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"She was there, a slight figure in black."— Page 311.

DEAR.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

MISS TOOSEY'S MISSION, LADDIE, TIP-CAT, OUR LITTLE ANN,
PEN, LIL, ZOE, ROSE AND LAVENDER, PRIS,
BABY JOHN.



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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. KINGSCOMBE MANOR	7
II. THE NEW PARSON.	21
III. DEAR'S DOMAIN	40
IV. LITTLE DEAR AND CLIVE	55
V. RALPH MADDISON	73
VI. BOY AND GIRL	89
VII. EVENING AT KINGSCOMBE	99
VIII. THE SLEEPING BEAUTY	115
IX. TWO IS COMPANY	130
X. INTO FAIRY LAND	146
XI. DAILY LIFE	162
XII. IN THE ORCHARD	177
XIII. A WOMAN'S WILL	191
XIV. AWAY FROM DEAR	209
XV. WEDDING BELLS	224
XVI. A MOTHER'S DOING	237
XVII. CAUSE OR IMPEDIMENT	265
XVIII. PARTING	283
XIX. MEETING	299

DEAR.



CHAPTER I.

KINGSCOMBE MANOR.

“The old house by the lindens
Stood silent in the shade,
And on the gravelled pathway
The light and shadow played.”

—LONGFELLOW.

A PEACEFUL little place is Kingscombe, lying under the chain of hills whose beautiful outline can be seen for many a mile throughout Loamshire, their sides clad with gorse and heather, and with, here and there, sharp bits of gray rock sticking out through the turf and making the tracks steep and precipitous. Over the hill sides are scattered flocks of sheep, and the soft, cracked tinkle of the sheep-bells adds to the drowsy peacefulness of the scene.

Kingscombe itself is hardly more than a handful of thatched cottages clustering round the little, clumsy, old Norman church; but Kingscombe Manor is one of the largest gentleman's seats in the neighborhood, and the park covers many an acre of undulating grass land, and wood and copse.

But at the time when my story begins, the Manor House was standing empty, with all the furniture in the principal rooms shrouded in brown holland, and the carpets rolled up and the shutters closed, and only a superannuated housekeeper and one maid to look after the place and keep the rooms aired. Outside, the gardens were beginning to show—and showed more plainly as years passed on—that no one took any interest in the planting of them; that the gardener, merely from force of habit, kept up a certain succession of flowers in the borders, and set the boys to weed the paths and mow the lawns. As long as the baskets sent up twice a week to London were well stocked with fruit and vegetables, and with cut flowers

for setting out the dining-table, that was all that signified, so the gardener did not waste his time in devising fresh arrangements or effective combinations in the beds, but planted great patches of sweet peas and asters and carnations and single dahlias, just as he did carrots or beetroot or potatoes, and sheared off the blossoms ruthlessly when the baskets had to be despatched.

“My lady,” as the people about Kingscombe called Mrs. Maddison, had never come near the place since the old Squire died; she had never liked it, and had only spent any time there to gratify her husband, who was fond of the old place where he had been born and bred, and where the wife of his youth lay buried. He had married for the second time when he was quite an old man, in his dotage, his friends maintained, and the second Mrs. Maddison was quite a young girl, young enough to have been his granddaughter, and very fond of society and, report said, admiration.

So, when the old Squire died, it was not to

be expected of his widow that she should bury herself in out-of-the-way Kingscombe, five miles from a railway station, with no society worth speaking of ; and still less that she should waste any of the money she knew so well how to spend, in keeping up a large establishment there, with a lot of useless old servants, who seemed to have more right to the place than she had.

So the establishment was reduced to its very smallest dimensions, and the old servants discharged ruthlessly, and the old plate packed up and dispatched to the pretty little house in May Fair, that suited my lady's taste so much better, or the gay little villa on the Thames, near Richmond, which was rustic enough for her when she needed a change from London ; and for the rest of the year there was country-house visiting, and a few weeks at Cowes, and a run to one of the German Spas, or a winter month or two on the Riviera. Who, with the whole, beautiful, gay world to choose from, would ever think twice of dull, dreary, old

Kingscombe Manor, with its square, matter-of-fact brick front, and its sensible sash windows of small square panes, and its heavy stone portico, all as solid and uninteresting as the builders of the end of the last century could make it, just like the country squires of the neighborhood, whose society bored my lady so unutterably?

Inside it was quite as bad, everything so hopelessly square and uncompromising, and furnished in an equally distressing manner, with great solid furniture of hideous form, upholstered in barbarous colors, huge mirrors on the drawing-room walls with scrolly gilt frames, and a suite of rosewood furniture, including a large round table in the centre of the room.

“Think of that, my dear!” Mrs. Maddison wrote to sympathizing friends in the early days of her married life, when she was trying to make the best of Kingscombe; “it’s enough to break one’s heart to look at it!”

And no doubt it was a trial even then,

when æsthetic tastes were the exception and not the rule, and would have been still more so in these days of oddments, when not a single article of furniture in the room should bear the slightest resemblance to its neighbor. The four-post bedsteads upstairs might have been got over, and perhaps even the shining mahogany of the dining-room, with its sarcophagus of a sideboard, if only the drawing-room had been improvable, or if there had been any room in the house capable of being done anything with. But “oh, dear me!” Mrs. Maddison used to say to herself surveying her own appearance in the great mirrors in the drawing-room, which reflected a very modern little person, in one of Worth’s latests confections, and with hair done in that artful confusion which to the un instructed looks like simple untidiness; “there’s no doubt I’m quite an anachronism, and poor, dear Fanny”—for so she spoke to herself of the first Mrs. Maddison—“would have looked much more in character, with hair done like

window curtains on such a painfully high forehead, and a barley sugar ringlet behind each ear, and a puce silk dress—I think they called that depressing color puce, didn't they?—trimmed with fringe." For an oil-painting done by a local painter hung in Mr. Maddison's dressing-room, and the present Mrs. Maddison had often ruminated over the appearance of her predecessor.

Everything in the house was in such terribly good repair; indeed, it seemed to her that such solid workmanship was never likely to wear out and require replacing, and that nothing short of an earthquake would make any alteration possible in Kingscombe or its substantial drawing-room suite.

There had been an old house before the present building, for the Maddisons were an old family in Loamshire, and Kingscombe had been theirs for many generations, but the old mansion had been burnt down when George the Third was king, and the present one was built in its place. The old Squire used to

tantalize his young wife by describing what his father had told him of the inconvenience and quaintness of the old place, of its rambling rooms, and up and down floors and broad staircases, and diamond-paned casement windows and open fireplaces, secret rooms, and concealed passages. "Altogether it was, by all accounts, a most uncomfortable, creaky, old barn," he used to end up with, "and I think we may consider ourselves very lucky to have a good stout roof over our heads, and solid walls that don't shake and shiver at every stormy blast of a winter's night, as the old place used."

Mrs. Maddison did not care much for the beauties of nature, or she might have found some consolation in the park, where some of the oaks and beeches were as old as any one need wish, and she also might have found antiquity in the little church, which, as I have said, dated back pretty well to the Norman Conquest, if her sensitive nerves had allowed of her exposing them to the irritation of a country choir.

Nor was it to be expected that Mrs. Maddison's high-heeled boots should have climbed, in her search for beauty and picturesqueness, the steep hill paths behind the church, where the hairbells nod their dainty heads, and the wild thyme gives a sweet, herby scent as your foot presses it down.

So when the old Squire died, Mrs. Maddison disappeared from Kingscombe, and the house stood empty year after year, and, as I have said, the gardens grew to look uncared for and the house desolate, though not even desolation could make it the least picturesque; only the paint was cracked and blistered, and the blinds were weather-stained and dirty, and the swallows had it all their own way under the portico.

"It ain't lucky to drive 'em away," old Sims the gardener used to say; "they brings luck to a house, folks says, though luck ain't much good to an empty house neither, and Miss Dear she's a terrible one, she be, for birds' nesties; she give it to Dick a good 'un, when he took them

fly-catchers' eggs, as did ought to aknow'n better; but eggs is eggs to a boy, and they don't stop for to think what sort of bird they belongs to. And I often wonders to myself what's the good of putting up a list of birds as ain't to be touched in the school yonder, when the youngsters don't know half the names on 'em, let alone their elders."

And who was Miss Dear? perhaps you will ask, whose wrath was terrible to the garden boys. By which question you will show that you are altogether a stranger to Kingscombe, and to the country for some distance round.

She had been the ruling spirit of the place from the time when she first appeared at Kingscombe, I think at the age of two and a half, in a very large sun-bonnet, not one of the modern Kate Greenaway constructions which make such quaint, little pictures of our children nowadays, but a regular countrywoman's lavender print bonnet, with a curtain falling below the waist of the faded drab pelisse, which was evidently not intended for such a determined little walker as

Dear, being so long that it swept the ground behind, and was in constant danger of tripping up the young feet in front, if it were not held up by the determined baby hands.

It was in this fashion that Dear first appeared before the astonished eyes of Kingscombe, astonished and disapproving, for even in these few, out-of-the-world cottages, nestling under the hill, there was a certain code of propriety in dress, and it was an offence against this code that "parson's little maid" should be no better dressed than that.

"It's plain to see that she ain't no mother and only half a father, as one might say."

But they soon settled it among themselves that the new parson—(they called him the *new* parson for ten years and more, with the conservatism of country places,) though he was only half a father and hardly to be reckoned a man—was more than half an angel, though there was no doubt that for practical purposes, such as roast mutton and rice puddings, pinafores and flannel vests, a more human parent would

have been as well for Dear and the boy. He was not angelic in outward appearance either, being small and lean and rather bald, and apt to wrinkle his face into sudden and odd grimacés, and to stand in grotesque positions, and to give little grunts and queer ejaculations, apparently unconnected with outside events.

He was painfully absent-minded, and, till Dear reached such years of discretion (which, I believe, took place at six) as enabled her to attend to his appearance, would sometimes scandalize the good folks of Kingscombe by his attire.

He had had a great deal of trouble, had passed through the burning fiery furnace of work in an East-end parish, where, except for that same Presence, which was with the three children of old, the strongest, noblest, greatest nature must needs be utterly consumed; but twenty years of such work and in such Company could hardly fail to make a man little short of an angel.

Then his health broke down; he had never been strong, but like many delicate instruments,

he outlasted many more substantial ; and then, when the few friends he had who were in a position to see the morning papers, expected daily to see the announcement of his death, they read to their amazement the notice of his marriage, and, on further inquiry, found that he had married, or rather been married by, a pretty, gay, little school-girl of eighteen, without a penny of her own, and with hardly a relation.

It was entirely her doing ; it would never have occurred to his mind, whatever it might have done to his heart, and the only excuse for this idiotic marriage, as indeed it is the only excuse for any marriage, idiotic or otherwise, was that they loved one another.

She was sure she could make him happy, and so she did.

“It will not be for very long, dear,” he said. Nor was it, but it was not ended as he meant when he spoke thus, nor as she understood him when she answered by clasping her strong, young arms round his neck, as if she never would let him go, as if she could drive back death by the strength of her love.

He took a seaside curacy, and they were very poor and perfectly happy, and, having accepted the curacy because there was not much to do, he at once set about making work for himself in all directions, till ultimately his days were nearly as much filled up as they were in London.

She was not a very good manager—what girl of eighteen is? and he was much too vague and unworldly to help her, so they got into money difficulties, which worried and tormented them, and would have upset their happiness altogether if it had not been too deeply rooted.

Then Dear came and then the boy, and the following winter, after just two days' illness, the young mother died, neither she nor her husband seeming to realize that the parting which they had anticipated from the first had come, only with their respective parts reversed, that it was she that was taken and he that was left, till he awoke to the fact that the boy, three months old, was screaming lustily in his cradle, and that two-year-old Dear was trying vainly to quiet him by pushing a much-dilapidated doll into the crimson, unappreciative countenance.

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW PARSON.

“That He so many years to us has lent
From the rich store of His vast treasury
That life so simple, earnest, innocent.”—F. C.

IT was six months after his wife's death that Mr. Hume was presented to the living of Kingscombe. It was not particularly good, or else it would hardly have fallen to his share, and Mrs. Maddison, in whose gift the living was, was quite indifferent in the matter, as she had no intention of residing at Kingscombe herself, and had no troublesome feeling of responsibility as to the spiritual welfare of the place. So when the name of Michael Hume was mentioned to her by a friend of a friend of a friend of his, she made no inquiries as to his fitness for

the charge, but wrote by the next post to offer it to him.

If it had not been for the children I think he would have declined it, as it had come too late to give Annie the pleasure it might have done a year before. A good part of him seemed to have died with her, and to have been buried in the little, wind-swept, sea-side cemetery, where he and Dear went so often to look at the nameless grave,—or rather perhaps to have followed her to the quiet land where her innocent gentle soul was in safe keeping. It seems to me that Annie's husband died with her, that death really could not part them, while the father of Dear and Clive lived on. I think, too, that the hard-working, energetic parish priest died then, but the holy, gentle man of God lived on to be a comfort and solace and bright example to many at Kingscombe in after years.

There were all sorts of stories in the village about the new parson's first arrival, stories which were told with indignation and reprobation at first, and then with amusement and indulgence,

as one might recount the doings of a favorite but whimsical child. They told how he arrived quite unexpectedly, walking, having carried the baby all those dusty five miles from Great Cheriton, losing his way more than once and so adding to the distance, and made his way at once to the church without even asking which was the vicarage. He sat down, fairly spent, in the church porch, and was nearly turned out by old Grimby the sexton, who took him for a tramp, not being able to grasp the notion that such a dusty, shabby little object, with a dirty-faced baby asleep in his arms, could be the new parson and successor to trim, well-brushed Mr. Clifford, who always looked as if he had just stepped out of a bandbox. And when it was made known who he was, nothing would serve him but that Grimby must fetch the key of the church, and he went in and knelt ever so long on the chancel step, with that blessed baby asleep on a cushion he fetched out of the Squire's pew, and he took no notice of Grimby's loud whispers, or even a nudge to which the old man's

impatience led him, and it was only the baby waking up and rolling off the cushion with a howl that brought him to a sense of the present emergency, and to the recollection that he had a baby's bottle in one of his pockets and a packet of some sort of farinaceous food in the other, and that these two must be brought to bear in some way upon the baby.

It brought also to his memory that Dear had been left behind with the luggage at Great Cheriton, a position which most children of two and a half would have resented even for a few minutes, but which Dear took very calmly, being of a naturally placid nature, and having found from experience, which though short had been wide, that humankind is generally good to small creatures, and that the masculine part of humanity in particular, however gruff to start with, nearly always becomes amiable on further acquaintance.

So Mr. Hume was hardly out of sight before Dear had found her way into the good graces of a couple of porters, who invited her into the

parcels-office and made her welcome to a share of their dinner, from whence she passed to the station-master's, who had a cat in his room and a box of biscuits, over which he and Dear became such friends that he was quite disappointed when a cart came over from Kingscombe to fetch the child, having decided to take her home with him to spend the night and amuse his wife.

It was one of the porters' wives who supplied the lavender print sun-bonnet which offended the eyes of the Kingscombe people at Dear's first appearance, for her hat had been blown out of a window in the train, and Mr. Hume had no further idea of remedying the loss except by tying his handkerchief round the curly head.

It was long after dark that Dear arrived at Kingscombe, the gray horse being slow and requiring a good deal of rest, a necessity which arose whenever a public-house came in view on the road. And, while the horse rested, Tom Clegg the driver went in to have "a tell" and a drain of cider with the host, a refreshment which would have been extended to Dear if she had

not happily fallen asleep. Luckily, too, the gray horse, though slow, knew his way home, and paid no attention to the erratic directions of Tom, who, after such frequent refreshment on the road, was less distinct in his vision, both mental and physical, than would have been safe with a less intelligent quadruped.

But old Dapple flopped down hill and scrambled up hill and jogged along the level with admirable steadiness, and Dear was as unconscious of the jolts and bumps of the cart as of the confused conversation of the driver.

The vicarage at Kingscombe, in Mr. Clifford's time, had been as trim and well-kept as its master, with a neat little garden and a smart dog-cart and fast-going mare, and a dapper groom and dignified housekeeper. But all this vanished with the new vicar's appearance; he kept no vehicle except a perambulator, of which he was the only driver; the garden was left to take care of itself, except when any one in the village wanted a job or had an hour to

spare, when they turned in and dug and hoed according to each one's ideas as to the necessary work required. Now and then they would go to the parson for payment for this purely voluntary work, or sometimes they would pay themselves with a few potatoes or a basket of apples, the least scrupulous among them being prevented from taking undue advantage by the perfect confidence placed in them. But as time went on and the little parson became better known, payment of any sort was no longer thought of, and the lads used to come up in parties to do the vicarage garden, till its neatness and order became quite the pride of the village, and it was a sort of point of honor that the vicarage garden should have the first and the best of everything. Indeed, one year, at the Cheriton Cottagers' Flower Show, Bill Price got into serious hot water and lost the prize for vegetable marrows, by taking the largest from his garden and putting it, with as much art as his simplicity was capable of, against a plant in the parson's garden, which

had never done well in spite of the care lavished on it, and whose yellow and spindly branches could hardly be believed capable of producing such a monster, still less that it could have been produced in one night.

He got no credit either from the very person he meant to benefit, and on whose behalf, I am sorry to say, he told a terrible number of blundering and contradictory untruths, for Mr. Hume was deeply concerned, and treated the whole affair as not only a discredit to Price but to all the village, and specially to himself, who should have taught his people a higher code of honor and truthfulness.

As to indoor servants, he actually engaged Patty Mills, in spite of the open remonstrances of the whole parish; indeed, everything urged against her seemed an additional reason for taking her, to his peculiarly-constituted mind.

“Her never keeps her places.”

“Mrs. Tompkins, up t’ Hill Farm, said as how she couldn’t keep her another day, were it ever so, as couldn’t keep her fingers out of

anything, and that impident, as there wasn't no bearing her sauce."

But there was worse than this against her character. Every one had some tale to tell of her unsteadiness, dishonesty, untruthfulness, laziness; all the stories more or less true, and any one of which would have prevented ordinary people from engaging such a servant.

Patty felt that her chances were very small, as she stood before the new parson, rolling a corner of a dirty apron in her fingers; it hardly seemed worth while to be civil, and to resist her inclination to laugh openly at his necktie, twisted round under one ear, and his waistcoat buttoned up wrong.

It was just a chance that some of the impudence Mrs. Tompkins had found so intolerable did not come out; but, somehow, in spite of his oddity, it was not easy to be impudent to Mr. Hume, and, perhaps, he spoke before she had time.

"Could you come at once?" he said; "it

would be a great convenience to me if you could do so."

And then he held out his hand to her, and his face wrinkled up into the oddest, kindest of smiles.

"I am sure you will do your best," he said; "and I hope my little ones will not be troublesome."

It was such a very unusual way of engaging a servant, that Patty drew back, thinking he was making game of her, and this might be some way that gentlefolks had of scorning and scathing a girl with no character to speak of, who presumed to apply for a situation. But the clasp of a bony hand was reassuring, and Patty felt an unusual choking sort of feeling in the throat, and a dimness in her eyes, and a feeling about her heart that there was some good in her after all, and that she would show the Kingscombe people that she was not so bad as they thought her.

She really did wonderfully well at first; it seemed as if it was just what she wanted, to

be believed in, to be treated as trustworthy, not to be watched and regarded with suspicion, not to have her previous shortcomings kept constantly before her. But, of course, it did not last, and the Kingscombe people were quite right in their wise remarks about "new brooms," and "we shall see what we shall see, by and by."

It was after she had been there about three months that a sudden temptation overcame her, and she opened a drawer in Mr. Hume's room, and took a five-pound note, and, along with it, a little old watch that had belonged to Mrs. Hume, and was being kept for Dear.

She was miserable as soon as she had done it, more especially as no one dreamed of suspecting her; and Mr. Hume was so absent-minded and forgetful, that he set any loss down to his bad memory, which had forgotten where he had put the object in question. She grew careless and neglectful in her work, and as nearly impudent as she could manage to her master, and rough and short-tempered to the

children, and at last went off, without asking leave, one afternoon, and was brought back, late at night, from Great Cheriton, in charge of a policeman ; having had a good deal more beer than was good for her, and having drawn suspicion on herself by trying to sell the gold watch at the pawnbroker's there, who, although it was not of any great value, felt sure, from the look of the thing, and the manner of the girl, that it had not been honestly come by, and sent for the police.

The five-mile drive in the light cart from Cheriton had sobered Patty, and as they drew near Kingscombe she did her utmost to persuade Constable Brown to let her go,—to take her back to the Cheriton lock-up,—to keep the money and the watch and say no more about it,—to take it back to her master and say he could keep her box and clothes and she would never come near Kingscombe again,—to stop at that pond by the roadside and let her throw herself in and end her miserable, good-for-nothing life,—anything was better, it seemed,

than facing the only person in the world who had believed in her and never suspected her.

The constable drove woodenly on, paying little attention to Patty's entreaties, except when they neared the pond, and the girl made a movement as if she would have jumped out of the cart, when he kept her firmly down with his elbow, and felt for the handcuffs in his coat-pocket.

"Now look here," he said, "my good girl, it's not a bit of use making a kick-up. I've got to take you to the Reverend Hume, and you've got to go."

Upon which she subsided into sullen despair, with a lingering hope of a sudden bolt when Kingscombe Vicarage was reached, which Constable Brown was too wide awake to permit.

The kitchen blind was not drawn down, and, as they passed, they could see the little parson, with a very anxious, absorbed face, and his coat off, and a saucepan in one hand and a spoon in the other, while their noses were saluted with the odor of burnt milk.

In front of the fire sat Dear in her night-gown, with small, pink feet stuck out, sharing a bit of bread and butter with a mangy sheep-dog from the farm, which got up at once and slunk out, with its tail between its legs, at the first glance of Patty's eye, though that eye had no longer the fire and sharpness of old days, which made a dog feel as if the thrashing had already begun when it turned in his direction ; and from the next room came the sound of Clive's voice, half naughtiness, half hunger, demanding the long-delayed supper.

“It really were the queerest start I ever came across !” Police-constable Brown used to say, even his wooden imperturbability shaken by the unusual character of the scene. “There was that gal, as impident a baggage as you'd come across between this and London, with a tongue as would sauce the Queen on her throne, and fists as she could use too, come to that ! and she sunk down of a heap by the door soon as ever the parson looked at her, like as if she'd been knocked over. He didn't say nothing to her,

only speaks pleasant and friendly-like to me—quite the gentleman, mind you, all the time—though he hadn't got no coat on, and kep' stirring the baby's food."

"'Come in, Mr. Constable,' he says, 'and take a cheer. You'll be glad of a bit of supper, but you'll excuse my seeing to the young folks first.' And while he stirred the food and tried to get it cool, I told him what the girl had been up to in Cheriton, and I brings out the watch and asks if he knows it. He did flash up a bit then, and dropped the spoon, and took the watch out of my hand all of a hurry, as if he couldn't abear to see one touch it. 'Know it!' he says, 'of course I know it; it was my wife's;' and he stood holding it, while I told him how she'd abeen trying to sell it at Mr. Atkins, and how she'd changed a five-pound note at the Percy Arms. She never said a word all the time, but just crouched down in the corner by the door, without nothing to say for herself. And then he put down the watch, kind of quiet, as if he felt fond like over it, and pushed it across the table

towards Patty, and went back to the stirring of the food ; and the little one by the fire got up and pattered across with her little bare feet on the bricks, and put her hands around the girl in her pretty baby way, saying, 'Don't cry, Patty, don'tee cry!' and the girl caught her up and hugged her so close as must ahurt the little thing, though she didn't do nothing but stroke her face and say, 'Poor Patty, don't cry!' And what do you think was the end of it, sir?" Constable Brown always ended the story. "Why if the parson didn't say as he'd *given* her the watch, as if any one were likely to believe that—not as it were a lie," the man always added quickly, lest any one should imagine for a moment that he cast any reflection on Mr. Hume, who soon held a firmly-established reputation for saintliness in all the country round, "for he gave it to her just then, when he pushed it across the table. 'And as for the money,' says he, 'its an advance of her wages. And now, Patty,' he says, 'if you'll kindly see to baby first, we shall be glad of a bit of supper.' She was like

mazed just at first, more dumbfounded even than me, who was just a fool for my pains, and had had my drive over to Kingscombe for nothing, and if it hadn't been for the child clinging to her, she'd have thrown herself right down at his feet, kind of grateful like, and she made as if she'd have caught his hand and kissed it, only he held out the spoon that he had been stirring the baby's food, as if he thought, and perhaps he did, that it was that she was reaching after."

Constable Brown did not know—nor did any one except Patty and her master—the end of the story, which indeed did not end till their lives ended too. That five pound wages advanced represented to Patty the wages for all the rest of her life, wages only to be earned by unremitting labor, morning and night, early and late, with self-gratification or rest or comfort put clean out of sight.

Of course, Mr. Hume did not regard it in this light. The five pounds was deducted, neither more nor less, and then the wages paid as usual in spite of Patty's vigorous resistance. But he

could not prevent her spending most of these unwillingly-received wages on the children, and—until Dear arrived at those years of discretion afore-mentioned, and undertook the general management of the parish—Patty in her burning gratitude stripped herself of the barest necessities, almost decencies of life, till the whole village was loud in its condemnation of her washed-out prints and patched aprons, which were a disgrace to the parson's situation.

But as to the watch, that was the hardest, bitterest punishment to Patty. He would never take it back nor let Dear or Clive have it; many and many a time she put it into his room, in the drawer from which she had taken it, in boxes and corners where she knew he hardly ever looked. Inattentive and vague as he was in most matters, he seemed always keen and on the alert in this matter, and the watch was always restored to her within a very short time of her attempt at giving it back.

It made it all the worse to her as time went on and she knew her master better, and found

how sacred to him was all that had been his wife's, and how on each of the children's birthdays he would give them, as some priceless treasure, some little thing of their mother's,—a book, a handkerchief, a pin-cushion. But he would never take the watch back, and by and by she found—for coarse rough natures grow sensitive by contact with superior souls—that it gave him pain to see it, so she gave up her futile attempts to restore it, and kept it laid by, looking at it every now and then, as a sort of punishment, when anything had gone amiss with her during the day, if her temper had failed, or she had broken something, or had let the porridge burn. And one day, but that was not just yet, she laid it at her master's feet as he lay dead, and it was buried with him in Kingscombe churchyard, under the hill.

CHAPTER III.

DEAR'S DOMAIN.

“ In her garden found her,
Sister roses round her ;
A most delightful, queenlike, little flower.”
—FROM “MONTH BY MONTH.”

PART of Dear's undisputed domains from her first arrival at Kingscombe was the empty house and grounds of the Manor. One of the first walks she took in that same drab pelisse and large sun-bonnet was through the gardens there ; and one of the first friends she made at Kingscombe, after Tom Clegg, her charioteer of the day before, was old Sims, the gardener at the Manor.

Mr. Hume, with Clive in his perambulator, were too slow and vague and desultory as companions to Dear, when, even at this early age,

she had once started on an exploring expedition. Mr. Hume was apt to stand transfixed for ten minutes at a time, with eyes fixed on vacancy, oblivious of impatient jerks at his hand or tuggings at his coat-tails. As they grew older the children treated these fits of abstraction with respect, for, as Dear explained to little Clive, "he had gone half way to heaven to see dear mother," and that was why he could not hear what they said, nor see the things that Clive held before his face.

The little boy pondered this explanation long and seriously. "Dear," he said at last, with a very awe-stricken little face, "s'pose that some day he got so near to heaven and dear mother that he couldn't find the way back?" And next time the absent, far-away look settled on Mr. Hume's face, he was called back abruptly to earth by the stifling clutch of young arms round his neck, and by Clive's sobbing, terrified voice in his ears, "Father, father! come back to me and Dear!" But this was three or four years later, when Clive's feelings were articulate,

for that first day at Kingscombe he was only nine months old, and had no great choice of vocabulary.

So Dear left them behind under the great beech trees that form the avenue leading from the lodge to the house. She tripped up now and then over her long pelisse, or over the mossy roots that pushed themselves up through the grass on either side of the broad roadway, but picked herself up with the independence of a child unused to nursery care, picking the sharp bits of stick or prickly beechnut shells from her poor little palms, and comforting herself for a scratch by kissing it to make it well, with a lingering memory of mother's tender ways.

The iron gate into the garden being open, Dear went in and made her way into the rose garden at the right of the house, where old Sims was at work hoeing up weeds. It was then only two summers since the old Squire had died, and the garden and house had not begun to show the manifest signs of absentee ownership which they contracted in after years, and even

to a far more experienced eye than Dear's the rose garden in the bright July sunshine might have appeared beautiful. The reign of the roses was at its height, and though perhaps a modern *connoisseur* of roses might have lamented the absence of some of the gorgeous new varieties, there was such a profusion of color and form and fragrance as might have satisfied the most exacting rose fancier, even though there was not a single label to proclaim their style and title, and old Sims had reached the end of his knowledge when he pointed out a well-known old favorite as "Glory to John." Anyhow there they were, quite as beautiful as if they had long French names written on neat zinc labels; dusky rich crimson and creamy white, full glowing pink and golden saffron, with dainty shell-like tints of buff and maiden's blush. There were roses far above little Dear's head, trained on arches over the path, but naturally wishing for notice, stretching down long branches, bending with the weight of their blossoms. There were roses too on either side, not on standards

displaying bare ugly straight stems surmounted by an unnatural mop of flowers, but on luxuriant bushes with leaves and stems and flowers gracefully intermixed, bushes low enough to allow of Dear making a cup with her two small hands round one beautiful half-opened pink blossom, and kissing the dewy fragrant petals.

Her print sun-bonnet had fallen back in her efforts to be polite to the *Maréchale Niel* above her head, whose soft yellow buds seemed actually to be smiling down at her as she passed, so that it was only pretty behaved to stop and smile back, and it was then that Sims saw the quaint baby figure with the sunlight dappling her fair, little, curly head through the rose foliage, and her eyes smiling up in a rapture of delight.

“Blessed if she mightn’t abeen one of the flowers come to life. She always were a terrible one for flowers were Miss Dear, and she’d a way of treating ’em every bit as if they was Christians, and could feel and hear, and would be put about if they was roughly handled or not took no notice on.”

"Please lift me up," was Dear's first remark to Sims, men being, according to her understanding, no doubt intended for lifting and carrying, and otherwise assisting determined characters of short stature to attain their ends.

From the vantage-ground of Sims' arms, Dear caught sight of the terrace beyond, on to which the rose garden opens. A rich deep violet clematis was tossed in a great mass on the balustrade, and in front, in lovely contrast, was a row of stately madonna lilies, taller by a good deal than little Dear that July day, and she made a little imperative gesture to Sims, who had already become her humble bond-slave, to carry her in that direction.

"And what may your name be, little miss?" asked Sims, after the lilies had been examined, and had left their golden dust on the child's little round nose. He was not deceived by the faded pelisse and print sun-bonnet and the absence of attendant nursery-maids into thinking that she was merely a village child, and he had heard too that the new parson

had arrived the day before. "Are you the parson's little maid?"

"I'm Dear," she said. "I used to be Baby Dear, before Boy came, and then he was Baby, and I was only Dear."

And here, perhaps, is a favorable opportunity of telling the reader how the little girl came by that name, which sounds like a pet name of endearment, but which was actually her baptismal name. Many names had been suggested and discussed, and I think the last conclusion come to before the christening was that she should bear her mother's name of Annie, but when Mr. Hume took the baby in his arms at the font, he forgot all about the name and called her what was in his heart of love and tenderness, though indeed Dear was her mother's name as far as he was concerned. "Dear, I baptize thee." He was very apologetic about it afterwards, when he grasped what he had done, thinking her mother might be vexed, but they both agreed, on reflection, that it was the very name for this rare and

wonderful little gift that had been granted them, eminently dear to them, and, as seemed sure to their partial minds, to all who came in contact with her.

As the child grew to notice such things, it seemed to her that her name was an unusually nice one, seeing that people appeared to know intuitively what it was, and strangers would address her as "Well, my little Dear!" and old women stop her to ask, "Where are you going, Dear?"

Now it was noticeable that Clive's name had not that advantage, for no uninformed person spoke to him as "Well, my little Clive," so Dear had certainly a great advantage in having such a name, and Clive was inclined to envy it.

"Why, whatever child have Sims got carrying about now?" Mrs. Lynch the housekeeper said, as she caught a glimpse of the old man raising Dear to peep into a thrush's nest in the hedge by the pantry window. "Wasting his time! and he as hadn't a minute to spare this blessed

morning to do a job, let alone speak a civil word to a body."

By which it may be seen that there was the usual amount of friction between the indoor and outdoor servants.

But Mrs. Lynch's irritation against Sims was not proof against Dear's radiant, little face, and the grumblings against him ended in a "Bless her little heart!" at the sight of a rapturous meeting between the child and Meg, the large, sleek tabby cat, who was the pride of her mistress's heart, and to whom Dear's innocent mind ascribed no evil intentions with regard to that same thrush's nest, though the spotted breast of the mother bird was greatly agitated by the neighborhood of that shining tabby body, and loud scoldings followed the cat's dignified retreat from the wall.

Mrs. Lynch's hand involuntarily strayed towards the button of the door of a cupboard, in one corner of which was a jar of honey; and, having got that out, she remembered that a bit of parsley was necessary in the preparation of

her dinner, and though that is not usually grown in a flower-garden (though why not it would be hard to say, seeing that it is quite as pretty as many of the foliage plants which are so largely cultivated), yet she took her way towards the lawn from whence Sims' gruff grumbling and the child's clear, sweet voice proceeded.

Ten minutes later, the doors of Kingscombe Manor opened to receive this young conqueror; kitchen doors, to be sure, but rather on that account to be preferred as leading more directly to the heart of the citadel, and not requiring the amount of unbarring and undrawing of rusty bolts which the opening of the front door necessitated. The garrison also capitulated unconditionally—the garrison consisting, it is true, only of Mrs. Lynch and her niece Betty; but still, not foes to be despised, for they had held the fortress gallantly against various assailants, or what they imagined to be such, in the shape of tramps and Irish haymakers, blood-curdling descriptions of whom they gave to their admiring friends and relations and to the local police-

man, who wondered in his foolish mind, which was always in a state of surprise and puzzle, that he never met these gigantic, brawny ruffians of threatening and savage aspect, who visited the Manor from time to time, and were put to flight by the courage and discretion of Mrs. Lynch and Betty. Even Mrs. Lynch's own friends and acquaintances seldom penetrated beyond the kitchen and the housekeeper's room, though it would have required super-human strength to have carried off the massive furniture of the Manor, if her scruples about showing the house were to be attributed to fear of dishonesty.

But to Dear all parts of the Manor were open and free ; not, however, on that first day, when I do not think she penetrated further than the honey-pot on the table in the housekeeper's room. But in after times Dear spent many a day trotting about in the empty rooms, gazing up at the pictures of bygone Maddisons, including "poor dear Fanny," whose mild and somewhat simpering expression she found very

pleasing, not being prejudiced as the second Mrs. Maddison had been by details of costume and hair-dressing. She was soon on speaking terms with all the pictures and had her favorites among them, and occasionally little misunderstandings and quarrels, and, with one stout old Maddison in a curly wig and with a sly, pig-like eye, that followed persistently wherever she went in the room, she had quite a serious tiff, and did not say good-morning to him for nearly a month.

The furniture that had been such a trial to Mrs. Maddison's æsthetic taste, became boon companions of little Dear; each solid chair and uninteresting table being invested with a character of its own, and representing animals in Noah's Ark, or roaring lions surrounding a Daniel clad in a dark pelisse and sun-bonnet; or a whale yawning to swallow a small, curly-headed Jonah. In later times they assumed the shapes of fairies and giants, witches and dwarfs; or later still, as Dear's reading enlarged its sphere, they became kings and heroes of

romance, fair ladies and gallant knights, and one sofa (it was a remarkably clumsy one in the morning-room—horsehair, with mahogany legs), carried its title of knight in Dear's mind far on into days to come, when clouds had gathered between her and the memories of those childish days, when the gallant deeds of that piece of furniture had gained for it a light tap from the wooden spade in Dear's hand, and "Rise, Sir Sofa!" was said in such impressive accents as must have thrilled to its very castors.

Clive in due time was admitted into this magic domain, and followed submissively in Dear's footsteps, regarding pictures and furniture through her eyes, and adopting all her ideas and prejudices without attempting to import into them any original ideas of his own, only accepting it all with a certain matter-of-factness and simplicity which gave a wonderful reality to her imaginations, so that Dear was sometimes almost frightened at the solid, palpable proportions which the airy fabrics she had built up assumed under Clive's treatment.

Mrs. Lynch from the very first had perfect confidence in Dear, which was amply justified by the respect the child paid to the Maddison belongings.

“She ain’t one of them fidgety, rompossing children as can’t leave nothing alone. If she do lift one of them ’olland covers to peep at the cushings and things, she’s as sure to put it back as I’d be myself, and a sight surer than Betty, though she’s no more than a baby.”

Mrs. Lynch’s confidence was not so unbounded as regards Clive, though I do not know that he ever did anything to merit her suspicions; but she had a theory that boys would be boys, meaning that they must of their very natures be constantly in mischief; and it is perfectly useless to attempt to upset people’s theories, even with the most convincing of facts; there is nothing so impregnable.

But that first day, as I have said, Dear went no further than the housekeeper’s room, and if at the age of nine months boys have already begun to be boys, the mischief was confined to

his perambulator, which did not get more than half way up the avenue, where Dear, on her return in Sims' arms, found him fast asleep, and Mr. Hume sitting on the grass beside him, and quite as far away from sublunary things as his sleeping, little son.

CHAPTER IV.

LITTLE DEAR AND CLIVE.

“The stars of midnight shall be dear
To her ; and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place,
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound,
Shall pass into her face.”

—WORDSWORTH.

I WONDER how much the outward circumstances of nature affect the development of character? Not so much, I am inclined to think, as we should naturally imagine, seeing that great, noble, breezy natures may grow up in close, smoky, manufacturing towns, with grimy brick walls close to right and left of them, and thick clouds of smoke hanging above their heads ; while small, mean souls may be found among the noble snow mountains or

wide-spreading moors, and slaves by the great free sea.

I know that the very same surroundings made an oaf of Will Martin, and an oaf too with a partiality for beer, and a shaky notion of truth and even of honesty, and the only intelligence about him, a mean sort of cunning and self-interest. And yet, I cannot quite get it out of my mind that the beautiful outlines of those gray-green hills against the sky may have had some influence in forming Dear's character, and the cloud shadows sweeping over them, and the great spreading broad landscape that the child's eyes gazed on so often; and the steep, little village street, with the yellow-washed cottages on either side, looking so snug and friendly under their beetling brows of thatch; and the pound, with its four pollard elms at the corners and the rare growth of nettles inside; and the village pump, with its stone trough, on the edge of which the buckets rested so long while their owners gossiped; and last, not least, the little old Norman church, with its

round arches and thick, clumsy, shapeless pillars, and small, deep, lancet windows.

In after years one, from whose mind Dear was not often absent, fancied that traces could be found in the girl's character of the subtle influence of these outward things, surrounding her growing up, and, being far away from Kingscombe and from Dear, loved to carry on this fancy, and conjure up before his mind's eye smaller details of the place—the clipped yew peacock at the Bush; the stile formed of one great slab of stone, leading to the footpath across the park; the broken steps to the post-office and village shop, between the stones of which grew little dainty tufts of fern; the blacksmith's forge at the cross roads with the cling-clang of the hammer and the shower of sparks flying up. He could see and hear it all, and out of each detail he fancied he could trace the origin of something sweet or tender or quaint in Dear's character. But this, of course, was fancy, and, as I said before, the very same surroundings

produced Will Martin, so it is not safe to set down too much to outward impressions. It may have been, one can well believe, that the intercourse with such a man as Mr. Hume may have accomplished the results which this fanciful dreamer set down to that lop-sided peacock and impossible stile and broken-down steps and so on. I do not think any one, least of all a child, can live in the company of simple holiness and not catch some of that most infectious of complaints. Talk of wickedness being catching, and the terrible power of bad example! it is nothing to the contagion of truth, and, I am sure, I do not know what disinfectant can remove the effect of good example; heap up the clods over it, sink it fathoms deep in mid-ocean, it is not to be got rid of by any means.

The children, even from babyhood, were his constant companions, and pattered about after him wherever he went. They were always at church, forming generally the sole congregation at the daily service, which being unheard of in these parts, roused considerable dissatisfaction

at first in the parish, though it was hard to say why, as no one ever came, any one need have objected; but nevertheless it was continued without intermission in Kingscombe till five days before Mr. Hume's funeral.

Dear and Clive were always present, and, that first winter at Kingscombe, when the weather was very severe and Clive was very small and had chilblains, and Dear was not yet old enough to bear the awful solitude of the vicarage pew with father far away—according to the measurements of three years—up in the chancel, the two would creep into the reading-desk with him and draw the ragged cassock round them, and feel quite warm; and if sometimes when he stepped out to the lectern to read the lessons he had Clive in his arms, though of course an irregularity and strongly to be deprecated as any precedent as regards ritual, it may not have been displeasing in the sight of Him Whose Gospel was there read, and Who, we are told, Himself took the little children up in His arms.

Patty, before that episode of the watch, of

which mention has been made in a former chapter, used to protest against this church-going.

“The children,” she declared, “is too good to live already, and don’t want no more to make ’em better. I never heard tell in all my born days of good children growing up, and ’tis just like driving so many nails into their coffins to let ’em go on so.”

But after her lapse from the paths of honesty Patty protested no more, and perhaps further experience of the children reassured her that they were not likely to become too good, perhaps by occasional fits of tantrums on Clive’s part, which were very healthy and did not forbode early decease, or, perhaps, by investigation of his chubby shoulders, on which no signs of premature wings showed themselves through the steam on tub-nights.

But the children accompanied their father on other occasions, equally objected to by Patty and others in Kingscombe, only from other motives than those aroused by the church-going. When Mr. Hume heard that Clegg was rapidly

getting tipsy in the Bush one evening, and went to fetch him out, Dear went too, though Clegg was known to be free in his language, and not particular with his fists when in his cups. Clive would have gone too, only it happened to be tub-night, and if he had gone it would have been straight out of his bath, and with no costume to speak of except soap. Clegg did not get tipsy for a long time after that ; he could never rightly remember what happened, but he had a dim recollection of Miss Dear's eyes looking at him through mists of beer and bewilderment, and of an overwhelming wish to hide or fight somebody, and then "all at onst, it wern't little Missy's eyes, but a couple of them big stars over the barn roof yonder, and we was out of the Bush in the dark, and the new parson he'd got hold of my arm ; he were a weakly sort of little chap, and needed a bit of help now and then to get over the ground, and he was talking away about them potatoes as wanted hoeing, and he happened to be coming along my way, as made a good chance of telling me what he wanted."

The village was still more outraged at his taking the children to a farm where a man was dying of some fever, darkly suspected of being typhus. Patty had sent the messenger from the farm away with a flea in his ear, at the proposal even that Mr. Hume should go. She wasn't a-going to give the master no such message. He wouldn't go, so there! It weren't likely as he'd go and catch all manner of nasty things, and for one too as never darkened the doors of the church, nor for the matter of that the chapel neither, and used such language of market days as would make a cat's blood run cold.

The messenger, a limp and meek-spirited youth, nephew to the sick man, and used to much bad language and many cuffs from him, felt the force of Patty's arguments, and took his departure with half a thought as to whether it was worth while to try the dissenting minister in the next village, and debating what he could say to the poor, draggled, ill-used wife, who had not had all the love beaten out of her yet, or at any rate the fear of what might be beyond the

darkness into which each moment took her husband deeper.

“There! it weren’t my fault; I said all I could, but it weren’t no manner of use. It’s the fever they’re afraid on, and I didn’t think ’twere no good going all the way to Dickson’s, down to Bristow, as he ain’t likely to agot over that stone as uncle chucked through chapel window Michaelmas fair.”

But the words were hardly out of his mouth when the new parson arrived breathless and hatless, having run best part of the way. Not come? Why, he would have got up from his dying bed for such a purpose, and all that Patty could urge against the man was so much the more reason for hastening to his side. And about ten minutes afterwards arrived Dear and Clive with Mr. Hume’s hat. Dear was five at that time, and had begun to feel responsible for her father’s appearance, and had set off trotting after him, followed and delayed by Clive’s fat legs.

And instead of sending them right away or

scolding them (but that he never did), Mr. Hume let them stop in that infected house; and Patty, who had not a notion where they had gone to, was pretty well at her wit's end at their disappearance, and went to every house in the village, including the Manor, but could hear nothing of them. At ten o'clock at night, conquering qualms of fear on her own account, but feeling obliged to tell her master of the children's loss, she made her way to Lea Farm, and there found both the children asleep on the settle in the farm kitchen, from which the bedroom led in which that solemn parting from earthly things was going on.

No harm came of it to one or the other, which was at the same time a relief and a disappointment to Patty and other wise people in the parish, who had prophesied the immediate death of both of them, and much as you may deplore the event, there is a certain satisfaction in proving yourself a true prophet even of evil.

The aggravating part of Mr. Hume and his children was that they never realized people's

prognostications. They were children who went about with holes in their shoes and did not take cold, who went into the way of infection and did not catch anything, who always had their own way and yet did not appear the least self-willed or spoilt, who were constantly taken to church and yet neither got tired of it, nor, familiarity breeding contempt, grew to behave badly and irreverently, nor, as seemed the only alternative, became little, unreal prigs, good for nothing but a premature grave; who learnt of their own accord what could hardly be driven into other children's heads by the combined energies of parents and school-master, with plentiful assistance from the cane.

I fancy that Patty, as far as her ability went, which was not very far, tided the children over the first difficulties of reading, and as far as pot-hooks in writing, and rudimentary arithmetic accomplished with acorns or strokes of chalk on the back kitchen door, and this slight taste of the tree of knowledge was enough to set off these two young gluttons to gather fruit on their

own account, dipping into folios, overcoming the difficulties of black letter, and picking out scraps of amusement and interest from books whose dullness would appall the general public.

Mr. Hume's library was not very extensive, and was naturally composed largely of theological works ; but the children were not easily discouraged, and, I think, they got as much pleasure, and more satisfaction, from what they could spell out of the tattered old Chaucer, or from quaint anecdotes in Jeremy Taylor, than our pampered young people find in their copiously-illustrated and beautifully-printed books in gorgeous bindings, written purposely to suit every infantile age or taste.

It is difficult to say at what age Clive first manifested his taste for mathematics. Looking back, Dear was inclined to maintain that it was evident from his very babyhood ; that before he could speak plain, or even walk with dependable steadiness, he was given to calculations and reckoning, and to poring over that old folio Newton, with its mysterious, and, to her, uninter-

esting figures and symbols. Clive himself attributed his first devotion to Newton to imitation of Dear's absorption in Chaucer, which she rather appropriated as her own, and objected to the prolonged contemplation of the crabbed old pictures of the "Nonne," or the "Prioress," or the "Doctor of Physike" which seemed to him the best part of the book.

So he set up an opposition folio to spread open on his legs, as he sat on the floor in front of the bookcase, and, as none other of the folios possessed pictures, Newton was selected as being occasionally interspersed with figures to relieve the monotony of the letterpress, and so accidentally the bent was given which year by year grew more decided, and influenced the whole course of his life.

It is very curious to notice how, when any one has a decided bent in one direction, things turn up to favor and help that bent, even though circumstances may appear most adyverse and discouraging. Who would not have thought that in a little, out-of-the-way Loamshire village,

among a set of clodhoppers, a boy's mathematical genius would have been stifled under the weight of dullness and want of opportunity? Not a bit of it. Helpers turned up in the most unexpected directions; that stupid old Hodge the carpenter knew a little elementary practical geometry, the bailiff at the Manor had some knowledge of land and timber measurement, the school-master over at Great Cheriton had a smattering of algebra, and a willingness to impart all he knew, and a good deal more. Mr. Hume himself would occasionally wake up and recall old Cambridge days, and give an amount of help which was all the more delightful because it was so unexpected and never reckoned upon by the boy, who drank in every word, knowing how short a time this mood in his father was likely to last, and how perhaps in the very middle of demonstrating a problem, the attention might wander, the interest die out, and his thoughts be miles away (if indeed heaven is measured by miles) from the little untidy study, the open, much-

thumbed algebra, and the eager boy's face with burning eyes.

And once when Clive, like another Pascal, was tracing a figure from Euclid in the sand by the gravel pit, there happened to pass on a bicycle, like a very *Deus ex machina*, a young man of mild aspect, who yet was a senior wrangler. He was better at mathematics than at cycling, and was not sorry to dismount and have a talk with the queer little kid with ragged knickerbockers and a shock head.

So many strange figures appeared that evening traced on the sand by the gravel pit, that a party of laborers, coming from work, stopped to contemplate them with much head shaking and awe, arriving at the conclusion that the powers of darkness had had a hand in it, and one of them wagered as old Betty Cook had been up to some of her tricks, as were well known to have overlooked Farmer White's cow, as went dry two days arter, and another reckoned as he see a black cat run out of the pit last time as ever he come that way at the full of the

moon. After which they left the doubtful spot, with its mysterious lines and circles, with quickened footsteps and a dislike to be hindermost.

But if there were witchcraft in those cabalistic signs, the spell had been cast on Clive, for the next few days nothing could keep him from Great Cheriton, whither he went at the earliest hour of the morning, returning dusty and exhausted, or wet through and muddy, late in the evening, too tired to eat and too excited to sleep. Nothing could stop him short of Patty hiding his clothes, which she had not the heart to do; a bilious attack, a thunderstorm, a blistered foot, a dilapidated boot, in which the upper leather was becoming alienated from the sole, an invitation to help pick cherries at the Manor,—nothing could prevent him toiling into Great Cheriton, where that magician of the bicycle was putting up at the George, and pretending to fish in the Cher.

The young wrangler was amused at the devotion of the ragged little genius from Kingscombe, and for want of better company had no

objection to the boy toiling after him carrying basket or rod, and ready to plunge into water or mud, or climb a tree, whenever the exigencies of not very expert fishing required such exertion.

And for all this Clive was more than rewarded by such crumbs and scraps of knowledge as this divinity pleased to throw him from that rich table of the gods at which it had been his privilege to sit at Cambridge, submitting uncomplainingly when the charms of sleep, or pipe, or shilling dreadful stopped the flow of wisdom for several hours together.

“Well, good-bye, old chap!” the wrangler said, as he was starting from Great Cheriton, performing that undignified but apparently necessary process of hopping preparatory to mounting his bicycle; “grind away at your mathematics like beans, and when I get back to Cambridge I’ll send you a ripping book that will help you no end.”

He forgot all about it when he got to the next hill, where the brake did not act properly, and never thought of it again; but he had done

more for Clive in those few days than any "ripping book" would have done, and when the boy got over the disappointment of post after post bringing no book for him, he preserved only feelings of gratitude.

CHAPTER V.

RALPH MADDISON.

“And what is so rare as a day in June?

Then, if ever, come perfect days;

Then Heaven tries the earth if it be in tune,

And over it softly her warm ear lays.”

—J. R. LOWELL.

IT must have been the year following the wrangler's visit, recorded in the last chapter, that Ralph Maddison made his appearance at Kingscombe Manor. I do not think I have even mentioned his existence, which is the more blamable because he was the heir of all the broad acres belonging to the Maddisons, and of a good deal of more substantial money value into the bargain.

This was not quite his first appearance at Kingscombe, as he had been brought down in the

chrysalis state, lace and embroidery and cambric and satin, with a crumpled red face somewhere about in it, to display to the admiring tenantry shortly before the old Squire's death. But after this nothing more was seen or heard of him, and as the old Manor servants had been dispersed, with the exception of Mrs. Lynch and Sims, there was no circle of faithful retainers to receive with breathless interest the details of the young master's gradual progress through all the changes and chances of childhood, cutting teeth, running off, discarding infantile petticoats and adopting manly garb, having measles, whooping cough, and suchlike childish complaints, or making his first steps in the thorny path of education.

And even if Mrs. Lynch and Sims had been ready to keep up old traditions of interest in the heir of Kingscombe, there was no one to keep them posted up in these particulars, as "my lady" never wrote, except when she had something to complain of about the way in which the baskets of flowers and butter and vegetables were sent, and then more often by the hand of

her housekeeper or maid than her own ; and the servants she had about her were all new and many of them foreign, and held no communication with Kingscombe.

I can hardly believe it possible that at some time during the ten years and more that the Humes had been at Kingscombe, Mrs. Lynch or Sims had not told Dear and Clive about the young master, for opportunities were never-ending, as when Dear was holding a tangled skein of wool for Mrs. Lynch to wind, or was sitting on a large turned-over flower-pot, while Sims was potting out geraniums, both of which occupations encouraged long-winded stories, as also did wide-open eyes fixed in earnest attention. And the supply of really interesting narrative, drawn from life at Kingscombe, even though that life extended to the seventy years of Sims, was necessarily limited, as conscience obliged a certain adherence to truth which takes most of the point out of stories of real life, and from this I feel sure the baby heir of Kingscombe must have figured in the stories at times ; though, as

years passed by, the arrival of a family of blind, crawling kittens, or the hatching of a brood of wise little yellow ducklings, seemed of more importance at the Manor than the birth of the heir fourteen years ago, so great is the all-powerful present.

Anyhow, if they had ever heard of him, Dear and Clive had altogether forgotten the existence of such a person as Ralph Maddison, until one June day they became aware of him, standing by the thick yew hedge below the terrace, and holding in his hand a thrush's nest. *A* thrush, did I say? *the* thrush, the one who built year after year in that very same place, where the yew is cut square and meets the balustrade; a privileged creature, who hardly flew off when the children came to peep at her, and whose young ones stretched out long bare necks and gaping mouths in expectation of the tender little red worms Clive brought to regale them.

Even Meg, Mrs. Lynch's tabby cat, seemed to understand that these young thrushes were not to be trifled with, and year after year the

course of true love had run smooth, and the blue eggs had turned into ugly, little, wide-mouthed birds, with hardly a flutter of agitation in the speckled breast that covered them, till this year, when nest, blue eggs (hard on hatching) and all were torn bodily out of the yew hedge, while the mother bird flew from the round stone ball on the balustrade to the coping above and back again, uttering cries that were almost articulate in their expression of grief. Dear heard them before she was around the corner of the house, and flew along the terrace with dark suspicions of Meg, who was not always so trustworthy and straightforward as could be desired, and then she saw Ralph Maddison with the nest in his hand.

He was a boy of fourteen at that time, a few months older than Dear, and considerably taller even then, a boy with a pleasant, smiling, sunny face, with curly chestnut hair and blue eyes, with very long lashes and a dimple in his cheek; a very pretty-looking boy now, though he was getting long-limbed and awkward, and of an age

when prettiness is an embarrassing quality which a boy would willingly dispense with. He bore the traces of having been quite an ideal little boy, when no doubt that pretty chestnut hair was done into a cockatoo curl at the top of his head, and he sat on ladies' laps and showed off his dimples and long lashes, and said pretty, lisping, little speeches that were thought marvelously clever and charming. School had taken a good deal of this nonsense out of him ; these silken darlings have a hard time of it generally the first term at school ; but a naturally sweet temper and a capability of liking and being liked, and unlimited pocket-money, made things easier for him than they are for most, and he was not of a nature to provoke bullying, so perhaps the spoiling was not fetched so completely out of him as the drastic treatment of school can sometimes effect.

Dear saw at a glance that he was not one of the Kingscombe boys—indeed not one of those would have ventured on such an act, at any rate not with this open audacity ; but beyond this,

her indignation did not allow of her noticing that he was a different style to the boys of the neighborhood, though, as to clothes, if she had observed them, she would not have set much store by them as marking his position in life, as she and Clive were as a rule much worse clad than the farmers' families, and, for the matter of that, than many of the laborers.

Ralph was quite bewildered by this sudden descent on him of a flying figure with a mane of fair hair floating behind, and a little white face with great, bright, indignant eyes.

The suddenness of her appearance complicated the situation still more, for the startled boy let the nest fall, and the eggs, unpleasantly near hatching, were shattered on the pavement.

She seized hold of his arm, panting out, "Oh! you bad, wicked, cruel boy! How dare you? how could you? why did Sims let you in? Oh! poor, little thrush!"

And then she cast herself down on the stone step of the terrace, and covered her face in uncontrollable grief, while Clive, who had come

upon the scene more slowly, stood on the step above, glaring at Ralph.

“I say,” Ralph protested, “I’m awfully sorry. I didn’t know it was your nest, or that any one cared. It was so jolly easy to take, and I thought every one took a nest when they’d the chance. Why, half the chaps at school have collections of birds’ eggs, and some of them take no end of trouble to get them, and climb trees and go up church towers, and nearly break their necks over it. I had a jolly collection one term, but I bought my specimens, because I couldn’t be bothered. Do you know, I don’t believe I’ve ever taken a nest myself before. It was a pity you startled me like that, so that I let it drop. I might have blown the eggs and started a fresh collection.”

“You couldn’t have blown them,” Clive said, with undisguised contempt; “don’t you see they’d have hatched in a day or two?”

“So they would. Don’t they look beastly? Glad I didn’t try to blow them, by Jove! I say, what’s she crying about? There must be kits

of other nests about, so what does it matter about this one?"

Just then old Sims came up, and instead of taking the part of Dear and Clive, and expelling the intruder with a sharp lesson to teach him not to repeat the offence, he stood stammering and touching his hat to the strange boy, in a manner quite new to their experience of the old man.

"Well, you see, Missy Dear—asking your pardon, Master Ralph—as should say Master Maddison—Miss Dear here, she do lay terrible store by them thrushes—and, as I was saying, Missy—there, don'tee cry!—seeing as the whole place like belongs to he—leastways will when his ma—begging her pardon—my lady is took—though it's to be hoped it mayn't be for many a year neither—properly speaking the nesties being part of the place, there ain't no one as can prevent it, if the young master have a fancy for 'em—though, knowing your feelings, missy, I'd adventured to say a word if I'd been anyways handy."

“I’m awfully sorry,” repeated the boy. “I say, is that your little girl? Do make her stop crying.”

“Blesh yer, no!” said Sims, much outraged at the suggestion, but anxious to show proper respect to the young master. “This is Miss Dear, the parson’s—Reverend Hume’s young lady, and that’s Master Clive, and there ain’t one in Kingscombe nor for miles round as don’t speak well of our parson,—even the chapel folks ain’t a word to say agin him, as is more than you can say of most.”

“Oh, I say!” said the boy, “that’s ripping. I thought when I was sent down to this jolly old place, there’d not be a soul for a fellow to speak to. Mrs. Lynch has been talking about you, and she says you know all about the pictures in the hall, and can tell me who the old buffers are. I’m Ralph Maddison, you know. I dare say she’s told you about me. I’ve been seedy, and the mater thought I’d pick up here; and besides, there’s been scarlet fever in my house at school, and she’s frightened to death of

infection, and just in the middle of the season too, when she's got her house full, and no end of engagements. You're not afraid of catching it, are you? There's no fear, only one chap had it, and none of the rest of us went near him, and there was a lot of fuss and humbug about disinfecting, sulphur and carbolic and beastliness. I believe that was what made me seedy to begin with."

Even in the midst of her real and entirely unaffected sympathy with the bereaved thrush, Dear could not be uninterested in this new incident in life; and presently, looking from between her fingers, she saw such a pleasant smiling face looking down at her, that she could not continue to feel resentment, and when decent burial had been given to those unhatched young thrushes, she found herself quite good friends with their ruthless destroyer, and even showing him other nests in ivy or apple tree or water shoot, confident that he would regard them as sacred.

He had arrived the evening before, a telegram

announcing his coming having nearly produced an apoplectic fit in Mrs. Lynch during the afternoon, being the first of those orange-colored missives that had ever reached her. She at once plunged into a fluster of preparation, quite half of it being entirely beside the mark, and including several things that might quite as well have been done during the untroubled calm that had preceded this visit, or the equally-peaceful period that followed it,—such for example as having the hen-house whitewashed, and clearing out the cupboard under the back stairs, and mending the china shepherdess that stood on the mantelpiece in Mrs. Lynch's bedroom.

She laid in a stock of provisions as if for a garrison of soldiers, and got quite hysterical over some tarts which did not come up to the lightness of former days.

Mrs. Maddison had really made one sacrifice on behalf of her son, for she had sent down with him her butler, Mr. Duncan, a perfectly invaluable man, who had been with her for five years, and who steered the household through

the whirlpool of the London season with a quiet art that was beyond praise. He knew all the shades of position, and the consideration due to each, better even than his mistress, and made everything easy for her; so that as long as Duncan was there, she did not feel the smallest doubt of everything going right. So we must do Mrs. Maddison credit for having made a considerable sacrifice for Ralph, more a great deal than another mother might have done by giving up all her engagements, and cutting short the most brilliant season at its very zenith, and rushing off to nurse a son in small-pox or diphtheria. Why, with many mothers that would be no self-denial at all, only as perfect happiness as was compatible with her darling being ill or suffering, and the most utter self-sacrifice would be to keep away, if it were for the boy's good.

But Mrs. Maddison was not a mother of that sort, and she made no insignificant offering to her love for Ralph (which really existed to a certain extent) in sending Duncan. Sacrifices

must be judged of from the people who make them, not by the deed done.

Duncan was almost more alarming to Mrs. Lynch than Master Ralph himself, for after all, boys are much the same in whatever rank of life they may be born ; but there is no knowing what grandeur gentlemen's gentlemen may arrive at, or the amount of respect and attention they may expect.

But Duncan had seen too much of the world not to be able to fit in pretty well in any circumstances among which he found himself. He had travelled nearly all over the world, and had known downs as well as ups, and roughed it as well as lain in the lap of luxury ; and he had a good, kindly nature under all the varnish of fashionable service, and simple tastes that lingered among the refinements of civilization. He had a liking too for Ralph, which the boy warmly returned, having spent a good deal of time in Duncan's company, as the exactions of fashionable life made it impossible for his mother to have the boy much with her, and

since he had been out of the nursery and had grown long-legged and conspicuous, he was not always acceptable in the drawing-room. Besides, a son that is as tall as oneself is rather an awkward testimony as to the flight of time, and Mrs. Maddison was a very young-looking woman, and if people did mistake her for two-and-twenty, it was not her fault, nor was it her business to contradict them or bring a great school-boy forward to confuse their calculations as to the possible date of her marriage.

“Ralph, my treasure,” she would say, “I know you would not care for that water-party at Richmond. It would bore you to death, as it does me. You would much rather go to the Crystal Palace with Duncan, and so you shall. I only wish I could come too.”

Or again, “Mother must leave her boy for a few days. Lady Westron would not let me off my visit, though I did my best. But Duncan shall take you down to Brighton while I’m away, and you can stop at the Grand and do just as you like.”

It was lucky for Ralph that Duncan was the sort of man he was, doing his duty by the boy, and keeping him out of mischief, when it would have been easier and a good deal pleasanter to have let him have his way, and only his mother would have been to blame for the consequences. It was his liking for Ralph that prevented Duncan from objecting, as many a butler might have done, to going off in the very middle of the season to vegetate at Kingscombe, and he was soon hand-and-glove with Mrs. Lynch and old Sims, and with a good many of the villagers, and went pottering about in the poultry-yard, or doing a little bit of gardening; apparently as interested in the little doings and sayings of the place as if he had lived there all his days, and had never tasted the more highly-spiced cup of London life.

CHAPTER VI.

BOY AND GIRL.

“ . . . Her fresh and innocent eyes
Had such a star of morning in their blue,
That all neglected places of the field
Broke into Nature's music when they saw her.”

—MOORE.

RALPH MADDISON'S visit to Kingscombe Manor lasted three months, and formed quite an era at Kingscombe from which people dated. “It must abeen the winter arter Master Ralph were here,” or “Master Ralph hadn't been gone a twelvemonth.”

He was a general favorite in the place, and, though he never rivaled Dear or Clive in the popular affection permanently, still there was a fascination in his light-hearted, gay nature and

his open-hearted generosity which was very irresistible. But there was no rivalry between them, for from the very first he was devoted to Dear and Clive, but especially the former, whom he followed about like her shadow, and was imbued by them with the love and reverence they bore their father.

Clive and he had occasional little rubs, as he could not at all sympathize with Clive's thirst for knowledge, and was inclined to think it was humbug, while to Clive it seemed almost blasphemy to hear him talk so lightly of those golden opportunities of learning, and the prospect of Eton and Cambridge, which to Clive would have seemed like Paradise, but which Ralph treated as a bore which had to be got through somehow. All the luxury and amusement of Ralph's life, which he described to them, seemed trifling and insignificant to Clive in comparison, and Ralph found a more interested listener in Dear when he described theatres he had been to, and the Crystal Palace and fireworks, and a visit to Paris, and big dinners and

balls he had had glimpses of, and his beautiful mother and her lovely dresses and glittering jewels.

“What is she like, Ralph? she would ask. “No one at Kingscombe, of course; but sometimes at Great Cheriton one sees very grand-looking people. There’s Mrs. Moss, the doctor’s wife, she’s rather stout, but she dresses beautifully, and I heard Mrs. Jones say she looked like a duchess. I suppose your mother would be about as old as she is, for Mrs. Moss has a son about your age.”

They were sitting on the side of the hill as they talked, and from among the tiny eyebright and spicy thyme and sweet fine grass they were picking out the little white snail-shells with dainty black markings, and tossing them at a sheep feeding just below, with a cracked bell at its neck, who now and then turned up a black, expressionless, stupid face, with yellow, glassy eyes, and gave a gruff ba-a.

“Like Mrs. Moss!” Ralph protested. “She’s as much like that sheep. And she’s not old.

Why, I've heard Clarisse, her maid, say that she's been taken for sixteen."

"Oh, Ralph, how ridiculous! Only two years older than you. Wasn't she vexed?"

"Vexed? not a bit of it. I remember some gentleman speaking of me as her little brother, and she did not contradict him, but looked as pleased as anything. She doesn't much like my calling her 'mother' before strangers. I had a sort of trick of saying it when I was a kid, whenever I spoke to her, and she didn't like it. But she's awfully fond of me all the same," the boy went on, with a note of defiance in his voice, ready to take up the cudgels even against a glance of blame for his beautiful, graceful young mother.

"Oh, yes, of course," Dear said, to whom it seemed to go without saying that a mother would love her son, like that poor thrush whose domestic happiness Ralph had interfered with, or like Dapple, Farmer Green's Alderney cow, whose great eyes were all blue and shining with agonizing love for her long-legged, awkward

little calf, and whose mournful cries filled the night after that same calf had gone jolting off to Great Cheriton in a cart driven by a butcher's boy. "Oh, yes, of course; mothers always are. Father says he never can make up to us for the want of that; though, of course, she goes on loving us all the same up there. Ralph, I wonder if your mother is at all like what ours was? I can just remember her, at least I think I can, though sometimes I'm afraid it is the picture of the Madonna in father's room that I am thinking of."

Before Ralph's mind's eye there was a picture of his mother in her boudoir, where the light fell, shaded by rose-tinted curtains, on her face where the bloom was too delicate to allow of boisterous salutations, which might also disturb the soft curls of hair which were arranged with such artistic carelessness by Mademoiselle Clarisse. A soft perfume always hung about her, and her voice was soft and slow, and her words emphasized by graceful movements of her slim white hands, gleaming with diamonds.

She had a way of letting her lids sink half over her eyes and then suddenly raising them and looking straight at you, with a look that seemed to come from her very soul, and then let them slowly and languidly sink again. It was a very effective performance, especially to her gentlemen friends, each and all of whom thought that those glances were only bestowed on him and on no other. Even Ralph, to whom, perhaps for practice, such a look had been given now and then, was as firmly impressed as any other of her admirers that she only looked so at him, and he could quite see and feel that look as Dear asked the question whether his mother was like what her remembrance of hers was.

Everything that was graceful and lovely and loving Ralph thought his mother, but as he turned to answer Dear's question—Dear looking at him with her clear, wide-open, truthful eyes, with her earnest, sweet little face, on which the sunshine fell, untempered even by the hat which lay at her feet, with her soft fair hair stirred by the little hill-side breeze, and behind her, as she

sat with her little sunburnt hands clasped round her knees, the soft, billowy undulations of the gray-green hills, cutting sharp, higher up, against the pure blue sky—as he turned to answer, he laughed.

“Oh, no!” he said, “not a bit! Your mother could never have been the least bit like mine.”

And he could not understand the feeling, half amusement, half pain, that the suggestion roused in him. There was a sort of absurd impossibility about the idea of anything so open-air and breezy and real and true as Dear, having any connection with the artistic, scented, sheltered loveliness of his mother. He did not analyze the feeling, which was neither disloyalty to his mother nor disparagement of Dear, who, indeed, was a little bit hurt at his vehement disclaiming of any sort of likeness; feeling that if his mother was a fashionable lady, beautiful and elegant beyond all comparison with any one in Kingscombe or its neighborhood, hers was a saint in light.

“I tell you what,” said Ralph, “I’ll get the

mater to come down here next summer. I don't believe she knows what a jolly place it is. I'm sure she'd like it—at least, I think she would," he added, more doubtfully, as he tried to realize his mother at Kingscombe. "Anyhow she might like it for a few days, when she's regularly fagged out with the season. By Jove, it's hard work, I can tell you—calling, and driving in the park, and matinées, and then a big dinner and two or three balls, or at homes, or the opera every night. It's pretty stiff, and she says sometimes it will kill her, poor, little mother!"

"Doesn't she like it?" Dear asked.

"Well, yes, I suppose she really does, because she's not obliged to keep on. She might chuck it all up, and live as quietly as anything, but then she'd get bored."

"I don't think," Dear said thoughtfully, "that I quite understand what being bored is. Of course I know what the word means—tired and disgusted and sick and uninterested in things, but I don't think I've ever felt it. But perhaps

one doesn't till one is grown up," said the girl, with a wonder how any one could be bored in such a great interesting world, full of people and beautiful things, great cloud shadows moving across a wide landscape, like that spread out before her now, corn-fields rippled suddenly by a little breeze, larks springing up as if bent on carrying their songs to heaven itself, blue smoke curling up from cottage chimneys among the trees down there, from hearths each one of which had some story of human interest attached to it. Think too, of all the spring flowers, and the birds' nests (always a weakness of Dear's, as we know), of the little babies, and young lambs, and then think of being bored!

She did not know that, as a rule, being bored is due entirely to selfishness and narrowness and want of sympathy.

"Well, anyhow," Ralph said, "if my mother doesn't care to come, I shall. I'll come every year, and when I'm a man, I'll come and live here. I ought to, oughtn't I, Dear? My father lived here pretty well all his life, and was awfully

fond of the old place, and I mean to be the same when I've got through that stupid old Eton and Oxford. Dear," he said, with a softening in his voice that might have been sentimental if he had been a few years older, "you'll have to put me in the way of what I shall have to do when I'm Squire here. It's the sort of thing I shan't pick up at Oxford."

But Dear's eyes were still following the cloud shadows across the landscape, or, half-dazzled, trying to find the lark in the brightness overhead, and her mind was still pondering the mystery of being bored.

"I wonder," she said hesitatingly, as if it might be profane to carry such speculations into holy ground, "I wonder if grown-up people ever feel bored in heaven—I mean while they are waiting for their friends to come. Oh no, of course not. They couldn't, could they?"

"I think my mother would," said Ralph.

CHAPTER VII.

EVENING AT KINGSCOMBE.

“ . . . Her angel's face,
As the great eye of heaven, shyned bright,
And made a sunshine in the shady place.”

—SPENSER.

“ I SHALL come every year,” Ralph had said, but it was six years before he came back to Kingscombe, and then again he came quite unexpectedly. He wrote once or twice during the year that succeeded his visit, and Dear answered, telling him all the little news of Kingscombe, and especially many details of a fox terrier puppy he had left in her charge. But in his next letter he made no comment on her news, nor even mentioned Dan, and Dear for the first time in her life realised how big the world is, and how small a part of it Kingscombe

forms, and how soon the greatest friends can forget. "Even little Dan," she said; "he's forgotten all about you, Dan," and she kissed the black nose that had not lost its puppy bluntness, and the round, solemnly foolish young eyes.

"But there, Miss Dear," Mrs. Lynch said, to whom she had confided her disappointment, "you didn't ought to take no account of letters, least of all boys'. Why myself even, half the times when I sits down to write, I leaves out just what I wants most to say. By the time I've got through all the hoping folks is well, and asking after one and another, and saying how the weather keeps, my hand most like has got that crampy as I'm glad to finish off anyhow. And sometimes it's the spelling comes awkward, though that ain't likely to stand in the way of gentlefolks. Why, there was a man as I knew, as kindhearted and good sort of body as need be, and not one to bear malice or be hard on any one—he set down to write a letter to his son as had done something to offend him, meaning to give him a touch, and then come round and

forgive him and make it all right. He got on well enough with the letter at first, and gave it to him a bit stronger than he intended, but when he came to the forgiving part, he couldn't spell this and he couldn't spell that, till, at last, he lost patience and got in a rage, and finished up short, thinking as how his son would understand all he meant to asaid. But there! how was the son to know when he got nothing but hard words, and he just packed up and went right off to Ameriky, and they never heard no more of him, as pretty near broke his father's heart."

So Dear forgave Ralph his not having mentioned Dan, and, as affectionate was spelt with one f, she thought that perhaps spelling might be at the bottom of it. But, when she wrote a year later to tell of old Sims' death and got no answer, she could make no such excuses for Ralph.

But all the same Ralph had not forgotten; indeed six years later, as he travelled down to Kingscombe, he described to his companion,

between puffs of his cigar, so much of Kingscombe and those three months spent there, that Dr. Meredith was half bored, half amused.

Those six years had added a whole foot to Ralph's stature, but had not endowed him with breadth and strength in proportion, so that he looked even taller than his six foot two, and his legs seemed inordinately long. His face was still that of a pretty boy, in spite of the light moustache that shaded the mouth that had something childish about it still, and his voice seemed hardly to have settled yet into manly tones, or his cheek to have lost its young trick of blushing; and when he dropped asleep in the corner of the carriage, with his hand covering his moustache, Dr. Meredith thought he might have been taken for a pretty girl, with the curls on his forehead, and the long lashes on his pink-flushed cheek.

"Poor young fellow!" Dr. Meredith said to himself, for who knew better than he the delicacy shown by the soft flush and the thin white, blue-veined hand?

Eton had had to be given up after the first term, and he went to a private tutor, where he took it very easy and worked as much or as little as he liked, and then he spent a winter on the Riviera and got stronger. And then he began growing so ridiculously tall, and grew all his strength away, and Oxford had to be given up; and now, this spring again, he had been so ill that the pretty little house in Mayfair had been hushed out of all its usual gaiety, and straw had been laid down in the street, and the white cap and apron of a hospital nurse was to be seen at the second-floor window, and the doctor's brougham twice or three times a day at the door, and the servants in the neighborhood glanced up many times to see if the shutters were shut, and speculated how soon there would be a funeral at No. 37.

“And his ma at the opera last night, if you'll b'lieve me! as ain't no'art, though the brougham waited round the corner so as no one shouldn't know!”

But there was no funeral at No. 37 just at

present, and Ralph got better, and, when he was well enough to be moved, proposed himself to go to Kingscombe, which was a great relief to Mrs. Maddison, as, if the doctors had ordered him to some out-of-the-way place in the Engadine or Pyrennees, it might have been considered her duty to go with him, whereas now, at Kingscombe, if he were the least worse, she could run down directly.

On the last occasion of his going to Kingscombe, we gave Mrs. Maddison credit for a great sacrifice in sparing the invaluable Duncan, who now, by the way, had become Ralph's regular attendant, another butler having taken his place ; but now, I think, we must give her credit for a still greater sacrifice in sparing Dr. Meredith.

Mrs. Maddison had many admirers, but none that suited her so entirely as the young doctor. The youthful officers who frequented her drawing-room were all very well in their way, some of them danced divinely, most of them brought her exquisite flowers, many of them could

chatter amusingly and were up in the gossip of society and the clubs ; they were mostly better looking, better dressed, of better family than Dr. Meredith, and much more demonstrative in their devotion to her. Mrs. Maddison did not set up in any way for being intellectual, and yet, I believe, it was Dr. Meredith's intellect that made her think so highly of his attention.

He was a clever, rising young man, his name was becoming known in scientific circles, he wrote abstruse articles in reviews, of which she could not even remember the names, though they were always to be found on her table among the society papers and novels that littered it. She was proud of having such a man in her train, and she liked to think that he sought her society, silly and frivolous as the world esteemed her, and came constantly to her house, when he systematically refused invitations elsewhere. She did not appreciate his intellect herself, but she liked to see others appreciate it, she felt a sort of reflected glory when people talked in his praise, or were anxious to be introduced to

him, and she was gratified at his being treated as her property, and even at people seeking her acquaintance with a view to arriving at his.

She did her utmost to make her house pleasant to him, and she certainly succeeded; she had the art of pleasing, an art that is quite independent of beauty, intellect, wealth or position, and rarer than either. She humored his weaknesses, the strongest of us has some; she flattered his vanity, it lurks in the wisest of us; she knew how to leave him alone, which is what few women understand; she did not call his fits of abstraction, sulkiness or ill-temper, and, when he came out of them, she was smiling and charming as ever, making him feel, what no pique or reproaches would have done, remorseful for having been so dull a companion and so selfishly absorbed.

And his feeling towards her? He was thinking of her that first evening at Kingscombe, as he sat out on the terrace, with his chair tilted back at the most extraordinary angle against the wall, with that curious tendency men have,

when very much at their ease, to adopt some position endangering life and limb.

Early June twilight, with the sunset crimson and gold deadening into purple and orange, and the air full of such an infinite variety of sweet scents as only a nose fresh from London could appreciate. He almost wished the early roses overhead could gather their sweetness back into their dewy cups and hold it there a minute, that he might do justice to the others, but if they had done so, that great luscious bed of lilies-of-the-valley under the terrace wall would have domineered over all the rest, and if that had held its peace, the bush of syringa would have filled the air with its passionate fragrance, and prevented the sweet-briar hedge and the beans in the kitchen garden from getting their due notice.

He was thinking of her that evening, in the heavenly hush that ears fresh from the muddling rattle of London listen to almost with awe, silence intensified rather than broken by the tinkle of a sheep's bell from the hill, or the

buzzing boom of a cockchafer sailing through the air, or the sleepy call of a thrush (perhaps related to those thrushes who had suffered at Ralph's hands six years before) in the bushes near, or the distant call of a cuckoo, with an irritating third note introduced.

But you will call me to order, and I was going to tell you about Dr. Meredith's thoughts of Mrs. Maddison, only his thoughts wandered as my pen does, tempted away by eyes and nose and ears even from such a pleasing subject of mental contemplation. He liked Mrs. Maddison—yes, his feeling was even stronger than that, he liked her very much, better than any woman he had ever known. She was his *beau ideal* of what a woman should be: not clever, he hated clever women, he had a horror of the enlightened young lady of the present day, and, when he met with such, carefully hid his light under a bushel, and talked society twaddle of the washiest description. Though she was his *beau ideal*, he did not idealize her. Is that a contradiction? I do not think so. He saw her faults,

but did not wish to alter them, they were the faults of her sex. She was shallow—oh yes, but who expects depth in a woman—or even desires it? What is so intolerable as a woman who pretends to anything below the surface? Let the surface be beautiful and graceful as Mrs. Maddison, that is enough. She was not always truthful—but there again, she was a woman, and those little arts and pretences were part of the feminine nature and very pardonable, much more so than the abrupt, rough sincerity of some of those tailor-made young ladies who tread so liberally on other people's toes. He was quite aware that some of the pleasing effect was due to art, and why not? if the real thing was the sort of woman that meets your revolted eye in the slums, dishevelled, rough-haired, brawny-armed, bold-eyed, or even short of that the little, dull, uninteresting, middle-class wife, wrapped up in her babies and her servants; if that was the real thing, he infinitely preferred the pretence, which was, at any rate, agreeable to look at.

He was not always quite as cold-blooded about her as this; there were times when he almost thought he loved her, when that look of hers thrilled through him, that sudden raising of the white lids, and the straight, intense look that meant so much. I think during the six years that have elapsed since my last chapter, when I mentioned that look as lingering in her young son's mind, that look had grown to mean more; for, you see, there had been so much practice of it. Dr. Meredith, like so many others, thought that look was only for him, and more than once, when the fascination had been strong upon him he had been near offering her what remained of a heart given over to science, and the feeling which he fondly believed to be love.

But each time something happened to prevent this consummation and the spell was broken, and, instead of feeling disappointed or tantalised, he was conscious only of an infinite feeling of relief, and a sensation that he had been very near making a fool of himself, which might have

enlightened him as to the real state of his feelings toward Mrs. Maddison, and been a warning against running into such dangers again ; but, I need hardly say, had no such effect.

There was much debate among lookers-on at the game, who are proverbially supposed to see most of it, as to what Mrs. Maddison meant. If she had wanted to marry again all these years since the old Squire died, she might have done so again and again, and much better than this, for clever man as he was, Dr. Meredith was no match for her as regards wealth and position ; and a scientific career, however successful, does not mean riches, or, very often, recognition, till old age. To be sure, she was getting old, kind friends said, who would not have dared to say so to her face ; and her admirers were getting fewer and younger, and she could not face daylight nor bear comparison with fresh young *débutantes* ; the present fashion did not exactly suit her style ; artistic as Clarisse was, there were lines and hollows that even her skilful hand could not obliterate ; so perhaps Mrs. Maddison felt there

was no further time to be lost if she meant to marry again. But the world, being always on the look-out for complicated motives, often overlooks the real ones, which may be the simplest. Mrs. Maddison had a warm feeling for Oliver Meredith; she as nearly loved him as she was capable of.

Why then did she let him go down to Kingscombe? you will ask, when he offered to go down with Ralph after his illness. There was a girl whom Mrs. Maddison suspected of having designs on the doctor, and who on more than one occasion had seemed to amuse and please him, and when Dr. Meredith himself proposed going down with Ralph as a good opportunity for writing some article he was engaged on, Mrs. Maddison thought it was an excellent way of wafting him out of the reach of this bright-eyed young minx, who seemed acquiring such influence over him.

“Where is Dr. Meredith?” the minx asked.

“Who? Oh, Oliver Meredith? He has gone down to my place in Loamshire with Ralph.

They are such friends. Isn't it nice, dear? (Impertinent, little hussy!)”

“Delightful, dear Mrs. Maddison! (Old cat!)”

It was heavenly calm and quiet down there, Dr. Meredith thought. Ralph had strolled away with his cigar an hour ago towards the village, to look up some of his old friends, whom he had known when he was there before, and the doctor was not sorry to be left alone to the thoughts that were more companions to him than any boy of twenty.

This was an ideal place for thought, for quiet work. Where he sat he could see a great shoulder of the hill, nearly black against the dusky orange of the sky, where, even now, as he watched, two soft stars came gently into sight.

Last night he had been at this time in my lady's boudoir, opening out of the drawing-room, from which came a buzz of talk, an occasional song, and when the soft silken curtains that veiled the entrance were pushed aside for a moment, there was a blaze of light and a

glimpse of the sheen of elegant dresses, and the glitter of gems. The air was hot and heavy with the scent of flowers—why are London drawing-room flowers so different from those in the country? There was an exhaustion, an oppression in the air.

He had come to bid my lady good-night, and as she leaned back languidly, she looked marvellously young and fair, and looked up at him over the great soft feather fan with that look full of meaning. As he closed his eyes now he could see it, feel the thrill of it in his veins.

“Are you asleep, doctor?” Ralph’s voice sounded from the terrace steps above him. “Are you having a nap? This is Dear.”

Just now two great soft stars had come out in the sky above the hill; now from the terrace Dear’s eyes were looking down at him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SLEEPING BEAUTY.

“ Here all things in their place remain,
As all were order'd ages since.
Come, Care and Pleasure, Hope and Pain,
And bring the fated Fairy Prince.”

—TENNYSON.

MR. HUME and Ralph Maddison made a curious contrast, the little parson being hardly above the elbow of the elongated, young man, who always maintained that Mr. Hume had distinctly grown smaller since he was there before, as had also the church and the doorways at the vicarage, against the lintels of which he invariably knocked his head on entering.

Otherwise it seemed to Ralph that all was precisely the same at Kingscombe as when he was there six years before. It might have been

the palace of the sleeping beauty, grown round by the sweet wildbriar, and shut in from all the noise and change and turmoil of the world outside. Why that very first evening, as Ralph walked up through the village, he was reminded of the old fairy tale by coming round the corner of the Bush just in time to see Polly Bristow, the landlord's daughter, box the ears of a too-admiring swain. Why! their courtship had reached that stage six years before; he remembered Tom West with a crimson ear, and the loud, hoarse laugh, with which he tried to cover his discomfiture, echoed still in Ralph's memory.

On the Bench outside the Bush sat the same men in the same positions, with the same vacantly-staring faces, as if they might have been sitting there for the past six years; the very smoke from their pipes seemed to hang in the same wreaths Ralph recollected when smoking was an unexplored country to him personally.

The illusion was greatly enhanced by meeting Mr. Hume at the churchyard gate, and being

greeted by him as if they had only parted half an hour before. The little parson was unchanged, except, as I said before, that it seemed to Ralph that he had grown smaller. That might have been the same dust on his coat and the same withered buttercup in his button-hole that Ralph remembered some friendly baby had stuck in six years ago ; and now, as then, Mr. Hume would have passed on without noticing the tall young man who was so conspicuous to others, if Ralph had not put himself directly in his way.

“ You have not forgotten Ralph Maddison, sir ? ”

“ Forgotten, my dear boy ? My memory is not as short as that. I am so glad you have had such a fine day for the cricket match.”

Could he be meaning that cricket match in which Ralph had played for Kingscombe six years ago, the day before he left ? And Mr. Hume looked steadily all the time at the top button of Ralph’s waistcoat, which was about the spot where his face had been when he was

last at Kingscombe; and Ralph had an eerie, queer sort of feeling, as if Mr. Hume could see the boy in his cricketing suit, bat in hand, and that the tall young man with his light tweed suit of latest cut was impalpable and unreal.

“Come and tell us all about it,” Mr. Hume went on, still addressing that top button. “Dear wants to know how Kingscombe got on.”

And then he took hold of Ralph’s arm (it was rather a strain to reach up to it) and took the well-remembered way to the vicarage. Was the sleeping princess waiting there for the kiss to wake her to life and love? Was Ralph the prince before whom would give way to right and left the prickly wildbriar thicket, which had baffled and closed round former gallant adventurers?

But anything fanciful or unreal vanished when Dear came across the little garden to meet him, though, strangely enough, she carried a long trail of briar-rose in her hand, just coming into dainty pink flower. The same Dear as the one of six years ago, not much

taller, still very slight and girlish, only the mane of soft fair hair was plaited up round the little head, and the skirts were longer than they had been when she came flying along the terrace, to avenge the destruction of the thrush's nest.

Ralph had seen and known plenty of girls by this time, and had been what is called "mashed" on at least half a dozen of them, and once or twice he had thought himself very hard hit, and once he had been quite unhappy for a day or two, and had assumed a cynical, man-of-the-world tone, and talked about women with a capital W. What a very small experience will set us off generalizing in youth; it is only as we grow old, and not always then, that we realise how the world of human beings is made up of individuals each of whom thinks and acts and suffers in a manner peculiar to him or herself. All those great systems of classification, orders and sub-orders, families and species, worked out with elaborate minuteness, are after all mere helps for human ignorance. God sees each individual small bright-eyed bird of all the myriads of the

air, each insignificant little dewy blade of grass in the boundless prairie, without putting each into its proper species or family or order, and each individual soul without classing it according to its race or nation or language or sex or century. And have you ever noticed how much more individual some people are than others? how such a one is not one among other boys, one among other men, but just himself, whom you never think of comparing to others, or judging by others, but who stands alone, a law unto himself. I have wondered sometimes if it is looking on such as God looks on all, with love, that makes them seem so individual; but I think there is a difference even to the eyes of love.

Dear was such a one, always had been from her babyhood; but then, of course, few eyes but those of love had looked at her.

“She’s not a bit like other girls,” Ralph said that first evening at Kingscombe, though he did not know why she was not, not being able to analyse feelings or make subtle distinctions.

He would rather have liked to be able to class her, even if it were just to put her above the other girls he had ever admired, and to say she was much prettier than Violet Martin, or sweeter and more graceful than Maude St. Clair.

No, she was just Dear, there seemed no room for comparison. Her very name seemed to convey this, positively Dear without comparison, not more dear or most dear, not love measured by the less or more given to others, but in the positive degree, denoting simple or absolute quality, without comparison or relation to increase or diminution.

You did not notice with Dear if her dress were in the prevailing fashion ; I do not expect it ever was. I know that in after times critical eyes from which love was absent pronounced her distinctly dowdy, and I dare say those critical eyes were right. But, you see, the fairy princess after her hundred years' sleep must have looked decidedly antiquated in dress, and her hair must have been done in the mode of the fairy prince's great-grandmother, which might have been a

shock to his æsthetic taste in spite of all her loveliness.

And there was Dan. I do not think Dan could have been asleep all these years, he was always so wonderfully wideawake. He was widely known and respected in the neighborhood, being recognized even in Cheriton with a "Hullo, Dan'l!" by people with whom neither Dear nor Clive were acquainted. He was of a peculiar temper, which was, no doubt, the reason he was respected. I do not think amiability wins respect whatever else it may gain, and he had strong likes and dislikes, and while, I believe, he would have died for Dear or Clive and one or two others, there were others whom he would not have minded dying for him, and would have assisted in the process with the greatest pleasure in life.

He was not at all sure that he liked the tall, long-legged young man who was at one time supposed to be his owner, but who had quite forgotten his existence, and he would not show off nor make himself agreeable, but sulked under

Dear's chair and went off in an offended way to visit a friend at the farm, and required much coaxing and explanation from Dear before he could be reconciled to Ralph's constant presence.

Ralph concealed his having forgotten Dan when he saw the position he held at the vicarage, and how even the Vicar begged his pardon when he trod on his tail, an insult which Dan would have avenged with those sharp teeth of his on most other people, but only growled and looked very injured when the Vicar did it.

Likewise Ralph concealed in the depths of his heart his opinion that Dan's pedigree was doubtful, and that an uncut tail, though much to be admired in theory, is not ornamental to a fox-terrier in practice ; and after he had been at Kingscombe a few days, this opinion was no longer his to be concealed, and he was quite prepared to join or even outdo the chorus of praise of Dan's perfections.

Patty would not allow Ralph even to fancy he had forgotten her, for she leaned out of the kitchen window as he passed that evening with

Dear and caught hold of his arm, and Patty's hold was not to be ignored.

“Why, if it ain't Master Ralph! Well a-never! and so growed as there ain't no knowing him! Sakes alive! if you ain't fine and tall—and a moustache, too! Why, it seems only the other day as you was here, and come in from blackberryin' with your knickers that torn as I had to cobble 'em up so as you could get home decent. Wasn't you a one for blackberry jam, too, and I made a dozen and more pots extry just apurpose, thinking as you was coming down the next year as ever was, and now I'll be bound you don't care for suchlike, and only relishes French kickshaws and rubbish, though I ain't silly enough to believe as even Frenchmen eats frogs and snails as folks pretends, any more than that London streets is paved with gold.”

But Ralph had not lost his taste for blackberry jam, and he declared he could eat some of it now, spread on a slice of bread with a coating of clotted cream on the top, a prepara-

tion which he remembered Patty spreading with such a liberal hand. To be sure he called her "Betty," but she forgave that slip of memory in her gratification at his remembering the jam, and she would have taken him at his word and cut him slice after slice off the big loaf, if it had not come out that he had only just dined.

Perhaps Patty had fallen asleep cutting bread and jam, certainly Clive might have done so over his book, for there he was in his old favorite place under the lime tree, at full length on the turf, leaning on his elbows, with some book of untold interest to him and untold dullness to other people, open before him.

During those six years opportunities had not failed to help Clive on, and for three of them he had attended the grammar school at Cheriton, which had wakened up to new life under an enterprising master. Mr. Jackson felt that if only all his pupils had been like Clive Hume, Cheriton Grammar School might make a name for itself throughout the land ; but it need not be said that the other boys had not the same

thirst for knowledge, indeed, were most of them quite ready to become total abstainers from the cup of learning, and made it their object at school to escape with as little education as possible; and I am afraid none of my readers ever heard of Great Cheriton Grammar School before, or are likely to do so again.

But Clive was eighteen now, and for the last year had been assistant-master at the grammar school, and a most unsatisfactory one too, being exceedingly youthful in appearance, and not, therefore, awe-inspiring to great stupid boys taller and much more manly-looking, and being far too much ahead of his pupils to feel any patience or sympathy with their ignorance and idleness.

Mr. Jackson himself was a little bit afraid of Clive, though he was interested in, and proud of him. He felt the boy was fit for better things, and he came over once to Kingscombe and interviewed Mr. Hume on the subject, but found him very unsatisfactory and unpractical, and inclined to rest contented with the feeling

that "the Lord will provide," a faith which his experience had taught him was always justified. Mr. Jackson, however, with his yearly increasing little family, could not attain to this faith, and was therefore inclined to characterise it as presumption, and to talk of "God only helping those who help themselves" (which we may most of us thank Heaven is not true), and that we have Divine authority for the rule that it is tempting God to cast ourselves down from the pinnacle of the temple, even though we are sure of the angelic care and power to preserve us. Perhaps what is faith in one may be presumption in another, it is difficult to define the limits where one ends and the other begins.

So Clive continued to be an assistant-master at Great Cheriton, a Pegasus yoked to the plough, and a very bad plough-horse Pegasus made; and Mr. Jackson fumed and fidgeted, now at his incompetence, and now at his superiority to his position, and lent him books, and spoke of him whenever he had the chance to influential friends, who always had at least half

a dozen promising youths on hand requiring help to achieve greatness, and who took off a great deal too much per cent from Mr. Jackson's laudations of Clive, and forgot all about him the next minute.

So when Mr. Jackson heard casually, for Clive was most uninteresting and uncommunicative in the matter of gossip, that young Mr. Maddison had taken up his abode at the Manor, and was constantly at the vicarage, he felt a half-aggravated remembrance of Mr. Hume's faith, which he had stigmatized as so unpractical, and thought that indeed the Lord had provided for Clive's future without Mr. Hume stretching out a little finger to forward the matter, though, I am afraid, in his heart of hearts, he attributed it more to some people's disgusting luck than to the ruling of Providence.

But whichever it was, luck or Providence, what could be plainer than that the young Squire, whose income, large as it was, local report greatly exaggerated, should become the patron of the young genius, and it never

occurred to Mr. Jackson as a possibility, that, with this splendid chance for Clive before him, Mr. Hume should not only not take advantage of it, but that it should never cross his mind to do so.

It was impossible to the ordinary run of mortals to estimate how very small in importance to a nature like Mr. Hume's are such matters as wealth or position. It is extraordinary when you consistently regard all your fellow-creatures as souls instead of bodies, how bodily adjuncts fade into utter insignificance, too much so perhaps, and the soul of ignorant, brutal Joe Hodge, toiling behind the plough, becomes fully as interesting as that of his Grace in the ducal palace.

CHAPTER IX.

TWO IS COMPANY.

“Perhaps the smile and tender tone
Came out of her pitying womanhood.”

—TENNYSON.

“And he is oft the wisest man
Who is not wise at all.”

—WORDSWORTH.

R ALPH'S health seemed to be restored by the first breath of Kingscombe air, and, a week after his arrival there, he was hardly to be recognized as the long, limp invalid who left Mayfair leaning on Dr. Meredith's arm, while sympathetic housemaids peeped at him from the kitchen stairs, shaking their heads in mournful anticipation of being able to say, "I told you so," when the very speedy termination of his illness and young life ensued.

Mrs. Maddison received most reassuring accounts of his improvement from Dr. Meredith, and felt free to enjoy what was left of the season, without fear of being summoned to her son's bedside, and also free to accept the homage of her young admirers, without calculating the effect on Oliver Meredith, or having to keep a watch on him to prevent his falling a prey to designing girls, like the minx of whom mention has been made in another chapter.

This too was to be her last year of freedom. She had firmly made up her mind to this, for if she married Oliver Meredith, she meant to be a good wife to him, and yield in all reasonable matters to his prejudices. She pictured to herself sometimes quite a Darby and Joan existence, only Joan must wear a becoming costume, and the *tête-à-tête* must not be too prolonged. Dr. Meredith seemed to have taken quite a fancy to that horrid old place down at Kingscombe, and she was glad, as being part of her belongings, that he should like it ; but she hoped he would not wish to live there as her first husband had

done (she had begun already to speak of him in her mind as her *first* husband, though the second was not yet a reality). She could not quite bring herself to accept Kingscombe as the background of the Darby and Joan picture, but perhaps it might be endurable for a week or two now and then, and, as he said, it was an ideal place for quiet study, he might retire there when he was writing one of his books, or when she had engagements into which he did not care to enter. Not that she intended that they should lead the divided lives many couples do in society, each going his or her own way, keeping different hours, knowing different sets, and hardly aware very often of each other's whereabouts; that was bad form, she considered, and besides, she liked Oliver Meredith too well for that.

Oliver expressed no wish to leave Kingscombe, even to return to her presence; but as his keeping away was infinitely more convenient just then, she forgave him for his apparent coolness. He was very full of his book, and

there was a little too much about it in his letters, and Mrs. Maddison sometimes stifled a yawn and now and then skipped a sentence in the neat, square character, though she was all the time proud to think he should write such things to her. If some of those superior intellectual women, who treated her as so empty and frivolous, could only see his letters, they would indeed be surprised.

He enlarged a good deal on the improvement in Ralph's health, "though indeed," he would add, "I do not see very much of him, as he is more than half his time at the vicarage, or on the hills or the river with the Humes."

Mrs. Maddison had a general notion of the Humes as being boys, though she did not trouble her mind as to Ralph's companions, as long as he was amused and well, and the idea of their being boys was favored by Oliver dwelling on the talents of Clive, and mentioning that he had sent to London for some books for him, and let him come and read with him sometimes in the evening.

There was no intentional concealment in Dr. Meredith's mind when he avoided the mention of Dear. As a matter of fact he saw little of her, at the beginning of his stay at Kingscombe, and when he did she was always entirely monopolized by Ralph, so that Clive and Oliver were rather out of it, and took refuge with one another, and by this means he discovered what a clever, out-of-the-way boy Clive was.

And perhaps his avoidance of mentioning Dear's name may have been from the same feeling that made Ralph deprecate, half with pain, half with amusement, the idea that Dear's mother could have been in any way like Mrs. Maddison, a sense that although he knew so little of Dear, and although Mrs. Maddison was his ideal of a woman, the two were utterly opposite and incompatible as fire and water.

Oliver had taken a good mathematical degree at Cambridge, besides distinguishing himself in science, and he had a well-stocked library of his

own, and a power of getting at other people's libraries, so though it never occurred to Mr. Hume's mind to make use of Ralph Maddison's being at the Manor to forward Clive's prospects, it practically did so by bringing him and Oliver Meredith in contact.

And it was not all give and no take between them, for the lad was only too delighted to be of any use to the doctor, to copy or make extracts, or look up points or arrange papers; and even while doing merely mechanical work, he dipped in and grew so interested in the subject that the doctor found himself led away into explaining points to his young companion, and listening with a deference he had often refused to older and more learned men, to the boy's crude but always intelligent remarks, and more than once Clive blundered on a new light or a suggestive idea that was of good service to the doctor.

Oliver grew so used to the boy's presence that it did not disturb him at all, and if he were busy, he hardly looked up from his writing when

a shadow darkened the window of the library, and Clive swung himself in from the terrace and settled down in some ungainly position (no doubt inherited from his father), on the arm of a chair or the edge of a table. Sometimes this ardor in learning would put to shame the older man, who was forced, now and then, to agree with the preacher of old, that "of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh"; and at such times the pen would pause and hesitate and stop, and his eye wander away from the books before him, even from the box of new books and uncut periodicals that were so enthralling to Clive, away out into the June sunshine, to the flowers and the birds and the butterflies, and all the bountiful life and movement and growth and foliage of the young year, and to Dear gathering roses, with Ralph holding the basket, in which she placed tenderly and with a certain sort of loving respect, each blossom as she cut it.

"I do love to see little Missy agathering the flowers," old Sims used to say. "She do treat

every one on 'em every bit, as though they was a Christian."

Those roses were to go to London. Oliver's thoughts followed them there, and pictured the careless unpacking, and the tray heaped up higgledy-piggledy with the flowers, and Mademoiselle Clarisse coming and turning them over to pick out any that took her fancy for "miladi's" dress to-night. Perhaps she would select that very rose that Dear had just cut; there was a dewdrop still glistening on its creamy petals; there was a great, soft, velvet-bodied humble-bee, doing heavy homage to its beauty, so that Dear had to hold it still for a minute, till he had buzzed out his drowsy compliment and sailed off to another flower. Clarisse would hold it up, with her head on one side, and quick, skilful, brown fingers, arranging the leaves this way and that with artistic effect, and pronounce it "ravissante" to place among the chiffon and lace by "miladi's" snowy neck.

Oliver had often admired some such studied effect, but now, he protested to himself that

there was a certain kind of profanation in using real flowers, and that fashionable ladies should content themselves with artificial, which are beautiful enough in all reason.

The rest of the flowers would be used for the adornment of the dinner-table. A young lady from a florist's came in every day to arrange the flowers ; such things are made quite a study of in these days, and Mrs. Maddison liked to be abreast of the wave of fashion, and to have her table decorations described in the society papers as "a symphony in sweet peas," or "reverie of tinted autumn leaves."

Faugh! could those have been flowers from Kingscombe, whose æsthetic arrangement among the wine-glasses and fairy lamps with tinted shades, had been so often the subject of admiring remark, and whose fragrance, mingling with that of soup, French dishes and wine, had hung so heavily on the air? He had to step out of the window to reassure himself that those in Dear's basket had not such odor or artificial posturing to display form or color.

“Don’t let Ralph interfere with your valuable time,” Mrs. Maddison said, as he bade her good-bye. “I would not for the world have consented to your going to Kingscombe if I had not thought you would get the uninterrupted leisure that I know is so important to your work.” And as Oliver Meredith travelled down with Ralph, he made up his mind that this should be so, and that he would not have more of Ralph’s society than was quite agreeable to him.

There was no difficulty about this, he found, from the very first evening when he became aware of the existence of the Humes; and though Clive, as we have seen, soon became a constant visitor to the library, he was in no way an interruption or hindrance, but an interest and occasionally a help to the busy student.

“Well, good-bye!” Ralph would call to him from the terrace; “don’t expect me back till night, if at all, for Dear has set her heart on scaling the highest point of the hills, and I’ve got Mrs. Lynch to pack us some lunch.”

Or, "Tat-ta! we're off down the river. Dont feel anxious. Dear can swim, and she'll take care of a little chap like me."

Or, "I'm going to drive the vicar and Dear over to Cheriton. There's a clerical meeting, and I've chartered that jolly old screw from the Bush, and am going to drive it in Farmer Green's yellow gig. I wanted to go tandem, with Green's wall-eyed pony for a leader, and the vicar had no objection, if he knew what tandem was, which I doubt; but Dear thought it might look like a circus."

And then they would be off, and their voices would grow fainter and die away, and soft summer silence reigned; stirred, not broken, by the buzz of a passing bee, or the sudden, little, silver, shrill song of a wren, or the tinkle of a sheep-bell from the hill. Sometimes a russet-coated robin would hop on to the window-sill, and look first with one round bright eye and then the other at the quiet figure at the table all by himself, and sometimes a rose-leaf would flutter in at the window on to the paper

on which he wrote. At mid-day, Mrs. Lynch's solid footsteps would echo along the passage, and she would come to the door and ask what he would please to do about lunch; and he would generally please to have some brought to him on a tray, and escape the somewhat mouldy pomp of the dining-room, with its depressingly substantial furniture. Then all was quiet again till Clive, after his daily tussle with those stupid and disrespectful boys at Cheriton, would come along the terrace, dusty and wayworn—and often out at elbows—and nearly as regardless of appearances as his father, and step over the window-seat, into what seemed to him a Paradise of peaceful learning.

It was certainly an ideal place for study, as Dr. Meredith had decided that first evening, but such is the perversity of human nature, there were times when his youth asserted itself and rebelled against the quiet monotony of his days: for he was young still, not so very much older than those two who treated him, he resentfully

told himself, as a mummy long since dead to enjoyment or amusement. He was fond of study it is true, but he was not a mere bookworm ; the outside world of nature gave him infinite enjoyment : he could understand the exquisite delight Dear got out of the deep crimson heart of a rose, or a tuft of bluebells growing in the crack of a mossy gray stone, or the sunlight through the trees on the beech-stems ; he felt just the same, though she always turned for sympathy to Ralph, who, good blundering creature that he was, never saw at the moment what she meant, but thought she was drawing his attention to an earwig in the rose, or a rabbit dodging among the rocks, or " something queer about the trunk of that tree."

And one morning, when they took it so entirely for granted that he was up to his eyes in work, and when indeed he was, for the morning post had brought him a roll of proofs, he took them by surprise, and himself more than either of them, by throwing down that much-cherished proof, and following them out on to the terrace, and saying—

“ I think I’ll go with you if you’re going down the river.”

He was sorry the moment he had said it ; never had the peaceful morning in the library seemed so attractive, or his proofs so interesting, or the importance of doing them in time for post so plain. Ralph gave a little involuntary grimace, which was not one of unmixed pleasure, though he said, “ That’s right, chuck work for once in a way ;” and Dear smiled rather uncertainly, for she was a little shy and in awe of this Dr. Meredith, who more from his learning than his years seemed so much older than herself and Ralph.

I do not think they any of them enjoyed the day very much, though it was as lovely as heart could wish, under the willows on the stream, with the light touching the brown water here and there, and the broad lily leaves which turned up red rims when the breeze caught them.

Oliver was possessed by the feeling that he was a wet blanket, and if you once feel that, you

are sure to become so, and he felt that his conversation was formal and pedantic, and, in spite of himself, he used long botanical names for the flowers they came across, and was conscious that such unwilling display of learning on his part damped and repressed all the pleasant, unconventional knowledge that Dear had acquired in her daily, loving, intimate intercourse with nature. Just because he would have given anything to be natural and unreserved and boyish, and even a little silly, he found himself talking more than usually sensibly, and expressing himself carefully and stiffly, and a shade pompously; and it fretted him to notice Dear's gentle, respectful manner to him, checking Ralph's boyish chatter to listen with courteous attention to what he was sure she could not fail to find dull and tedious.

Ralph too irritated him by treating him as altogether ignorant of rowing—he who not so many years ago had rowed in his College boat, and acquitted himself very creditably. To be sure he was out of training and practice, but

even so he was a long way better than Ralph, with his actual want of bodily strength combined with his lack of science, who splashed and strained and got very hot, and come too within an ace of catching a crab every few minutes.

However, Oliver acquiesced in his supposed character of aged incapable, and refrained from any interference with the very bungling management of the boat, and even with Ralph's instructions to Dear in the art of rowing. He took refuge in pretended sleepiness after a time, and dozed at the end of the boat, as he thought, to relieve them of the constraint of his waking presence, and as they thought, because he was unutterably bored with their society. And by mutual consent their water expedition terminated much earlier than former ones of Ralph's and Dear's had done, and Oliver hurried back to his proofs, and shut himself into the library with a sigh of relief, and a determination of "Never again!"

CHAPTER X.

INTO FAIRY-LAND.

“ To sit and watch the wavelets as they flow,
Two,—side by side ;
To see the gliding clouds that come and go,
And mark them glide.
Beneath the willow when the brook is singing,
To hear its song ;
Nor feel, while round us that sweet dream is clinging,
The hours too long. ”

—SULLY-PRUDHOMME.

THAT water excursion had, as we have seen, been anything but a success, and you would have thought that a wise man like Oliver Meredith would not have repeated the experiment ; so it will, perhaps, surprise you to hear that before another week had elapsed the library was again deserted, with manuscripts, proofs and letters in alluring array, and Dr. Meredith had gone a-gadding. And after this it happened

almost as often as fine days occurred, which was very often that year, when summer seemed on her mettle to show how beautiful she could be even in this much-maligned English climate.

He had not the least preconceived idea of going that heavenly July morning ; he had listened without much interest to Ralph's description of his plans for the day, given as they breakfasted together.

Ralph was not very well that morning, and when he was out of sorts he was inclined to establish a grievance, and work away at it in a somewhat tiresome manner, with a good deal of childish reiteration, and a persistence which would have been called nagging in a woman, though why it should be considered only a feminine accomplishment I do not know, as it is by no means peculiar to the sex.

Oliver Meredith wondered whether that grievance (I think it was about the abominable way the boy cleaned his boots) would be aired to Dear, and he imagined the look of concern that would come into her gray eyes, and the sympathy

she would express and really feel—not of course because his boots were badly cleaned, but because he was vexed about it.

Ralph in one of these very occasional fits of irritability was not a companion you would choose for a long summer day; and yet when Dr. Meredith saw Dear standing out on the terrace steps waiting for Ralph, he felt an overpowering wish to go too, and when Dear turned and saw him standing at the window and smiled and said, “Good-morning, Dr. Meredith. Won’t you come with us?” he went.

“Go on,” called Ralph from his bedroom window, which was above the library, “I’ll catch you up in a minute. I’ve sent Joe to get the boat ready.”

And so they went slowly on across the meadow, where the mowers were just beginning to lay down the undulating tawny grass in fragrant swathes with the rhythmical swing of their scythes; then along the narrow path through the cornfield with the green ears, some of them twisted nearly to the top with pink and white

bindweed, tapping against Dear's skirts ; and then into the grateful shadow of the little copse by the river side where the boat was moored.

Ralph had not overtaken them though they had walked lingeringly, and stopped to watch the mowers and pick some poppies just bursting with their crumpled silken petals out of their soft hairy gray-green sheaths, and for some minutes they waited for him by the boat, and the conversation, though it mainly turned on flowers, was not so highly botanical and hatefully improving as it had been on the last occasion.

And at last, instead of Ralph, Duncan appeared, out of breath, for he was getting rather portly with advancing years, to say that Mr. Ralph was not well enough to go ; he was very sorry to disappoint Miss Dear, but he had turned giddy and had a fall, and thought he had better lie down and keep quiet.

“ There's nothing to be anxious about, Missy, he'll be all right to-morrow. The doctor here knows that he's subject to these little turns now

and then, and they're soon over if he'll only keep quiet. ”

And Duncan hurried back to mount guard over his somewhat refractory patient, while Dr. Meredith assured Dear that there was no need to look so pitiful, and that the kindest thing she could do for Ralph was to leave him to Duncan's ministrations.

“How fond she is of him,” he thought. “I wonder if her eyes would look the least like that or her lip quiver ever so little at the thought of any suffering of mine?”

“I suppose,” he said aloud, “but—of course not—” And he tied the painter decidedly and a shade viciously to the post and turned away from the boat.

“What?”

“I suppose you could not let me row you instead of Ralph?”

“Can you row?”

“I might try.”

And then he was helping her into the boat, and you cannot imagine how much younger he

felt when he did so than he did the week before, when Ralph had carefully steadied the boat, and bid him step on the middle of the seat as he got in. And Dear watched, with surprise and a little consternation, the skilful way in which he managed the sculls, and how the boat swept smoothly out into the open channel without any of the lurching and rocking and splashing that had seemed a necessary part of the business before.

“Were you laughing at us all the time,” she asked, with the little pink color coming into her face, and a little reproach into her soft eyes, “when you sat at the other end of the boat and we made such a bungle of rowing?”

“Laughing?” he answered, “not a bit, I was much too cross.”

But he could laugh now, not at her or Ralph, but at himself for his cross-grained, surly fancies. These were all put to flight by the mere feel of the sculls in his hands, the dip of the blades in the stream, the ripple of the water against the sides of the boat, and most of all by the sight

of Dear's face opposite him, sweet and gentle, but without that look of respectful attention which had so disturbed him when he came before. Old—not he; he felt as young as an undergraduate in his first term, though he, I think, is generally seriously impressed with his age and experience; as silly and light-hearted as a boy; every stroke he pulled seemed to make him less wise and solemn and scientific. He laughed out of sheer gaiety of heart; he talked such nonsense as surprised himself when he thought of it afterwards, convinced that even Ralph had never chattered away such rubbish; but at the time it seemed the pleasantest, happiest, most natural expression of pleasant, happy, natural thoughts, echoed back as pleasantly, as happily, as naturally, by that most sympathetic companion, who seemed to catch the thought or whimsical fancy before it was even put into words, so that he hardly knew if it were he or she who said it.

“Where are we going?” she said. She was leaning a little forward, and the soft breeze

and the speed of the boat as it flew through the water with the strong steady strokes of his sculls, ruffled the tender little curls on her temples, and her eyes were wide with the exhilaration of swift motion, and her lips a little parted with the excitement of passing beyond the usual limits of Ralph's clumsy rowing. "Where are we going?"

"Into fairy-land," he answered. But indeed they were in fairy-land already. It was not far to seek; it lies so close at hand to some of us, far nearer than seems possible in this matter-of-fact, plain prose, work-a-day world of ours. It needs but a touch from a certain great enchanter's wand, and, hey, presto! we are there, out of life's ugliness, dullness, and discord, into love's beauty, brightness, and harmony.

Now I do not imagine, dear reader, that that early July day was more beautiful than many another before or since. I fancy that some of the haymakers who paused in their toil as the boat went by, to stare or wipe their hot foreheads, or take a pull from the stone jar of flat

beer, used strong language in clumsy Loamshire dialect about the heat of the sun that brought out those beads of perspiration on their brows, and made them so thirsty and their work so burdensome. I think that the cows, standing in the shallows and whisking irritable tails, thought more of the flies than of the soft shadows from the willows. I am sure there is many a stream in the length and breadth of the land, far prettier and more picturesque than that little Loamshire river, winding between meadows and copses, with rushes and meadow-sweet, loose-strife and forget-me-not fringing its banks, and lily leaves rising and falling on its placid breast, stirred by the passage of the boat. That was only a hoary old water-rat swimming across and making a widening furrow on the oily smooth water. That was merely a kingfisher that flashed up the stream, with a glimpse of tropical blue and green, flaunting its prismatic brightness before the sober, little, brown moorhen, peeping bright-eyed from the sedges. Those are only roach who flash silver sides among the soft green hair

of the weed, as eyes peer down at them through the water or red-finned perch drowsing on the gravel bottom with heads up stream and with tails lazily beating the water. These are only wood-pigeons whose purring note sounds so soothingly from the Scotch fir, whose stem gives such a rich resinous smell in the warm sun. If you or I, dear reader, had been there,—and I am glad for all our sakes that we were not,—we might not have seen anything remarkable; but Oliver Meredith was rowing Dear through fairy-land, and that is a very different thing, and not capable of being described in ordinary prose, or printed in every-day ink on matter-of-fact paper.

The stream was not always wide enough to allow of Oliver's keeping up the speed he started with, sometimes it was weedy and overhung with trees, and they had to push their way among the reeds, and bend their heads to avoid the willow branches. At last they were brought to a check by a mill-dam, and a kind, old, floury miller came to the bank and bade them come

right away in and see the missus, as never in all his born days had a boat come down stream afore, though a many rowed up from Cheriton. He treated it as an excellent joke, and laughed and slapped his leg with such energy that the flour flew out in clouds all about him.

He did not know much of the Kingscombe folk, but he had heard tell of the Parson there, and this here was the Parson's young lady? Well a-never!

And "his missus" came hobbling out in answer to his stentorian calls, much crippled with rheumatism, with a kind, mumping, old face, devoid of teeth, and wearing a chestnut wig of the most ingenious character, and a black cap with little purple bows. She set a little round table under the great willow on the grass plot by the river, and spread a cloth, and brought out home-made bread and butter and honeycomb, and a great brown jug of ice-cold cider; and while Dear and Oliver partook of what to the latter seemed the most delicious meal, he had ever enjoyed, the old woman knitted with

quick, crooked fingers, and the husband leaned against the railings, smoking his little, short pipe, and the great water-wheel creaked round, bringing up the slimy green weed on its black boards; and within the mill, the big stones ground and grunted and rubbed, and the miller's man came to the door just above their heads to see what the master was after.

In after years every small detail of that old mill, and indeed of the whole day, was photographed on Oliver's mind, and if he had had the artistic skill, he could have sketched it all: the apricot tree trained against the tarred boards, with little woolly apricots just turning color in the warm sun, the big patch of house-leek on the tiles above, and the soft coloring of emerald moss and orange-and-white lichen.

The old man's garrulous talk and the click of the wife's knitting needles mixed with the creaking and straining of the wheel, and the grinding of the stones, and the soft rush of the water. In years to come he could conjure it all up, with the central figure of Dear, then, as ever

afterwards, the centre of all Oliver Meredith's dreams and memories.

How quickly the time slipped by. The old miller looking at his great silver watch, which came with difficulty out of his trouser pocket, bringing a cloud of dust with it, and then comparing it with the sun, which was a more reliable authority, declared it to be "'bout of a three."

"There ain't no call, however, for you to be hurrying, but I've a job to see to, and when I gets talking I loses all reckoning how the time's going. But there, it ain't often as I gets visitors, let alone visitors down-stream, as is the first time since I've been in the old place, and that's man and boy nigh upon fifty year. It's the first time as you've found your way, but I hope as it won't be the last by a many, for it's right down glad me and the missus'll be to see you any time as you've a mind to look in."

Yes, they would come again, Oliver assured the miller as he bid him good-bye, and thanked him for his hospitality, feeling intuitively that any payment was out of the question.

“We will come again,” he said, as they turned to look back at the mill, with the rich warm afternoon sun full on the long tiled roof, on which the pigeons were strutting and preening their feathers, and where they could see the white-coated miller standing at the mill door, shading his eyes as he looked after them.

“Yes, we will come again,” Dear answered. And neither of them thought, strangely enough, how pleasant it would be to bring Ralph to see this pretty, out-of-the-world nook, or pictured returning to it in any way except these two alone together, though it might have occurred to their minds that circumstances were not likely to repeat themselves so as to throw them alone together again for a whole long summer day.

The return was more slow. Perhaps it was because they were going against the stream, which in the morning had sometimes carried them down the river with hardly a movement of the oars, and perhaps they did not care to hurry, for the afternoon effects in fairy-land are as lovely and worthy of remark as the morning,

and wanderers in that magic realm find so much to say to one another (there is never more than one other, mind you, so do not set off to seek fairy-land in company with more, you might as well go alone), and the words they say are to one another like the utterances of that little girl from whose mouth a benevolent fairy caused pearls and diamonds to drop whenever she opened her lips. Sometimes, to be sure, unenchanted hearers, or those listening outside the magic pale of fairy-land, might mistake their utterances for those of the other little girl who was doomed to produce nothing but toads and newts. So I will not record what Oliver Meredith said while the boat lay for so long under the willows, nor what Dear answered when the tall rushes closed in all around them, and they could see nothing but the blue sky above them, with the velvety bulrushes dark and sharp against it, lest perchance the deluded reader might mistake it for the toads and newts instead of the pure gems Oliver and Dear received with such delight.

The sun was nearing the horizon when they came to the landing-place, and Oliver—oh! how reluctantly—fastened the boat and helped Dear out. Why had he made such tremendous haste? In another half-hour the sunset would have been painting the sky, and yet another half-hour and it would have faded, and the sweet little crescent moon would be there. He felt he had cheated himself out of the completion of this exquisite day and cut it all too short; and yet, looking back, how long it seemed since he had said, “I suppose you would not let me row you instead of Ralph?” That had all happened in another age, long ago and far away, before he entered fairy-land.

CHAPTER XI.

DAILY LIFE.

“ Room in her heart for all.

For striving stitchwort as for oak tree tall ;
Room for the chickweed at the gate, the weed upon
the wall.

A glory haloed round

The very wayside grasses, as she found
The highest, holiest loveliness was closest to the ground.

Others might dully plod,

Purblind with custom, deaf as any clod—
She knew the highest heights of heaven bent o'er the
path she trod.” —MARY GEOGHEGAN.

MRS. MADDISON was greatly exercised in her mind. At the end of the season, a particularly alluring invitation had come to go to a house in the north of England, where one of her youthful admirers was celebrating his coming of age by a series of entertainments, and a house full of nice people.

He was very urgent that she should come, and though she had no particular liking for him,—being empty-headed even to a point beyond even her endurance, and insufferably vain and purse-proud,—she knew she could twist him round her little finger, and that she would have it all her own way, and be treated like the queen of the whole affair.

It was a great temptation. Dr. Meredith had always abominated this young Dundas, so in the future which she contemplated he would have to be dropped, and she did not much mind, but she would like to squeeze the orange before she threw it away, and get the amusement she anticipated from presiding over his coming of age.

Ralph seemed well and contented at Kingscombe, and what was more important, Dr. Meredith was the same, and in none of his letters did he even suggest any wish to leave or any other engagements which would take him away. He wrote less about his book, but this was rather a relief, and there was nothing

to rouse her suspicions, or suggest that there could be anything at Kingscombe that could in any way affect or interfere with her plans for the future. Ralph's letters were of such a hurried and fragmentary character that they did not convey much information, and if he mentioned Dear Hume casually, Mrs. Maddison did not trouble to think who it was, or if Dear might not be the adjective written with a capital in Ralph's somewhat erratic manner, and signifying one of the Hume boys, though such terms of endearment are not usually applied to boys.

So she accepted the Dundas' invitation with an untroubled mind, and wrote an effusive little note to Dr. Meredith, hoping that he was not being bored to death at Kingscombe, and holding out the hope that if she survived these terrible festivities at Dundas, they might meet at Ryde, where Colonel Henderson had put his yacht at her disposal. "It will be something for him to look forward to, poor fellow," she said to herself, as she directed the envelope, thinking how she would make up to him for

those dull days at Kingscombe, endured, she was firmly convinced, for her sake.

She found the visit to Dundas Castle sufficiently amusing, not quite as much so, perhaps, as she had expected ; but no cosmetic or artistic dressing can restore the inexhaustible spirits and powers of enjoyment of youth, though they may to a certain extent the bloom, and she found herself now and then looking forward to the time when, as Oliver Meredith's wife, she might relax a little of her social efforts, and the eternal competition with girls in rude health and spirits, and robust *débutantes*, who could ride all day and dance all night and be as fresh as a daisy in the morning.

It was a letter of Ralph's that first aroused any suspicion in her mind that things were not going on at Kingscombe quite as she would have wished. It was a letter written in one of Ralph's irritable moods when he was not very well, and when, as I have said, he was apt to take up a grievance and harp upon it. Dear had kept him waiting one day, not very long,

but enough to make him fidgety and impatient, and he described it to his mother, in the irritation of the moment, as "kicking his heels for a couple of hours while Dear was talking to the Doctor ; but it's always the way now."

"H-m-m," said Mrs. Maddison, reflectively, when she had read this.

How quickly and brightly those summer days at Kingscombe passed away ! I suppose there were some wet days, some cloudy mornings, some dull afternoons ; but Oliver Meredith, looking back on that time, could not recall any such. There is not much to describe in that time. "Happy is the nation," they say, "that has no history," and I think it is so with our lives ; the happiest times are those of which there is nothing to record, no convulsions, no earthquakes, no surprises, no startling occurrences, but a peaceful, even course like Nature herself in her gentle, imperceptible progress.

Oliver Meredith did not in the least realise where these sunny July and August days were leading him, he did not look forward, he did not

look back, he lived just in the sunny present, without even recognizing that it was Dear's presence that made the sunshine. These learned men are sometimes the greatest dunces in the dame's school of life and love. His publishers accounted themselves as ill-used men at that time; important letters remained unanswered, proofs were not corrected, suggestions or proposals ignored or taken up with indifference and want of interest. Is the man bewitched? they asked; and, I suppose, the long and the short of it is that he was.

Clive was a little bit disgusted with him too; he had seemed quite the right sort at first, a man who saw things in their right proportions, who put study first and all the rest nowhere, which was Clive's present sense of proportion; but now, when Clive came in from Cheriton, dusty but ardent, he mostly found the library empty, and Oliver's precious papers, perhaps, fluttering about the room, if a mischievous little breeze had stolen in to mock at the present scholar.

And when that blissful time came, and the Grammar School broke up, and Clive was free from those detestable dull boys, and could fill his day from morning to night as he liked best,—though he was welcome to be all day in the Manor library, and Oliver's books were quite at his service,—he did not have much of Oliver's company, or if he did, it was only the outer man who sat there, listlessly fiddling with a pen. Even Clide could tell that it was no deep thought of study or mental research that occupied his mind, and on one occasion, when he thought the Doctor was indeed once more concentrated on his work, and bent over his page with the old devotion, Clive saw, passing behind his chair, that he was sketching in pen and ink a girl's head, not very successfully, for he was nothing much of an artist, but good enough for Clive to recognize that it was meant for Dear.

“Dear !” he said to himself, with that feeling of depreciation which brothers of unripe years, however affectionate, have for their sisters.

It does not come within the scope of this history to chronicle if in later years, when Clive's time came, as it comes to most of us sooner or later, he looked back with more leniency on Dr. Meredith's sad falling away from the paths of learning, or if there ever came a day when a girl's smile would upset his ideas of proportion for good and all.

It must not be supposed that Dear had nothing to do but make that summer holiday pleasant to Ralph and his companion. Dear's life was full of occupation and of interests, as in the old times when she found it impossible to imagine being bored. There was, first of all, her father; do not imagine she stinted one moment of tender companionship or loving care for him on their account. The course of years had made him more vague, more absent-minded, less capable of looking after himself than before, and Dear, with Patty's never-failing help, watched over him as a mother over a child, a protecting care mixed all the time with that deep reverence which his saintliness never failed to inspire.

There were her parochial duties—children to be taught, sick to be visited, old people to be cared for and cheered, wicked people to be pitied, sorrowful to be comforted, happy to be sympathised with, all to be loved and thought of and prayed for, and you may be sure she was never missing at the daily prayers, often forming the only congregation now Clive had to go to Cheriton. There was housekeeping too, though, of course, on so small and simple a scale it was no great matter; and Patty was practically housekeeper, though she kept up the outward show of deference to her young mistress.

There was also a variety of retainers, biped and quadruped, who demanded a good deal of attention: an old deaf and dumb and stupid man, to whose dim intellect Dear alone could bring a glimmer of light; an idiotic girl with a very large face, who came and stood very close and looked fixedly into Dear's face with her strange, senseless eyes, and who liked to think that "Missy was learning Bessie to sew." And

among the bipeds I ought also to rank the magpie from the cobbler's, whose leg Dear had set, and who loved her surreptitiously with its odd, little, crafty heart, and took every opportunity of escaping from its wicker cage and coming solemnly hopping up to the vicarage, appearing generally at inconvenient moments, such as prayer-time, or when some matter of parish importance was being discussed, coming flopping in at the window, with its pale blue eye keenly on the look-out for anything it could steal or any mischief to be accomplished.

Then there were weakly, little pigs or motherless lambs who occasionally required her care, and broods of little yellow ducklings, or chickens with the pip; anything weak or ill or miserable found its way to Dear to be cared for or comforted.

Dr. Meredith used to wonder sometimes if Dear's affection for Ralph was like her affection for all the weakly, dependent things she came in contact with. She was always good to him, always patient when he was irritable or fractious,

though he very rarely was so to her. She considered his tastes, she gave way in nearly everything to his fancies, she humored his caprices, she sacrificed her own inclinations readily to him, and by and by she got to sacrifice Oliver Meredith's. It hurt him at first; he chafed at the feeling of her preference for Ralph, but presently he got more than reconciled to the treatment, dwelling with delight on the difference she made between them, realising or fancying a subtle compliment in treating him as one who did not need humoring or consideration.

“I had rather she did not like me at all,” he said to himself, “than that she should like me as she does Ralph, or a sick hen or a lame puppy dog.”

And yet when his hand was cut with a reaping-hook, it was exquisite satisfaction to him to have it bound up by Dear, though he knew she would have done it quite as readily and tenderly for that same sick hen or lame puppy or Ralph either; and though it was not

much more than a scratch, he made the most of it, and carried his hand in a sling for nearly a week, demanding frequent dressing and continual pity, which Dear was not backward to give.

Harvest was early that year; those long, bright July days ripened the corn so quickly that by the time the last heavily-laden hay wagon lumbered into the rick-yard, the sickle had been put in in Farmer Green's five acres, and the waving golden glories Dear loved to watch ripple and undulate, were turned into sheaves in the harvest fields.

It was one afternoon towards the end of harvest that Ralph was kept waiting, as he complained to his mother, for hours while Dear talked to the Doctor. Half an hour would perhaps have been nearer the mark, though Dr. Meredith would have been ready to declare on oath that it was not more than ten minutes, and to Dear the time seemed no longer. They very rarely were alone together; that long lovely

June day had never been repeated, and Oliver Meredith could have reckoned up on one hand the number of half-hours he had spent in Dear's company without Ralph's presence ; and this afternoon as they walked together to the place where Ralph was to meet them, at Farmer Green's last field, from which they were to carry the final load that evening, perhaps they did linger a little, to notice the chequered light and shade and the shafts of sunlight between the trees and the broad stubble fields, which even in their despoiled and shaven condition have a beauty of their own.

Ralph had gone on to expound to Farmer Green a plan he had in his mind, of having a general harvest-home at the Manor, with a heavy feed for the men, and tea and cake, which is accounted appropriate food, for the women and children. There was to be a big tent and games and dancing and perhaps fireworks to conclude with.

But the farmer, with the natural conservatism

of his class, regarded the proposal doubtfully, and scratched his head and twisted a button of his coat in his perplexity, not wishing to offend the young master, but convinced that what he'd done every harvest since he had the farm, and his father afore him,—and come to that, most like his grandfather too,—must be the best thing to do as long as he held the farm, and his son arter him.

“And come to that, come next year, and Master Ralph ain't here, nor no one at the Manor, how's any one to keep it up with all them bands and music and fireworks and all the rest of the kick-up? And there'll be all the chaps thinking themselves ill-used because they've just to go back to having their belly full of beef and plenty of beer to wash it down, as has been good enough for them and their fathers afore 'em. Thankye all the same.”

This pig-headedness on the farmer's part to begin with upset Ralph, and then the delay in Dear and Oliver's appearance; and when they

came, their innocence, which he thought affected, of being at all behind their time aggravated the irritation, and his ill-temper produced, as we have seen, that letter to his mother over which she pondered at Dundas Castle.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE ORCHARD.

“And Thought leapt out to wed with Thought
Ere Thought could wed itself to Speech.”

—TENNYSON.

“**T**OO bright to last,” Mrs. Lynch said one morning a few days later. She had a variety of such little cut-and-dried axioms about the weather, which sometimes came true, when she was able triumphantly to call you to witness that she had said how it would be; and sometimes did not, when she discreetly forgot her prophecies and infallible signs. “Mark my words, if the fine weather ain’t going to break up.”

Oliver Meredith remembered her words, though it was not in the physical world that the breaking up of the fine weather came, and in the cloudless sunshine of the ensuing days Mrs. Lynch did not recall her evil prognostications.

It was such a very beautiful day, with that touch of autumn freshness that is so exhilarating, though it tells that summer is over. Oliver Meredith felt in unreasonably high spirits; perhaps it was the feeling the Scotch call "fey," a wild elation that surely precedes some calamity. He felt as if nothing could disturb his equanimity; he cut himself in shaving, the button came off the back of his shirt collar, his egg at breakfast was not above suspicion (yes, even at Kingscombe, under Mrs. Lynch's lynx-eye, such accidents will happen), a bothering letter was on the breakfast-table that demanded immediate attention, and might demand a visit to London very shortly—it all ran off like water from a duck's back.

We most of us know what it is to wake up with a presentiment of evil which is not, happily, always realised, but it is much rarer, and unhappily quite as unreliable, to wake up as Oliver did that morning, with a presentiment of good and happiness and sunshine.

There was this much foundation for it in his

case, that Mr. Hume, and of course Dear, were to come to lunch at the Manor that day. It was quite an event, as Mr. Hume had not been known to take any meal away from home within the memory of mortal man, except perhaps a cup of tea at some cottage, or a bit of bread and cheese at a farm ; but Ralph had made such a point of it, that he had at last reluctantly consented to come, and Ralph had amused himself by ordering an elaborate luncheon, though, "Bless your heart," Mrs. Lynch very justly remarked, "he won't see no difference, and had quite as lief have a crust of bread and cheese and a drain of hard cider."

But Ralph was resolved that the viands should be of the choicest description that the resources of Kingscombe and Cheriton and Mrs. Lynch's old-fashioned notions of cooking would allow, and he spent the whole morning pottering in and out of the kitchen, till Mrs. Lynch's good-temper almost gave way, and, as she said, "she got that flustered as she hardly knew if she stood on her head or her heels."

The table too was to be set out with such state as the somewhat scanty appliances in the pantry would permit ; but Duncan was ingenious in contrivances, and the table presented as elegant an appearance as could be wished, when Ralph had been persuaded to relinquish his intention of arranging the flowers himself.

Dr. Meredith did not interfere in Ralph's arrangements, but still could not settle to work in the library, where Clive's reproachful eyes looked up at him from his books, so he set off for a good stretch over the hills, every breath of the sweet, clear air on the heights adding to the feeling of exhilaration and hopefulness.

And on his way back, as luck would have it, he overtook Dear, with Dan in attendance, coming back from a visit to some outlying cottage ; Dan in high spirits, fancying himself a puppy, and dancing round her, and making foolish little dashes after birds, in a manner quite unlike his usual staid behavior ; Dear, with a light in her eyes, and a little soft color on her usually pale cheeks, due perhaps to her

walk, and the bracing air of the hill, or perhaps, Oliver hoped and fancied, to his sudden appearance round the shoulder of the hill.

So there was another half-hour for Oliver to reckon up as a cherished memory—and oh! if you come to think of it, what a lovely thing memory is, what a priceless gift! Only think, if the thick curtain of oblivion fell on each completed thought, or word, or deed, how dreary life would be. True, there are things we would gladly forget, but for one such there are with most of us, thousands we love to remember, are there not?

She was getting to talk to him without reserve, to tell him little half-formed thoughts and fancies, without fear of his criticism or ridicule, to turn to him for sympathy, to trust to his understanding what she meant even though she could not always put it quite clearly into words. And in return, he found himself talking to her, as he talked to no one else, expressing real, simple, natural feelings that had lain hidden away under cartloads of conventional, second-hand, borrowed

worldly wisdom ; he told her of his mother and his boyhood—subjects he would never have thought of mentioning to Mrs. Maddison, and which, no doubt, would have bored her if he had.

And as it never rains but it pours, not only had he that morning walk with Dear that day, but he spent nearly all the afternoon in her company, while Ralph, in his character of host, was trying his best to entertain Mr. Hume.

The gardener was picking pears on the sunny south wall, and Clive, who felt that *noblesse oblige* not to shut himself up alone in the library, as he had been asked to lunch, was helping store the fruit away in the loft ; and Dear and Oliver helped too for a time, and then wandered on along the mossy path between the high box edging, pacing up and down in the sunshine, with a word now and then from the gardener, Sims' successor, who had inherited the old man's longwinded wisdom, as well as the traditions about Dear's supremacy. And then they reached the white gate into the orchard,

where one of the Manor Alderneys was rubbing her fair neck on the paling, expecting Dear's gentle caressing touch on her soft, hairy ears and large damp nose. It was not all cupboard love that those great, soft, deer-like eyes expressed, though honesty compels me to state that a lettuce from an adjoining bed was received with somewhat rough greediness.

Then they went on into the orchard among the gnarled and knotted old apple trees, covered with moss and lichen, and some of them already dropping red and yellow fruit in the grass around them. One of the trees at the further end had, in some freak, grown partly horizontally, so as to form a seat cushioned with moss, and here they rested "just for a minute," it was so shady and pleasant, with a glimpse through the trees of sunny country, meadow-land and pasture. Was it only for a minute? There is no knowing, seeing that in certain conditions time does not exist.

After all, they were talking on quite indifferent subjects, and might have gone on so till "the

minute" was over ; he had not thought of telling her he loved her, indeed I hardly think he had told himself so, in so many words. But by chance, as they sat there, his hand touched hers as it lay on the moss of the apple tree, a hand not milk-white like my lady's, but small and soft and warm, and all of a sudden, as if it needed but that touch to break down the barrier between them, which must, indeed, have been growing gossamer thin of late, he had her hand in both of his, and was looking into her half-frightened, startled, yet not unwilling eyes, as if his heart were looking straight into hers.

What was it he was saying when that sudden revelation came? What words were they that melted into thin air when their hands met? Something absurdly trifling, something not at all *àpropos* of what followed. It was something to do with Dan, he fancied, when he tried to recall the scene; the cut of his ears, or a trick he had of going on three legs now and then. But what does the way matter if you reach the desired end? and surely that end had been

reached when he held her hand in his and his heart rushed to his lips.

“Dear,” he said. “Dear,” and his voice was deep, and full of such meaning as might have told all he would say, without another word. Oh! if only it could indeed have done so! In after times he tortured himself with the thought of that torrent of words that was on his very lips, and of that moment’s hesitation when he only stammered her name. But for that, it would have been said, let what might have come after; he would have told her that he loved her, and life could not have failed to be richer, happier, more precious for ever after.

But a little, silvery laugh from behind broke in at the very moment he spoke Dear’s name, and a voice said—

“Dear me! what a pretty place, and so sweetly rural! And there is Dr. Meredith, I declare! Why, Oliver, we thought you were lost; we have been looking for you everywhere, and I would not let Ralph go on and find you, as I had set my heart on giving you a surprise.

And this is Miss Hume, I am sure. I am so pleased to make your acquaintance."

And Mrs. Maddison effusively took Dear's hand, that was still tingling with that magnetic touch of Oliver Meredith's and his tender clasp.

How pretty and elegant Mrs. Maddison looked! No one would have thought she had just come off a long journey, still less that the journey of her life had been twice as long as Dear's. She was taller than Dear, and her perfectly-fitting travelling dress added to her height, and her face, under the little veil, showed an almost infantile bloom, and her eyes smiled in innocent admiration of the scene around her and interest in the girl whose hand she held in kindly condescension.

Oliver heard himself asking about her journey, and expressing apprehension that it must have tired her, and regrets that he should have been out of the way when she arrived, and inquiries as to how she thought Ralph was looking. His voice sounded to him unnatural and forced,

but she did not seem to notice it, and presently he found himself walking by her side up the orchard towards the house, while Ralph followed with Dear. How different it all looked! The sun was behind a cloud, and the colors of grass and foliage and mossy trunks had turned dull and dead; a wasp flew up from an over-ripe pear on the ground and buzzed angrily about them, and Mrs. Maddison gave a little scream of disgust as she brushed an earwig off Oliver's sleeve. Ugh! after all an orchard is an unpleasant earwiggy place to stop long in!

“You did not tell me what a pretty, little girl Mr. Hume's daughter is,” she said, “Jessie or Daisy or Dolly—what is her name? quite a rustic belle; she would be quite presentable if she were properly dressed. Ralph is greatly *épris* with her, is he not? Poor boy! he is so impressionable.”

And Oliver heard that contemptible creature, Dr. Meredith, laughing and replying vaguely, as if he agreed with what she said, instead of saying that whatever Ralph's opinion of her

might be, he, Oliver thought there was no one like Dear the wide world over.

“Is she like what you expected?” Ralph was saying to Dear. “I have so often described my mother to you. Did you fancy her like this? Why, Dear, are you cold?”

For Dear gave a little shiver as just at this moment Mrs. Maddison turned to look at her through those double eye-glasses with a long tortoiseshell handle, which she used, as she took pains to inform the public, because they were so much in fashion, and not because her eyesight needed any help. Certainly those eye-glasses are very useful weapons of offence in the hands of cold-blooded insolence.

“Cold? No, I don’t think so, only it’s a little bit dull and damp in this orchard when there is no sun. I think there must be what they call a blight, and it was such a beautiful morning!”

There was a wistfulness and disquiet in the girl’s voice that struck even on Ralph’s not very discriminating ear.

“You don’t much take to the mater, Dear. There’s not many women that do just at first, but you should see how the men go after her. You can hardly get a sight of her at a ball, she’s so surrounded. Why, she cuts out all the girls as easy as anything, girls years younger than she is. Doesn’t she look young? Why, when you were standing together just now, you might have been sisters. Meredith thinks a lot of her, you can see that, can’t you? and he is not at all a sort of fellow for ladies in a general way, but the mater can twist him round her little finger.”

And even as he spoke the two in front stopped, and Dear saw, as no doubt she was intended to see, Mrs. Maddison lay her hand on Oliver Meredith’s arm with a caressing gesture, and look up into his face with a very different glance to that bestowed on Dear a few moments before through the double eye-glasses.

“I think,” Dear said with a little gasp, “that I will go home through the garden. You want to be with Mrs. Maddison, and it must be tea-

time, and I must see that my father has a quiet evening. He will be tired; it is such a rare thing for him to go out, you know," she added, with a little wan smile; "he will have to keep very quiet to recover from such dissipation. No, don't trouble Mrs. Maddison," for Ralph was on the point of calling to his mother to stop. "She will be tired with her journey and glad to be alone. Will you bid her good-bye for me?"

And then Dear slipped away, along the path under the wall that was sunny no longer, and out through the door into the lane, which looked littered and untidy with the passage of the harvest waggons; and Dear noticed then for the first time, that there was a patch of yellow on the big elm tree at the corner.

"Summer is over," she said to herself sadly; "and it has been such a beautiful summer."

CHAPTER XIII.

A WOMAN'S WILL.

“ Whene'er I see those smiling eyes,
So full of hope and joy and light,
As if no cloud could ever rise
To dim a heav'n so purely bright,
I sigh to think how soon that brow
In grief may lose its every ray,
And that light heart so joyous now
Almost forget it once was gay.”—MOORE.

NEXT morning that business letter of which mention has already been made, came forcibly into Oliver Meredith's mind directly he awoke, and the importance of giving it immediate attention was impressed upon him as it had not been, unfortunately, the day before.

It was unfortunate, he felt, because it would appear so discourteous to Mrs. Maddison if he left Kingscombe directly she arrived, and the

most important business would only appear to her an empty excuse, especially if it came out that the letter about it had arrived the day before and had received no attention.

The charm of Kingscombe seemed somehow to have gone, the view from his window which had seemed to him so idyllic looked dull and uninteresting this morning, and for the first time he noticed a smell from the farmyard when he opened his window. The old-fashioned quiet of the house seemed transformed into mere deadly dullness, as Mademoiselle Clarisse tripped along on her high heels, with little shrill exclamations of horror at the *tristesse* of the great solid house. He saw the whole place with Mrs. Maddison's eyes as he came down to breakfast, spread on the big mahogany dining-table, with good, honest, farmer-like Maddison ancestors looking down in solemn, respectable stupidity from the walls.

She, however, did not appear till two hours later, when she came down in a most elegant morning *negligèe* toilette, and, passing the dining-

room with a shudder, established herself in the drawing-room, which Clarisse and Duncan had been trying to make habitable, having reduced the furniture to what Mrs. Lynch's old-fashioned, tidy notions considered a state of chaos. A fire had been lighted too in the big grate (constructed artfully so that all the heat should go up the chimney), greatly to the annoyance of the starlings who had made their abode there; and this also was a shock to Mrs. Lynch's feelings, as she had been brought up to begin fires the first of November, and leave them off the first of May, so that all the frosty May mornings and penetrating chill fogs of October evenings of this capricious English climate, to say nothing of bitter midsummers, and chilblainy Augusts, must be endured as best you might, "for no one ever heard tell of lighting up fires in summer time."

But Mrs. Lynch heard tell of a good many things new to her at that time, and lived in a chronic state of "Well a-never!" and "Who'd a-thought!"

I said the charm seemed to have gone from Kingscombe; but Oliver Meredith told himself it was only interrupted, it would all come back, the sun would shine again, and the soft shadows lie on the orchard grass, and the sun light up the emerald moss on the old trees and the rosy fruit on the boughs above or at their feet, and he would hold Dear's hand in his again and look into her eyes, and say those words which had been checked on his very lips. It would all come back, it was only deferred, to be all the sweeter for waiting. What could ever come between them when once their hands and eyes had met like that? Or should he take her to the old mill? The Virginia creeper on the gable end of the house would be turning to scarlet, the French poplars' shivering leaves would be beginning to show some gold, the old miller must have looked many times up the stream and wondered if his visitors would come again, the old wife must have finished half a dozen gray stockings with her shining, clicking, needles. He could see it all,—whirr! the white

pigeons flew up to the mill roof as the boat with him and Dear came to the landing-steps—

“You were saying—?” Mrs. Maddison was looking at him with one of her sweetest smiles, in as elegant an attitude as that uncompromising armchair would allow, and holding up a large feather fan to shield her face from the glow of the fire. “You were saying—?”

What had he been saying? Surely Oliver Meredith needed a screen too, for the fire had caught his face and turned it crimson and burning.

“Excuse me!” he said. “I was speaking of that letter I had received from Mr.—”

“Yes? Tell me about it. I thought you were speaking just then of Ralph, but I am so absent-minded no doubt I was mistaken.”

There was a fly which had settled for a moment on the dainty lace and cashmere of Mrs. Maddison's sleeve, and her eyes, as they left Oliver's face, sank on this unoffending insect, and I wonder it ever lived to tell the tale or join

the mazy dance with its fellows round the chandelier, so scorching was the wrathful blaze of the steel-blue lightning that flashed down on it.

“You see,” he hastened clumsily to excuse himself, “my mind is a good deal occupied with this letter, which I am afraid may call me away. If you had not come I should have written to you about it to-day.”

She bent towards him with that graceful interest which not so long ago had been so delightful to him, which had encouraged him to pour out confidences to her, sure of her sympathy, even if she did not always enter into his feelings ; but by the side of the sympathy to which he had lately been growing used, Mrs. Maddison’s rang false and unreal, and he distrusted the earnest attention of her eyes, and could hardly keep himself from shrinking from the touch of her hand upon his arm.

Those tortoise-shell eye-glasses were required by Mrs. Maddison for something more than ornament, but without them she could see clearly

enough the doubt of her in Oliver's face and the involuntary recoil from her touch.

"It came this morning?" she asked. And in times past he would not have hesitated to answer "Yes" on the principle that verbal truth may be sacrificed when inconvenient or impertinent questions are asked, but if you are constantly in the company of an absolutely true person you cease to draw fine distinctions between truth and falsehood.

"No, it came yesterday, but I hardly realised its importance till I read it through again this morning."

A very slight raising of the delicately-pencilled eyebrows showed him that she was taking the matter just as he had anticipated she would, and with a man's clumsiness he proceeded to make matters worse.

"You see I have been wasting my time so much the last few weeks. I shall have to buckle too now to make up for lost time."

A little sharpening of the lines round Mrs. Maddison's mouth might have warned him that

his words were not acceptable, but he was just then filled with a rush of regret for the holiday time that was over, and the sunshine of those idle summer days was dazzling in his eyes as he went blundering on.

“This is such an ideal place to be idle in.”

“Yes,” she said, “but I think when you first came you used that very expression about it as a place for work. I would never have consented to your burying yourself all this time down here if I had not thought that the quiet was just what you wanted for your work. I would not have asked so great a sacrifice of you, Oliver—nor of myself,” she added in a soft voice, and with a look meant to tell what that separation had been to her ; but he was looking at the scar on his hand which Dear had doctored so tenderly and missed the look and perhaps the softly added words.

“It was no sacrifice,” he said, and she interrupted him with a playful, little tap of the feather fan on the lips that assuredly were not

going to say anything outrageously complimentary.

“What flatterers you men are! I know what you are going to say, that it was no sacrifice because it was done for—Ralph, was that it? And I must not even be grateful, must I? not even thank you, nor tell you how much I appreciate these three months’ banishment of yours?”

There was a glove of Dear’s, left behind the day before, lying on the table near where Oliver sat—a small, shabby, wash-leather glove, such an one as Mrs. Maddison would not have worn even in the most rustic seclusion, and I am free to confess it was not ornamental, being stained and discolored and stretched and worn into a hole at the thumb; but he took it up and smoothed it out with a tenderness not lost on Mrs. Maddison, and the touch of it seemed to act like a charm to take all the fascination out of “my lady’s” soft words and tender glances, and to keep Oliver from falling back into the bondage that had been so pleasant to him in old days.

“It is I,” he said, “that am indebted to you for perhaps the pleasantest summer of my life.”

Dr. Meredith had never been great at compliment, but the impoliteness of that last speech approached the brutal, and he felt it himself as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

“You see,” he added, “it has been such exceptionally fine weather, and this is such a lovely place, and—”

“And so the work got set aside, and all the time that I, poor I, was flattering myself that I was conferring a benefit on society at large, by giving you an opportunity to write your book undisturbed by the distractions of London, you were—merely finding Kingscombe an ideal place for being idle in. For shame, Dr. Meredith! May I ask what mischief has been found for your idle hands to do which I fondly believed so well employed?”

He was not good at *badinage*, he never had been, he had no repartee, and he was uncomfortably conscious that every now and then among

the roses with which she pelted him there was a thorn of malice, and that the soft velvet paw concealed claws which might give an ugly scratch. She had not often treated him in this way, but at times he had seen some presuming youngster so daintily and prettily put to torture that it was only by the visible signs of discomfiture, the scarlet ears and stammering tongue, and restless hands and deprecating eyes and final precipitate retreat, that any one would have known that she was not showing her victim special honor.

“And this very important business that distracts your mind from my very frivolous conversation. May I hear what it is? The letter came yesterday, you say, and must have absorbed every thought. Indeed, I fancied when I came upon you in the orchard that dull care was pressing heavily upon you, you looked wrapt in thought. Would you kindly pull down the blind if there is one to that dreadful window, the glare is intolerable.”

But what was really intolerable was that

caressing, smoothing of that impossible glove, the sort of thing housemaids wear to black grates in, dirty enough for that too and shapeless, and yet that man sat up fondling it with that inane smile as if he were going to kiss it next moment ; it was sickening.

And when Oliver, after much fumbling, had managed to pull down the blind, which after resisting his most strenuous pulls to begin with, suddenly gave in and came down with a run to its whole yellow and weather-stained length—when this was done and he returned to his place and felt mechanically for the glove which had seemed a talisman of truth and purity in the atmosphere of unreality and pretence, it was gone, and “my lady” was dusting the dainty tips of her fingers with her cobweb handkerchief as if they had been in contact with something unpleasant.

But greatly to his relief her mood had changed, and she dropped the bantering tone.

“Oliver,” she said, “of course if this business is really important, I should be the last to wish

you to neglect it on my account. We are too old friends for me to think for a minute of my own disappointment at your having to run away directly I arrive."

"You know," he protested, and I really believe the loss of that glove made him more defenceless—for one thing he could not help looking at her, and no one can deny that Mrs. Maddison's eyes are very lovely—"You know that I would much rather stay, but it concerns my future prospects so nearly that I hardly feel justified in putting it aside even for—"

"Me?" she ended softly. Their eyes had met now, and how could he end as he might have done if Dear's glove had been in his hand, "even for politeness to you."

"I think I told you something about it before," he went on. "It is Professor K——, who is carrying out some very interesting scientific experiments at Berlin, and has done me the great honor of proposing that I should go out and work with him. He has read an article of mine bearing on the subject, and

thinks I can be of use to him. There is a handsome salary for the two years during which the experiments will last, and this is, of course, of importance to a poor man as I am ; but besides this, it will be such an introduction in the scientific world as will be greatly to my future advantage, and is a chance that only occurs once in a lifetime."

Mrs. Maddison had been listening with that engrossed air of interest that made her so delightful a companion ; but on this occasion it was not assumed, for in her own mind she was weighing the pros and cons of those two years at Berlin. As far as the salary went, it was not worth thinking of, her husband would have no need to trouble about such a trifle ; but if it led, as he said, to distinction, it would be worth the sacrifice, for Berlin was, in her opinion, a hideously dull place, and Germans she loathed with a good honest abhorrence of all their uninteresting varieties ; from the *hausfrau*, ill-dressed and clumsy and subservient to the superior sex, to the sensible, coarse, money-making German,

or the heavily intellectual or the enthusiastically artistic,—all she equally detested.

But still even two years in Berlin might be made endurable, and a vision of agreeable *attaches* and handsome Prussian officers served to throw a little color into the otherwise gloomy picture.

There was a little pause after Oliver ceased speaking, while Mrs. Maddison's thoughts ran on and pictured herself the centre of an amusing and brilliant circle, while her husband's reputation was growing and becoming known in all the capitals of Europe.

And he too was thinking of two years at Berlin, and of a modest flat which that salary would make comfortable if not luxurious, and of a wife whose sympathy would follow him into all his studies, and whose pure, sweet, innocent appreciation would make life full of beauty and interest. He was a slower painter of mind pictures than she was, or else he loved to dwell on each delicate, little touch that brought out the harmonious whole, for hers was finished with

a glitter of gems and diplomatic orders and Prussian uniforms, a very brilliant piece of work, I can assure you, and she was speaking again before he had got his canvas half filled in.

“Yes,” she said, “you must not let the opportunity slip. Is it too late to go to-day? Am I not good to let you go and leave me in this forsaken place? But you will come back, will you not, Oliver? It will be only for a few days, and then you will come back?”

“Oh yes, I will come back,” he answered, and there was a fervor in his tone which was gratifying.

“To me,” she told herself.

“To Dear,” he told himself.

But it was so great a comfort to him to find his way made easy, that he could not help feeling grateful to Mrs. Maddison for having made it so; and when she went on to speak in praise of Dear without the patronising sneer of the day before, Oliver confessed to himself that there was a great charm about Mrs. Maddison, and that he should be very sorry to lose her friendship; and

when she finished up by asking if he would go and beg Miss Hume to come up and have tea with her that afternoon, he could have kissed her hand with the greatest pleasure, as she seemed to be giving him an opportunity of finishing that explanation with Dear which her sudden appearance had interrupted the previous afternoon.

He might have felt less grateful to her if he had known that Mrs. Maddison had already despatched Ralph to the Vicarage, so she knew that Oliver would not find Dear alone; and that the moment he was out of the room, the languid grace and smiling serenity of her manner changed, as she snatched a little worn glove from where it lay hid under a fold of her dress and tore at it with an energy you would hardly have credited her with. Duncan, coming into the room a moment later, stood looking in surprise at the unaccustomed sight of "my lady" with the poker in her hand—and such a poker too, not one of those fairy-like polished steel and brass implements, such as was to be found

in the Mayfair rooms, but a good, honest, heavy, old-fashioned poker, in keeping with the house and its furniture—and with this Mrs. Maddison was ramming something down into the hot coals, but what it was he could not see.

CHAPTER XIV.

AWAY FROM DEAR.

“ Whatever in fame’s high path could waken
My spirit once, is now forsaken
For thee, thee, only thee.
Like shores by which some headlong bark
To the ocean hurries, resting never,
Life’s scenes go by me, bright or dark
I know not, heed not, hastening ever
To thee, thee, only thee.”—MOORE.

AND so Oliver Meredith went away from Kingscombe that afternoon, and the fates that had been so kind to him the day before, in the matter of allowing *tête-à-tête* interviews with Dear, seemed to have turned crusty, for he only saw her for a few minutes just as he was starting, and then in the presence of Mrs. Maddison, Ralph and Clive, with Mdlle. Clarisse fluttering in the background, and Duncan coming fussing

with the key of his portmanteau and inquiries as to his wishes about a hatbox.

He had no opportunity for a single word, he could not hold her hand a second longer than usual as he bade her good-bye, he could not even look at her without his glance being intercepted either by Ralph's long limbs, that seemed all over the place, or Mrs. Maddison's feather fan, that seemed somehow to have the art, in its graceful movement, of drawing attention however unwillingly from every one else, and concentrating it on herself. And Dear's eyes never once met his; they were fixed for the most part on some flowers lying on the table, which Mrs. Maddison had gathered in the garden, in a short turn which she took with Oliver after lunch. They were picked with that want of consideration which marks people who do not really care for flowers, one rose broken off with a long strip of bark torn from the tender stem, another with half a dozen young buds, too young to be pretty, and with none of its own leaves to give the flower its

right complement of green, a piece of fuchsia broken off the central shoot, and spoiling the shape of the plant for good and all, some mignonette pulled up by the roots, and all left on the table to grow limp and withered in the afternoon sun.

Oliver himself, who had learnt of late gentler treatment, could hardly restrain an expostulation as he watched "my lady" gather them, and he could guess the feeling in Dear's heart as she looked at them, the pity as for some living thing that could feel and suffer.

She was pale, he thought, but there was never much color on the white skin; she was silent, but she never was a very great talker. Was her mouth always so grave? he wondered, or was it only that it struck him more as brought in contrast with Mrs. Maddison's dimpling smiles?

She had been out when he went in the morning with Mrs. Maddison's message, as perhaps "my lady" knew would be the case, and she only came to the Manor a few minutes

before the fly arrived to take Oliver and his belongings to Cheriton to catch the night mail.

He was up in his room, packing his portmanteau when she came ; and when he went down, she was sitting in the drawing-room watching those withering flowers.

“I was telling Miss Hume, Oliver,” Mrs. Maddison said, and he felt a little prick, like the sting of a gnat, every time she said his Christian name before Dear, with that soft inflection of the voice on the word that was almost a caress. When had she begun to call him by his Christian name ? He could not remember, but it seemed to him that it used not to be so continual before this. “I was telling Miss Hume, Oliver, that you are going to run away from us this afternoon. I had to explain to her that it was not exactly my coming that had scared you away, but important business—for it does look suspicious, doesn't it ? that he should go the very first day I am here.”

And then she gathered Oliver's attention to herself with that prettily-imperious wave of the

fan, and shut out the others, and her voice grew confidential.

“You will write to me directly you have seen Professor K——, won't you, Oliver? You know how anxious I shall be to hear the result.” And so on, and all the time he was listening with Dear's ears, and feeling how it must give her the impression of the great intimacy and confidence existing between him and Mrs. Maddison.

And then it was time to go, and he held Dear's hand in his for a second; it was cold and a little tremulous, he fancied, but how can you judge of the feel of a hand in such a momentary clasp?

It brought back to his mind the remembrance of that little glove he had been holding in the morning, and a sudden, ridiculous wish seized him to have it to carry away with him. He had absolutely nothing of Dear's, not a photograph or flower or ribbon, not a scrap even of her handwriting. It is easy enough to make fun of such sentimental nonsense, but the most

before the fly arrived to take Oliver and his belongings to Cheriton to catch the night mail.

He was up in his room, packing his portmanteau when she came; and when he went down, she was sitting in the drawing-room watching those withering flowers.

“I was telling Miss Hume, Oliver,” Mrs. Maddison said, and he felt a little prick, like the sting of a gnat, every time she said his Christian name before Dear, with that soft inflection of the voice on the word that was almost a caress. When had she begun to call him by his Christian name? He could not remember, but it seemed to him that it used not to be so continual before this. “I was telling Miss Hume, Oliver, that you are going to run away from us this afternoon. I had to explain to her that it was not exactly my coming that had scared you away, but important business—for it does look suspicious, doesn't it? that he should go the very first day I am here.”

And then she gathered Oliver's attention to herself with that prettily-imperious wave of the

unprotected standing there, though Ralph was close beside her, all his six feet two of height, and with one elbow leaning against the doorpost above her head, in an attitude suggestive of protection, a long-limbed guardian angel in tweed.

It comforted Oliver much more to think of Dan's not very amiable face and tan ears on her other side, and, just as the turn in the drive came and shut out the view of the group still standing on the portico steps, he saw Dan caught up in Dear's arms, and her lips—could it have been to hide their quivering?—pressed on the dog's head.

“Dan will protect her,” he thought, as if there were dangers threatening the girl in those few days during which he would be away, and then he laughed at himself for this absurd feeling of apprehension. What should befall her with Ralph sworn to her service, and every man, woman, and child, ay! and beast too, in Kingscombe her devoted lieges? Even Mrs. Maddison had spoken kindly of her that

morning, and had expressed a wish for her company.

It was all so bright and sunny as he drove away; the weather had not proved too bright to last, as Mrs. Lynch had prophesied, and summer showed no signs of being over as Dear had sadly told herself; and Kingscombe looked its fairest and most peaceful in the afternoon radiance. There was no thunder-cloud hanging over the place, no smell of pestilence in the sweet air, no sign of those green hills or gray rocks preparing to hurl themselves down on the little village nestling below, and yet Oliver once laid his hand on the check-string to bid the driver turn back, for he must see Dear again, even at the risk of losing his train. But when the man turned round to see what his fare wanted, common sense re-asserted itself, and he bade the man drive on and look alive, as there was no time to be lost.

He felt this unreasonable fear less acutely as the days passed on, for the few days he had agreed with Mrs. Maddison as the time of his

absence lengthened into weeks. Business looks very different when you are in the midst of its hurry and bustle in London, to what it does as seen from afar in the peaceful atmosphere of Kingscombe. He found many arrears of business to be attended to, letters to be answered, interviews to be effected, publishers to be mollified, friends who could not be put off, or made short work of; and above all, he found that the delay in answering that letter, which had been forwarded to him from London, and which, as we have seen, he had not attended to immediately on receiving it, had made it necessary for him to go to Berlin, to see the Professor himself.

He did not mind the journey, except in so far as it delayed his return to Kingscombe; he had often made it before; but every incident in it came fresh and interesting, as he imagined how it would strike on a mind that had never since babyhood been ten miles from Kingscombe, and yet was in no way narrowed or cramped, but was eager and open, and appreciative of new impressions.

Berlin had never appeared to him so beautiful ; he was never tired of Unter den Linden, with the thought of how Dear would like it ; he looked in at the Grand Opera, and half envied the solemn, stout, spectacled Germans, because so many had their stolid, little wives tucked under their arms, and yet more than half pitied them, because those wives were so unlike Dear.

He was amused and inwardly pleased at the Professor being disappointed at his youthful appearance ; he felt so much younger inwardly that it was pleasing to know that it showed outwardly also, even though it imperilled his prospects with the serious, old Professor. He found it difficult to subdue his manner into befitting gravity, he who in the early days at Kingscombe had felt so old and grave, and the Professor at one time felt serious doubts of the identity of this frivolous boy with the writer of that thoughtful treatise which had so impressed him.

What would the old Vicar do without Dear ? That was the only misgiving that beset him in his sunny dreams of the future. Her father was

so dependent on her; Oliver remembered one evening coming into the vicarage and finding the little Vicar sleeping, after a very tiring day of harassing work. He had fallen asleep with his head against Dear's shoulder as she sat, in a not very comfortable position, on the arm of his chair. She must have been cramped, and weary of the constrained attitude, but she would not move as long as the tired, old head, with its thin gray hair, rested against her, and she held up a finger entreating silence, as he came in. He had very quietly taken his seat just behind them, and had sat there in silence for an hour of soft deepening twilight. This was one of his treasured memories of a *tête-à-tête* with Dear, silent to be sure, though sometimes he thought that silence was more full of sympathy than words.

But against whose shoulder would the gray head rest when Dear was gone? That troubled him even in his brightest anticipations. For Clive the matter was easily settled. He must go to Cambridge, that must be managed, how-

ever small the income, and he knew how gladly, eagerly, Dear would economize to effect this.

He wrote several times to Mrs. Maddison, and heard two or three times in reply, letters which he tore open with a passionate anxiety which would have gratified that lady if she could have seen it, and if she could have avoided seeing also the disappointment with which the eagerly-welcomed letter was tossed aside when it was found to contain no news of Dear.

Mrs. Maddison took this prolonged absence very reasonably, indeed he almost fancied she was glad he could not return on the day first named. She wrote a good deal more about his affairs than her own, but then, as she always ended, "there is so little ever happens at Kingscombe, as you know by experience."

He wondered at her stopping there so long; he knew she had other plans for the autumn, and he could not believe that she could find the same fascination as he had. He tried to imagine

how she passed her days. That first day had seemed to pass heavily enough ; she had complained more than once of *ennui* before she had been there twenty-four hours, and she had told him that when he was gone it would be quite insupportable, and yet three weeks had passed and she had said not a word of a move. He wished she would leave ; he had left many of his belongings there, so he would have sufficient excuse for going back, and without Mrs. Madison or Ralph, who, no doubt, would go with his mother, there would be no one to come between him and Dear.

Though September was half over, the weather was still supporting its reputation of being exceptionally fine ; the sun was still warm and genial, the river would still look like fairy-land as their boat floated down, and there would be autumn tints on trees and coverts to give novelty to what was lovely enough before ; the orchard would still be chequered with golden light and soft ashen shadows, and if a yellow leaf fluttered down to remind them that summer was over, he

would look into Dear's eyes, and find everlasting spring.

But Mrs. Maddison seemed settled at Kingscombe, so he must reckon on her presence there, and Ralph too, on his return, unless indeed during the few last days of his stay in Berlin, in the course of which no letters had reached him, the dullness of Kingscombe had become intolerable, and she had made up her mind to strike her tents.

At last his business was settled, and he was free to return to England. The Professor had gathered from one or two hints let fall in conversation, that when Dr. Meredith came to Berlin at Christmas, he would not come alone, and had gravely approved of the prospect of the lady wife, having an extremely stout, old wife of his own, worth her weight in gold, which is saying a great deal.

One day in London would be enough, he decided, to see his publishers and pick up his letters, and the next morning he would start for Kingscombe to go to Dear. But as he came

out of his publisher's office, he ran up against the very last person he expected to see in London, who also seemed as much astonished at seeing him there—it was the invaluable Duncan.

CHAPTER XV.

WEDDING BELLS.

“ . . . Deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret ;
O Death in Life ! the days that are no more.”

—TENNYSON.

“ **I**S Mrs. Maddison in London ? Have they left Kingscombe ? ”

“ How is Mr. Ralph ? Have you just come up from Kingscombe ? ”

Duncan's usually imperturbably respectful manner was quite upset by his surprise at seeing Dr. Meredith, and he stood staring at him as if he could hardly believe his senses !

“ I understood my lady to say,” he said, “ that you was back at Kingscombe more than a fortnight ago. Beg your pardon, sir, for, of course, it's my mistake ; but I was just thinking of you

and Mr. Ralph, and hoping I'd find him pretty middling when I got back to-morrow, for I didn't like the look of him when I left. He was very queer, though he wouldn't own to it, and at the last moment I'd two minds about going, only my lady said that you was sure to come back next day, and if Mr. Ralph was poorly, which she couldn't see any signs of, she said, and that it was all my fancy, but anyhow if he was, you'd be there to look after him, and they'd let me know if I was wanted. I didn't at all particularly care for a holiday just now, as Kingscombe suits me and I've took a liking to the place, and I'd a deal rather have had it later when my lady was back in London, and Donaldson could valet Mr. Ralph a bit, and my folks was home from Scotland."

"There was no talk of your having a holiday when I left, Duncan."

"No, nor it never crossed my mind, least of all when my lady had just come and wanted things made comfortable, and Mrs. Lynch nervous about not having things as my lady

was used to, and wanting me to tell her every little thing, even down to how she liked her melted butter done.”

Duncan’s face relapsed into a smile at the remembrance of Mrs. Lynch’s nervous dependence, but it soon resumed its serious expression, and his anxiety was communicating itself to Oliver, though he hardly knew why he felt uneasy or what he dreaded.

“Have you heard from Mrs. Maddison since you came away?”

“Yes, and that’s curious too, for she nearly always makes Mdlle. Clarisse write when there’s anything to say, and though it takes half one’s time to make out the girl’s scrawl, one finds out what’s going on without her always intending it. But my lady wrote herself this time to say it was all going right, and Mr. Ralph was quite well, and I need not come back for another week. I have the letter here.”

By this time they had reached Dr. Meredith’s rooms, towards which they had been walking as they talked. Oliver turned over again the heap

of letters he had hastily opened on his arrival that morning, in case there might be one from Kingscombe which had escaped his notice, but there was none, and then he looked at the note Mrs. Maddison had sent to Duncan. It was dated a week back, and was an ordinary, ladylike, little note, such as any mistress might write to a valued and rather confidential manservant, and yet it gave Oliver an undefined feeling of nervousness as it did Duncan. It was no use telling himself it was nonsense, and that there was no reason why mother and son should not enjoy two or three weeks to themselves, unrestrained by the society even of a friend as intimate as himself, or a servant whose rule often becomes tyrannical when he knows himself to be indispensable.

He could not rid himself of an uneasy feeling, nor could Duncan either apparently, for he kept fidgeting about the room and interrupting Dr. Meredith in a manner totally unlike his usual behavior.

“He was queer and out of sorts, and I told

her so. He had that restlessness that's always a sign when one of those fits is coming on, and that way of facing it out that he was all right and that there was no need to be bothering, and as savage as a bear because he caught me watching him. I haven't been with him these six years without knowing pretty well when he's in for one of them, though I've known them kept off if he keeps quiet and don't excite himself about anything. But there! he's that contrary, as you know, sir, that when he feels queer, he'll do just the thing to make him worse, such as he'd never think of doing when he was pretty well; and his mother—asking your pardon, sir, and I wouldn't say it if there was any one besides ourselves and you an old friend of the family—she's no more sense or consideration for him than that table.”

“But, Duncan,” Oliver protested, arguing as much against his own senseless apprehension as against the man's, “Mrs. Maddison would be the last person to wish Mr. Ralph to be ill, least of all when you were away. She has such entire

confidence in you and in your knowing how to manage when Mr. Ralph gets one of those fits, that she would never have let you go if she had felt the least fear of such a thing. And besides, she would have telegraphed for you at once if there had been any alarm. Look here! we should have time to catch the night express if we look sharp. Hurry up and fetch your traps, and meet me at Paddington at seven."

He told himself, as he re-packed the few things he had taken out of his portmanteau, that Duncan was a fool and he was a bigger one, after travelling all the night before with all the wretched discomforts of a night journey, the rattle and grind and the short feverish naps in constrained and cramped positions, broken by the long shrieking whistle as the train rushed through some lighted station out into the darkness, and then the pale, sickly dawn, when you feel dirty and shivering, and the stopping at some station and the appearance of fellow-passengers in all sorts of unbecoming costumes, querulous, fatigued women and surly, unshaven

men, struggling for coffee without any pretence at courtesy or ordinary politeness. Certainly one does not get favorable impressions of one's kind during a night journey.

It was all so fresh in his memory and yet he chose to repeat the dose, when he might have had a comfortable night in his own bed and a leisurely toilette, and gone comfortably down to Kingscombe arriving, when he was expected, in time for dinner. The feeling that he was a fool for his pains increased on him through the night, and culminated when he found himself standing on the platform at Cheriton at eight o'clock next morning, very grimy and bristly as to his chin, and stiff as to his limbs and cross as to his temper, not at all in a frame of mind or body to present himself before his lady love, still less before Mrs. Maddison.

Perhaps Duncan felt a little bit the same, for when Dr. Meredith proposed a wash up and breakfast at the railway hotel before they went on to Kingscombe, he offered no objection ; and, having sacrificed their night's rest and comfort

for the sake of reaching Kingscombe earlier, they sat over their breakfast in the cheerful, little coffee-room at the hotel while Oliver described the details of his journey to Berlin to Duncan, who had been a great traveller in his time and had all the continental railways and most of the hotels at his fingers'-ends, and was well acquainted with and loved to discuss all the knavish tricks of foreigners as practised on the British tourist.

So it was nearly ten before they set off in a fly for Kingscombe, and then, the morning being beautiful with the fresh, invigorating beauty of late September, with thick white dew on the grass and studding the cobwebs on the hedges-rows, and the trees all russet and golden overhead against the pale, pleasant, blue sky, they agreed to send on their traps in the fly, whose shambling gray horse did not go at an exhilarating pace, and walk themselves over the hill to Kingscombe, climbing to the top by what in those parts was called "the pig's path," steps cut or worn in the turf, which would bring them

up to the brow of the hill, right over Kingscombe, from whence they could drop down on the village nestling below.

Oliver had lost all that feeling of apprehension that had brought him down at so much personal discomfort through the night. The pleasure of getting back to Kingscombe had taken its place, the sense of nearness to Dear, the charm of the place, the thought of what he should say, how she would answer when they met. It was all so exquisitely sweet to think of, that he stopped when he reached the top of the hill and sat down, hoping that Duncan would go on and leave him to his own devices. But Duncan too seemed to have lost all wish to hurry, and he too took a seat on a flat gray stone hard by and puffed away at his pipe in peaceful silence; he too, perhaps, having pleasing subjects of reflection connected with the little village below, from whose chimneys the blue wood smoke curled up.

It was the very spot where Dear and Ralph had sat six years before, tossing the snail shells

at the sheep feeding below them, and discussing the possibility of being bored in such an interesting world ; it was nearly the place where a month before Oliver had come in sight of Dear with Dan by her side returning to the village. What if kind fate would permit such a thing to occur again ? What if he might make his way down the steep hillside and through those gorse bushes to the lower path and join her, and see the color brighten in her cheeks and her eyes meet his with startled glad surprise ?

But at the very moment that the thought sent the blood warm and quick through his veins, from the little gray church tower below, the bells began to ring out a glad peal of their sweet, old tones, with a clash and a hurry and a cheerful energy as if each wanted to be the first to tell some good news and set the world smiling.

“ Hullo, Duncan, there’s a wedding. Who can it be ? Steady there ! That’s Nicholls with the tenor bell, he’s always running away. Don’t they ring with a will ? It might be one of themselves being married to hear them. Well done !

Well done! Come, Duncan, let's go down or we shall be too late to drink their health, whoever they may be."

"Will they ring like that for me?" he wondered, "for me and Dear?"

Down below at the foot of the hill is a little bit of arable land, shaped like a cocked-hat, with the point running up into the hillside turf. It had been ploughed and sown since Oliver had been gone, and now a village boy had been set to watch over it and prevent the great, shiny, black rooks who sailed so solemnly round the shoulder of the hill, from settling down on the patch and carrying off the seed. It needed all little Will Kemp's power of lungs and the heavy wooden rattle with which he was furnished to keep the rooks away, and even with his best exertions one of them would leave the clamorous party in the elms, and ignoring Will's hoarse, Loamshire objurgations and the clods of earth that supplemented them, drop on to the rich brown mould with a loud, raucous caw of triumph.

But just now the rooks had a fine opportunity of taking their fill, for Will Kemp's attention had been entirely distracted from the cocked-hat patch by the church bells, and, mounted on the gate with his back turned to the field, he was vainly trying to follow the bells with his voice, "Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong," and finding that impossible from their glad hurry, one bell treading on another's heels and tripping over one another, he subsided into "Hip, hip, hip, hooray! hip, hip, hip, hooray!" whirling the rattle round and round his head to add to the gratifying din.

He was so deafened by his own performances that it was a minute or two before he could hear Oliver's question—

"Whose wedding is it, Willie?" and when he heard it, his mouth dropped and his eyes opened in such surprise, almost amounting to incredulity, that any one, most of all "Muster Doctor," should be ignorant of such a tremendous fact, delayed his answer.

"Don't yer know? Well a-never! Don'tee

hear the bells? Why it's the young Squire's wedding, blesh yer, and Miss Dear's. Hip, hip, hip, hooray! ding-dong, ding-dong. Hip, hip, hooray. B—r—r—r—r— Oh! I say! leave go! I ain't done nothing! Tain't a lie!"

For "Muster Doctor," as the boy told afterwards, had got him by the collar and was shaking him till his teeth chattered, and then flung him into a gorse bush as if he had been an old sack, and went striding off towards the village with the wooden rattle grasped unconsciously in his hand, and "Muster Duncan after him with a face as long as my arm."

CHAPTER XVI.

A MOTHER'S DOING.

“That a lie which is half the truth is ever the blackest of lies,
That a lie which is all a lie may be met and fought with outright ;
But a lie which is part a truth is a harder matter to fight.” —TENNYSON.

OUT of the little gray church at Kingscombe, as the bells announced far and near, a wedding party was coming, and the whole population of the village was there to see, except that poor, little, ill-used Will Kemp, of whom mention has been made in the last chapter. Old women who had not been outside their doors or out of their armchairs for years, babies of a few days old, hobbling, crippled, old men, laborers from the plough, women from the wash-tub, all

pressing, crowding round to wish their Miss Dear happiness on her wedding-day.

Happy is the bride that the sun shines on, and, as we have seen, the sun was shining with a will that September day, and, as the bride came out from the shadow of the old yew-tree, it fell full upon her like a loving blessing from the kind old nurse, Nature, whom the girl had loved and learnt of from her babyhood.

Dear was very pale, but then she had never much color, and her eyes had a startled, dazed look in them, such as one does not often see in a happy, young bride.

“She didn’t look somehow natural like!” was the verdict of the loving hearts who had known her all her life, since she was the baby child of two years in the drab pelisse who had won them all by her innocent confidence in their kindness. They really did feel this mis-giving, though, as none of them mentioned the fact till after events had clouded the brightness of the wedding-day, cynical hearers might have doubted it.

Dress, as I have said before, made but little difference in Dear, or else this day of all days of her life she should have appeared to advantage, for Mdlle. Clarisse had had the making of the soft white dress, and no doubt imparted to it a style which none of Dear's dresses had ever known before ; and the same skilful fingers had arranged the fair hair into soft plaits and curls, the very abundance of the material being an embarrassment to one used to make the most of scantiness, and supplement it with artificial aids.

No one could wonder if the bride's face were anxious or troubled who looked at the bridegroom who walked by her side in such a strange, shambling, spasmodic way. "Dear sakes!" whispered one of the onlookers, "if it ain't a-been the young Squire, a-might have said he'd had a drop." There was a glazy, staring look in his eyes, and he bit at his under lip as though he were trying to control himself, and the arm that Dear held trembled and twitched under her hand, and once, as they came down the aisle, he stopped and held to the side of a pew, as if

he needed support, and then pushed back the damp hair from his forehead and passed his hand over his eyes as if he could not see distinctly. No wonder that the bride should look troubled, or that his mother, following close behind with Clive, should watch him so anxiously.

Mrs. Maddison looked haggard ; yes, even in spite of her careful toilette and artistic complexion, she looked old and haggard as she came out into the September sunshine. Those three weeks had aged her more than double their number of years had done. One of the bystanders spoke of her as "t'ould lady," and no one protested at the application of the adjective. But indeed she had had hard work during those three weeks, the time was so short, the anxieties and risks so great, it was enough to wear and age a stronger woman ; and even now, when the purpose for which she had worked and intrigued was successfully carried out, there was Oliver's return to face, which every moment grew a more terrible prospect to her guilty conscience.

She had made up her mind to this that very first morning at Kingscombe when Oliver had sat playing with Dear's glove ; it had been a firm and fixed purpose when she stood bidding him good-bye on the steps as he drove away. Dear, as a possible rival, and the possibility might almost be reckoned a certainty, and a successful rival too, must be removed clear out of Oliver's reach, and how better than by marrying her to Ralph, who was devoted to the girl ? It was no sacrifice of Dear, she told herself, when conscience—poor, easily smothered, little conscience, used to summary treatment for many a year at Mrs. Maddison's hands, but still lifting its head and making its thin, little voice heard—ventured a remonstrance ; it was a brilliant match for a penniless clergyman's daughter, and one which few mothers in her situation would have thought good enough, for their only son, but Ralph's heart was set on it, and as long as he was happy and well, this unworldly mother was content.

It was easy enough to put it into Ralph's

head. That very first evening after Oliver's departure, and before Duncan had been despatched for his holiday, the seed was successfully sown.

He was so well at Kingscombe, it really appeared to suit him so thoroughly that it seemed a pity he should not make up his mind to settle there. It was just what his poor father would have liked, and the place could easily be improved and modernized and the stables rebuilt.

“But, mother, you would not like it?”

Mrs. Maddison smiled behind her fan. What a child he is still! “No,” she answered, “and you would want some one younger and brighter than your poor, old mother. Ralph,” she said, and she laid her hand on his knee as they sat in the firelight in the drawing-room—“Ralph, I think a wife is what you want. I have taken a great fancy to this little Dear of yours, and I have a dream that I should like her for a daughter-in-law.”

After that the conversation seemed to Mrs.

Maddison to become rather monotonous, even though the substance of it was exactly what she wished. There is a limit to hearing another woman's praises sung, and she had to hide more than one yawn behind her fan, and once she caught herself nodding and was only awakened, and that thoroughly, by hearing him say: "But I don't think I'm half good enough for her, and besides, I've sometimes thought she had a liking for Meredith."

"Nonsense!" her voice startled him it was so sharp; "it's plain to any one that she prefers you. Dr. Meredith is much too serious to take a girl's fancy."

"Well, perhaps he is a bit prosy," and Ralph was launched again on his wearisome eloquence.

So far, so good, but it was not so easy with Dear, though Mrs. Maddison implored Ralph to let her pave the way before he came blundering out with his proposal and frightened the girl. She made a great deal of Dear the next day or two, and took infinite pains to make her like her, and

succeeded, for a true nature does not easily suspect deceit, and the first intuitive repulsion Dear had felt died away before Mrs. Maddison's caressing kindness.

Oliver's name was never mentioned, but the conversation turned much on Ralph whenever he was not present and the two were alone together. Dear was ready enough to talk of him—almost too ready—Mrs. Maddison thought. There was no shyness, no consciousness, as a girl might show when talking of a possible lover; she spoke of him just as she did of Clive, and did not hesitate to say she was fond of him and discuss his good looks and pleasant manners, and to say how much she should miss him when he went away; but she said it all without a shade of color rising to her cheeks or a moment's lowering of the eyes that looked so simply and straight at his mother. Mrs. Maddison knew enough of girls' nature to feel that this was not encouraging.

Dear entered with earnest sympathy into all Mrs. Maddison's anxiety about Ralph's delicacy

of health, and agreed that Kingscombe seemed to suit him wonderfully well.

“I have been telling him,” Mrs. Maddison said, “that as he is so well and so happy here, it seems to me that he cannot do better than settle down as a country squire in the old place as his father did before him. His father would have loved to think of Ralph taking up the position he himself held in the county ; and, of course, a great deal might be done to make the place more habitable, only—” and here Mrs. Maddison sighed and paused for a minute, and Dear waited inquiringly—“only I am afraid I could not possibly come and live with him here, poor boy ! There are so many ties and duties that keep me in London.”

“Yes,” Dear answered in eager response to a mother’s feelings, “it would be dreadful for you being separated from him.”

“Yes, of course,” said Mrs. Maddison, with a touch of impatience in her voice ; “but I was not thinking of myself but of him ; it would be

so lonely for him, and he is so dependent on love and companionship."

It was not often that Dear's attention wandered; she was one of those delightful listeners who invited confidence by their never-failing lively interest; but now perhaps she might be excused for thinking of the companionship Ralph had enjoyed that summer, and wondering if the same perfect arrangement might not be continued indefinitely. But she was brought back to the present by the light touch of Mrs. Maddison's little hand on her arm, and became aware that that lady was bending towards her and speaking with much earnestness.

"My dear," she was saying, "if I knew that Ralph had a sweet, young wife like you to love and care for him, I could feel quite happy."

"Ralph's wife!" Dear answered with a start, that made the caressing hand on her arm drop suddenly away. "Oh no, that couldn't be. I like him ever so much. I would do anything for him. I would nurse him if he were ill, and

care for him just as I do for Clive and my father—but his wife? no, that is something quite different, you know.”

The girl's voice shook and faltered, and, though Mrs. Maddison's eyes had no longer the clear sight of her youth, and the twilight was beginning to creep into the room, she could see the soft color tint the colorless cheek, and the sweet, truthful eyes droop to hide the sudden light that shone out in them, and my lady turned away with an impatient jerk, knowing that the “something quite different” was in the girl's heart, but not for Ralph; and the little, delicate hand that had lain so affectionately on Dear's arm a minute before, clenched itself as if it would willingly have struck the girl who loved Oliver Meredith.

“You are not vexed with me?” Dear asked, after the minute's silence that ensued.

“Vexed with you?” Mrs. Maddison controlled her voice with an effort. “No, my dear, only a little disappointed. Poor Ralph! he will feel it a good deal, for I know his heart is greatly

set on it, and he is so sensitive, so delicately strung, and I had hoped so much—let myself build so on the hope of his living at Kingscombe, and growing strong, and shaking off the delicacy of his boyhood. Oh no, dear—” as Dear began eagerly to interrupt her—“he never could live at Kingscombe alone, and, of course—Dr. Meredith and I could not often be with him.”

It was done, the blow that cruel, pretty little hand had longed to deal, had been given far more effectually by the soft, silver tones of my lady’s tongue. There was a little gasp and a shiver, and in the twilight that had deepened Mrs. Maddison could only see the outline of Dear’s figure against the evening sky outside the window near which they sat, quite still, with hands clasped together and head a little drooped—poor, little head!—to shield which from pain Oliver Meredith would have given his life.

But Mrs. Maddison went pitilessly on.

“There is something about you, child, that makes one inclined to be confidential, but

perhaps you may have guessed my secret already—our secret, Oliver's and mine. You know I was hardly more than a child when I married Mr. Maddison. I was just out of the schoolroom. He was very good to me, and I was quite happy and content with him, but I loved him more like a father, for, as you said just now, the love of a wife is something different. You are quite right. I think I know it now since I have known Oliver. But, Dear, short of that, if you can be sure that you are making some one else happy as I did in those old days with Mr. Maddison, it goes a long way to make you happy yourself, and Mr. Maddison was very much in character like Ralph, kind and simple-hearted and domestic and fond of home and quiet, and he used to say I made his happiness. It all comes back to me now when a new life is beginning for me, and now and then it seems as if I were doing a wrong to the kind, old man who petted me and humored my every wish, but I know he would have wished before all

things that I should be happy, and I think there is no doubt of that with Oliver, do you, Dear? for you must have seen a little of him since he has been at Kingscombe, and, indeed, he said such pretty things about you that I could almost have been jealous, if it had been any one but Oliver. Why, here is Martin with the lamp; and it is nearly time to dress for dinner. Will you stop and dine with us? Ralph will be so disappointed if you are gone before he comes in. Must you go? Ah, the dear Vicar, he cannot get on without you. There, child, I will not worry you; but think if that little plan of mine were possible, you would be always with him, he would not lose his daughter." And Mrs. Maddison kissed a cheek that was very white and chill, and pressed a little, cold hand.

Next day the attack was renewed from a different point. Mrs. Maddison was full of Clive and his wonderful genius, and Dear, who was very white and still, with a new strange look in the soft eyes and on the gentle lips,

hailed this new subject, not seeing at first how it was to be brought to bear.

Dear was pleased, or rather she was content, for just then she was too numbed to feel any active pleasure; everything, pleasure and pain alike, seemed far off and indistinct. But she was satisfied to listen to Clive's praises, and agreed duly that it was a pity he should be buried in an out-of-the-way place like Kingscombe. Others had said the same to her before, when voices and feelings were nearer and clearer and more real. It was years ago, surely, that somebody spoke of Clive's great talents as they stood by the sunny wall in the kitchen-garden watching him gather the pears.

"He ought to go to Cambridge," Mrs. Maddison said. "Ah! Dear, if he were Ralph's brother it would make it all so easy. There need be no question of ways and means then, and when he had distinguished himself and made a name in the world, how proud we should all be of him, and how grateful he would be to the sister who had made success possible

to him. But there! it is no use thinking of such things, is it?"

I think if Dear had not been so dazed and numb and shaken, she would have seen through the snares that Mrs. Maddison laid for her, have appreciated the want of delicacy and the clumsiness with which the bribe was offered. Perhaps even now she would have held out, but for a circumstance that happened most unfortunately at that very time when the world, which had been so full of Oliver not a week before, was empty and desolate, and the heart that had been so glad and gay was sore and sad.

She was going home that evening after Mrs. Maddison had been talking of Clive, not with that quick, light step that Oliver recognized from afar, even half-way up the hill, but slowly and lingeringly, when at the entrance to the village Clive overtook her. She could see at a glance that something had happened, and he was not slow in telling her what it was.

"I've lost my situation at the Grammar School. I've not got the sack in so many

words yet, but there's no help for it; it's safe to come, and on the whole, I'm glad of it."

"Oh, Clive, what is it?"

"Why, that great bully Marsland, you know—his father has the big factory the other side of Cheriton—well, he cheeked me in class. It's not the first time he's done it, and I've managed to put up with it, but to-day I couldn't stand it, and I struck him. Oh, what a fool I am not to be stronger. If I'd been able to give him a good licking it would have been all right, but he's twice the man I am, and he struck back and knocked me right down and I hit my head against the table and didn't come to for a minute, and there was a hullabaloo, and the boys were frightened, and old Jackson was called in."

"Oh, Clive, were you hurt? Can you feel it now?"

"Oh, bother the hurt! Jackson was in a towering rage and expelled Marsland there and then."

"Well, Clive, and he quite deserved it. It

will be a lesson to the other boys and make it pleasanter for you.”

Clive laughed.

“But Marsland’s one of old Jackson’s best cards. He has half a dozen younger brothers coming on, and old Marsland is made of money, and is thought a lot of in Cheriton, and he’ll be as mad as a hatter and do all he knows against the school. I don’t think Jackson will care for the sight of me after this, and he might make his peace with Marsland if I was out of the way—Oh, Dear, I think I’m glad it’s come to an end. I was sick and tired of it. I’d a hundred times rather go to plough or dig in the garden than grind away with those boys. But what can I do? Dear, what can I do? It does seem so hard on a fellow never to get a chance, and to feel I’ve got it in me to do something, if only I wasn’t tied hand and foot. What’s the use of having brains, as people say I have, if one’s to rot here all one’s life.”

And Dear could only cling to his arm, and rub her cheek against his shoulder, and

entreat him to have patience, it would all come right.

But at night as she lay awake in that dull, sleepless suffering the long nights brought, she heard the boy sobbing in his little bedroom next to hers, and trying to stifle the sound in the bed-clothes. He was such a boy still, she felt years older than he, as she sat up in dry-eyed misery listening to his sobs, which she knew she must ignore; for it is only with his mother that a boy is not ashamed of his tears.

But this was not all, for next morning her father came to her with a letter in his hand and a look of bewilderment and worry in his face. Money troubles had not disturbed the quiet of their lives for many years, they had lived so quietly and simply and shabbily and contentedly, with hardly any temptation to spend money; but here was a bill, the length of which made Mr. Hume and Dear aghast, though it might have appeared a mere trifle in ordinary households.

It was from a wine-merchant at Cheriton, and was almost entirely for wine given away in the parish, a matter in which Mr. Hume, according to Patty, was certainly inclined to be extravagant.

“As did oughter know better than to come bothering for port wine every time they’ve any aches and pains. If I was the master I’d give ’em a good drop of rue along of it, and they’d not be in such a hurry to take it. ’T was just the same with my black-currant jam. I’d never have had a bit left in my cupboard—if the children had a pain in their big toe, the mothers come after black-currant jam for ’em. So I said as I’d heerd tell as a little alum was good to be took with it, for sore throats or broken chil-blains or a pain in the innerds, and the first as came I gave ’em a taste of it, and said as they couldn’t have the jam nohows without the alum mixed with it, and after, that bless you! I had black-currant jam in my cupboard all the winter and roley-poleys in May.”

But Mr. Hume was not so wise as Patty, and

the wine merchant's bill had crept up by degrees to what seemed to them an alarming sum, and moreover, an early remittance was asked for; and Dear remembered with a pang that the wine merchant's son was at the Grammar School, and that perhaps the peremptory sending in of the account might be one of the results of poor Clive's loss of temper; and she took care to keep it out of his sight, which was not difficult, as he was too heavy-eyed and miserable to notice anything.

At the Manor she found Ralph out of sorts. Duncan had not been mistaken in thinking him queer when he went away, and the excitement produced by his mother's conversation had not improved his condition. He had been very cross and irritable to his mother that morning. Duncan's absence had interfered with his comfort, and he was inclined to be fretful and contradictory. But with Dear he was hardly ever out of temper, and when she came in he consented at once to lie down on the sofa, which he had altogether refused to do at his mother's request,

and keep quiet if Dear would sit with him and read and talk to him.

So Mrs. Maddison gladly gave over the charge of her very troublesome invalid, and went away with an expressive look at the girl, which Dear wearily avoided, and a sigh which roused even Dear's gentle nature to opposition.

"Sit where I can see you," he said ; and she moved at once. His eyes had not the power to embarrass her or make her conscious, his look was less to her even than Dan's gaze, which disturbed her sometimes by its fixed, inarticulate meaning. "I have so much to say to you," he began, but she stopped him.

"Hush ! I am going to read to you," and she took up a book from the table, but dropped it again with a little shiver. It was one belonging to Oliver Meredith, a book of translations and poems, out of which he had read bits to her, and she took up in preference a novel that my lady had been reading, and she read steadily on through a chapter or two of feeble twaddle,

mainly made up of descriptions of dress and furniture, and vapid conversation interlarded with French expressions.

It did not matter to Ralph what she read as long as it was she who read it, and before long his eyes closed and he fell asleep, and she let the book drop into her lap, and sat still looking before her with great sad gray eyes, that seemed trying to look into the future, which lay in deepest gloom before her.

It was very quiet and peaceful in the Manor drawing-room ; if it had not been that every corner of the room, every stone of the terrace steps outside, every group of trees or glimpse of soft grass in the park beyond, was associated past all separation with bitter-sweet memories, Dear could have fancied herself happy, could have imagined without disquiet a future spent in the old place which she loved, with Ralph, whom she certainly liked. She was so sorry for him ; as he lay there he looked so ill. She had it in her power to make him so happy, and if, as my lady had said, you can be quite sure you

are making some one else happy, it goes a long way to make you happy yourself.

And then in array passed before her the other arguments Mrs. Maddison had used, and others that the girl's own unselfish, loving heart brought against her: Clive and his prospects,—her father, and being constantly near him, and able to help in such matters as that unpaid bill,—sick and poor and suffering, for whom she could do so little now, but might have it in her power to do so much,—schemes of improvement which the want of funds had made impossible. If Mrs. Maddison had but known it, that afternoon, when not a word of argument was said to Dear, did more to persuade her than all the eloquence in the world, and it took my lady quite by surprise when Ralph came in that evening from walking home with Dear, and said—

“Mother, I've asked Dear to marry me, and she has consented.”

And then, when everything seemed going exactly as Mrs. Maddison wished, difficulties arose in the very quarter in which she least

expected them—Ralph himself. He was attacked by what Mrs. Maddison called “ridiculous and inconvenient scruples,” as to whether he ought to marry when his health was so uncertain. She had hardly patience to argue the subject with him, and when she had spent her time and breath and succeeded in convincing him of its folly, and he had fallen eagerly into all her plans and imaginings for the future, he would revert to these tiresome scruples.

“But I say, mother, I wish I felt sure it was all right. I’ve a great mind to write to Meredith and ask what he thinks.”

“What on earth has Dr. Meredith to do with it? Is he the keeper of your conscience? Upon my word, Ralph, you ought to be man enough to judge for yourself.”

It was from Ralph, too, that the opposition came to the idea of hastening the wedding.

“There’s no need for such hurry,” he said. “I won’t have Dear bothered. It shall be all just as she likes.”

We have seen that when Ralph was not well

he was not very pleasant company, and this was the first time his mother had had any experience of this, for when "the poor dear boy" was out of sorts she had always hitherto left him to Duncan, who knew just how to manage him. I am glad to think that Mrs. Maddison had a bad time of it with him most of those three weeks. She grew seriously anxious about his health more than once, and once she actually wrote a telegram to summon Duncan back, which would have seriously complicated her arrangements, but Ralph was better again and the telegraph form was torn up.

Strangely enough there was no difficulty about the immediate marriage with Dear; indeed, the idea seemed almost to please her. That dazed look, which the people noticed on her wedding-day, had settled in her sweet eyes, and she went about as one in a dream, and let my lady do what she liked with her, as on the wedding-day she let Clarisse dress her and arrange her hair, without a word either of satisfaction or objection.

“And when the toilette is made,” the maid declared, “and she looks better than she has ever done in her life before, she does not as much as give one little look in her glass, but catches up that dog, who never ceases to growl at me from the foot of the bed, and kisses it, crumpling the chiffon on her corsage. *Mon Dieu!* these English!”

Through the dream and unreality of it all, was an aching, feverish wish in Dear's mind to get the thing done past all recall before—any one came back. She did not feel as if any ties except those irremediable ones, which death alone can part, could stand before the look of Oliver Meredith's eyes. She would like the rivets to be beaten hard of the chain that would bind her to Ralph, till gracious death came to set her free, so as to keep her from crawling to Oliver's feet, even while she knew him to be Mrs. Maddison's lover.

“If you take my advice,” my lady said to Ralph, “you will leave the girl alone. Don't go hanging about her, it will only disgust her.”

And Ralph followed her advice and kept away, though he protested that if Dear cared for him so little as that, he had no wish to marry her.

CHAPTER XVII.

CAUSE OR IMPEDIMENT.

“Should I love her as well if she
Had given her word to a thing so low?
Shall I love her as well if she
Can break her word, were it even for me?
I trust that it is not so.”—TENNYSON.

BEFORE poor, little Will Kemp had picked himself out of the gorse bush into which Oliver had so casually tossed him, the doctor had crossed the field and gone up the bit of lane that led to the village, and Duncan came puffing and blowing behind him.

The church lies at the other end of the village, and it was round that that all the inhabitants of Kingscombe had gathered; but, as Oliver turned out of the lane, a man came running, hatless and at post haste, down the street,

followed closely by another, and at the same moment the bells, which had been making such a noisy proclamation of the wedding, came to an abrupt silence.

The first man passed Dr. Meredith in his hurry without recognizing him, but the second stopped suddenly at sight of him, and shouted to the man in front as well as his breathless condition would allow, "Hi there! Stop, can't you now! 'Tain't no use fetching Dr. Carston, here's the doctor and Muster Duncan, as sure as life! Thank the Lord as you've come!" the man continued.

But Oliver did not wait to hear more, but pushed his way through the crowd round the churchyard gate to where an awe-stricken group surrounded Ralph's prostrate form, Ralph lying stiff and rigid and senseless, with open, fixed eyes glazed and staring, while by his side knelt Dear, with a scared, white face, trying to loosen his collar and raise his head from the turf on which it lay.

"For God's sake take her away!" Oliver

heard somebody saying—was it his own voice?—and then in answer to an indistinct murmur among the bystanders the same voice said, “Dead? Fools! it’s no such thing. It’s a fit. Let Duncan come to him, can’t you?”

Oliver could not clearly remember what happened then till he was walking towards the Manor by the side of a shutter carried by four of the Kingscombe men, and bearing that strangely-rigid form which was Ralph Madison, Dear’s bridegroom. Oliver had had no time to think or understand what it all meant, it seemed as if his mind shrank from grasping the situation, fought against it, struggled to put it away from him, occupied itself nervously with little details, directing the men, steadying the shutter, drilling the bearers into walking in step. He noticed all sorts of trifles, filling his mind with them as if to crowd out the dread reality, he occupied himself for some minutes with a green stain on Ralph’s coat and the wonder if it would brush off, and then got a certain amount of superficial amusement from noticing that the

shutter was one from the Bush, and had a score chalked on it, p's and q's in old-world fashion, and he wondered whose score it might be, and whether some of it might be rubbed off in the journey.

He was conscious, as the sad procession turned off along the footpath through the park, that a carriage passed behind them, a carriage with white favors on the horses' heads. He knew that my lady was in it, from the undisciplined eyes of two of the bearers looking round, and one of them, with inbred respect for "the quality," making an ineffectual effort to touch his hat. And he felt that Dear was with her, though he would not let his sensations form themselves into thoughts.

He was conscious too of her presence as they carried Ralph in through the hall and up the staircase. There were others there too, no doubt Mrs. Maddison among them, but of her he had no thought or consciousness just then, though she drew back as he passed her, with the feeling that his accusing eye was seeking her.

I do not think any of them rightly knew how that strange long day went by ; perhaps it seemed the longest to the two who sat in the library and heard the movements in the room up-stairs, or listened to the silence up there, till imaginary noises sounded in their ears, and the fall of a cinder on the hearth made them jump like the report of a gun.

Dear sat in the window perfectly still, looking out at the September day which had clouded to soft gloom. She had tried to follow when they carried Ralph up-stairs, but had been detained, and somewhat sharply told that it was better to leave him to Duncan, who knew how to treat him, and she had passively obeyed.

My lady sat by the fire holding up a novel before her face, that same novel that Dear had been reading to Ralph, but the plot or style mattered as little to the reader now as it had done then, though she might have been learning that mawkish conversation by heart, so long did she hold it before her eyes without turning the page.

The only incident that interrupted the deadly quiet of that afternoon was the arrival of Dan, who had been tied up since the morning, and, the moment he was set free, went straight as an arrow from a bow to the Manor, and made his presence known with voice and nails outside the door. Dan never scratched in vain at any door at the vicarage; even the Vicar would get up from his sermon and let him in; and Patty, at a critical moment in cooking, would turn with perhaps a "Drat that dog!" in response to his somewhat peremptory summons.

So Dear rose and went to the door, and knowing what boisterous delight would be shown at sight of her, she turned to my lady, absorbed in her novel by the fire, and said, "I will go into the garden. Please let me know if I am wanted."

Perhaps from the room above the library some one might have seen the slight girlish figure going down the terrace steps, with Dan in most inappropriate and uproarious spirits, curvetting and dancing about her, flying round in

the air and making little pretence dashes at her hands and dress. And perhaps this spectator of Dan's gambols was only waiting for Dear to go out to come down-stairs, for a minute or two later the library door opened and Oliver Meredith came in, and Mrs. Maddison let the novel fall out of her cold hand and felt that the moment of explanation had come. I believe that in that moment if Mrs. Maddison had had it in her power to recall the past three weeks, she would gladly have done so. There is a moment with every criminal when he would give the world to retrieve what he has done, but it mostly comes too late, when there is nothing more to be done than to cast down the pieces of silver in the temple and depart and hang himself.

"How is he?" she asked faintly. There was something in the look of Oliver's face, quiet and self-controlled as it was, that put to flight all the arguments she had been calling to her aid as she sat holding the novel before her face.

"Very ill," he answered; "he has been terribly convulsed all the afternoon, far worse, Duncan

says, than he has ever seen him before. He is quieter now, but I have promised to go back soon. I do not know if it would be any use to have further medical advice, for there is, unfortunately, so little to be done in these cases of epilepsy ; but there is Dr. Carston at Cheriton, or we might telegraph to his doctor in London who has treated him before—”

“No, no ;” she interrupted eagerly ; “I have every confidence in your treatment.”

He turned away impatiently.

“If he recovers—” he began, but she broke in again, “You are trying to frighten me ; it is cruel, cruel of you ! He is not so bad as that. He will recover as he has before. He has often had these fits and got over them. It is cruel to frighten me like this, you forget that I am his mother.”

“No,” Oliver said, “I wish I could forget that you, his mother, will be responsible for his death if he dies in one of these fits, as is more than likely ; responsible too if he survives, shattered in mind and body, which will be worse even than death.”

“Don’t!” she sobbed, “don’t! How am I responsible?”

“Ralph was not well Duncan said before he left, and he was unwilling to go but you urged his doing so. The only way of averting these fits, experience has shown, is by quiet, and avoiding all agitation, and these three weeks must have been full of excitement and agitation for him.”

“How could I help it? His heart was set on marrying this girl.” (Ah! she could sting him back, he winced at the mention of her!)

“Was it?” he said; “then I was strangely mistaken in him. He was a good, young fellow, honest and right feeling, though he was not so strong-minded as some, and it was not long before I went away that he was talking of marriage and saying that a man with his weak health (poor fellow!) ought not to think of it, and I was glad to feel that he thought so honorably about it. I don’t blame him in the matter.”

“But you do me.”

Just then Dear passed along the terrace outside, a small, drooping, white figure, pacing slowly along, with Dan, who had got over his first exuberant joy at finding his mistress, and to whom some of her unhappiness had communicated itself, following her in much depression.

“Blame you?” he said. “Do you realise what you have done in letting—but it must have been more than that, in urging that poor girl to marry your son, when you knew him to be subject to these fits, every one of which weakened his mind and body.”

“She did it with her eyes open ; she knew he was an invalid.”

“Did she know how? It was always kept a profound secret. Duncan says that not even Mrs. Lynch or the servants in the house really knew what was the matter with him.”

“She was fond of Ralph. And besides, innocent as she seems, she was sharp enough to see the advantages to be gained. It appears that her father is in money difficulties, and Ralph is

going to send that brother of hers to Cambridge—”

“And that was the bribe, was it? Oh, poor little girl! if only I had been here! if only I had been here!”

“Yes that is the root of all this righteous indignation!” Mrs. Maddison’s temper was getting the better of her now. “Why don’t you speak the truth? You loved this girl yourself, and that is why you are so fierce with me for not having prevented the marriage. How was I to know that you loved the girl?”

She had stung him now to the very quick, and she quailed before his eyes as he turned to her. He caught his breath before he spoke, as if half-choked by his emotion.

“Yes,” he said, “I will speak the truth. I loved Dear Hume better than my life itself—I love her now. I could almost thank you for giving me an opportunity of saying it even to you just once before I lock it out of sight for ever, for I can never put it away from me

though it is love for another man's wife, though it would be an insult to speak of it to her. Yes, I love her. Oh, my God! I love her."

He had sunk into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

Surely Mrs. Maddison was punished, for as much as in her nature lay, she loved this man, and the very means she had used to bring him nearer to her, had set them hopelessly apart, worlds apart, as far apart as heaven is from hell.

It was getting dusk in the library, and outside on the terrace a damp fog was gathering, where passed and re-passed the sad, little, white figure like a ghost, a ghost of warm July days and roses and sunshine and love and hope.

A movement in the room above roused Oliver and he got up.

"You had better tell her," he said, "to go home to her father. If Ralph is better, or—worse, she shall be sent for, but at present she can do no good, and she must not see him as he looks now."

And then with sudden increase of haste he went, for, as he spoke, Dear was coming towards the house and Clive was with her. In one of her paces on the terrace she had become conscious of some one standing watching her from the rose garden, damp and sodden and dreary now, out of all recognition of the radiance and color and perfume of June. Dan also perceived the newcomer, and pricked his ears and then wagged his tail in greeting of a friend.

“Clive,” Dear said ; “Clive, is it you ?”

And then he came forward hesitatingly.

“I oughtn’t to come bothering you, Dear, and I wouldn’t have come into the house if I hadn’t seen you out here, and I wasn’t sure for a minute if it was you till I saw Dan. Oh, Dear, I’m so awfully sorry ! Of course you’re quite taken up with poor Ralph’s illness, and I know you couldn’t leave him to come home, even for ten minutes. But father is so strange. I think I’ve got frightened and so has Patty. He seems to have forgotten all about the wedding, and he

wouldn't have tea till you came in, and he keeps going to the window to see if you are coming. He is standing there now, Dear, looking out—and I can't bear it. I've told him ever so many times that you are married and won't come back just yet, and he says, 'Yes, yes, of course! of course! to be sure,' and sits down again. But in a minute he has forgotten and goes to the window again, saying, 'She will soon be in. What can be keeping her?'"

"I will come," Dear said. "I am not wanted here."

And then she went quickly towards the house, and Oliver seeing her coming, retreated to Ralph's room.

"Can you tell me," she asked timidly of the motionless figure with averted face that still sat in the library, "how Ralph is now? and if I can be of any help up in his room?"

The time of tenderness and caressing between these two seemed years ago, an impossible state of affairs that could never be renewed. What in other circumstances must have brought them

together, clinging close, heart to heart, in a common sorrow, agonized mother, forlorn young wife, had set these two far apart, beyond even outward appearance of sympathy and love.

Mrs. Maddison did not turn her head, and her voice sounded thin and hard.

“I have just heard,” she said, “that he is no better, and perfect quiet is imperative. I am going to my room, and if you would prefer to return home, I will give orders that you shall be sent for directly there is any change.”

“I shall be glad to go to my father,” Dear answered; “but can I do nothing for you?” she added hesitatingly.

There was something so lonely in the look of that stiffly-turned-away figure which, in spite of its elegant dress, in spite of the soft firelight which deals tenderly with the marks of age, looked old and desolate, that the girl, sad and sorehearted as she was herself, could not bear to go without some kind word, and she made a step nearer, but was at once repelled by the frosty answer—

“For me? Thanks, no, Clarisse will attend to me.”

And Dear turned away chilled and repulsed.

In the hall Duncan was waiting for her—kind, fussy old Duncan, with his face an odd mixture of conflicting emotions, anxiety, pity and indignation.

“Run home, Missy, there’s a good, little girl. Oh, bless my stars! I don’t know what I’m saying. But it’s not a bit of good your stopping here. He’s no better, nor won’t be just yet. You shall be the first to know if—when he’s better. There! I can’t trust myself to speak of this day’s work, but if I know you’re safe at home, I’ll not feel quite so much like murdering somebody.”

And the old man wrapped a shawl round her with trembling hands, and went off using, I am afraid, strong language as he went.

“Run on, Clive; run on as fast as you can and tell him I’m coming.”

But Dear was not far behind, and while Clive was reassuring the sad, old face watching at the

window, with dim eyes peering out into the mist and darkness, she ran up into her little bedroom, plain and shabby, but dear to her from many associations of sweet, simple girlhood. There stood the modest, little trunk containing the hasty trousseau ("All that can be arranged afterwards," Mrs. Maddison had said), and the room still bore the traces of that wedding toilette over which Mdlle. Clarisse had presided.

There was a wonderful feeling of relief in being back there, and in taking off the white dress, limp and clinging from the damp mist, and in pulling out hairpins and shaking down curls and rolls and plaits, and twisting her hair into the old, comfortable coil, and in putting on the shabby, old dress, thrown contemptuously down at the foot of the bed as a garment never likely to be worn again by the young mistress of Kingscombe Manor.

She hesitated for a moment over the wedding-ring, and half drew it off the finger where it looked so new and shining and unnatural, but

put it back with a sigh and went down-stairs, just the same Dear that had come in hundreds of times before, to where the old father sat awaiting her.

“Here I am, father,” she said. “Will you come and have tea?”

CHAPTER XVIII.

PARTING.

“ Comfort her, comfort her, all things good,
While I am over the sea ;
Let me and my passionate love go by,
But speak to her all things holy and high
Whatever happen to me.” —TENNYSON.

A WEEK has passed since that ill-fated wedding-day, and still Ralph Maddison lies in that room at the Manor, and still Dear is with her father at home, waiting for the summons which they have promised to send her if Ralph is better or worse ; better, if he recovers consciousness and asks for her ; worse, if the death they had spoken of in the marriage service as the only means of parting them, had set them free again so soon.

It never occurred to her mind that there

could be any other alternative, that it was possible for him not to be better and yet not to die, but to live on with his mind hopelessly enfeebled, with memory and sense gone; but this terrible prospect for poor Ralph Maddison became more and more clear and certain as the days went on, to those who watched by his bedside. Other medical advice was called in; Dr. Carston from Cheriton came with all the self-importance of a country town doctor; and a specialist from London, at a fabulous fee, who could do nothing but confirm Dr. Meredith's gloomy forebodings.

It was when this great man was gone that Oliver Meredith came down and asked to see Mrs. Maddison. They had met occasionally since he had confessed his love for Dear to her, but their interviews had been of a merely formal character—bulletins of Ralph's state, or inquiries as to her wishes about further advice.

The London doctor had been much impressed by Mrs. Maddison, and the dignified

self-control with which she received the verdict, which must have been infinitely painful to any mother's heart, and this an only son, and heir to such a fine estate, and such a good-looking young fellow as he must have been. The doctor was used to many sad things in the course of his professional experience, but this seemed one of the most deplorable, and, perhaps, after the pity in his kind eyes, Oliver's may have seemed hard and cruel as he came into the room, and waited without a word while she pressed her cobweb handkerchief to her eyes and sobbed—

“My poor boy! My poor Ralph!”

I do not think he gave her credit for the suffering she really felt. If only she had been a little less elegant in her grief—if she had dabbed her eyes less carefully and sobbed less musically—he might have believed in her and gone on, perhaps, to pity her; and pity, we know, is akin to love; but the small affectations he detected blinded his eyes to the real grief that was mixed with them, and he waited with

a perfectly unmoved face till she had recovered her composure.

“Why did you wish to see me?” she asked at last.

“I wanted to know your programme,” he answered.

“What do you mean?”

“I want to know what you propose to do?”

“About what?”

“About Ralph and—his wife?”

“It is most deplorable,” she said. “I know now that the marriage was most ill-advised, and I am sincerely sorry for the poor girl, and I will do all in my power to alleviate her position. Nothing that money can do shall be spared to make it easier for her. Of course there will be Duncan. I am sure he will not leave him, and if other attendants are needed they can easily be got. She will have everything just as she likes here; I shall not interfere in any way. Oh, Oliver,” she interrupted herself, for his silence made her think he was listening with approval, “I am not so bad as

you think me. I will do anything in my power in the way of reparation to regain your good opinion."

"Excuse me," he said, and his voice was hard, and seemed to cut like a knife; "excuse me, let us keep to the point. If I understand you rightly, you mean to leave your son here with his wife. I don't think you have seen him, have you? I don't think you quite realise the state he is in, and, unhappily, likely to continue in?"

"There will be Duncan," she said.

"No, there will not be Duncan. I have been talking to him. He used stronger language than I should care to repeat in speaking of what has been done, and he declares that if this mockery of a marriage is to hold good, and that poor girl's young life is to be sacrificed to the poor, imbecile creature that Ralph—"

"Don't! for pity's sake, don't!"

It was real now; there was no pretence or elegance about her now, and he felt at once like a brute.

“I do not mean to be unnecessarily hard,” he said; “but Duncan declares he will not remain a day with Ralph under such circumstances.”

“But what can be done?”

“I have thought of a plan,” he said, “and it is this. You know I have accepted an appointment at Berlin which will keep me there for two years, and perhaps longer. If you approve, I will take Ralph with me. Duncan will go too, and I need not assure you that every care and attention shall be given to poor Ralph.”

Mrs. Maddison’s lips tightened to a hard little smile. “A charming plan, Dr. Meredith, I must say! and Mrs. Ralph will, no doubt, share all the care and attention that you will lavish on her husband.”

“Hush!” he said. “I will not endure any insolence to her. It is only for her sake I am offering to do what will tie and hamper me in every way. I will only do it on condition that she does not even know where we are, that it

shall be put out of her power ever to find us out, lest in some sudden mistaken sense of duty or self-sacrifice she should follow Ralph."

"And the girl?"

"Mrs. Maddison will remain with her father and, mind you! every part of the bargain must be carried out to the letter. Ample means must be provided for Clive's career at Cambridge, plenty to relieve any money difficulties her father may have, sufficient to support her dignity in the eyes of the people here; for there must be no mistake about it, she must be recognized as Mrs. Maddison, your son's wife, before all the world. The people here are all too fond of her to think any harm of her for a moment, but others might question and make a talk about her."

"What can we say about it?"

He was silent a minute, thinking of clear eyes that looked so straight and earnestly at you as if untruth were impossible, prevarication and deceit undreamt of. With Dear there was no question what to say on any subject.

“I think it might be safest in this case to speak the truth,” he said.

“But will she agree to it?”

“Ah! that I cannot tell.

Would she feel bound, he asked himself, by that marriage bond to have and to hold that poor imbecile creature, that a few days ago had been kindly, warm-hearted Ralph Maddison—never very strong-minded or quick-witted, but not far below the average in intelligence and sense; now, in intervals of the fits, playing childishly with his fingers, and whimpering at a word from Duncan, or laughing in meaningless, unreasonable mirth. Perhaps to Dear it would seem all the more imperative to keep that marriage vow, because the bright alternatives had all been done away at one stroke, and it was only for worse and not for better; for poorer, not for richer; in sickness, not in health, that she was to love, cherish, and obey Ralph Maddison till death did them part.

While he thought, Mrs. Maddison too was deeply considering the plan Oliver had pro-

posed. If Dear would agree to stop with her father, and all intercourse between her and Oliver were cut off entirely, while, on Ralph's account, correspondence must be frequent between herself and Oliver, and occasional personal interviews necessary, who could tell but what the unaccountable fascination the girl had over him might die away from force of distance and hopelessness, and his indignation against herself die away with it, and the old feeling return?

But Dear, she felt sure, would never consent, and Mrs. Maddison did not know what arguments she could bring forward to separate the two whom she had so lately moved heaven and earth to bring together.

"You must tell her what is proposed," she said. "See, there she is."

For just then Dear came up the terrace steps, just as in the old golden summer days she used to do (but oh! the difference); and now, as then, Oliver went out to meet her.

It was the first time they had met face to face since they parted under the portico, and he drove

away with that strange feeling of apprehension and disquiet in his heart which after events had so fully justified. He knew that Mrs. Maddison was watching the meeting lynx-eyed from the library. What did it matter? The whole world might look on if it liked. It was just here he had first seen her that first evening at Kingscombe, when, half dozing, half thinking, he had been roused by Ralph's voice, and had seen Dear's eyes, soft and radiant, looking down at him from the steps above, and now he was come to urge on her a plan that would part them for ever.

Mrs. Maddison could see that they had not even shaken hands when they met. How could he trust himself to take that hand he had held that afternoon in the orchard? She could see that they did not stand near together as they talked. How could he have helped catching her in his arms unless that couple of feet of paving-stone and gravel had separated them? Mrs. Maddison noticed that he only once or twice turned and looked at Dear. How could

he have controlled the burning words of love for her if their eyes had met often ?

He told her very gently what the London doctor had said about Ralph, and how his own medical experience, and that of Dr. Carston, forced them to coincide in the sad belief that though he might recover bodily strength to some degree, his mind would never recover the shock of those violent fits, and most likely would weaken still more as time went on.

She listened quite quietly, with great mournful eyes fixed on the dim blue distance, and a tender sadness on her lips. The bitter indignation seemed to die out when he suffered himself to look at her, and the burning wish to punish the author of all the trouble, and in their stead was only pity and the longing wish to do all he could to help and alleviate. "Bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and evil-speaking with all malice" seemed to be put away by this strong, pure, human love of his as they are by the Divine, and kindness, tender-heartedness and forgiveness to take their place.

“Has he asked for me?” she said.

“No; and I think it is doubtful if he recognizes either of us, though Duncan, good soul! likes to think he knows him and misses him when he leaves the bedside, and I wish I could think so too.”

“I do not know what to do,” Dear said, and for the first time there was a pitiful, little shake in her voice, and a quiver in the quiet, little face.

“I am sure I ought to be with Ralph, nursing and caring for him, but my father seems to want me so much, I don’t think I could leave him. I know I ought to have thought of this before. It was very wrong of me, but” (this very softly) “I think I hardly knew what I was doing.”

Then for a moment their eyes met, and it seemed as if the passionate pity in his heart must overcome his self control.

“Dear,” he said. It was the same voice that had spoken a month ago in the orchard; the intervening weeks of separation and bitter trouble had vanished, and the long-delayed

words rushed tumultuously to his lips. But it was only for a second, and then the hand he had stretched out to her, fell to his side, the words died on his lips, and Mrs. Maddison, from the library window, saw nothing but a sudden movement, interrupting for a moment the calm of an apparently very unemotional conversation, which immediately resumed its quiet course, and was no more disturbed till they parted, ten minutes later, without even shaking hands, without any tender last word, without even a look back at one another as Dear went down the terrace steps and Oliver came into the house.

“I did not know,” she had said, in answer to that one word. “I did not know.”

And this was all the explanation they ever had, but somehow in years to come, Oliver found much comfort from those words. “I did not know.” They might, of course, have meant that she did not know of Ralph’s tendency, or that she did not know how impossible it would be to leave her father, but he knew that it

meant, "I did not know you loved me," and he found comfort in them.

That word of his too, or perhaps the tone of it, had swept away from Dear's mind all belief in the lie Mrs. Maddison had spoken; she never thought again after that that it was possible that he and my lady could ever be more to one another than friends, even if that. So the explanation, short as it was, was more satisfactory than many long-winded, diffuse explanations, which as often as not only make things worse, and widen the breach they are meant to close.

He told her of the plan that was proposed for Ralph to go abroad under his care, putting entirely out of sight any sacrifice on his own part in the matter.

"You are very necessary to your father," he said; "but for poor Ralph, I think if you know that he is tenderly cared for and watched over, as I need not assure you he will be, I do not think you need be unhappy or feel that you are not doing your duty. You will receive reports

of his state at regular intervals, and if at any time there is any improvement or hope of it, you should know at once. Will you trust me?"

"Yes," she said, "I will trust you. May I see him once before he goes?"

"If you wish it very much," he answered gently; "but if you will take my advice and trust me in this too, I think you had better not. Think of him still as the frank, pleasant, bright-faced, young fellow you have known him. Do you know that to me Ralph seems to have gone as entirely as the summer and the sunshine and the beauty of everything. There is no good to be gained by having that memory of him deformed and defaced by the sight of him as he is now. Poor fellow, he is terribly changed."

And in this again Dear trusted Oliver Meredith, and, in the quiet years that followed, when she thought of or prayed for her young husband, it was with the memory of a boyish bright face, and eyes full of affection, and smiling lips ready always with frank pleasant words—not always very wise, but kind and cheery; and only

Oliver and Duncan really knew the sad reality of imbecility and weakness, the body, the dust of the earth, without the living soul, the breath of life; the poor human coin from which the Divine image had been obliterated. Surely in all the perplexities of this "unintelligible world" this is one of the most mysterious, when the reason returns to God who gave it.

CHAPTER XIX.

MEETING.

“O that ’twere possible
After long grief and pain,
To find the arms of my true love
Round me once again.”—TENNYSON.

TEN years is a long time out of any one’s life, and yet that early spring day, when Oliver Meredith came over the hill from Cheriton and stood once more looking down on Kingscombe, the ten years seemed but a few days, or rather, perhaps, a few months, for it was damp misty autumn when he parted from Dear and a few days later travelled away from Kingscombe, and now it was spring, and in between had lain dark winter months, gloomy and sunless and cold. Winter months are apt to seem long, are they not, with their monotonous days of short grudg-

ing daylight, and the long, long darkness? There had plainly been snow in those winter months, for Oliver Meredith's hair was nearly white, and his eyes had a tired look as from long watching and close study and little sunshine. April sunshine is not as a rule very brilliant, but to-day it seemed to dazzle and fret his eyes, and he had lost that power, which had developed so largely in Dear's company, of noticing little things that were beautiful and sweet in nature; he passed unnoticed the tufts of sweet pale primroses in the banks, the silver clear song of a wren was unheeded; he did not look at the blue shadows under the elms made by the blue-bells growing so thickly, or at the little thick-legged clumsy lambs, leaping clear off the ground in their light-hearted gambols; his foot kicked against a tasselled cowslip, and he never glanced down at its freckles, or up at the lark that sprang from the grass before him; he did not appreciate the soft elasticity of the turf he trod on, or the infinite variety of sweet scents of growth and blossom that were in the balmy spring air.

He had grown so used to only taking exercise in a perfunctory manner, a constitutional of so many miles, generally alone, when his mind was still full of his scientific studies, and he was hardly conscious of outside things, so oblivious of them, indeed, that he would pass acquaintances unnoticed, or even run up against other pedestrians who did not get out of his way. And, if he walked in company, he had few friends^s but scientific ones, and so the talk fell into the same groove, and it did not much matter whether the body were walking on a straight dull country road, or along the streets of a town, or in the midst of beautiful scenery.

As he came in sight of Kingscombe to-day he became suddenly conscious of this dullness and want of perception in himself, and he stopped and passed his hands over his eyes, as though there were an actual film that obscured the fairness and brightness of the world. Perhaps there had been, if not physical, at any rate mental, for when he looked again the beauty of it all seemed to come with a rush into his heart,

with a fullness that seemed to choke him and take away his breath.

The great generous stretch of sky, softly blue with masses of fleecy white cloud tossed about on it, throwing shadows on the broad rich-colored ploughed fields and on the meadows recovering from their winter brownness, and on one or two patches of some early rye-grass of incredibly vivid green. Down along the river the willows were coral red, with the sap rising in their branches, and among the beautiful indigo-blue depths of the leafless woods the nut-bushes' green tassels made a show even from this distance, and here and there the sturdy obstinate oaks kept their last year's leaves and made a patch of rich russet. A week or two later a soft green veil would be cast over the elm trees down below, but now at this distance they looked bare, and the cottages in Kingscombe showed more plainly from the hill now there was no foliage to hide them. He recognized all the old familiar landmarks ; it was pleasant to find how few he had forgotten. There was never a

day in all these ten years that he had not allowed himself a few minutes to go back and recall it all, little details insignificant and trifling, but filling in the background in the picture of the woman he loved. He liked to think that he could detect—so well had he got it all by heart—that the ivy had grown more thickly over the church, that a fresh thatch had been put here and tiles there, and a little new shed had been added at the side of the forge.

It was just here he had stood when the sound of the wedding-bells had suddenly struck upon his ear and roused no apprehension of the direful event. There below was the triangular piece of ground where the little boy, scaring the birds, had been the first to give him the overwhelming news. How often had that ground been ploughed and sowed and reaped since then? That little boy, if he still lived, must be a grown-up man now, married perhaps himself with all that merry clanging of bells, which had seemed so exhilarating to him then. If he still lived! that sent a sudden pang through Oliver's heart.

What if one of those bells that rang out so merrily then, should toll now the heavy message of death? Death is so near each one of us, why should not his hand fall on one as well as on another?

Oliver had heard nothing directly of Dear for ten years; indirectly he had heard that she was still at Kingscombe, at any rate she was there a month ago, when poor Ralph Maddison died or rather ceased to die, for all those sad years had been slow death of mind and body. It had been debated whether the poor worn-out body should be brought home and laid by his father in Kingscombe churchyard, but Lady Trevor decided that he should be laid in the English cemetery at Florence, where he died. No doubt her decision was very sensible, for what does it really matter where the poor dust mingles with its kind? and Oliver agreed in the good sense of the arrangement, and said not a word of his own feeling that Ralph—I mean the old, boyish Ralph, who went away with the summer and the sunshine, ten years before,

and who seemed to come back directly the last painful breath was drawn—Ralph would have liked to be laid in the little churchyard under the hill at Kingscombe, where he had been so happy, with Dear, whom he had loved in his simple, boyish way, and whom he never of his own free will would have injured, to stand by his grave, and the villagers gathered round in respectful sorrow for the poor, young master. But Lady Trevor decided otherwise, and the funeral had to take place too quickly to allow of either her or Dear coming; so Oliver and Duncan were the only friends present, as they had been through all the weakness and suffering of the past ten years.

Mrs. Maddison had married Sir John Trevor, five years before. Report said she had not a very happy life with the baronet, who was given to strong waters and coarse language, and with whom it was a favorite joke, my lady's superiority to himself in the matter of age. Any small vanity she had on this point was fetched effectually out of her before they had been

married a twelvemonth, and now Lady Trevor appears as a middle-aged woman, and to my mind, and to Oliver's too, looks far better and more dignified than in the days of her assumed girliness.

Oliver had seen from time to time notices of Clive's successes, proving that that part of the bargain had been honestly kept, and he had met Cambridge men who had told him how the awkward, discontented boy had changed, like the ugly duck, which developed into the beautiful white swan, spreading its wings in the sunshine of opportunity. And in one of the notices of Clive, I think it was when he was senior wrangler, he had been spoken of as the son of the late Rev. Michael Hume, so Oliver knew that the old man had gone to rejoin his wife.

"He will have such a little way to go," Dear had said once, talking of the time when her father would leave her, and the old hackneyed phrase of consolation, "It is his gain, though it is our loss," seemed to have a reality in it, which it does not always bear.

But oh ! the loss ! It was almost more than Oliver could endure to think of, when before his mind's eye came the memory of the old gray head resting against the girl's arm, and the love in Dear's face as she looked down at it.

He knew quite well that, such being the case Dear would no longer be at the vicarage, that another vicar was at Kingscombe, another voice in the little church, another figure going in and out among the cottagers, and ministering to their spiritual wants ; and yet it gave him as great a shock, as if indeed the knell had tolled out as he stood listening on the hill, when he drew near the vicarage, to see a substantial clerical form come out of the well-remembered little gate, a country parson of the period, athletic and muscular, with a beard and a broad brimmed hat, and it seemed downright profanation, when two laughing girls, tennis racquet in hand, looked over the garden hedge and called out some girlish nonsense to their father, checked by the unusual sight of a strange gentleman passing up the village street, who, no doubt

glared at them in a manner unusual and uncalled for.

He passed on, hardly knowing why, to the church. In the churchyard there were many fresh graves since he last stood there, and on one green mound, without even a headstone to mark the place, was a dainty fresh wreath of primroses, looking as if it had just been laid there. There was no need to ask whose handiwork it was, for each tender flower-stalk and crinkled leaf was in damp moss.

“That be the ould parson’s grave,” a cracked old voice quavered at his elbow. “You be a stranger in these parts, I take it, and maybe you ain’t heerd tell of Parson Hume. He were a man, sure-lie.”

It was old Grimby the sexton, and he was peering up at Oliver with his bleared, old eyes, rheumy with age, as if he half recognized the face.

“Not as I’d say nothing agin the new parson, as is all very well in his way, but he ain’t the old one nor nothing like. I mind un when he first come with Master Clive, he as has done great

things, folks say, up to College, and were only a babby then, and Miss Dear—begging her pardon, Mrs. Maddison, the young lady, you know, sir, maybe you've a-heerd tell of her marrying the young Squire—”

“ Yes, yes,” Oliver interrupted the garrulous, old tongue. “ Where is she now ? ”

“ Why at the Manor, for sure. She moved up there when the ould parson went, and there she be now, with only just Patty to see to her since Mrs. Lynch were took off sudden with brongtyphus. Its terrible lonesome for her, sure-lie, except when Master Clive come down, and that's not often now, but she never seems mopish like some, bless her ! If you was minded to step that way, sir, 'tis a fine old place, and I'd come along and show you round, as there ain't no objection to parties seeing the place.”

But Oliver could not reduce his pace to suit the old man's hobbling progress, so they parted company, with a good many “ Thank ye kindly, sirs,” and touchings of the hat on the part of old Grimby, and an immediate making off to the

Bush to drink his health. And Oliver went on alone towards the Manor, across the park, the very way Ralph had been carried on his wedding day; but he turned aside when he reached the front entrance and went into the rose garden, the way little Dear had gone in her drab pelisse, on her first visit. On the rose branches he noticed the young buds, strong and vigorous, beginning to unfold into small tender leaves, telling of the coming June, and all the beauty and brightness of summer time.

On the terrace the anemones were dazzling to behold in the bright sun, scarlet and purple and white, with a background of golden jonquils, and there was a thrush singing its heart out on the balustrade by the steps where he had first seen Dear, a song of spring after winter, love after loneliness, praise after patience. He went on—what led him?—down the steps, through the kitchen garden, where the bees were humming round the great bushes of wall-flower, and neat lines of very youthful vegetables were becoming apparent across the brown mould.

A new strange gardener turned from his hoeing and stared at this calm intruder, who walked along the mossy path as if the whole place belonged to him.

At the white gate into the orchard an Alderney cow stood, as if on purpose to recall the day when, perhaps, its mother or grandmother was caressed by tender hands, but he pushed its gentle, greedy nose aside, and passed on into the orchard, where, on the twisted and lichen-covered branches, showed gray-green buds, with here and there a hint of pink to prepare poor, dull, wintry hearts for the glory of blossom that a few more days would bring.

She was there, a slight figure in black, standing by that very tree where they had sat ten years before, when Mrs. Maddison's coming had interrupted his words. Simple black, no heavy widows' weeds. She had taken off her hat, and as she stood with the sunlight on her soft hair, she looked as young as she had done when he saw her last, and when she turned at the sound of his step, it was the very same face, gentle and

fair and sweet, with the same great soft eyes that lit up at sight of him from their quiet sadness into great joy.

And then he had her hand in his, and all the trouble and weary waiting were at an end, and he could speak at last. And he said, "Dear."

THE END.



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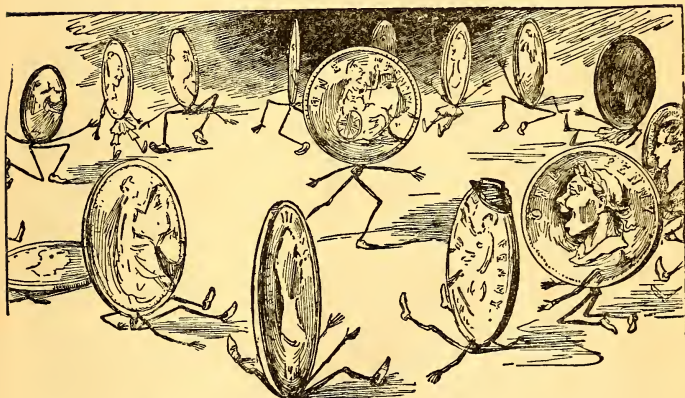
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