be perfectly welcome to see how far he meant henceforth to be master. But his eye no sooner fell upon the signature than a black and angry shadow fell over his face, the like of which those who knew him best had never seen. He changed his mind about running over the letter at the foot of the stairs, and carried it at once into the privacy of his own room.

The letter was dated 'Copleston, near Hillswick,' and began without any sort of form. And it ran as follows:—

'I hardly know how to begin this letter. There are things I ought to say to you that I must say, and things that I must say whether I ought or not; and I feel unable to say any of them in such a way as to feel sure that you will take them in the right way, which is the only way I desire. I can only hope that, as the Walter Gray who tries to be, and still wishes to be, your friend, I made you under-

stand me better than when we parted in Hills-wick churchyard. Your brother understood me, as I am and not as I am named, before he died; and had he lived but one day longer, I have no fear but^s that he would have understood the insufferable burden that Copleston has been to me. Until a very short while ago I never knew how absolutely intolerable it is to feel that wrong has come through me to you and yours. *He* would have learned to understand it all, and would, as a plain and simple duty of friendship, have consented to make some arrangement whereby I might be released from the burden. I can now only come to you in his name. But in his name I have a right to *demand* your consent to a settlement which may set me free from the horror of possessing an inheritance that is only mine by an accident, while you are left dependent for your daily bread on the turns and chances of such a life as Gideon Skull's.

‘I besought you to give the rest of your life to duty, however hard, as I trust to be able to give myself henceforth to mine. But duty ought not to be the result of necessity.

You must be free to do it or not to do it, or doing it becomes nothing, and you must be independent in order to be free. If your marriage were a happy one, I should have nothing to say. There can be no question of freedom or slavery where love rules. But since your relation to your husband must henceforth be one of duty, the duty you will give him ought to be, and *must* be, that of a free woman, who gives it of her own free will, because it is right, and not of a slave, who must pay it or starve. If you refuse to take a sufficient share of what is all yours by every moral right, you will be wronging yourself and me, and even Gideon Skull—for he has his rights as well as I and you. You will be wronging me by visiting my most unintentional wrong with a punishment harder than I can bear—that is to say, by forbidding me to help you to live, and so in effect forbidding me to redress one grain and one atom of the wrong that I have unwillingly and unwittingly done. It is not usual to punish a wrongdoer by forbidding him to repair the evil he has wrought ; I have always looked upon that as the worst punishment

reserved for dead sinners. You will be wronging yourself because you will be doing wrong; because you will be showing yourself too weak to be just and too proud to pardon. I may say all this now, I suppose, for Alan's sake, without fear of your throwing this into the fire without reading another word.

‘Only for one reason, *now*, I am glad that Copleston is mine by law. If you were unmarried I should know what to say—I mean, of course, no compromise would content me which should not wring the utmost concession from your pride. I am bound to talk of a compromise instead of an entire surrender, because it is idle to pretend I don't know how impossible it would be to make you meet me more than half way. The reason why I am glad of Copleston being technically mine is that you *are* married. It is perfectly easy, I find, to make a settlement upon you which will make you independent of Gideon Skull, and over which he will have no control whatever. And that is what I propose to do *now*. How I may further deal with Copleston it will be for me to consider.

‘There are questions of duty for both of us—for me as well as for you—and we will not argue about so idle a question as to whose is the harder. Perhaps—in my heart—I may think that part of *your* duty the very hardest which obliges you to take any part of your own right from my hands. But it *is* your duty. One of the hardest parts of mine is to write in this way to you about business arrangements which cannot be put into delicate forms twist them as we may. But these will soon be past and over, and then will come the rest of our lives. I won’t say that I hope you may be happy in yours, because it seems to me that happiness is not a thing for people to think about, even when it comes of its own accord. My own part in the business of life seems fairly plain. I must be steward of Copleston while I live, and not punish the place and the people by being out of the way of helping *them*—it is not their fault that the place and its interests have fallen into wrong hands. The wrong hands must try to be right ones for *them*. I only wish we could be friends enough for me to come to you for counsel

about such plans as I may make for the welfare of a place of which I feel myself to be steward for you. And your part? Well—I spoke of that when I last saw you, and I can hardly bear to speak of it again. We have both made cruel mistakes; but we are not alone in that, and we must not make the worse mistake of not making the best of them. When I see so many others bearing so bravely the burdens of lives which jar with their natures at every turn I feel ashamed. And when I see *you* bearing *yours* bravely—then I shall be ashamed a hundred times over if I don't find ample courage to bear mine.

VICTOR WALDRON.'

Gideon crumpled up the letter in his fist, then he spread it open, and read it again. He was filled, not with anger, but with dull savage pain. Yes—there was the name, Victor Waldron—every letter was distinct and clear. He could not think how all this had come to pass. But he knew terribly well how to feel. For he had believed in Helen—and now she was just as worthless as all the rest of the world.

He knew well enough that he had a heart now, for he felt it aching.

And probably he knew what to think too. *Now* he knew why Helen had refused to take Copleston from Victor Waldron. The letter told its own story of the long and close intimacy that creates secret understandings and the right of people to preach to one another ; her flight from her home was fully explained now, and it was he who had been visiting her in lodgings during her husband's absence ; he whom she had made the confidant of her married life ; he who had lured her away. All these were things that Gideon Skull could perfectly comprehend. There was room for a great deal more than jealousy. The same scoundrel who had cheated him of his share of Copleston had, with hypocritical sentiments and false chivalry, been robbing him of his wife too—the wife for whom he now knew he would have given ten thousand Coplestons. He knew Waldron's tricks of old—that sham Quixote, who took all things he could get and paid for them in fine words. How had Helen met him ? At the Aristides', of course—it

was Victor Waldron who had been masquerading under the name of Walter Gray; Victor Waldron, the arch-thief, who had been dogging Alan, and worming out Gideon's pieces of policy, and making 'friends' with Helen to such good purpose that she preferred to see Copleston, that end and aim of her life, in Waldron's hands instead of in her own. He remembered Victor's old fancy for Helen Reid—it was all as clear as day.

And did she not understand the whole game—was she not a very woman after all? Thought was making Gideon outwardly calmer, but he shuddered at the sight of feminine depths, though there were few men in the world who could have guessed at them but he. The very instant she found herself the wife of a ruined man, she had made friends with a foe who was able, and whom she had made eager, to settle upon her, for her own independent use, as much of the income of Copleston as she might choose. And what was to be the whole nature of such a bargain, made between such a woman and such a man? Waldron give nothing for nothing? Not even Helen

herself would be able to work such a miracle as that would be. Alas! Even Gideon himself had to feel at last the shame of suspecting himself to be a fool.

But it was infinitely worse than if he had known himself to be one. All hope of Helen's heart had gone from him—and it had proved so worthless a heart that he was ashamed of having ever desired such trash for his own, even with Copleston tacked thereto. Helen's goodness was his one delusion, and now even that was gone. He felt, in his way, as Helen had felt in hers when it was first borne in upon her that she was tied for life to a scoundrel, and the meanest of scoundrels. But scoundrels feel very much like other people after all, and Gideon felt very unlike a scoundrel now—only like any other husband who has put his whole stake of Faith, Hope, and Love upon his wife, and has lost it all, and once for all. It was too hard to find life no longer worth living for, in the moment of finding out how much worth living it might have been. . . .

Life not worth living? If he thought so for an instant, it was for an instant during

which he ceased to be Gideon Skull. Copleston might no longer mean Helen, but it meant Victor Waldron still.

For a few moments he leant over the fire-place, perfectly still. Then he began to tear up the letter, but before it was torn half across, changed his mind, and put it into the letter-case he carried in his breast-pocket, carefully and smoothly. He lighted a cigar, smoked about a quarter of it, and threw the rest away. Then more heavily quiet than ever, he rang the bell and bade the servant tell Mrs. Skull that he wanted to speak to her, if she was disengaged.

Helen came.

‘Who did you tell me it was,’ he asked, ‘who told you of the death of Alan?’

‘Mr. Gray.’

‘Mr. Walter Gray?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you ever seen him since?’

‘I saw him nearly every day while you were from home.’

He had looked for some sign of confusion, but he found none. He almost found it in his

heart to admire her for the coolness with which she was playing her game—she could be no ordinary woman after all. But after the first instant, when he was nearly surprised out of his own quietness by hers, her open confession only deepened his indignation. ‘I suppose,’ said he, ‘you have been expecting to hear something about Copleston all this while?’

Then her face flushed, and he triumphed a little over her in finding that the name of the place disturbed her more than that of the man.

‘I have been expecting it,’ she said.

‘All the better, as I shall not take you by surprise. To-morrow morning I go down, myself, to Copleston. I do not intend to deal with that blackguard — you know whom I mean—through lawyers. I have my reasons for meeting him face to face——’

‘There is no need to tell me anything. If Copleston is yours, it must be yours.’

‘I’m glad you understand so much any way. Yes, Copleston *is* mine. But I am not so unreasonable as you think in telling you my plans. You will come with me.’

‘ I—to Copleston? Do you want to torture me? No—I cannot——’

‘ Torture you? What do you mean? I thought people always made a point of raptures when they revisit the scenes of their youth: *Cari Luoghi*, you know. I thought it was the right thing to do. And besides, as you’ll have to live at Copleston for fifty years, if you live so long, you had better make a beginning. And I didn’t say you were to come to Copleston. You will stay with my Uncle Christopher. My aunt must have the spare room ready, for once in a way.’

‘ You cannot want me. I cannot go.’

‘ I can quite understand that you may like to have London to yourself while I am gone. I, on the contrary, intend to keep you under my own eye—young wives ought not to be left alone, especially when they have a way of going out and not coming back again. Once is often enough to play that comedy. In short, I do not mean you to see Mr—Walter Gray every day at Mrs. Green’s while my back is turned.’

‘ You dare to think——’ She began

fiercely and bravely, but her words died suddenly on her tongue. And she herself knew well why such words on her lips had become merely the mocking echo of far-off days indeed. She never understood till that instant all the danger from which Walter Gray had been flying when he seemed to be only selfishly flying from her. But could he, she thought, have known all that Duty may come to mean?

‘I most certainly dare to think,’ said Gideon, ‘that your place is with me. You may think it a misfortune—perhaps it is—but we can’t mend misfortunes by calling them so. I go to Copleston to avoid the scandal that lawyers would be certain to turn into a most unpleasant lawsuit, and I don’t choose to incur another scandal by leaving you at home. But all that’s as outside the mark as a thing can be. The long and the short of it is, I mean you to come. And if—you don’t come——’

But the ‘if’ meant nothing, now. Threats were no longer needed to break her spirit, which he saw was fairly broken at last, as he

believed, by the Will which had given Copleston to him, and lost it to her. His triumph was beginning ; if he had lost her heart, he could still crush it—and his own.

CHAPTER XXXI.

And if my life be hollow,
I'll choke it up with stones.

HILLSWICK and Copleston were in their full summer beauty when Mr. Waldron of Copleston took rooms at the 'George' until the house of his ancestors could be got ready to receive him. Since he had, at the last moment, managed to turn aside from the edge of the precipice over which he had been rushing, he had tried hard to take a cool-headed view of life and its surroundings. He thought it quite possible for a man, with some right to be confident of his own strength, to feel deeply and keenly, and yet to separate his conscious and reasonable part from that region of his nature over which he could have no control. For Waldron, though desperately given to sudden impulse, did not believe in

impulse as being altogether the best part of a man.

That he must give up all thought of Helen had come upon him like a sudden inspiration in the midst of impulse—even in the moment when temptation was strongest, and when sympathetic insight told him that her whole life was in his hands, to take or to leave. It seemed almost unaccountably strange that such a revulsion of feeling should have come to him exactly then—as if the impulse to win her and the inspiration to save her from his own impulse were one and the same thing. Many people, it is to be hoped, will think it by no means strange that the moment in which a man first feels that he loves a woman above all things should be the instant in which he first learns that he must cut out his own heart for her sake, if need be.

But he was a bad self-analyst, like most people, when the self with whom he had to do was a new one, only distantly related to the old. And he was not the first man who has been bewildered by being saved from wrong-doing by an influence that has seemed,

when remembered, to be apart from himself and to have come he knew neither whence nor how.

He had not exaggerated the difficulties of his first letter to Helen; and, when it was written, he felt dissatisfied with it from beginning to end. It was a great deal too long. It amounted to offering a settlement of money to one to whom such an offer must sound almost like an insult unless her insight should prove a great deal more subtle and penetrating than he could venture to believe. Such an offer could not be made otherwise than grossly and clumsily, and yet it amounted not alone to the only, but to the best, help he could give her. All the delicacy and the poetry of his relation with her appeared to be altogether on the side of wrong—it would have been so easy to have offered her his whole life: it was so difficult to offer her only a yearly income. Then there was so much in the letter about this gross sort of help, and so little about hope and courage and all that may help the loneliest and weakest to bear the heaviest burdens—we are all shy of preaching, even in season;

and our own sermons are so empty to us, when it is we who need them. Altogether, he was dissatisfied. But he could do no better, so he let the letter go. Perhaps she would understand it, after all, and be able to read a little between the lines.

He did not, however, feel that he needed any excuse to himself for accepting the responsibility of Copleston with a good grace instead of shirking it and running away from it with a bad one. He could not feel it a misfortune for place and people that it was in his hands instead of Gideon Skull's. As he had said in his letter, he could not make matters better by making the worst of them. He did not feel in the least fitted for the life of an English squire, and his original views of making Hillswick and Copleston into a centre of energy, intelligence, and true republican example for the whole of the old country had faded away with a better knowledge of the capacity of those places for such things. But he did know that the man who waits to find something he can do before he does something, waits long, and mostly does nothing in

the end. For Helen's sake, he must not let Copleston go to the dogs because it had fallen back into the hands of one of the old Waldrons instead of continuing in those of the new Reids. He was no such *lusus naturæ* as an American without family pride. If he could only feel that he was working a little for Helen—if only he could make his own life full, without feeling that hers must for ever remain empty and cold!

I do not know that the plans he sat brooding over at the 'George' would, for all their good intentions, have met with unqualified approval among those for whose benefit they were being laid. There was the Curate, for instance, the Reverend Christopher Skull, to whose thorough-going and systematic incompetence the people were as accustomed as to the church tower, but who struck the American squire as a piece of waste stuff that ought as quickly as possible to be carted away. As patron of the living, he had very different views as to the man who should succeed to the cure of souls in Hillswick, so soon as the absentee Rector or the Curate-in-Charge should

be considerate enough to die off and make room. Somebody with whom he could work he would look for—somebody who could give him counsel, and keep his active energies alive—who would wake up Hillswick into life—it scarcely mattered what special form of life, so long as it should be life of some kind. He might not be able to make Hillswick much more intelligent, but he would at any rate manage to ensure an educated instead of an ignorant stupidity. He would take a hand at school-teaching himself, and scatter conventional routine to the winds. He would become a justice of the peace, of course, and in that capacity would wage war less against criminals than against the causes of crime, including the satellitium of beer-houses that clustered round the ‘George.’ And so on, and so on—if Hillswick could not be made the capital of a great social and political influence (and there was really no If in the matter), it should at any rate be made a model country parish, of which Helen Reid would be pleased to hear, should news from her old home ever come to her.

Two or three rooms of Copleston were soon made habitable, and in these, with a few servants, he felt himself destined to live for the rest of his days. He knew that he had become a monk without the vows, and that Hillswick must henceforth become his whole world of action for the remainder of his life. It is very easy to welcome the prospect of such lives when the outlook is new: one knows beforehand that the settled plans will in due course of time become fixed habits, harder to break than they were to form.

He had made all the proper calls, and could not help feeling conscious that his coming was a nine-days' wonder. But he could not complain of any want of welcome from high or low. Copleston had been uninhabited long enough for the people to be used to its emptiness; but they were only too glad to have once more among them a natural leader of society. And, when that leader came in the person of a man and a Waldron, young, rich, handsome, unmarried—in short, everything that a man ought to be, and with a romance

about his inheritance so obscure that gossip might fall upon it with a new appetite for all time to come—then he came in the person of a lion and a hero.

From this point of view, the only unsatisfactory visit he paid was to the Reverend Christopher Skull. The Curate's manner struck everybody who did not know him well as being rather odd, and it only confirmed Victor in his intention of getting him to resign his charge as soon as possible. Every subject of conversation he started was instantly dropped by the Curate as if it were a hot coal. It was after this call that he again came across his old instructor in the art of campanology, old Grimes. The old fellow was rather unsteady on his legs, and looked altogether so much like a disreputable mummy as to make the new squire feel that the whole parish, from the parson down to the sexton, was in need of immediate and sweeping reform. All the poetry and romance that had seemed to hang over Hillswick when he first met Helen in the belfry had gone out, and had left nothing but an exceedingly dull country parish overgrown

with weeds. The very church seemed to have lost its soul.

It was only satisfactory in one way, but that way was a great one. Hillswick and Copleston would give a new broom plenty to do.

So the time began, and so it went on—but no answer arrived from Helen. Yet she must have received his letter, and it was cruelly hard to be obliged to feel that the gulf she had set between herself and Victor Waldron was so immutably fixed that, by declaring himself, he had cut himself off from her absolutely. In any common case he could have invented a thousand reasons for her silence—the need of long and definite consideration, the miscarriage of his letter, the margin to be always allowed for chances and accidents. But he could not forget her look when she declared war against him to the end: though he could not, after all that had passed between them, have dreamed of such endurance of enmity on the part of any woman towards any man, until now, when he was forced, not to dream, but to believe.

Even he was beginning to find that there are limits of circumstance which no man can pass, do what he will.

It seemed wonderful to himself that he should be able to set about his plans of reform with Helen upon his heart and mind. She might be right in refusing to take his help, and in taking his counsel by making her outward life one with her husband's; but she might have let him have one line of answer, out of the mere formal courtesy that is due, above all, to our enemies. In spite of the love for her that he could not even try to conquer, it was so far beyond the utmost reach of reason, his own pride and temper were wounded sorely. It had become a point of honour that he should go on with his plans and his work without reference to her, and yet still, in the inconsistent way of such things, for her sake, and because she refused to recognise the spirit in which his part of the duty of life was to be done. Nor would he leave her the least loophole for saying that, so long as he lived, he had used Copleston for his own advantage or pleasure. That must be his revenge.

It would be long to tell how even at the outset he, in the course of his labours without heart in them, began to grow less popular among the Hillswick people than he had been before they knew him. At first they had, by tacit consent, made a point of ignoring his nationality; by degrees, his American ways began to be talked about with an increasingly ominous stress upon the word 'American.' Presently they would become Yankee ways, and then Foreign, and then Un-English ways; and, when it came to that, there would be an end of them, so far as public opinion was concerned. But at present, public opinion had not got beyond American; though not a soul in Hillswick knew what American ways are.

It was very soon after 'American' had come into common use as an adjective at Hillswick that he came across old Grimes again, just outside the gates of Copleston Park—an unusual distance from the 'George' for the sexton to be found.

The old fellow had of late made a point of evading the new squire, and had, indeed,

whenever they met, passed by him with a sort of drunken dignity, or, rather, with a manner half scornful and half shy. Victor set it down either to consciousness of drink or to an attempt to imitate the hardly less peculiar behaviour towards him of the Reverend Christopher. But on this occasion he stepped up and lifted his hat, in a half-hearted and grudging sort of way.

‘I was coming up to the place o’ purpose to see you, Mr. Waldron,’ said he.

‘And I’ve got one or two things to say to you, Mr. Grimes,’ said Victor. ‘There are a great many things going on which do not satisfy me at all.’

Mr. Grimes was evidently less deaf than usual to-day.

‘This aren’t ’Merica, where the people is slaves,’ said old Grimes. ‘Nor I aren’t a black nor a negro, if it were. And if you’re not satisfied, no more are I and my parson. If things aren’t to be as they useten, we want to know the reason why.’

Waldron had often been irritated by what seemed to him the servility of the British

peasant, who cannot be induced to believe that one man is as good as another, or that a Reid or a Waldron can possibly be, by nature, other than the superior of a Grimes. He set himself, on principle, against the perpetual doffing of caps, and the eternal 'Zir,'—so he had no moral right to find anything offensive in the independent attitude of the sexton towards the Squire. Besides, from time immemorial, public use had given old Grimes a charter to hear as much or as little as he liked, and to say whatever he pleased.

'Well—you first. I'm glad to hear you're dissatisfied. It's a sign of life. I suppose you think there's too much beer drunk in Hillswick? I quite agree with you, and I'm doing what I can. I shall be glad both of your sympathy and of your example, Mr. Grimes.'

'Eh? I'm mortal hard of hearing to-day. Beer? Ay—I won't object to a glass of beer, after walking all the way to Copleston at eighty year old. Maybe I wouldn't touch a drop of beer if I could get port and sherry like you. No; it's not the beer, Mr. Waldron. It's the Times. I'm not going to change

'em, and I'm not going to begin. And Mr. Skull—he'll say the same.'

'I should not expect you to change.'

'I can see how the land lies, Mr. Waldron, with the half of an eye, for all my ears is hard. You want to get rid of the parson, and you want to get rid of me.'

'Well?'

'Well, sir, now you look here. I'm not denying that Parson Skull is a bit old and ancient for his years, and his sermons aren't what they used to be. There's that sermon he preaches about the roaring lion that isn't half as good as it used to be forty year ago; and to tell you the downright honest truth, without a bit of a lie, I don't know where he'd be at times if it wasn't for me. But I'm another sort, I am, and I'll pull tenor, and dig a grave, and say amen, and bury ye and marry ye, with any man dead or alive. I've been at it sixty year, so I ought to know. You've no call to want to get rid of *I*. But I tell you what, Squire Waldron. I'll get rid of my own self, bell, bones, and all, if so be you'll make it worth your while. And what I do to-day,

Parson Skull 'll do to-morrow ; you see if you don't see.'

'Worth my while? You mean you want to be bought out, I suppose? But suppose I don't think it worth my while?'

'Well, sir, I'll just keep on as I be for twenty year to come. I buried an old chap last week that was ninety-nine, and he was always a weakly sort o' chap, and that I never were.'

'I think you would certainly be the better for a few years of rest, Mr. Grimes, and it's true that you and I might not be able to pull quite so well together as we used to in the belfry. And you have earned a pension, too, after marrying and burying your neighbours for sixty years. You need not have come to me in such a money-or-your-life sort of fashion, for I think your proposal perfectly reasonable and fair. I'll think it over, and, on your release from office, allow you enough to make you comfortable for twenty years, or more, as the case may be. You're not married, I believe?'

'No, sir, I aren't, though there's no know-

ing what mightn't happen any day to a single man. 'T aren't the fault of the wenches I haven't married twice a year. So don't you go to make no mistake about that there.'

'What is your pay now?'

'Nothing worth mentioning. You look here, Squire Waldron. I aren't neither a profligate nor a prodigal. But I know my own vally to the parish, and I'll be as content like an archdeacon with five hundred pound down on the nail, and a hundred pound every year. That's my vally, Squire Waldron, and for that I'll never bury another mortal man.'

'Five hundred pounds, and a hundred a year! May I ask how long it is since you left the "George"? You really rate your value to the parish so highly, and you consider your danger to me so great, that you are not to be bought out under five hundred pounds and a hundred a year?'

'Well, sir—no. There's an empty cottage belonging to you as I've got an eye on, and I'd ask to have thrown in, rent-free.'

'Anything more?'

‘Well, sir, being dry, I’d like a pint o’ beer thrown in too.’

‘Let me see—a hundred a year, five hundred pounds down, a house rent-free, and a pint of beer. I think that pint of beer is exorbitant, Mr. Grimes.’

‘Say a quart, then, Squire Waldron. I aren’t the man to cry off a fair bargain for a thing like a pint, one way or t’other one.’

‘Mr. Grimes, we Americans are a simple people, but there are bounds to even our simplicity. And you have a way of asserting your claims and your value that I don’t understand. If I am to do good in this parish I must not let myself be bullied and I must not let myself be done.’

‘Very good, Squire Waldron. Then if you won’t give me my rights and my dues, I must go to them as will, that’s all. I come to you first, natural, you being here, and being a Waldron comes before a Reid, as the tombs do testify. But you won’t do much good in this here parish if you think to do me with ’Merican ways.’

‘I do not understand you, Mr. Grimes.’

Who else could—assuredly nobody else—give you what you expect me to give you for nothing? After all, I think you had better keep your place. It will cost less on the whole.'

'I thought you'd take a hint.'

'I never take hints, Mr. Grimes.'

'Then, if you let I resign, 'twill cost you just five hundred pound, and the rent of a cottage, and a hundred a year.'

'And a pint of beer.'

'Thank ye, Squire. But if you let I stay in, 'twill cost you just—Copleston. That's a hint and a half, I do seem.'

'I suppose you are not quite drunk, Mr. Grimes: I see you can stand.'

'And I can, too. Them that hide can find; but them can find that don't hide.'

'No doubt. Well? You've got something to say to me about Copleston. Time's money in my country. Every minute you keep me waiting will be so much out of your retiring pension. Now, then, out with it all at once, and look alive.'

'So, sir, says I to myself, "If one man can

get all Copleston by groping about in a lot of old lumber, it seems to me I'd best turn antiquity, too." So I roked and roked till one fine day I found something in a box where it hadn't been put a hundred years ago.'

'Well?'

'So, sir, I put this thing to that thing, and there I were. 'Twas one of them old chests you used to rummage, and 'twasn't likely anybody would go rummaging there again. There! That may be what you call a hint, but it's what I call a pretty strong one. And if you think best not to take it, I'll go to them as will. Ay, as *will*—and that's the very word.'

'What was it you found?'

'Something I'll sell you for what I've named. Something I found in a box that none but you ever groped in. But what's the use? You know. But I aren't going to show you, with you and me here all alone. If you'll come with me to the "George," where there's folks about, you'll see 't isn't a cock nor a bull I've brought to the fair.'

'I shall not do anything of the kind.'

Whatever it is, you've got it about you, because you've come here on purpose to show it me. Out with it——'

'Eh?' asked old Grimes, with his hand to his ear. 'Ay—at the "George," where there's folks, you see. Ay, sure enough, at the "George."'

'I understand you to say that I have been hiding away something in the belfry, and that you have found it. Is that what you mean?'

'Eh?'

'And that you are afraid of my destroying it, if you show it me without witnesses—so that you may lose your hold of me? How can I tell what it's worth till I see it? Take it to Jackson—he's my lawyer here. Or, if you won't show it me here and now, take it to anybody you please. That's my last word. If it proves to be any secret of my own, it will be worth my while, I suppose, to pay you to hold your tongue.'

'Ay, Squire—that's true. 'Twill be worth your while, for—well, since you put it that way, here it be.'

Old Grimes, very slowly, put on his spec-

tacles, felt in the pocket of his jacket about a dozen times, and at last produced a document which he continued to hold with both his hands. ‘Now you look here, Squire Waldron,’ said he. ‘If you’d heard me out, you’d have know’d by this time ’twas not you but my Parson put that thing here in that chest there. And I tell you that, so you may know if you go to play me false there’ll be Parson Skull to swear to knowing of this here thing as well as me.’

At last Waldron held the document of which the sexton had made such a mystery in his hands and before his eyes. He started for a moment, but read it carefully through, and then said, without the least change of tone :

‘Mr. Grimes, if you had brought me this without any attempt at a sale, I would have given you more than you asked, as a reward for your honesty. As things are, I buy it of you at your own terms. If I fail, talk as much as you please. Here is your document—keep it, for security, till everything is arranged and you are satisfied. I see you are quite sharp enough to understand. To-morrow morning

you will hear from me. . . . The estate will bear this charge anyhow,' thought he, as he watched old Grimes down the road. The sexton had been so taken aback at having gained all he had asked for instead of the half which was all he had ventured to expect, that, for once, he had become not only deaf but dumb. Why had he not asked for a thousand pounds, two hundred a year, two cottages, and a whole gallon of beer?

CHAPTER XXXII.

Love her ? I love her so that if she look
This way or that—I being elsewhere—
I'd strike her blind : and if I saw her ear
Bend toward the west when I had eastward gone,
Or if she dreamed a dream I could not trace
Back to some maiden fountain pure and clear—
Why, I would take her heart between my hands,
And crush it till it ached to match with mine.

Hate her ? I hate her so that if she threw
Some slightest touch of tenderness on me,
Were 't but of pity for my hating her—
Why, I would give my life, my heart, my soul
Into her hands, and hold them all o'erpaid.

GIDEON had bidden Helen prepare for a journey to Hillswick the very next day after his interception of Waldron's letter. But, before next morning, business, or whatever he called such, had made him change his mind, and the same reason continued so long that Helen almost thought the matter had passed by. Almost, but not quite, for she had begun to know Gideon Skull better than to think that

he acted without purpose or reason. Whatever she almost thought, her instinct made her feel that clouds were gathering, and she was afraid.

Long silence had told her that she would never see or hear from, in all likelihood never hear of, Walter Gray again. He might have chosen the right path—she must needs suppose so—but he had left her to unbearable solitude. The moment that she needed support, and had thought to find the support she needed, it had been wrenched away from her. She thought she could understand what tempts people to kill themselves. And yet she knew all the while that if Walter Grey came back again, and offered her his whole life once more, she would refuse at once and without an instant's doubt all he could offer her. He had done right to leave her; she could not wish him to return. It was good to think that somebody was left in the world to do right, however cruel right might be.

She had ample time for thought, and was by nature incapable of mere reverie. Like Waldron, she had to face life as it was, and as

it must be, and what it might be made—he himself had woke her, effectually, if rudely, from dreaming of what might have been. She was bound to think of the worst that could happen—that Copleston should come into the hands of Gideon Skull, and that he should call upon her to live with him there, in the home that had once been her father's and her mother's and Alan's, until he or she died. That was what lay before her now; and she could imagine nothing worse, however she might try. Of course she might obtain a separation from Gideon as soon as she was called upon to share his wealth instead of his ruin. If honour compelled her to share his ruin, his wealth would set her free. She might leave him, and leave Copleston, and the million things it meant, entirely to him. It was her own hand, given in marriage, that had betrayed Copleston to Gideon. Ought she to leave it to him wholly, while there was a chance of tempering his rule by her tenderness, and while there lived a single neighbour who had a trouble that she might relieve? She seemed to have no right even to liberty, since

that would deprive her of the power of helping those who needed help less than she.

But it is only when duty takes the form of sacrificing the good things of this world that, in the guise of self-sacrifice, it tempts by its grandeur : nobody can feel much exaltation or enthusiasm about duty when it implies the acceptance of a great estate, high position, and all the things that are held to make life worth having, and duty only a vague sort of hanger-on. Not the less cold and hard did duty look to her in so far as it must consist in making the best of Gideon's life for the sake of others as well as for her own. If she could but once more see Walter Gray, in order that she might get from him a clearer idea of wifely duty than his last words had conveyed to her!— that she might really understand all he meant by urging that the worse a husband is, the more he needs the devotion and fellowship of a redeeming soul : that there must needs be more in marriage even than love itself, which is not the final fruit, but only the blossoms and the leaves. The image was her own ; but it had come into her mind from his parting

words. But—her duty to Gideon! Yes: if Walter Gray was right, there was even such a thing as her duty to Gideon. Nor could it be wiped out because she had done nearly as much wrong in marrying him for his wealth as he had in marrying her for hers. The need of making the best of the life she had brought upon herself seemed to be staring her in the face at every turn.

If she could only guess why Gideon needed her! But that, only love could have made her understand; and then there would not have been anything to need understanding.

At last, however, the day came when she was bidden prepare for her journey to Copleston, and when Gideon did not change in his mind. The summons fell, as it happened, upon a mood when self-surrender, in every form, appeared to be the only form of life left her to obey. From London to Deepweald was a long journey by rail, and thence to Hillswick a long journey by road. It was long in fact, an age in seeming, since she had dreamed of her old home as of a place she would never see

again ; and the first breath of its air that she consciously drew tasted of pain. It seemed to her as if it were literally charged with a flavour of its own, unlike that of any other air in the world.

It was late in the afternoon when she first, through the carriage window, caught sight of the church tower. Think of all that had happened to her, all that she had done since leaving Copleston—of all her life before her father died—if you care to know how she felt then, as the carriage drove nearer and nearer to what had once been her home. She was not the Helen who had lived at Copleston ; but that Helen was still the flesh of her flesh, and the soul of her soul. She felt like going back into a dead self, and at the same time like a dead self coming to life, during this homeward journey to what was no longer her home, and though it would once more become her dwelling-place, could never be her home again. As she drew nearer and nearer, and the cottages and the gaps in the hedges and the branchings of bye-lanes and all the landmarks of the road became more and more

familiar to her eyes, the immediate past seemed to turn into mist, and the clearest picture before her was the inside of Hillswick church on a certain Easter Eve, when she was a mere girl without a thought beyond the spring sunshine, and when Alan was her brother and Bertha her friend.

Gideon had in one way done his best to make her journey as little painful as might be : that is to say, he had scarcely spoken a word. He acted towards her less like a husband than like an angry father with a rebellious daughter in his custody, and left her to her own thoughts and memories : her views of the future were as yet far too undefined to be called fears. He did not even appear to notice whether her eyes were moist or dry ; and perhaps he was afraid to look, lest he might read in them what he would not wish to read.

At last the carriage wheels rattled over the rough pavement of the street of Hillswick ; then it turned sharply round by the churchyard, drove along a short and narrow lane, and drew up at last before the door of the

Vicarage. That day's journey was at an end; and she was as ignorant as when she started why Gideon had not chosen to make it alone.

She had not found room in her thoughts for speculations as to how she would be received by her old acquaintances the Misses Skull, or how she would feel at her first sight of Hillswick faces. She certainly had not looked forward to what really happened. As soon as the two old ladies, of whom she had never been over-fond, met her in the entrance hall, she burst into tears. The tears must have come at last; but they had chosen a sadly inconvenient time for coming.

'She is over-tired, I suppose,' said Gideon. 'You're all well, of course? Is Uncle Christopher at home?'

Uncle Christopher was at home; and he came out of his study at the sound of his nephew's voice with a feeble and shadowy air of welcome in outline. Miss Sarah Skull, who was a grim and angular old lady, as sharply defined as her brother was the reverse, opened her arms to Helen, who went to them

as if they had been an elder sister's. Even Uncle Christopher looked surprised.

The atmosphere of the Vicarage was one of chronic frost, but Helen could not complain of any want of welcome. She had evidently been expected in the light of an honoured guest, and was taken upstairs into that famous spare room which, for the first time within the memory of man, was not, at the present moment, undergoing a thorough cleaning.

‘How you have changed, to be sure!’ said Miss Sarah Skull. ‘But I suppose changes do make people change. You’ll find *us* the same. We were all so surprised to hear that you had married Gideon; but, indeed, there’s no foreseeing anything, and it made us all very pleased and proud. He wanted a good wife, and that you are, I’m sure. And everything is to be all right now. And you and Gideon are to come and live at Copleston. It seems all like a dream. I wonder what Mr. Waldron will say. I never did like that man. The first minute I set eyes on him I said, “That’s no proper companion for Gideon.”’

And I was right, you see. The first time he was ever in the house he broke a lamp of your uncle's that cost shillings and shillings when it was new. And he's been making a regular revolution in the place with all sorts of new-fangled ideas. Dr. Bolt says he's convinced he's a homœopathist; and he must be either an atheist or a Jesuit, for he hasn't been to hear your uncle preach once all the time he's been here. I hope you've got everything you want? We dine in half an hour.'

But even her welcome as the future queen of Hillswick, though it accounted for the spare room and a late dinner at which there was really something to eat, did not make Helen feel any the less that some genuine impulse had made Miss Sarah Skull throw open her arms to her when she first arrived. The impulse might be over now, but it had been there.

Half through dinner, in spite of all Gideon could do to change the topic, so as to remove it from the atmosphere of a family council, the talk ran upon the misdeeds of Victor Waldron, and upon the duties attaching to

the ownership of a great place like Copleston, more especially upon such duties as referred to the relation between the great house and the Vicarage. Of course, urged both Miss Sarah and Miss Anne, nobody could possibly be expected to understand Hillswick and how to deal with it half so well as the Curate-in-Charge, whose advice must therefore be taken and followed in all matters, both temporal and spiritual. Gideon was reminded by his aunts some ten times that Helen's father had always held the business qualities of the Rev. Christopher Skull in the very highest regard, and had considered the reversion of the living to be no more than the Curate's due. And then Helen would be fortunate in having the faithful counsel and experienced co-operation of two aunts who knew all the affairs of the parish, from the highest to the lowest, through and through. She might trust to them blindly and implicitly until she learned to walk alone; and even then there were details of social and parochial duty which the great lady of Copleston must needs leave to subordinate hands. Helen's heart sank deeper and deeper

through all the dreary table-talk which always came back to one refrain—that she was to live at Copleston in order that her aunts by marriage might rule the parish in her name. She could not help sympathising with the usurper, who had at least taken his own business into his own hands. Would she be able to find the spirit to rebel?

To her surprise it was Gideon himself who came to her rescue.

‘Don’t make too sure you’re going to change King Stork for Queen Log, Aunt Sarah,’ said he bluntly. ‘There isn’t one single thing in the whole parish that I approve of, and don’t mean to change. There’s nothing like putting one’s foot down at once, you see. Perhaps you won’t find your experience of broth and blankets go very far when you’ve got to deal with navvies and pitmen.’

‘Navvies—pitmen!’ cried Aunt Sarah. ‘Gideon!’

‘If Copleston doesn’t cover a coal-pit, then Nature’s a liar. And you can’t get coal without pitmen, nor carry it without a railway

line. Take my word for it, you won't know Hillswick in less than two years.'

The threat fell among them like a thunderbolt. Waldron had been at worst a sentimental and even excessively conservative reformer compared with a man who talked of coal-pits and railways in connection with Hillswick and Copleston before he was in possession. Waldron had been but rearranging the letters: Gideon—their nephew Gideon—was going to change the whole word.

'Don't you think, Uncle Christopher,' he asked, 'that Hillswick ought to be opened up? It's so much like an oyster that there must be something worth eating inside.'

'Oh, yes; of course, of course, Gideon,' stammered his uncle. 'Of course; nothing could possibly be more proper. Only we must be cautious, and not do everything at once. Things come, you know, if one waits for them.' 'Even livings,' he thought, with a sigh. 'You are aware,' he said turning to his sisters, 'that we live in times of progress, and that there are movements and remarkable social developments in many directions which

I, as a man of ordinary education and intelligence, ought not to—nay, cannot—be the last to recognise.’

‘You have heard, of course, Mrs. Gideon, of your old friend’s marriage?’ said Miss Sarah stiffly. When her brother began to talk like a Radical there was nothing left to be said on that score.

‘No,’ said Helen, answering almost at random. ‘What friend?’

‘You mean to say you have not heard of Bertha Meyrick’s marriage? I should have thought you would have been the first to know. Why, it was quite an event. I used to fancy your poor brother was rather tender in that quarter. But marriages are written in heaven, you see. Yes; she married Sir Wilfred Lexmere, who has a splendid place in Devonshire. So she’s done quite as well, on the whole, as if he had been your brother. She’s Lady Lexmere now.’

Helen hung her head with new shame. She had long given up corresponding with her girl friend, because she believed herself to have ceased to be worthy to touch Bertha’s

hand—Bertha's, whom she had assumed to be devoted to maiden widowhood for the sake of the one man whom she loved and who loved her. And now even Bertha had forgotten Alan, and had given herself to a stranger even before she could possibly have learned that her old lover was not alive. 'That even I could not have done,' thought Helen. 'And Bertha—how could *she* have done that, for very shame? I am glad Alan has *not* lived: death is better than a broken heart, after all.' And so she swallowed camels and strained at gnats, in more sympathy with the common world about her than she knew

'Well, Uncle Christopher,' began Gideon, as soon as the ladies, with all proper formalities, had left the uncle and nephew to their wine—for, on this special occasion, not even wine had been lacking—'No, you needn't trouble to pass the—h'm—liquid. With your leave, I'll smoke a dry cigar. You see, war's in the enemy's country now, and the fighting's begun.'

'I wish,' began Uncle Christopher, filling

his own glass—‘I wish——’ He broke off abruptly and sighed.

‘What do you wish? I think you ought to be very well content with things as they are. I wish a good many things, too; but I must take what I can get, and let the rest slide.’

‘It does seem so strange that you should have found that will.’

‘Of course it was strange. Stories about wills are always strange—nearly as strange as wills are themselves.’

‘I ought to have had more caution, Gideon.’

‘Nonsense! How could you have had more caution? You make an affidavit that you put old Harry’s will away, wrapped in a blue cover, initialled by yourself, in a certain place. I, on a second search, find the very document in the very place where it had been put by you. There’s no doubt about the will, or about what the contents were and are. I don’t know what you mean by more caution, Uncle Christopher, I don’t indeed.’

‘It has occurred to me that—just as a

mere matter of form, of course—I ought to have seen the will.'

'In the name of absurdity, why? You have made your affidavit in the only way you could; you have sworn to the receipt, to the contents, to the identity. Had you done more you would have seemed most unnaturally suspicious, I may say. I may have had very good reasons for your not seeing the will. I don't often do things without exceedingly good reason. Perhaps you want me to explain why, instead of putting the business into a lawyer's hands, I come down to arrange it privately with Waldron. Perhaps you would prefer the chance of a public scandal, from which you would come out as guilty of the crime—the punishable crime—of suppressing and concealing a will. Well, as you please. I should say that, on the whole, the less you see and the less you say the better for you.'

'Well, Gideon, you know best; I know that I never intended to imply the contrary.'

'Yes; and whatever is done, is done now.'
The two had no farther talk on hand.

The Curate collapsed into his glass of port; Gideon thought over the best way for having his interview with Waldron so as to make his triumph as complete as possible.

Honestly—in a higher and deeper sense than his own—it was no longer mostly for Copleston's sake that he hungered for Copleston. He had to crush and trample under foot the enemy who had robbed him of what had become to him worth a million Coplestons. He must let Helen see with her eyes the full extent of her lover's weakness and meanness and of her husband's power. It was therefore that he had brought her with him, not only that he might crush her spirit, put to the test her true relation with her former enemy, and prevent her communicating with Waldron by letter while his back was turned. He felt as if he hardly knew whether he most hated her or most loved her. With some men, and some women too, love and hate are terribly akin.

Waldron, in a gossiping place like Hills-wick, would be safe to hear of the arrival at the Vicarage. But he could not possibly sus-

pect that mischief was brewing unless Helen herself contrived to give him warning. To guard himself from the effects of her feminine cunning he would call on Waldron and see him the first thing to-morrow morning. Nothing would tell so well as a sharp and sudden blow. Helen's mere presence in Copleston, had it not been so important for other reasons, would cause fresh talk that would give *éclat* to the triumphant return of the rightful heir ; and her popularity as a Reid would remove the edge from the public disgust which he knew would follow upon the discovery that Copleston had become the property of Gideon Skull.

So he laid his plans, anticipating his coming interview, and even the very words that would pass between himself and Waldron, who would be compelled, in the face of such incontrovertible evidence as the very will of old Harry Reid, to quit the field. And then Helen, with nothing to gain from Waldron, would at any rate go with the Copleston estate ; and, if only to baulk Waldron, she was worth the keeping. When she was utterly crushed, so he argued

from his experience of womankind, she would be reduced into being to him whatever he pleased; utterly dependent upon him, and so thankful for tenderness that she would become his slave. So absorbed was he in all these forecasts that he did not even see the door open. But he heard Aunt Sarah's voice, as she burst in with—

‘Christopher! Are you asleep? Wake up, for goodness’ sake! Here’s Mr. Waldron himself. I’ve had him put into the study, where there’s a good fire, and he wants to see *you!* What *can* it be for?’

‘Mr. Waldron!—In the study!—To see me!’ The Curate could only answer his sister with exclamatory echoes, look at Gideon, and ask, ‘Shall I see him? What shall I do?’

But Gideon was awake now, and a brilliant thought came into his mind. How if he dealt his blow now, with Helen herself standing by to see? Nothing less than an outburst of hitherto latent dramatic genius could have inspired him with such a stroke of victory and vengeance, all in one.

‘Yes, Uncle Christopher,’ he said very

gently—almost absently. ‘See him by all means: see him now. We will see him together, you and I. . . . And will you be so very kind, Aunt Sarah, as to tell Helen to come into the study at once? She must see him, too.’

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Defter was neither Faustus, nor
Cornelius, that great conjuror :
For out of bale of blackest linen
That ever rascal wrapped a sin in,
He, with Hey presto ! would evoke
Some playful quip or honest joke,
So that the rogue who knew them lies
Would stand dumbfounded with surprise
To see how falsehood lies no further
From truth than homicide from murder.
For what is Truth (he used to say)
But Falsehood turned the other way ?

HELEN had been carried off into the drawing-room, to be entertained by her hostesses until it should be time to summon the gentlemen from their wine to the tea-table. Everything had evidently been prepared for the reception of the new great lady, who had a house in town, in due form. But, with all their pride in being the aunts of such a nephew as Gideon and of such a niece as Helen, it was clear that

the Miss Skulls, though in their own house, could not contrive to feel at home. The old themes of talk between the great house and the Rectory had faded out with all these years ; Helen had changed, and yet all that might have caused the change suggested nothing to say. She seemed, they could not help thinking, a great deal more like the brotherless orphan than like the heiress and the bride who ought to have been full of Gideon and Copleston, and eager to learn from her new aunts what she ought to think and do. Gideon's own talk, too, about railways and coal-pits made them feel as if they were sitting upon a powder-magazine to which the train had been laid. Helen asked them no questions, and let their attempts to interest her in the increasing deafness of old Grimes ramble round her in vain. It was very far, indeed, from her intention to be impolite, but she was more tired out than she herself knew. She fancied herself ashamed at being so little moved by her return to the neighbourhood of her old home : whereas, in truth, her seeming apathy did not arise from the want, but from the fear, of feel-

ing. She could not dare to let herself feel. . . . And so Bertha Meyrick was married! 'Yes, better die of a bullet than a heart-break,' was the refrain to her thoughts that kept on ringing through her mind. She had her own views of what love and marriage ought to mean; and it was better for Alan to be safely dead than to have married one who could have cared for him so little as to marry another man before she could possibly have learned that her first lover was not still alive. Were all women, even Bertha, like herself, and was it by the very nature of their sex that they sold themselves to any satisfactory bidder? She was catching Gideon's own views about such things. 'Well—I must drift on, like the rest,' was the end that all her thoughts came to. No wonder the Miss Skulls thought her changed and dull. She made them feel dull themselves.

Presently Miss Sarah was summoned mysteriously from the drawing-room; and, when she came back, it was to say, with an awful gravity—

'Gideon says you are to go to him in the

study at once. Something very strange has happened, Helen—something very strange, Anne. Mr. Waldron has called to see Christopher. I wonder what *he* can want to say? And Christopher is so little fitted to face excitement now—and Mr. Waldron once threw a lamp at his head, and broke it; he has never got over that shock, and never will. I wish Mr. Waldron would ask to see *me*. But, luckily, Gideon is there.’

‘Gideon wishes *me* to see Mr. Waldron?’ asked Helen, startled at last into taking an interest in one of her new aunt’s speeches. ‘He could not mean such a thing. You must be mistaken, indeed.’

‘Gideon is not the one to make mistakes, nor I to be mistaken. If he wishes you to see that man, he has good reason for it, you may be sure,’ said Miss Sarah, whom something in Helen’s tone did not please. ‘“Helen must see him, too.” Those were his words.’

‘“*Must* see him?” Well, then, if he said must,’ said Helen, ‘I will go.’

She meant a great deal more than met even her own ears. If she must henceforth drift,

and surrender all that was left of her blind and useless will to the control of blinder chance and circumstance, then drifting could only mean implicit obedience to the will of Gideon Skull, in great things and small. If Walter Gray had been right, it was the only semblance of a duty left her: one cannot go on fighting with the wind all one's days. Where there is nothing to be gained by battle, one must at last, if only for sleep's sake, give oneself up to the blast, and let it drive one whither it will. To do something, anything, simply because she was told she must, was almost a luxury in her present mood, which was not likely to prove only a mood. As for seeing Waldron, that was nothing, after she had been brought to see Hillswick steeple again. It was better to meet the face of an enemy than to look upon that of a friend.

'Anne,' said Miss Sarah, as soon as Helen had left the room, 'there is something wrong between her and Gideon, mark my words. I hope he has got a good wife, as well as a rich one, because I have always been strongly of opinion, and always shall be, strange as some

people may think it, that a bad wife is a decidedly objectionable person, however rich she may be. I have always thought that, and nothing will ever make me think differently. And there was always something—something, you know—about Helen Reid. She never would take advice any more than that table, and was as obstinate as she was high.'

'But she went when she was told,' said Miss Anne.

'Yes, when Gideon said *must*,' said Miss Sarah. 'That's just where it is, Anne. I should like to see the man who would say "must" to me!'

Helen went straight to the study, and did not pause before entering after she had once touched the handle of the door. There, by the light of a pair of candles, she saw her husband, his uncle, and—

Walter Gray.

If this were drifting, it was drifting as we drift in dreams. It was so startling that she could scarcely feel surprise. She had been summoned to an interview with Victor Wal-

dron, and she found herself face to face with Walter Gray. She did not ask herself what it meant, or how it was possible. Everything was possible, since Bertha was married. And what did anything mean, whatever it might be?

Nevertheless, she was too much absorbed in this new recognition to note the expression of her husband's face as he watched the meeting between his false wife and her treacherous lover. He was bent upon probing to its depths every glance of the eye, every movement of the hand, every change of colour. And who ever looked for things of this sort that he failed to find?

Helen's eyes did become filled with a sudden light, her hand did tremble, and her colour came and went again. Such signs may mean a thousand things, from mere confusion and bewilderment to anything short of actual guilt: for actual guilt is the only thing that looks like innocence in the eyes of those who judge by visible signs. How far Helen's deepest heart was innocent there is no need to say. Sheer bewilderment, and nothing more, was

the root of all she showed now. And there is nothing which looks so much like guilt as bewilderment, as all who do not judge by visible signs know well. In the eyes of Gideon Skull, who found what he looked for, she was already judged and doomed. His revenge was justified before it had begun.

He almost smiled as he said, 'Mr. Victor Waldron—my wife, Mrs. Gideon Skull—but I forget: you two have met in Hillswick before.'

He looked at Victor now. Victor, with the thought of his unanswered letter still stabbing him, only bowed. But Gideon could not fail to read the sublimity of hypocrisy in that bow. It was not returned by Helen: and Gideon read something worse than hypocrisy in her greater honesty.

'I am glad of the chance,' he said, 'that brought you to call upon my Uncle Christopher, while I and Mrs. Gideon Skull'—he seemed to find a zest in dwelling upon the whole of her married name—'are here. It will save a great deal of trouble to us all: and, when a thing has to be done, the sooner the

better. No time like now, for an unpleasant thing.'

'As you say—no time like now,' said Waldron. 'And so—'

'Yes—and so. You had better hear my—my wife's business with you before we come to your business with my uncle, whatever that may happen to be. Do you remember the day when my wife's father, the late Henry Reid, of Copleston, died?'

'I don't think you need ask me that,' said Victor. 'Go on—with whatever you have to say. Assume that I forget nothing, if you please.'

He was speaking in this cold way to the man who had, like a scoundrel as he held, tricked Helen—or rather say any woman—into a marriage she had learned to abhor. Gideon translated his tone into the incapacity of a traitor to speak courteously to him who has it in his power to lay all his treachery bare. Each man was honest—each in his own way. For some moments neither said a word more. Victor was waiting for Gideon; Gideon was turning his triumph, so to speak,

over with his tongue, and tasting it luxuriously, and meditating how he could use it the most effectively for making Waldron feel it with the greatest possible amount of defeat and humiliation. Helen must see her lover come out glaringly in his true colours—a beaten traitor, who had tried to pit himself against her husband, and had failed. She was not the woman he had learned to think her if, when she found him under another man's feet, her easily purchased love did not change to womanly scorn. But Helen's thoughts were for those moments of silence far away. She was realising that in truth Victor Waldron and Walter Gray were indeed one and the same: how could she have failed to identify her few days' friend with her old enemy? Yet—Victor Waldron, her brother's friend, the comrade who had last held his hand and seen him die! She no longer felt bewilderment: that is all too weak a word when chaos has come.

‘You forget nothing?’ at last asked Gideon. ‘So be it, then. I will not remind you how you came to England with the sole purpose of proving a fancied claim to Cople-

ston—a claim which vanished, if *I* remember rightly, on a first inspection of a parish register. Nor will I remind you how you, nevertheless, obtained the whole estate because my wife's father, aye, and Alan Reid's father, died without a will. As you say you remember everything, we will go on——'

'Gideon Skull,' began Waldron eagerly, 'I——'

'Wait! I advise you to hear me out,' said Gideon, with all the weight of his voice and manner, 'before you say one word. Your turn shall come to say whatever you please—or whatever you can.' He laid two documents, one in a blue envelope, upon the table, but kept one hand over them. 'Read these first, and then say *your* say. But, before you read——'

And now Helen knew, or thought she knew, why she had been brought down from London to Hillswick, in order to be present at whatever interview might take place between Victor Waldron and Gideon Skull. No doubt, she imagined, since Copleston was to come to Gideon through her, it was necessary that she

should authorise, by her presence, his claim in her name. And then, as if she had never dreamed for one single moment of surrendering her will to circumstances and Gideon——

‘*I must speak first!*’ said she. ‘Since you are Victor Waldron—if you are—I will have nothing to do with taking Copleston from Alan’s only friend. . . . his friend at last, whatever you once had been! Let things go. Let things be as they are. *This* is not my doing.’

Gideon smiled no more. ‘I have no doubt Mr. Waldron perfectly understands you, Helen,’ said he. He meant to speak a biting sarcasm: but he only scowled, and his words fell without a meaning. ‘And you shall have your turn too. To go on with what I was saying—’ He paused: for he had so much to say, and so many ways of starting tempted him, that he scarcely knew how to begin. ‘As you remember so many things, Waldron—I beg your pardon: Mr. Waldron,’ he said at last, ‘you may remember my once telling you that what I had once done for you, and what you refused to recognise, I might be able to undo.’

Neither you nor I foresaw at that time that I should ever be in a position to make it my right, as well as my duty, to vindicate the claim, the right, of one of Henry Reid's children to what was his to leave them—my right, my duty, as the husband of Helen Reid, now Helen Skull. I tell you, as an honest man, that nobody ever regretted any deed on earth more than I regretted what I had so thoughtlessly done for you when you refused to—when I discovered, too late, what manner of man you turned out to be. I had believed in you as a Quixote, a Bayard, an Arthur: you turned out a—Waldron. A Victor Waldron: a man who would use a fool of a friend as a tool to rob widows and orphans, and then kick the tool away. It always seemed to me impossible that Henry Reid, knowing the nature of his marriage, should have left no will.'

An angry colour was coming into Victor's face; but he showed no other sign of feeling Gideon's hammer blows.

'I have here an affidavit,' said Gideon, 'on the part of a clergyman and a magistrate, the

Reverend Christopher Skull, who is here. He states that Mr. Henry Reid, of Copleston, *did* make a will. He states—— Wait till I have done. He states that Mrs. Reid induced him, by her arguments, to suppress that will, to humour her in some wild belief that her son would be ruined by suddenly becoming a man of fortune. He states, moreover, that——’

‘Is that so, Mr. Skull?’ asked Victor quickly, turning to Uncle Christopher. ‘I would rather not see your affidavit, if you please. I will take your word.’

‘My poor friend did it for the best—for the best,’ stammered Uncle Christopher, ‘according to her lights. She convinced me for the time. Of course I understand now that it was wrong—sadly wrong. But there is one thing against which the wisest of us is unable to provide. And that thing is what we cannot foresee. Yes—not even the wisest man who ever lived can foresee the unforeseen. It is sad, but it is true; and, being true, it is doubtless right that it should be so. I assure you I should have acted very differently if I had acted in a totally different way.’

‘You hear what my uncle says,’ said Gideon. ‘He will contradict me as lucidly as he has confirmed me, if I misquote his evidence, in his presence, in the least degree. Unfortunately, by excess of caution, he mislaid the will. He believed he had placed it in a certain chest in the steeple belfry. Now it is obvious—we must all be frank and business-like here—that he has exposed himself to a charge of suppressing a will, of which he himself had been made one of the executors.’

‘Gideon!’ cried his uncle, in a sort of wail intended for manly indignation against his nephew’s uncomfortable practice of trampling over his relations’ tenderest feelings and calling things by their right names.

‘And therefore,’ Gideon went on, ‘I have, for my good uncle’s sake, preferred to settle this business privately between you and me, to avoid any sort of scandal or lawyers’ meddling. He—my uncle—is prepared, like the brave, honourable gentleman and clergyman that he is, to take all the consequences of his error, whatever they may be. He will give his evidence in a court of justice, if need be.

But I don't think you will care to drive him to such an extremity; you'll find it hardly worth while to spend your last penny in fighting a case you're bound to lose. Victor Waldron—once upon a time I would have cut off my right hand rather than do against you what I am doing now. But—now—I have no regrets, no scruples, knowing you for what you are. And if I had, there is only one honest thing to be done. To come to the point—here is my wife's father's will.'

He was a little disappointed to be able to read in Victor's face nothing but the most extreme surprise, as the reputed owner of Copleston received the document which was to deprive him of his lands. However, he remembered that his former friend had always been rather a cool hand, unlikely to commit himself in any way, and that surprise was probably the most prudent expression anybody could assume.

'This is Miss Reid's—Mrs. Skull's father's will?' asked Victor. 'I really do not understand.'

Helen's heart sank deeper than ever A

minute ago, her only wish was that her inheritance should remain in the hands of Walter Gray, and not pass into those of Gideon Skull. But that was while her heart believed that, in the person of Victor Waldron, she had been wronging Walter Gray. If his protests, at the time her father died, against depriving Alan of Copleston had had a grain of honesty in them, he would now be leaping at the chance of surrendering what he had been compelled to take and keep against his own desire. He would not have seemed astonished, or failed to understand; he would have outrun Gideon himself in acknowledging her father's will. It was this belief concerning the nature of Walter Gray that had been at the root of her protest five minutes ago; her dread lest he, of all men, should think her, of all women, capable of fighting for a right which she had professed to scorn as much as he. A right, which for her meant nothing but a lifelong slavery to duties which she felt powerless to fulfil. And so even Walter Gray, who had shown how easily he could give up such a thing as love from a sense of

duty, paused, doubted, and failed to understand, when called upon by duty to give up such a thing as Copleston. Had she been really wronging Walter Gray in feeling him to be better and stronger than Victor Waldron, or Victor Waldron in ever having thought him worse than other men? Were all men able to throw away what they called love so soon as it became an inconvenience to what they called their consciences, but would hold on to lands and gold as if to get and to keep these made up the whole duty of man? Yes, all men—since it was so with Walter Gray. That he should lose gold and lands to Gideon Skull was bad enough; but not half so bad as his want of eagerness to throw them all away. It was so bad that she even ceased to condemn him. Why should she condemn Victor Waldron for simply being like all the rest of the world? Only she wished she had never known him as Walter Gray. She could still have believed in something, if only she had never known. Without knowing it, she had just received the heaviest blow to her inmost life that she had ever had to bear. It

almost seemed to her as if Gideon Skull, in his openness and frank measure of himself as no better than his neighbours, was the best man she had ever known, because the most honest one. He, at least, never preached about duties, as a fine name for desires, or pretended to be ruled by fine sentiments that he could not feel.

‘You will find it plain enough,’ she heard Gideon say, ‘if you read.’

‘I have read enough of it,’ said Victor presently. ‘It does appear to be what you say. You know the contents, of course. Does anybody know them but you?’ He had not yet spoken a word to Helen: and she noticed that he did not look at her while thus talking with Gideon. Could he, even Walter Gray, be thinking of disputing her father’s will? But she forgot—he was Victor Waldron now: not Walter Gray.

‘Nobody,’ said Gideon, ‘except you and I. I have had nothing to do with lawyers. I had to think of my uncle, and of my wife’s mother, and of everybody concerned—even of you. It is a matter to be arranged quietly,

as you must yourself see. It is enough that the will is there, beyond question of cavil. You must either admit it or be prepared to fight a costly and hopeless battle. There—I have said my say.'

'You have shown this will to nobody but me? Are you sure?'

'What if I had shown it to fifty? But I have shown it to nobody, not even to my uncle, except my wife and you. Of course you can let your own lawyer see it, if you think it worth his fee.'

'You have done right there,' said Victor, with a strangely grave and troubled look, and still avoiding Helen's eyes. Had Copleston managed to hook itself to his heart, after all, now that he had at last fairly taken possession and made it part of his life for ever? It is surely one thing to wish to get rid of a fine estate while one knows that one cannot get one's wish—quite another when it begins to slip from one's fingers without one's will. Honestly and justly he might feel that Copleston would fare better in his usurping hands than in Gideon's rightful ones. 'I think,' he

said, 'that you and I had better settle this matter alone—without any witnesses : without even the presence of——'

'What? Do you know that sounds very like an offer of a compromise, as humbugs, who don't like plain words, call a Bribe? Certainly not. I am in a delicate position as my wife's husband. She must take part in everything I say and do, and it is, above all things, needful that a witness should be here—in the person of my uncle, who has a right to be here.'

'It was in your own interest I made the offer,' said Victor, yet more gravely than before ; 'and in your interest—remembering an old friendship—I make it yet again.'

'In my interest? I see. You think to deal with me as you did once before : but once bit, twice shy. I intend to have the protection of my uncle's presence.'

'You will not see me alone?'

'No. Is that plain enough for you? I have nothing to say except out loud, and I will hear nothing except what is said out loud. I'd say it still plainer, if I knew how. You

needn't give your answer to-day; but when you do give it—— No; on second thoughts you must give it to-day, and here and now.'

'Very well, then; I will, since you will have it so,' said Victor. 'This is my answer—take it as you please.' The angry heat in him, to which every word of Gideon's had been fuel, burst out at last. He took the will, tore it across and across, and threw the pieces into the blaze of the fire.

Helen turned almost sick at the sight of what she could only take for sheer madness of greed when driven to bay. Gideon, for the first time in his life, turned pale.

'*Are you mad?*' he burst out. 'By —— you must be. That is a will. Do you know what it means in this country to destroy a will? Uncle Christopher, I call on you to bear witness that Victor Waldron has committed felony. Aye, and useless felony, after all,' he said, in a voice strangely unlike his own, that trembled with scorn. 'There are other ways of proving the contents of a will that can be proved to have been destroyed, if I know anything of the law.'

‘And I say it was no will,’ said Victor ; ‘and if it were, you tell me yourself that nobody knows its contents but you and I. I know what I am doing, Gideon Skull, and you know it too. You had better say no more.’

The two men faced one another silently. Helen could only see in them two wild beasts fighting over a carcass, with force for teeth and fraud for claws. Gideon looked dark, stubborn, and hard ; Victor eager and angry—almost as if he still persuaded himself that he was carried away by zeal in a just cause, instead of by madness in an infamous one. They were wolf and vulture, thought she.

But suddenly the fire died out in Victor’s eyes, and he spoke as calmly as if he were speaking to a circle of friends, with the eyes still bent upon Gideon which had not as yet even once turned towards her.

‘And now,’ he said, ‘I will say my own say. Gideon Skull, it *is* well for you that no eyes have seen that paper but your own and your wife’s, and your uncle’s, and mine. You know, as well as I, why you took care that this should be so, and why, in destroying the

paper, I did you the best service man could do to man. I meant to have let you destroy it yourself, but I had to do it for you, as you would not let me see you alone. We will say no more about that ; let it go. Yes, let it go, as I let Copleston go. . . . Miss Reid—Mrs. Skull——’

At last his eyes turned, and looked full into hers. How could they dare to meet hers without shame? But they did so meet hers, even with the reverse of shame.

‘From the day when, by your father’s grave, you declared that there could be nothing but War for ever—War to the knife—between you and me, it became the wish of my life that something should happen to make you know me, and how much I value all the land in Britain when it means War—with you. You would not listen to me when I tried to speak a word. Alan was like iron with pride—for his mother and for you. I do think, before he died, *he* knew that Walter Gray was not the man to care for Copleston only because it meant so many pounds a year. I hoped, when I found you did not recognise me, to

make you feel like him. Well, it was a vain hope: as soon as you knew I was Victor Waldron you . . . But perhaps you will know, when, for your sake, and Alan's sake, and I hope for right's sake, I think so little of Copleston for my own sake as to let it go to—but you know what I mean by that. Only understand that I might keep it if I pleased. Understand, if you please, that I defy all the lawyers in England to prove the paper I have just destroyed. From the very beginning it was never worth more than it is now. . . . If I had seen it three days ago, I should have admitted it: but you would have thought to the end of your life that I had surrendered because I found fighting impossible, and not of my own free will. . . . You would have received Copleston from other hands than mine. Thank God, that is not to be. I, who have done all this evil—it is Victor Waldron who has been permitted to give you back Copleston.
Here is your father's Will.'

He had held a folded paper while speaking; he now rose, came to Helen, and placed it quietly in her hands.

‘You need not read it now,’ said he. ‘You may be sure—till you read it—that it is as I say. Old Grimes, who has a taste for documents and antiquities, found it in the lumber chest the Reverend Mr. Skull speaks of, and—with his characteristic honesty—brought it to me, whom it very decidedly concerns. I have shown it to a lawyer at Deepweald; there is no doubt about its being your father’s will; that will which the evidence of the Reverend Mr. Skull goes amply to prove. I admit it—and my admission is everything, so I am advised. You will see that—like the will I have destroyed—it leaves everything to Alan, with charges for your mother and yourself, and, in case of his dying childless, then to you and yours. And now—one word more; and I will say it before your husband as I would before all the world. . . . It is no grief or loss to me to lose Copleston; but it does rub my skin up the wrong way to leave it to Gideon Skull—for he says rightly that, under this will, that is his which is yours. . . . But I think we have all learned one lesson, anyhow. My way to improve upon Providence would

have been to throw *this* will behind the fire, and to pay half my income by way of blackmail to old Grimes. I can't see what good can come from Gideon Skull's being owner of Copleston; and I think I see a considerable amount of good that I could have done. . . . It's *not* so easy to give up the whole thing, when I had made up my mind to make the best of it, now that the time is come; and I could have turned fraud into duty without more than half shutting one eye; and have taken the part of Providence, which is a long way above the part of law. . . . Well, I don't; that's all. Perhaps I'm afraid of committing a felony; perhaps of being found out in one; perhaps I'm only a fool; perhaps—but anyhow, there's Copleston, for you—and Gideon I don't think, Mrs. Skull, you'll mind, for one minute, taking a hand that gives you Copleston; and that will never offend you again.'

She did not know of the letter he had written her, or she would have understood him a great deal more; for every word he had spoken to her needed that letter for its inter-

pretation. He did not know that it had never reached her hands, or he would not have been meeting what he deemed her pride and her coldness with greater coldness and pride. There was pride even in the way he held out his hand. She let him take hers—and then something, more subtle than anything which has a name, ran from eyes to eyes, and told them more than can be told in words. No written letter was needed to tell her how and why he was giving up wealth and power, even as he had given up passion. It was certainly not because he was afraid of felony; he had not been thinking of that sort of law.

Somehow, he seemed to speak his next words to her that, though others were by, they reached her ears alone. At least she heard them plainly, though neither her husband nor his uncle appeared to hear.

‘It is hard to compel you to give Copleston to Gideon Skull. I would have kept it to save you from that, though it is not my own. But—“do what you ought,” you know; if Providence wants helping through, that seems like the way. I’ve given you

something to live for now. For Alan's sake, be a real wife to the master of Copleston, and make him what the master of Copleston ought to be. You can do it, and there's nobody to do it but you. I have lived to help you, after all.'

'Gideon—you have made me, a magistrate and a clergyman; Me,' she heard her husband's uncle stammering, with a sketch of real indignation in his voice, when Waldron had gone. 'You have made me commit Perjury—you have made me swear to a false Will! I can forgive most things, Gideon—almost everything; when you came back to us, as I hoped and trusted, like the Prodigal, I remembered nothing against you; I, and your Aunt Sarah, and your Aunt Anne, received you as if you had been our own son. We forgave everything. But to make me a tool to help you to commit Forgery—No! Gideon—I will never speak to you again.'

'Forgery?' said Gideon, fiercely. 'Forgery—to make a fair copy of a real Will? Are you crazy, Uncle Christopher—or a fool? How was I to know that that scoundrel had

found what you had hidden away? Was my wife to lose Copleston because you were a fool? Forgery! It was the remedy of accident and error for the sake of justice—it was what the Courts of Equity have to do every day. . . I will not have my honesty slandered—no ; not even by you !’

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A ghostly flight are they that rise
 Around the rock-hewn wall :
 Yet none, by pennon and devise,
 May fail to name them all—

By Sword or Scrip, or Bleeding Heart
 Held high, that all may see :
 Hard round that castle do their part
 That phantom chivalry.

Which come as friends? and which as foes?
 Which banners lose or win?
 More wise than man is he who knows,
 Till All have entered in !

GIDEON SKULL had nailed the colours of Honesty to the mast. He had certainly been detected in what looked, from the outside, like an exceedingly ugly piece of business ; but it was impossible for a man in whom honesty was a passion to perceive that to replace a lost document could be called Forgery by anybody but an imbecile curate or a straw-splitting attorney. He could place his hand upon

his heart, and dare anybody to say that, throughout the whole course of his history, he had ever told a single lie. If others had allowed themselves to be deceived by the bare literal truth, which he made it his pride and his boast to tell, that was surely the fault of their own stupidity, for which he could not be held accountable. The will he had put forward, though—from unavoidable necessity—written, signed, and executed by his own hand, was as true and honest a will as that which his uncle had hidden, and old Grimes had found. He felt himself as much beyond reproach in this business as in that of his marriage with Helen. He had never told her that he was actually a rich man, and he had honestly believed that he was going to be one. And so, in the matter of the will, it was his uncle who had chosen to swear to its genuineness; and he was not his uncle's keeper.

And, forger or no forger, he had won Copleston after all—thanks to Mrs. Reid's violent effort to straighten what seemed the

crooked lines of the world instead of following their curves.

He had won it—but the bitterness of the prize! Tragedy had entered into the life even of Gideon Skull.

He had come down to Hillswick, full of all zeal of revenge in the name of justice, and of greed in the name of passion. Never, since the world was made, had a man found Love, Hate, Revenge, Self-Interest, Justice, Pride of Will, Copleston, Waldron, Helen, Self—in a word, all Right and all Passion so completely blended in one; so that he might gratify all his desires by one single word or touch without feeling his especial kind of conscience one whit disturbed. All his wishes and principles had been turned loose into a masquerade with licence to wear one another's masks and dominoes as chaotically as they pleased. He might picture himself to himself as a man who, inflamed by a righteously indignant sense of having been wronged, and by a sense of justice so exalted as to place him above all personal considerations, had come to thrust out a

usurper and to reinstate a rightful heir: as a true and faithful knight who, for his lady's sake, had vowed to regain Copleston: as a husband generously bent upon showing his wife that he was the true and the strong man—her romantic and sentimental lover to be a sneak and a cur. How could he help it, that the unscrupulous doing of complete justice meant his own gain?

A first and unsatisfied passion in such a man, heightened, strengthened, and deepened belief and instinct that has part in him, is no child's play. Copleston was indeed his and hers. But it had not come to her from him. It had come to her straight from Victor Waldron. Volumes could not tell what this meant to him. It was the lover who had come out as the faithful and generous knight: while it had been himself who had been made to look a liar and a felon in Helen's eyes. Most people would not have seen a very wonderful feat of generosity in Victor's giving up an inheritance to an heir whose right was beyond question. But Gideon was simply stunned by the discovery that a man who had Copleston, and

could have kept it, should let it go. Waldron, having the true will, the ace of trumps, in his hand, had any forger in his power, and might have done anything he pleased—so felt Gideon. It is strange and painful enough to an innocent beginner in life when he first discovers that the world contains some rogues; but it was ten times more strange, nay, more painful to Gideon Skull to find that the world, which he believed himself to know through and through, contained a single man whose professions of the commonest honesty were anything better than a conventional sham. His one pride had been that he had been free from the sham. The very existence of Victor Waldron dislocated his entire theory of the universe: and who can bear to have it suddenly thrust upon him that he has been wrong about everything for more than forty years?

And then—at last he knew that Copleston had come to mean nothing to him beyond his one grand hope of Helen's life and heart: according to his views of how lives and hearts are to be gained. Could he have been wrong in that too? And right or wrong, he had

gained Copleston, but in such a way that he, even Gideon Skull, would rather have lost it a thousand times.

The uncle, having had his answer, left the room, with some real dignity about him, to avoid a storm. Gideon and Helen were left alone together once more. He expected her to have followed his uncle, with an air of scornful disgust, such as she had shown him that night when she heard for the first time that Alan had died. But she stayed. If he had proved wrong about all things he had ever looked for, why not in this also—if in great things, why not in the small, by which the great things are made? He had lost all belief in his own wisdom, and in the world's dishonesty: he had nothing to say: nothing to do. Helen sat as if absorbed in thought, seemingly without the least intention of breaking the dead silence by a word—if, indeed, he could suppose her to be conscious that she was not alone.

‘Well,’ he said at last, to break the oppression of silence, and with a special savageness of tone, simply for want of a better, ‘I

suppose you are satisfied at last, now that you can have ecclesiastical authority for adding forgery to your catalogue of my misdemeanours. I suppose you are looking forward to have me found out in a murder. Perhaps I shall be, before I've done—now that I *have* found out the way to please you—I shall be giving some scoundrel what he deserves, and the parsons and the lawyers and the other old women will call it Murder. I suppose nobody has ever had so great a pleasure as you would have in seeing me hanged.'

All the firm ground upon which he had ever believed himself to have a foothold seemed to slip away from him as Helen rose, and, instead of sweeping from the room in scorn and anger, came up to him where he sat, gloomy and sullen, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

'Gideon!' said she. It was only a single word: but a single syllable may contain a world of indignant scorn. And in her word there was simply—none. Only a solemn, simple gravity which he had as yet never heard in any voice, except in Victor Waldron's a few

minutes ago. He looked up and stared at the face from which such a word had come in such a tone.

‘Gideon—I have been thinking—that it is not for me to upbraid you. My poor mother—I can understand without knowledge, for I can remember enough to explain what I have heard—she, by meaning well to Alan, and out of her over-great love to him, brought on him nothing but evil: and yet how can I blame *her*? Why, I cannot even blame you. . . . Whatever you have done, I have done—and worse, and more. I married you without love, and for another’s sake, and to put right what I thought wrong. How can a woman wrong a man more? . . . I—I am afraid—it is the worst wickedness a woman can do. . . . No: it is *not* for me to blame you, whatever you have done. I do owe you my whole duty, for amends. Let us help each other to be good, Gideon: and try to think less ill of me than I deserve. Let us do what everybody ought to have done always: let us try to make the best of things as they are.’

Gideon was beginning to feel like a child

in the ways of the world. 'What the devil do you mean?' he growled out; but, in his heart, it was more like a cry for light than a growl.

'I mean, we took one another for better or worse: and that you took me for worse than I took you. Gideon—I want to do my whole duty; don't make it harder for me—no, I don't mean that—I mean, help me all you can.'

He could not tell that she was accepting Victor Waldron's gospel. But suddenly a new light flashed through his mind, which made him the Gideon Skull of old. He rose from his chair, thrust her hand from his shoulder, and faced her with renewed confidence in himself and in his knowledge of women and men.

'No—I will have nothing to do with you—I am not such a blind idiot as that comes to! While your lover had Copleston you were false to me—now that *I* have it, you are false to *him*. I don't understand him—but I understand *you*! Dare to tell me you would not make love to old Grimes, if he became owner of Copleston!'

Helen could only stand dumb and crimson

before him. None could guess more profoundly than she felt how it was for love's best sake that she had been clutching at what love had shown to be duty. But she could meet his look bravely at last; for the most shameful part of his charge had wildly missed fire.

‘Gideon!’ she said, ‘I can only tell you that, if Victor Waldron were the richest man on earth, and you the poorest, my place should be with you, and I would never see him again. . . . You have a right to suspect of anything a woman who married a man for the reason that I married you. . . . But try me in any way you can find, and see. . . . Do you know what I most wish with my whole heart and soul? That Copleston were Victor Waldron's very own, so that you might see what I would do; and that my duty, instead of meaning wealth, might mean poverty and every sort of struggle—Oh,’ she cried eagerly, ‘it would be so infinitely easier to do then!’

‘You—you tell me that, if he were rich and I were poor, you would choose me? . . . Helen, answer me this, and answer it truly—

I shall know well enough whether you speak truth or no. Answer it truly—if you were free, and if he came to you rich and I poor, which would you choose then? No—not that—if we came to you on equal terms? No—not that again; which of us two would you choose, him or me, if I came to you rich and he poor? . . . Speak, Helen—say instantly, truly, which you would choose; I do not mean to be blind any more. Have you not even the wit to say, “I would choose you,” and honesty enough to say, “Whoever had it I would choose Copleston”? Helen—I swear before Heaven I will believe you if you say “I would choose you,” even if I know it to be a lie!’

‘Gideon!’ faltered Helen, ‘you bade me speak the truth—and I cannot; but I want to do what I ought, and I will—do not make it too hard!’

‘So that is the whole truth!’ said he. ‘You would do your duty as my wife because the man you love bids you; Victor Waldron gives me Copleston; Victor Waldron gives me my wife. . . . Good-night, Helen. Per-

haps I shall understand things better—some day. I suppose you think I want Copleston still? Not I. . . . I only want a dose of sleep. I can always get what I want, where that's concerned. Go to bed yourself; and tell my uncle that I'm taking a nap here for an hour. I suppose it isn't your fault that you prefer that sort of man—sane or no—who has all the proper sentiments at his tongue's end, and can afford to throw away estates as if they were handfuls of dust, to one who doesn't want duty, or anything, right or wrong, but only—*you.*'

It will be remembered that Gideon Skull had at least once before put in practice an exceedingly peculiar art of sleeping, by means of which he could ensure himself absolute escape from everything that troubled him—even against the disturbance of dreams. But, in truth, he had used it far oftener than once; often enough, indeed, to make himself master of the art, whatever it might be. The only condition he required for it was the certainty of unbroken solitude; he needed no help from narcotics or any sort of artifice to induce the

result. Some physical peculiarities must have made that result possible, but his only apparatus was a concentrated effort of will applied, as may be inferred, to the nervous centres ; a kind of self-mesmerism, in which the will of the patient aided that of the operator, since the two were one, and thus acquired more than double power. According to cases which have become historical, he by no means stood alone in the possession of the power of reducing himself at will less into an ordinary condition of sleep than into that of a trance, resembling nothing so much as a suspension of vitality for the time. By its nature it could not continue long ; but it was so complete as long as it lasted that he never failed to rise, at the end of a period varying from a few minutes to nearly an hour, without the sensation of having come to life again after a temporary separation of body and soul, during which the latter at least, if not both, had taken an infinitely refreshing holiday. And to-night he needed this utter profundity of rest and annihilation of thought more than ever, so that to-morrow he might be wholly

himself again and see clearly what life must henceforth mean and be.

As soon as Helen, reduced to self-conscious silence, had left him to prepare for the facing of a new life in her own very different way, he, as before, partly undressed, loosened the rest of his clothes, and stretched himself at full length upon a sofa on his back, with his head low. His first proceeding was to withdraw every sort of personal thought from his mind, an operation which, as most sound and regular sleepers know, practice and habit render perfectly easy, and requires no real effort of will. Everybody who knows how to do it has his own recipe for it; some people substitute abstract facts for their proper thoughts, others fancies: Gideon's way was exceedingly simple, and consisted in merely watching the development of the changing colours with which darkness amuses closed eyes. But to-night, for the first time, it seemed as if his recipe would prove vain. To-night, for the first time, he had not merely thoughts and plans to extract from his brain, but something which did not seem to be in

his brain at all. Not only did the darkness become filled with its normal hues of red and green, orange and blue, but a living face was painted upon the black background, and that was Helen's.

Try as he would, that face would not shift or move. He could only feel that he had lost her for ever; that the love which bade her devote herself to a wife's duty was not for him; that she only gave him her life because she could not give him her heart and her soul. It was a hideous prospect for the man who had too late discovered that he, even he, had a soul that could love as well as a body that could desire; and that all he had done, out of what he thought wisdom, had been to lose Helen by gaining that Copleston which was to buy her and had cut him off from her. Why had he not known from the beginning that it was Helen's own self he wanted, and not Copleston? His own irremediable blunder in life and in his belief about life no longer filled him with shame: it overwhelmed him with despair. What was he to do with a wife who had vowed to be his slave

only because she could never love him? In a word, Gideon Skull was crushed and maddened because he had at last found out that all men are not scoundrels, that all women are not heartless fiends, that Helen was a woman, and that he himself was a man, with the need in him of good as well as of evil.

He could not contrive, try as he would, to disbelieve in Waldron's hitherto incredible honesty, or in Helen's indifference as to who might be the owner of Copleston. But all this had become but half material to him now. He felt that he had been taking hold of the world by the wrong end, or rather had believed it square when in truth it was round. A round shape may not be better than a square one—it is enough that a globe is not a cube. If disbelief in one's whole self and an impossible love means what we mean by a broken heart, Gideon's first discovery that he, or any man, had what is called a heart at all was proved by its breaking.

'Let us be good,' were the sum of Helen's last words. They must mean something beyond a hypocritical common form. 'Good!'

thought Gideon. ‘I dare say I could be that, if I could begin things all over again ; I could run a blockade every time, and pluck every feather out of Sinon and Aristides, and do everything I haven’t done if I could begin all over again. . . . There must have been something wrong, after all, about either the world or me. . . . Well: then I must abolish the world for an hour, and I *will*. I won’t give in ; no, not even now. Can’t be good? Bah! There’s no can’t about anything. Gideon Skull the Good!—Well, anything for a change. I don’t suppose it will be so very hard to be pretty good on Copleston. If Helen—Gideon Skull the Good!—For how long?’

Though he was alone, the fancy took the form of a sneer. But it was only the sneer without which he would as yet have found it impossible to own, even to himself, that Goodness is a thing as well as a word. ‘Good’ is a child’s word. And Gideon, new to all that was real over forty years old, used it like a child—and this time it was the sneer that was an empty form.

One sort of will, or another, began to do

its work at last ; the face before him softened without fading away. Then, with some weary and passive sort of consciousness that some form or fashion of new life was before him after all, he let himself sink, rather than forcibly compelled himself, into that state of trance wherein all his faculties found absolute repose. As when Helen had first heard of Alan's death, his heavy jaw relaxed, and his breath came so quietly and faintly that his chest could not be seen to heave. No wonder that he required absolute freedom from disturbance when he indulged in this form of rest, for any intruder would assuredly have taken him for a dead man.

Helen had slept but little ; for she had spent nearly the whole of the night in thinking out some plan whereby she could, in spite of all that passed between her and her husband, crowd her life and his with so much fulfilment of all that duty in its heaviest sense can mean, that she, and—if it might be—he also, should be able to willingly dispense with every thought of happiness for the rest of their days. She had learned from his latest

words and by her deepening knowledge of him through herself that he had been crushed and softened; and she had never suspected, till to-night, that he had ever felt for her more than a sort of passion to which she had of set purpose closed her eyes, combined with a very decided passion for Alan's lands. If he had come to need and want her for herself—what would that mean? It would make her wifely duty a thousand times more hard, but ten thousand times more needful. To devote herself to Gideon Skull loving her, instead of to Gideon Skull hating her, looked impossibly hard, without greater strength than she could hope to find; but even so it must be. She knew all Victor Waldron had meant now. To think how all these things had sprung from a mother's attempting to be her son's providence, she did not dare. Nor did she look forward with any special anxiety as to what the morrow might bring. Life was going to consist of too many days to make her especially heedful of any one of them—life was likely to be too long to let her think much of hours that were so near. She would

have plenty of time to thrust Victor Waldron from her heart and to give it, though empty of all but honesty, into the hands of Gideon Skull, to whom it belonged as rightfully as did Copleston.

So she had not yet quite lost her old courage after all—unless, indeed, some one had given her some new courage that was not her own.

There was of course nothing for her to notice in Gideon's not having left his uncle's study before she was dressed, since he had chosen to convert that into a bedroom. But she, a little restored to her old self, and therefore, as of old, letting her deeds run before her thoughts by seizing the first possible moment for putting into execution any resolve however immature, herself went into the study to call him, as a better wife might have done.

She had never seen him in one of these trances; and seeing him thus still, white, without sign of breath or motion, was seized with a new and strange alarm. 'Gideon!' she breathed out in a frightened whisper, as she laid her hand on his brow. He neither heard nor moved.

In truth, the man had never had a soul to part from before. It had come to him that night in the form of the bewildered soul of a new-born child, and having once escaped, had been too frightened to come back again.

Only this remained—that the old Gideon had ceased to live before the new-born Gideon had died.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Boughs that are serest
Will soonest be sheen :
For Spring-time is nearest
When Summer hath been :
When the frost that thou fearest
For closest and dearest
Alone is between
The seeking, forsaking,
The losing and taking,
The sleep and the waking,
The Russet and Green.

HERE, many will fairly enough suppose, this chronicle of Copleston has reached its natural and conclusive end. Mrs. Reid, by planning everything for the best, had, almost beyond even expectation, done everything for the worst ; Gideon Skull, with all the will in the world to do harm, had done more than could have been dreamed of in the direction of straightening what had been twisted beyond all hope of being thoroughly right again.

Good had done its worst, and bad its best, and there was nothing more to be done. As for Helen and Victor—it is easy enough for any moderately fertile imagination to make out an almost inexhaustible list of what might have been when all else was over and done. She might have felt that it was for him to speak out very plainly to her, if there was to be anything more than distant and mostly silent friendship between them. He, a poor man whom the temporary ownership of a great estate had thrown terribly back in the world, might have felt invincibly incapable of asking an exceedingly rich widow to marry him. In short, a complete romance might be erected upon the way in which they might go on misunderstanding one another and keeping apart until it became almost, or quite, too late for any understanding to come to them. The only possible objection to such an exercise of fancy would be that it would assume a man and a woman, who had been taught a little sense very sharply, to be an absolutely impossible pair of fools.

In any case—though it may seem little

enough to any purpose—it happened one day, as it had often happened before, that the ancient fly belonging to the ‘George’ at Hillswick brought a lady, a gentleman, and their luggage into the inn yard. The gentleman handed out the lady, and led her, leaning on his arm, straight into the coffee-room. He rang the bell and asked if they could have a bedroom. The waiter answered that he would go and see.

It was a merely formal and customary answer, however, for there were always vacant beds at the ‘George,’ except at election time and on yet rarer occasions. But the waiter’s object in hurrying out to discover what he knew was by no means an empty form. Hotel guests in Hillswick had always been rare, and had for some time past been rarer than ever, since Gideon Skull had ceased to visit his uncle; and it was only natural for him to wish to know if he alone had failed to recognise the new arrivals. It made a considerable difference at the ‘George’ whether guests were *Somebodies* from round Deepweald, which was the county town, or *Nobodies* from *Everywhere*.

Everybody about the place had seen the arrivals, but nobody knew them. Their luggage, though eminently satisfactory in every other respect, was labelled with neither name nor initials. They were a Lady and a Gentleman, even from the 'George' point of view; that was clear. She was something more, too, for she was both young and pretty. She was little and slight, and fair, with a charming delicate complexion, laughing lips, and smiling blue eyes. She was the picture of a happy wife, too lately married to have found out yet that marriage means something a great deal nobler than escape from life's troubles. She looked up at her husband with something of the shyness that belongs to the first experience of a great change, but with a smile of love and trust that was touching because of its simple perfection. Nor did he look unworthy to receive her half proud, half humble smile. In the first and best place, he looked like a Man. As to lesser things, he was tall, broad, and strong, brown-bearded and well bronzed, with a face that was almost too grave, but without sternness, and with truth written in every

feature and line. His happiness was doubtless more serious, though it might be very far from being less deep than hers. As for the rest, there was but little to observe. They came without a servant or any signs of whether their purpose in coming to Hillswick was business, pleasure, or chance, and the lady was dressed simply and plainly for travelling.

They dined together in a private room, and with appetites too healthy to gratify the curiosity of the waiter very far during the meal. But when the last dish had been removed—

‘I suppose you know all about Hillswick?’ said the gentleman to the waiter.

‘Well, sir, as much as I’ve come to hear in a month or so. I’m a Deepweald man myself, and Hillswick is but a poor little bit of a place, after towns like Deepweald or London.’

‘And so one comes to know them sooner. Let me see—— I used to know a little about the place myself, once upon a time. I remember the name of the Rector—I should say of the Curate-in-Charge.’

‘Rector he is, sir. The Rev. William Blane, M.A.’

‘Blane? I meant Mr. Skull—Mr. Christopher Skull.’

‘No, sir. I’ve heard of him. He was here before Mr. Blane. He gave up through old age, and the parishioners gave him a silver tea-caddy for a testimonial for his long and faithful service; and he’s gone to live at Deepweald, where I come from myself, with the Misses Skull. He was much respected, I believe, by all that knew him. So I’m told.’

The waiter lingered; he was evidently on the track of news to carry back to the bar.

‘Who keeps the ‘George’ now? Mr. Reynolds?’

‘Oh, no, sir! He retired long and long ago; almost, as one may say, before you were born. It’s Mr. Pool keeps the ‘George’—Mr. Pool, from Redchester.’

‘Mr. Bolt, the doctor? I remember him; I suppose he is still here?’

‘I believe there was a medical man of that name, or used to be; but that was before my

time. But where he is now, I can't say. Shall I inquire at the bar?'

'And you told me,' said the lady, 'you told me that Hillswick was the one place where change never came! I thought there couldn't be such a place—and you see.'

'I have made a bad beginning, Lucy, I must own. Well—I suppose that there is such a thing as change, even in Hillswick, if one puts long enough intervals between one's observations. But the Parson, the Doctor, and the Landlord, all together—it does shake one's faith a little in the immutability of things. But wait a minute, and you'll see. . . . Of course, old Grimes is still clerk and sexton here?'

'Why, sir,' said the waiter, 'you must know Hillswick like a native born, to know the name of the man that was sexton when Mr. Skull was Curate-in-Charge, and Mr. Reynolds kept the "George"! You never heard how he came into a fortune, then?'

'Old Grimes into a fortune? No!'

'He did, though. People do say it was through finding ancient documents in the

church tower, that proved him out to be a long lost heir. I don't mean to say it was thousands, but he gave up church work and came to the bar——'

'What?'

'To the bar of this house, sir—every day, taking his glass, and talking about old times. There wasn't a day he didn't come, till he grew to be a regular fixture, haunting about the churchyard between whiles, whenever there was a funeral, till he died in harness, as one may say. They missed old Grimes, terrible, at the "George." They do say he was near on a hundred years old.'

'Then I give it up, Lucy,' said the stranger, with a smile that was not wholly a smile. 'Since old Grimes is dead and buried, I give up Hillswick—it is a different place from what I used to know. . . . I suppose Mr. Waldron is still at Copleston?'

'Well, sir, not exactly, so to say, in residence,' said the waiter, who as a Deepweald man, knew the phrases of a cathedral city. 'But that will soon be, now, after the wedding, if all's true they say. And for my part, sir, I

shall be pleased to see a proper married gentleman settled down at the place—it will be good for business and make things a bit brisker than they are now. Hillswick is not like Deepweald, sir, as you perceive. And that wedding, sir——’

‘Well—the church is still standing, any way—I saw that, as we drove through the town. And yet, if I had been asked which would hold out longest, old Grimes or the steeple, I would have backed old Grimes. Come, Lucy. It’s a fine evening: we’ll take a stroll, if you’re not too tired.’

‘You’ll be taking a look round our church, sir?’ asked the waiter, as Lucy was putting on her hat and shawl. ‘Shall I send up Boots to show you the way, and get the keys? I don’t think much of the church myself, sir, naturally, being a Deepweald man; but there’s some curious things there, I’ve heard say.’

‘The way from the “George” to the church? I’ll show Boots, if he wants to know. No, thank you: I don’t want the way or the key. . . . So, Lucy,’ he said, as they left the inn

door, 'now you see the only town I had ever seen, to know it, till I was five-and-twenty. *You* won't fancy I wouldn't have things as they are, because you will guess what all this means to me.'

'I *do* guess,' said Lucy, gently. 'It must mean a great, great deal to you—and as if I could think that all the old memories on earth could make any difference between you and me! If you did not feel them very deeply indeed, you would not be you.'

'Do you know where we are going now?'

'Where shall we be going? Are we not going to say good-bye to all that is left of us here—to your father's grave?'

'Lucy, I can't tell you how strange it is to come back to Hillswick with *you*, and to find it to be the only place in the whole world where I can feel unknown and alone. You are part of myself everywhere else; but here I am almost a man who never knew you, and whom you never knew. Of course, it is all mood and fancy, so you won't really mind—and you need not, any way. . . . My dear

little wife, you don't know how dear my sister was to me——.'

'Don't I? If losing me would help me to find her, and your mother—I would——'

'No: you would not: don't say anything of the kind. We are one. I cannot think they are living still, whatever you may say. If they were, I must have found traces of them, long and long ago. Just think, Lucy. When I left that French hospital—where *we* met—and came home, they had left their lodgings, and had given no new address, not even to the "Argus," where they might be found. That seemed incredible, unless——'

'But it does not mean death, Alan.'

'It *must* mean death, Lucy. Only Death could have parted me and Helen—my mother and me. Death alone could have made them pass away from my life without a sign. They were not helpless or thoughtless people; and anything but Death would imply—well, some only impossible thing. Helen was as pure, and as good, and as true, as—as you. Mystery as it is, Death is the only way by which

it can be solved. My mother must have caught some disease that Helen took from her—or—but who knows? No: I *must* have found them, were either alive. Dear—you have done your best to keep my hope living; but you have done all you can. You are my Whole and my All.'

'Except your memories, Alan. I want to share those, not destroy them. I could not have left England without having a picture of your old home to carry with me wherever we may go.'

They entered the churchyard, which proved a little disappointing; it was far better kept under the rule of the new rector and the new sexton than in the days of old Grimes and the Reverend Christopher Skull.

Nobody was there but the dead: the visitors had the churchyard to themselves. Lucy's husband needed no guide to find the straightest path to the tomb of old Harry, where the '*Well done, thou good and faithful servant,*' was still as deep and clean as if it had been carved yesterday.

Lucy did not disturb her husband's silence by a word; nor was he ashamed to let her see how much he was moved.

Presently she withdrew herself from him, feeling that he might wish to be alone for a while with the memories of that part of his life in which she had no real share. But he took her hand, and said :

‘Don't go. All that is mine is yours.’
And she stayed.

The sun was on the verge of setting when they at last turned round. They would have chosen to leave the churchyard as alone as they had entered it, so that their picture of it might not be made less harmonious by any sort of life with which their hearts could not be concerned. By ill luck, however, they no longer had the churchyard to themselves when the approaching twilight warned them that it was time to return. She took his arm, and moved slowly down the broad gravel path that led from the lych-gate to the church door.

‘To-morrow is Sunday,’ said he. ‘We will come to church here, so that you may

have that also in your picture ; and then you shall see Copleston——’

Before he could say another word, he was face to face with Walter Gray and—Helen ; and Helen saw her brother, among the graves, and risen from the grave.

They had thought each other dead ; and they had met alive, and here, and now. That was enough for the wonderful moment that followed the first wild shock of surprise—if surprise be not an absolutely meaningless word. For we know that there was no real reason for surprise that Alan and Helen, not being dead, should meet in Hillswick churchyard rather than in any other place that the world contains : and as for coincidences of days and hours, these are quite as common as the unseen sympathies of action which compel their happening. If Alan had gone where his father was buried and where his sister was living, and had found nothing, then, indeed, it would have been almost as strange as if he had left England for ever without a farewell.

But surprise is indeed all too weak a word

to tell what rose up in the hearts of Helen and Alan—they thinking and knowing nothing of the chances that are above ruling, and yet must needs be ruled. It was enough, and more than enough, that they were he and she. Lucy, indeed, might feel surprise: for she only saw her husband seemingly rooted to the ground at the sight of two people whom she did not know. But even before she heard the names ‘Helen!’—‘Alan!’ she knew all.

It was Walter Gray—to call him by Alan’s name for him—who called them down from the air where wonders cease to be wonderful, to the solid ground where nothing can be understood until it has been explained, and where faith needs the crutches of reason.

‘Yes!’ said he: ‘We *are* we three—Alan, Helen——’

‘It is Gray,’ cried Alan. ‘Thank God for that—I shall know what has happened now—It *is* my sister, Helen? as surely as that you *are* Walter Gray?’

‘As surely as that I am Victor Waldron,’ said he.

And so Alan Reid, Bertha Meyrick’s dead

lover, came to life again, himself married to a stranger, to find his sister Helen, the widow of Gideon Skull, the mistress of Copleston, and leaning on Victor Waldron's arm. Such was the catalogue of seemingly monstrous fruits that had grown from the soil of Mrs. Reid's great plan. No human being could have dreamed of one of these things—and they were all true.

Alan had yet to hear that his mother had died.

Helen was living at Copleston; and Mr. and Mrs. Alan Reid did not sleep that night at the 'George.' Victor was staying at Deepweald till the time of his marriage with Gideon Skull's widow, now close at hand. There was considerable confusion of ideas at Hillswick on the subject of the ownership of Copleston; for neither Victor nor Helen had thought it worth while to publish the history of the title for the benefit of the town. And, as all the world knew, a marriage between the heir of the Waldrons and the heiress of the Reids would very quickly set matters upon the best possible footing.

Victor returned to Deepweald that evening as usual, leaving the brother and sister to themselves. Even Lucy managed to withdraw herself from her husband's life for full two hours or more. How Helen justified to Alan her marriage with Gideon would be beyond the reach of the boldest guess, had she made any attempt to justify it at all. She could not dare to say 'I did it for Alan's sake,' when she had to say, to the face of Alan himself, 'I did it for yours.' For Alan's sake to commit a sin—she had never known all that this meant until now. She could only tell her tale; and she did not find him hard, in the hour of his finding his mother dead and sister—alive.

'And do you not even ask after Lady Lexmere?' she said at last, when, for this one night, nothing more was left to say.

'And who on earth is Lady Lexmere? Is there anyone I have forgotten whom I ever knew?'

'Only Bertha—Bertha Meyrick, whom you once told me, that Easter Eve, you loved with all your——'

‘So Bertha Meyrick is Lady Lexmere? Well, Helen, I suppose, when I come to think of it, that is one of the things that might have been—and are the better for not being. I did care a good deal about Bertha, it is true. But love! That is a very different thing. That comes and does *not* go.’

Helen could not help sighing—her last sigh on Alan’s score. Was it not to save Bertha and Alan from a heartbreak that she had been the wife of Gideon? And now Bertha was Lady Lexmere, for whom, it seemed, Alan had never cared enough, in his real heart, to risk the breaking of a straw. . . . If she had only known!

She could only go straight to Lucy. ‘It was you, I hear, who nursed my brother back into life,’ said she, ‘when his best friend thought his life beyond saving. I once had a sister named Bertha. But she has changed her name to Lucy, now. He *does* love you: and I know—now—what love means.’

Then Alan, dreaming before he slept, laid himself down to rest in the old home, and did not dream.

Next morning the sun shone. The sun does not always shine seasonably, but it did to-day—or at least some people in Copleston thought so, so it came to the same thing. Alan, who had a young Englishman's wholesome scorn for sentiment—long may that scorn flourish!—felt that he ought to be cheerful, and did his duty in that respect as in all lesser things. Lucy could not help being happy, and took all new things for granted. Helen alone was grave, and yet not wholly out of sympathy with the sunshine, which has something better than brightness when the sky is not wholly free from clouds.

After breakfast the Arch-Enemy, Victor Waldron, rode over from Deepweald. His experiences of Copleston had been many and various, and enough in number and variety to turn many a sane brain. Firstly, he had never dreamed of owning Copleston. Secondly, he had come from America to see if he had not a lawful claim. Thirdly, he had decided that he had no claim whatever. Fourthly, Copleston had become his own, against his will. Fifthly—still against his will—it had been

proved not his own. Sixthly, it had ceased, by his own act, to be his own. Seventhly, it had been on the eve of becoming his own by marriage. And now, Eighthly, the appearance of its true owner had lost it to him once more. And he was as glad of its final loss as of anything that had ever happened to him since he was born—save one.

Even still, not everything had been explained. It has taken this pen more than an hour or two to get to the root of every why and every how. But Alan and Lucy, instead of talking, had wisely gone out into the park and its sunshine, neither of which he had hoped to see again. I fear that his mother, with all her anxiety and eagerness of devotion, did not live in his heart like his father, who had never let anybody see anything but the sun, even when hidden out of all other sight by clouds. So Victor Waldron and Helen were alone.

‘So, Victor,’ said she, gravely, ‘I cannot give you Copleston now. . . . By no deed of mine, *against* all my deeds, it has come back to its own.’

‘ And thank God for that!’ said Victor.
‘ You are my Queen Cophetua.’

‘ No! I called myself that when you told me that—when I saw that you would—leave me without one word—because I was rich, and you were—— That is not so any more. Nobody will accuse you of marrying Copleston now.’

‘ You called yourself that—then? I call you that, now. You *are* my Queen Cophetua. You give me yourself—a royal treasure to me, beggar in all else that I am.’

‘ Victor! It is you who have been Good—not I.’

‘ No. But were it so—Helen—you are *my* QUEEN COPHETUA all the same.’

THE END.

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