

MISS BLAKE  
OF MONKSHALTON













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OF

## MONKSHALTON.

BY

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And if I pray, the only prayer  
That moves my lips for me,  
Is, "Leave the heart that now I bear,  
And give me liberty."

E. BRONTË.







## MISS BLAKE OF MONKSHALTON.



### CHAPTER I.

**T**HE pavement was hot, the walls were hot, the iron railings were blistering with the heat. Dust was everywhere, covering everything, making the lilac bushes and trees in the garden of Portman Square look grey and parched, although it was still early summer. The Virginian creeper which climbs sadly over so many London houses, was hanging wearily over the hot balcony of No. —, Portman Square, throwing out thirsty tendrils in longing desire after that happy land of fresh air and cooling showers, which it could never reach, but of which it had heard

murmurs from the birds. A faint steamy odour, as of roasting and cooking, floated lazily up from area windows.

A dusty uninteresting world, full of sordid people and unsatisfied desires, thought Anne Blake, as she stood under the striped awning on the balcony, leaning on the creeper, and ruthlessly crushing its delicate stems with her round firm arms.

Behind the muslin curtains, inside the hot drawing-room, were Aunt Jane and Aunt Emma, who, with discreetly lowered voices, were discussing something concerning their niece; for though Anne could not hear their words, the tone of the low murmur was quite sufficient to make her aware of the drift of their talk, and also that on Aunt Jane's part it was, as usual, not favourable to herself.

"It's a wonder to me," Aunt Jane was saying, "where the child has got all her notions from; our dear father brought us up so wisely, he never let us have any new-fangled notions; what was



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good enough for him was good enough for us, he said, as you know quite well, Emma ; and if any of us wanted to do anything out of the way—which, I am thankful to say, I for one never did—he used to say that if we must make ourselves the laughing-stock of our neighbours, we must wait till he was gone, for as long as he lived he would be master in his own house.”

As Aunt Jane paused for breath and glanced triumphantly round the room, as if a once rebellious-minded, but now crushed audience were seated there, Aunt Emma gave a gentle sigh, and her knitting fell on to her lap. These reminiscences, which Jane was never tired of repeating, were full of pain to Emma, for she had thirsted after many forbidden things in her youth ; and though the state of constant repression in which she lived had not embittered her and made her hard and intolerant, as had been the case with Jane, it had nevertheless worn away her courage and faith, so that when twenty years ago their father died, and

with his death freedom had come, Emma found herself a middle-aged woman with a mind unable to grasp any definite purpose: even her visions seemed to have faded away, leaving only a vague yearning after some misty glow of unattainable sunlight. Of course these feelings were carefully concealed from Jane. Knowledge of the existence of this repressed and wasted energy in Emma had indeed no place in Jane's mind; the elder sister regarded the younger as a person, certainly possessing grace and refinement of character and both religious and sweet-natured, but exceedingly weak and unreliable, and, above all things, requiring a guiding hand. To do her justice, Miss Blake had no notion how that guiding hand worried Emma, for most of the more subtle feelings of life were mere "stuff and nonsense" to Jane.

Emma had always stood a good deal in awe of her sister, being ten years the younger of the two. She regarded Jane as a perfect standard of excellence and greatness, being convinced that her

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habit of fault-finding arose not only from a deficiency of personal knowledge of, and therefore sympathy with, the weaknesses to which ordinary mortals are prone, but also from a true desire to show them that higher path which she herself trod by nature. Unconsciously the strain of living with this unswerving pinnacle of excellence was wearing Emma's life and strength away. It was as if she felt the constant pressure of Jane's soul near her day by day, gazing even into her inmost depths: and this intangible contact, with which no words or looks were mingled, so powerfully gnawed into her being that she sometimes felt as if life itself were growing weaker and fainter. Sometimes, after an hour of silence, with a great effort she left the room, and the relief from cessation of bodily presence brought back the blood to her heart and brain; but, as time went on, the relief grew feebler and the horror stronger, till sometimes for days Jane seemed to be ever there, everywhere—in the street, at her elbow, all around her.

And still they loved each other. Emma did not know why Jane's presence unnerved her, nor Jane why Emma's air of submission irritated her and tinged her words with anger. The habit of years was so strong, that neither could imagine living without the other, and apart happiness would have seemed a feebler possibility to each. What could they do? Continue this murderous life together, or live stuntedly and apart? The ties we find most irksome are often our strongest motive for living if we could but know it.

"Why don't you answer me, Emma? You sigh as if I were saying something wrong; you really seem to take a pleasure in making me feel I've been unkind to that girl."

"Dear Jane, as if I don't always think you in the right!" which remark irritated Jane to the extent of producing an angry sniff, making Emma drop a stitch in her nervousness.

But what was there to say? In her heart of hearts Emma sided with Anne, but how to tell



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Jane that judiciously without making her angry Emma could not imagine. Much of the wasted energy of her monotonous life was centred in a deep love for her niece, who, fourteen years ago, when her parents died, had come to live with her aunts. Anne always found a warm though tactless ally in Aunt Emma.

“Why shouldn't the child be content to stay quietly here, instead of gadding about paying visits, I should like to know?”

This was a somewhat wide statement of Aunt Jane's, seeing that Anne was never allowed to pay visits, and if she had been allowed had few friends to visit, for the strict seclusion in which she was kept by Miss Blake—ten months of the year at their country house in North Lancashire and two months in Portman Square—necessarily narrowed the number of their acquaintance to a considerable extent. The “gadding about” here discussed was a request made by an old friend living in Bayswater, that Anne should be allowed to dine with her that

very evening, accompanied by her two aunts it is true, but to be left behind to spend a few days at her house, to enjoy some of the season's gaieties, of which the poor child had seldom more than a glimpse.

“What is it she complains of? She has good food, good clothing—I'm sure that last evening dress of white silk cost enough to satisfy any silly, discontented young woman—drives in the park every day, no cares, no responsibilities, what more can she want? What more did we ever want, and why should she ask for what we never asked?”

Another pause and another sigh from Emma, checked as it rose lest Jane should be annoyed by it.

“You see, Jane, every one isn't alike, and she hasn't your strength of purpose; duty cannot always be her ideal, she wants a little gaiety and brightness.”—“How I longed for pleasure at her age!” she added to herself.—“You see, she's only twenty, and I do really think she might pay this

little visit," she concluded somewhat incoherently, for her courage was rapidly oozing away after this unusually bold opposition on her part to Jane's opinions.

"And pray what's the good of it all? When the visit is paid, she'll only come back here more discontented than ever; once open the cage door you can't shut it again! Well, well, I suppose she must go, or I shall never hear the end of it; but I must say I never thought it becoming, myself, to want more than one could get," said Jane, in such a clear sharp tone that her last words reached Anne's ears as she stood on the hot balcony, gazing discontentedly down the dusty street.

"Just like Aunt Jane," she thought; "what a shame it is that I always have to stand alone like this with every one against me; for though dear Aunt Emma tries to take my part, she cannot hold out against Aunt Jane—no one can; I know that woman is slowly killing her! But what can I do? I don't know how to help her! If it goes on much

longer I shall become petrified, frozen up, or else I shall do something wicked and desperate. Oh, what must I do? how will it all end? Very soon Henry will bring in tea, and we shall all three eat, and drink, and think just the same as we do every day of our lives, when the clock strikes five. If only something would happen to break this horrible suffocating monotony! Just because Aunt Jane had a tyrannical old father, who never let her do what she liked, why should she revenge herself on me and Aunt Emma, and every one she comes near? Oh, dear me! if only I could marry some one, any one, it would be better than this life of slow torture. Aunt Emma is old, I do think it is different for her; but I am young, and I shall die and never have seen anything of this wonderful thrilling world!"

A bitter choking sob rose in her throat. She put up her hand and snapped off a young tendril of the creeper, which was waving softly in the heavy air, and crushed it in her hot hand. "If



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only I could crush Aunt Jane so," she thought. She threw the leaves away, and they sank into the dust in the street. Within, a large bluebottle was lazily buzzing and thumping against the ceiling, and Emma's fingers were growing hot and tremulous over her knitting. She hated knitting and all kinds of sewing or work, but it irritated Jane to see her idle, she felt sure, so work she must: little knowing that Jane partly suspected her motive, and at the sight of her heated efforts always experienced a spasm of exasperation flavoured with remorse—the flavouring unfortunately lending a sharper tone to her voice. It is a sad pity that remorse generally makes people disagreeable.

A door decorously closing downstairs, heavy footsteps and a subdued rattle of tea-cups announced Henry's approach with tea. Anne appeared at the window with smuts from the creeper clinging to her arms, and a look of sullen indifference on her face.

"Shall I pour out the tea for you, Jane?" said

Emma, in a deprecatory voice ; “ let me, it is so hot and you have been so busy all day, you must be tired.”

This constant desire on Emma's part to save Jane, virtuous active Jane, from all extra trouble and fatigue, was another cause of friction between the sisters. Emma was filled with a never-ending craving to do something for another human being—any one ; if the washerwoman had been there instead of Jane the desire would have been just as strong, indeed perhaps stronger, for a stranger sometimes awakens the feeling of abstract love for humanity in our soul more keenly than kith and kin can do. All the expression which these waves of love in Emma's helpless soul could find, beyond giving away blankets and coals to the poor people at Monkshilton, was in doing little menial offices for Jane. Besides, it was only right, she thought, that the menial side of their life should be done by her, the feebler partner, for Jane, she loved to think, represented the better part.

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Jane was always irritated at this assumption of fatigue on her part ; to admit she felt tired was ignoble, therefore, however prostrate she might feel, Emma's words invariably acted like a sudden stimulant, stringing her up to the most energetic action. Her better feelings, too, made her dislike to see Emma assume this humble rôle ; it was unfair to Emma, she felt, as well as humiliating to herself.

“Certainly not, thank you, Emma, I am not in the least tired ; why should I be ? and even if I were, why should you fatigue yourself with doing my duties for me ?” She would have indeed considered it most improper to allow the younger sister to pour out tea, even on the most private occasion.

“But, my dear Anne,” she continued, “how is it you are so hot and flushed ? Pray remember the dinner-party to which you are going to-night. If there is one thing I dislike to see, it is a young lady looking hot and sunburnt like a milkmaid.”

“What will it matter how I look to-night? No one will care, no one will look at me or think about me. I know exactly what it will all be like. Sir James will be there, and will take you in, Aunt Jane, or else Mr. Taylor will, and old Forbes Aunt Emma, and ”——

“And how often must I beg of you not to call Colonel Forbes ‘old Forbes’? I really wish you had more delicacy of feeling and language.”

But Anne for once was not to be checked, and with her mouth full of toast, continued eagerly, “And I shall go in with young Forbes, Bernard—at least *you* call him young, *I* call him middle-aged—I know you want me to marry him, Aunt Jane.”

“My dear,” exclaimed Emma, perfectly aghast at Anne’s boldness and indecorum—Jane was speechless—“how can you speak so to your Aunt Jane? you know she doesn’t approve of such things at all; she doesn’t think them nice, and of course I do not either;” she loyally added, her agitation causing confusion in her mind as to what



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exactly were the things which Jane did not consider nice. Anne eagerly took advantage of this.

“Do you mean, Aunt Emma, that you and Aunt Jane don’t approve of people marrying? Of course I think it’s generally a great mistake; but then it’s better than nothing—better than droning away at home all your life, for a married woman can at least do as she likes. I certainly mean to marry, and I shall have everything my own way.” But here Jane’s wrath was poured out on Anne’s head in a torrent of stern rebuke which reduced even that bold young lady to a state of quiet limpness, and increased still more Emma’s nervous depression.

Silence came at last, and the bluebottle could again make his melancholy thumping and buzzing audible. Outside in the misty sunshine carriages rolled past, the cheerful ring of the horses’ hoofs and the occasional jingle of bells on their necks making the heavy silence within the stately drawing-room seem more and more unbearable to

poor Anne. A coach drove past, gaily blowing its horn, a brilliant type of happiness and dissipation. It was too much ; she hastily took up a book, and, putting her fingers in her ears to drown all these unendurably pleasant sounds, began to read diligently.

But it was useless ; she could not understand anything she read, for the thought of Aunt Jane and her tyranny, her continual snubbing and putting down of every one round her, filled and overflowed her mind.

She put the book down and listened again to the carriages.

“If Aunt Jane died how happy we two, Aunt Emma and I, should be,” was the thought which gradually shaped itself in her brain with startling distinctness. It was an old thought, and she was used to it, but somehow to-day the buzzing of the fly and the hot heavy air outside made it take stronger and more definite shape than usual. As she looked at the spindle-legged chairs, at the tall

cabinets with glass doors full of precious china, at the old-fashioned engravings on the walls, she seemed to see on everything the words, "if only *she* would die." She dared not meet Jane's eye at last, for she felt sure the dreadful words must be written on her face and Jane would surely see them. She got up, and sat down close to the open window, but still the thought followed her, and even the bluebottle seemed to be humming it. Jane must know what he was saying, she must know why she was so restless. She could bear it no longer; at all costs she must break this dreadful spell which was binding her, and pushing back her chair, she rushed to the door and upstairs to her room, hearing, as she did so, a shocked chorus of exclamations on the impropriety of such rapidity of movement in a well-brought-up young lady.

As she ran up the staircase a gloom seemed to follow her and close round her, and her ears were full of the sound of the words, "Death—Aunt Jane's death." She flung her window open, and

sat looking at the wide vista of roofs and red chimneys ; but even up here the hazy air was full of sultry thoughts, and Aunt Jane's hard face seemed to be pressing against the window-pane looking at her with a cold smile.

“Go where I will she follows me, and my wicked thoughts follow me—this dreary house is full of shapes and sighs and horrible thoughts. All Aunt Jane's people must have been gloomy and hard ; and now the very walls, even the chairs and tables, are full of their hardness and misery : I can never escape from it all—never ! Thank Heaven Aunt Jane is the last of them ; but woe, woe to Aunt Emma and me, who have to live with her, and whose lives she is grinding away ! Poor Aunt Emma is sinking into silent despair, and I into madness or wickedness, or both !”

Resting her chin on her hands, she gazed drearily at the roofs, trying to shape impossible plans for escape. She thought over all the people she knew ; could any of them help her ? At Monkshalton



their nearest neighbours, the Forbes, lived two or three miles away, and all their other acquaintances much farther, so that the distance, combined with Miss Blake's usual mental attitude of severity towards mankind in general, had reduced their intercourse with the other county families to stately calls exchanged at proper intervals, and in the summer-time occasional flower and vegetable shows, when Jane, together with the other elderly magnates of the district, distributed prizes, and Anne was only allowed to walk sadly and silently about under her aunt's all-shadowing wing. How often had she cried in secret over the invitations to balls which were always refused, for Jane did not like late hours, and of course would not allow Anne to go to such affairs under any other chaperonage than her own.

“And it's just the same here in London,” murmured the poor child to herself. “If it wasn't for my singing lessons when we are up here, and for my rides with Bernard Forbes when we are at

Monkshalton, I should have committed suicide long ago," she concluded, with that youthful scorn of life and belief in our ability to end it at any moment, which is so rapidly destroyed with advancing years.

At least age teaches us the futility of such a philosophy, which (to my mind) belongs along with other unhappiness to that much praised period we call youth—the period surely when we are most burdened with a sense of our age, and of the responsibility of living.





## CHAPTER II.

**A**S the clock was striking eight Anne came slowly down the staircase, clad in soft creamy silk which fell in graceful lines around her tall, slim figure, thinking that, after all, a dinner party was something not to be despised—that an evening with “young Forbes” was better than one with Aunt Jane. As she passed Aunt Emma’s door it opened, and Emma came out with an expression of restrained excitement on her face.

“Your Aunt Jane has got one of her dreadful headaches and cannot go out this evening ; you and I must go alone. But it doesn’t seem the right thing somehow for me to go out without her ; I never do such a thing. Perhaps I had better stay at home with her,” she added, in a slightly

questioning tone, and evidently wishing to be contradicted.

Joy leapt into Anne's heart. Something nice must surely be going to happen at Mrs. Taylor's since Jane would not be there to freeze up all pleasure.

"Stay behind—what nonsense, Aunt Emma! Why, we shall have all the more fun, you and I by ourselves; and *she* won't mind being left behind, for I sometimes believe we worry her nearly as much as she worries us; at least, I know I do."

"My dear," said Emma remonstratingly, "don't speak unkindly of dear Jane, especially since she has given leave for you to visit Mrs. Taylor till Friday. I have just told Coates to follow us to Bayswater to-night with your things, so you will find her waiting for you when you go upstairs to bed. I told her to be sure and pack up your prettiest dresses," she added, looking tenderly at Anne's eager face, which was now crimson with excitement at her news.



“Aunt Emma—dear Aunt Emma, do you really, really mean it? It can’t be true; you must have misunderstood Aunt Jane. You know I never am allowed to pay visits by myself—never!”

Henry’s solemn voice at her elbow, announcing that the carriage was at the door, stopped any further questioning on her part, and debate on Emma’s concerning the propriety of going out to dinner without Jane; for whatever happened, Jenkins must not be kept waiting, so without more words the two ladies drove away.

There was a striking contrast between the two figures sitting side by side in the heavy old-fashioned carriage drawn by its pair of solemn-paced bays, yet both touched you alike with a feeling of pathos. Emma’s thin face with its mild grey eyes, the wistful lines round her gentle mouth, her brown hair streaked with white, which she wore in little old-fashioned curls fastened down on her temples by small side-combs, all bore the impress of an ever-increasing melancholy. You somehow

felt sure, as you looked at her, that she had never known the greatness and beauty of life, and now was becoming dimly conscious that in the little portion of it left to her, her soul was not widening towards the vast sea of eternity, but was slowly narrowing and suffocating within the walls of its prison-house—those intolerable walls of inherited circumstance—which she was too feeble to break down.

Anne, sitting erect and eager, her blue eyes looking dark with joyous excitement, and her hands folded tightly on her knee, was full of the most delightful anticipation of the evening's happiness ; and her look of assured belief in this happiness in store for her, was as pathetic in its way as was Emma's despondency.

How delightful it was, thought Anne, that to-day was only Tuesday, and what unheard of, unprecedented joy, that she should have two whole days and a half, almost three days, at Mrs. Taylor's ! It was true she did not know Mrs.

Taylor intimately, but she had known her most of her life, and was not at all afraid of either her or Mr. Taylor, a kindly hearted though rather irascible old gentleman, much afflicted with gout. They had no children, which was an acknowledged sorrow to them both, and Mrs. Taylor often told the Blakes how much she envied them their possession of such a pretty and charming niece as Anne. Many were the invitations which they had sent Anne to stay with them both in London and on their Scotch moor, but hitherto they had been all refused on the ground that Anne was not old enough to be allowed such gaiety. No wonder then that she sat smiling to herself, and pitying the passers-by in the street who were not going to such a delightful dinner party as she was.

But an anxious thought was troubling Emma, ruffling her forehead into lines as she slowly buttoned her gloves. Should she let herself be announced as Miss Blake instead of Miss Emma Blake? She preferred the first, for it would

increase the guilty feeling of freedom which Jane's absence created, and yet could she, would she, when the trying moment arrived, behave with suitable coolness and dignity?

Before the weighty question was decided, the carriage drew up at the Taylors' door. The butler, blind to Emma's nervous tremors, took the law into his own hands, and announced in a ringing voice "Miss Blake." The room swam before her eyes at the unaccustomed name, as she walked across the large drawing-room. The rays of the setting sun were streaming in through the windows and fell on her sweet thin face with its pretty look of timid dignity, her inward excitement adding light to her grey eyes and a slight flush to her cheeks.

"Why, I never thought Emma Blake could look so well—she looks nearly as pretty as her niece," thought old Sir James Haughton, who was hungrily watching the company arrive, and wondering whether "Taylor would have his best port out to-night or his second best." The arrival of an old



clergyman with a cheery red face decided that matter satisfactorily.

“Thank heaven here’s Dr. Ridsley, so we shall have the ’47 port,” he murmured ; and, settling his waistcoat and collar, with a contented air he walked across the room to where Emma was standing by Anne. Anne Blake was a strikingly pretty girl, though when you came to examine her face in detail it was difficult to say where the charm exactly lay. I think it was chiefly in the lovely contour of her head and neck, and in the beauty of her eyes, which to-night were brilliant with eagerness. The graceful lines of her figure were accentuated by her style of dress. She never wore tight tailor-made costumes, partly from an innate artistic perception of their vulgarity, and partly from a dislike to be reduced to the mere counterpart of every other young lady in the room. To-night she was looking prettier than ever, for her face was shining with happy expectancy of the something nice which must surely happen.

“I am to have the pleasure of taking you in to dinner, Miss Emma,” said Sir James with a gallant bow. Emma’s spirits rose still higher—she then was to be the object of his attentions. She felt rather flustered and anxious, and gave her pretty old lace cap a hurried pat, and the folds of her soft grey satin gown a hasty smooth down. “I hope he will find me pleasant to talk to,” she thought; “but if I cannot talk like Jane, I can at least listen.”

They sailed in to dinner, and as Emma nervously settled herself into her place, she wondered whether she ought to begin the conversation, or wait for Sir James to do it; which did Jane do? However, her fears soon fled, for Jane’s absence, she found, took a weight off her mind. No one could make unpleasant comparisons between them this evening she felt, and there was no fear of severe criticism when she got home: for once she might let herself go. Sir James was astonished; was this the little nervous, silent Miss Emma, this sprightly sympa-

thetic woman with a pink flush on her cheeks, and pretty grey eyes! His portly mind unbent itself, and he became less pompous than when Jane's critical eye was upon him. With Jane, he always felt he must act up to his highest intellectual level, and the strain was not pleasant, particularly with one of Mrs. Taylor's good dinners claiming his attention. To-night he could both talk and eat without restraint, and his flow of gallant speeches increased to such an extent, that Miss Emma felt quite nervous, and began tremblingly to wonder what she should or could say, and what Jane would say, if he were to propose to her! What a free, gay world it was to-night, spiced with a delightful dash of wickedness!

“Don't take that champagne, Miss Emma—take the other; ladies always like it sweet, you know; now it never can be too dry for me. 'Gad! I'm glad that old churchman's here, it's made Taylor get out his best wine. It's not often you'll drink such port as his.”

"I'm afraid I don't know much about wine ; it generally gets a little into my head," said Miss Emma gently.

"You're quite right," said Sir James, with a benevolent smile of approval at Miss Emma's feminine inferiority. "I don't like to see a lady enjoying her glass of wine, or drinking her tumbler of stout, but now-a-days these young folks think nothing of their two or three glasses of champagne and their sherry and claret ; and they drink 'em all off at once too, and miss all the delicate flavour. However, everything is turned topsy-turvy from what it was in my young days ! My father used to sigh over it all in his old age, and I suppose it's my turn now to do the same."

"But, my dear Sir James, surely you think the world is improving ! Why, when I think of my young days, and of how little amusement or change we ever got, I am sure of it. Of course, meat was cheaper and servants were better."

It was the hostess who spoke. She was a woman



who rather prided herself on her advanced opinions and general broadness of view ; but, like most people, considered it safer and more ladylike not to go "too far : " you must never be guilty of showing too much interest in any one particular thing.

She was rather in awe of the Misses Blake, partly on the score of social position, for the Blakes were an old county family and had never of course had any connection with trade ; whilst poor Mrs. Taylor had a disagreeable and industriously concealed remembrance of her father's warehouse in the City : partly too because she had an uneasy sensation that Jane's keen eye saw through her various little deceptions, and was aware of that vulgar commercial background, whilst Emma's gentle dignity of manner somehow made her uncomfortably conscious of her own shortcomings.

Jane's eye being absent, and Emma more absorbed than usual, Mrs. Taylor felt more courage ; like Sir James Haughton, she was happy and

unrestrained. The City, trade, all such vulgarities seemed to disappear entirely from her ken, and she gradually found herself talking with so much familiar sympathy of the troubles appertaining to entailed estates in these bad times, of the last drawing-room, of the latest fashionable scandal, that by the time the ladies left the dining-room a look of happy content had settled on her face. Indeed, some of her guests were completely awed by her evident familiarity with the habits and doings of the aristocracy, and in the drawing-room after dinner a little group gathered round her listening reverentially to stories of poor Lady B—— and dear Sir Edmund C——.

Amongst the rest of the ladies, before the appearance of the gentlemen, the talk flagged. Emma was feeling slightly ashamed of her animation during dinner, and was beginning to wonder what Jane would have said to Sir James when he made complimentary speeches. How much more properly Jane would have behaved! She smoothed

her gown and sighed, while the usual expression of nervous anxiety crept again over her face.

Anne was sitting in a state of listening expectancy for the entrance of the gentlemen. Her something nice had happened after all—contrary to all precedent, “young Forbes” was not there, and an interesting stranger had taken her in to dinner. The meal had passed like a dream. She dimly remembered that tiresome servants had from time to time offered her plates of something ; but after the first one or two courses, when the talk had become intense, they had been impatiently waved aside. Now, her thought was, “Will he come and talk to me again ?” The door opened—her heart stood still—in came the coffee. With a sigh she took up an album and made a pretence of examining it, but it contained mostly old-fashioned cartes-de-visite of elderly young ladies in wide sleeves and Garibaldi waists, and married couples arm-in-arm : people who looked, she thought, as if they had never sat by interesting strangers at

dinner-parties—whose lives must have been devoid of all romance to others or to themselves. The album was thrust away, and she began to count the waving plumes in Mrs. Taylor's hair.

A voice at her elbow roused her—the voice.

“Miss Blake, do you care for music? shall I meet you at Mrs. B——'s to-morrow night?”

“Yes,” said Anne, her heart beating so fast she could hardly articulate the words distinctly. “I am staying with Mrs. Taylor till Friday, and she is going to take me out every night till then—every night,” she added rapturously. “You see, my Aunt Jane doesn't approve of much gaiety for young people, so that I am not accustomed to so much happiness as three nights running of balls and ‘at homes.’”

“I hope I shall be at all the balls, and that you will allow me to dance with you,” said Mr. Stevens, in rather a lower tone.

The bright look on Anne's face caught Emma's attention and made her heart sink. With her



usual habit of jumping to groundless conclusions she wondered if Anne were going to fall in love with that dark-haired, uninteresting-looking young man, as he appeared to her dispassionate gaze. If so, she would be left alone with Jane—alone in the gloom of their dull house. Her mind rapidly made a little picture of her future when bereft of Anne's young presence. She saw Henry laying breakfast for two, luncheon for two, the tea-tray with only two cups on it ; no third plate to stand between Jane's and hers, no third presence to break their everlasting tête-à-tête. Should she join a sisterhood or go out to nurse sick soldiers on battle-fields? She had the vaguest notions concerning the duties of either calling, and drifted into confused speculations about the kind of dress she would have to wear on the battle-field, and whether nurses had to stand near the guns. She hoped not ; for fire-arms, even unloaded, she regarded with nervous distrust, how should she endure the presence of a great cannon?

Sir James Haughton's voice interrupted her thoughts just as the firing of a gun had made her scream and drop a wounded drummer boy whom she was bearing off the field.

Sir James had a passion for gossip, and for the last few minutes, since he had come into the drawing-room, had been watching with great attention the animated conversation going on between Anne and Mr. Stevens. He was a very old friend of the Blakes, and knowing Miss Blake's extreme conservatism of opinion on all such matters as birth and position, he felt very anxious to find out whether anything more serious than a passing flirtation was going on between the two young people.

"Miss Emma, I should like to know your opinion of that young fellow there, who is talking to Miss Anne. I knew his mother very well in my young days, and a fine girl she was too! Why, she was the toast of half the country side, and might have married any one of us; but she went and threw

herself away on a young fellow from London, who was a poet or an actor, or some such useless nonsense. But, as my poor father used to say, 'a woman's harder to follow than a fox. You never know when to have her, or what cover she'll make for next.' I beg your pardon, Miss Emma," he added abruptly; "really, you see, I had forgotten what I was saying, you must forgive an old fellow like me saying rude things, but talking to you, Miss Emma, is not like talking to most ladies; it's a treat too that I don't often get," he concluded with a gallant bow.

Miss Emma flushed with pleasure and drew up her gloves. "What would Jane say?" came up as usual in her mind; however, Sir James was not a person who required answers, and he continued in a more confidential tone—

"You know I don't think Miss Blake would approve of Miss Anne talking to him so much if she were here."

Emma sighed, and said in a tone which belied

the confidence her words expressed, "I think we can always trust our niece to behave in suitable and proper manner."

She felt irritated with Sir James; why need he help to rivet her chains more firmly by bringing in Jane's opinion? She got up, leaving Sir James somewhat surprised at her chilling reply, for it was unusual for Emma to snub people, and went across the room to where Anne was sitting. Generally her sympathetic turn of mind made her unwilling to interrupt interesting conversations, but to-night she felt it was her duty to check Anne's impulsive course.

"My dear," she said, laying her hand on Anne's shoulder. "I think Jenkins must be here and I don't like to keep him waiting. I want you to come and help me with my cloak."

Anne gave an impatient toss, but the light in her eyes did not grow less bright, for she remembered she was not driving back to the gloom of Portman Square too: Emma was going alone.



Mrs. Taylor's plumes waved graciously as Emma said good-night. Her feeling of aristocratic descent had been so much nourished by Mrs. Woodford's attitude of reverential attention to all her fashionable gossip, that she shook hands with Emma and thanked her for entrusting Anne to her care with an almost patronising affability. Jane would have soon brought things to their proper level again, but Emma was too much absorbed in her anxiety about Anne, to observe anything around her, and mechanically responded to all Mrs. Taylor's smiles and hand-shakes.

As the drawing-room door closed, she took Anne's hand and began nervously stroking it.

“ My dear, I don't think Jane would—— ”

“ Oh, Aunt Emma, leave me alone, please ; don't quote Aunt Jane to-night—to-night when I am enjoying myself so much—you don't understand—— ”

“ Don't understand what, dear ? ” said Emma, as Anne paused confusedly.

“Oh, I mean you don’t know how happy it makes me feel, to be going to be free for two whole days—at least, perhaps you don’t,” she added, feeling that her words sounded rather selfish.

“I don’t think you quite meant that, my dear,” said Emma sadly; “but perhaps it is best not to say any more. Only, my dear child, don’t let us have cause to regret having allowed you this little holiday—don’t do anything your Aunt Jane would not entirely approve of.”

The unlucky allusion to Aunt Jane destroyed any softening effect her words might otherwise have had, and Anne’s farewell kiss was not so warm as usual. Emma felt she was in a hurry for her to be gone, in a hurry to return to the interrupted talk, and that instead of having mended matters, she had made them, if anything, rather worse.

As she drove home she looked out at the streets, wondering, could they be the same through which she and Anne had gaily driven a few hours before.

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for now they seemed quite different, and the passers-by had a forlorn dull look about them—the night air seemed heavier and more sultry than usual. She thought of Anne sitting happily in the brightly lighted drawing-room, not giving a thought to her aunt driving sadly home alone. How bitter it was to find herself thus cast aside—she who had cared for the child so tenderly all these years! And, after all, did Jane love her much either? was not the irritation caused by her tactless ways greater than the love, in Jane's mind? It would only be natural if it were so, she thought. Oh, why was she such a stupid, worthless person? was there no one to whom she could be of use? could she never find an outlet for the cravings after love and helpfulness which filled her soul? She leaned back with a sigh; "As I have been hitherto, so I shall be till the end, one of the dumb and useless ones of the earth," she murmured.

As the carriage gave a sudden swerve round a corner, she started up and looked out of the window. The sight of an old watercress-seller

trudging wearily home, her cress unsold, brought her back to every-day human life, with its little common needs and cares, and with a rush of tears she buried her face in her hands. To some such humble souls as these, the watercress-sellers and crossing-sweepers of life, she might be, she was perhaps, of use, for her sympathy with unimpressive common suffering was surely boundless.

As the footman opened the carriage door for her, a beggar crept up, his ragged boots shuffling over the pavement. "Kind lady, spare me a copper." Emma never left the house for the shortest distance without her purse; Jane said it was so much safer in case of accidents, though the carrying of it caused her a great deal of uneasiness and trouble on account of pickpockets. She brought out a shilling after a good deal of fumbling and dropped it into the man's hand, who received it with blessings and gratitude. When the front door had closed on Emma and the carriage had driven away, he shuffled hastily away round the corner to join his companions in the public-house.





### CHAPTER III.

**H**ANE, lying in bed in her large mahogany furnished bedroom, heard the front door bang as Emma came in; her head was giving throbs and beats of pain, and the bang intensified them.

“I do think when Emma has been enjoying herself all the evening,” she murmured irritably to herself, “she might remember my head and tell Henry not to bang the door—it’s such a bad habit he has, as if handles were not made to turn, and it wears out the latch spring—however, I mustn’t scold her or she will be so nervous, that I shan’t get to hear anything about the party and who was there.”

A soft creaking and rustling came up the stairs.

It was Emma laboriously walking on tiptoe, in order not to disturb Jane. She paused outside the door to listen whether Jane was awake, and a kind of rustling breathing sound came through the key-hole. Jane could not bear it.

“Oh, come in, Emma, don't wait out there ; I am wide awake, and if I were not, that's just the way to rouse any one up, to stand like that creaking and listening. Now don't look frightened,” she continued as Emma came in, “you didn't wake me, I tell you. Who was at the Taylors'? and did Mrs. Taylor give herself airs? Silly woman ! when every one knows about her father's business. Why can't she be content to stay in the station she was born in? we must all be born somewhere, and if Providence sees fit to put us in different places, it's not for us to rebel—Well !”

“Sir James Haughton was there,” said Emma. “He took me in to dinner.”

“Well, and what did you talk about ?”

“Really, Jane, I hardly know. We talked about

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anything which turned up—oh, about champagne for one thing,” said Emma, with a feeling of relief at being able to remember something besides Sir James’s flow of compliments and their conversation about Mr. Stevens.

“Champagne! what a very odd subject of conversation—and not one *you* know much about, considering that you never drink it; but can’t you tell me something more amusing than that? Here have I been lying awake listening for your return, and now you have nothing to say! I might as well have tried to sleep,” grumbled Jane, forgetting or ignoring that she would gladly have slept had the heat and the pain in her head allowed her to do so.

Emma felt a throb of pleasure on hearing Jane had been listening for her, but at the same time she could not help thinking how nice it would have been if she had been asleep, and the catechism could have been deferred till breakfast-time.

“Tell me who was there besides Sir James.”

“The Woodfords were there—all three of them—and the M.’s, and the S.’s, and Dr. Ridsley.”

“Rather a poor set,” said Jane, as Emma paused; “except, of course, Dr. Ridsley: and who took Anne in to dinner? Wasn’t Colonel Forbes there, or his son?”

Emma’s heart quaked within her—the awful moment had come.

“No, neither of the Forbes were there. Anne went in with a Mr. Stevens—a stranger.”

“Indeed!” said Jane, “and what was he like? what age was he?”

“Oh, about five- or six-and-twenty, I should think. Sir James seemed to know him,” she added hastily; “he used to know his mother; she was a great beauty, he said.”

“You seem to have talked a good deal about him, then. What else did you say about him? Was there anything particular about him that made you talk so much about him? Did he seem to admire Anne?”



What terrible insight Jane possessed! thought unhappy Emma. Everything somehow seemed to be leaking out in the worst possible manner; but then it never was any use trying to hide things from Jane, for sooner or later she always found them out.

“Well, she did look very pretty,”—here Jane gave a disapproving grunt—“and I think Mr. Stevens thought so, as was only natural—however, I told her she must not——”

She stopped abruptly, remembering it would have been better to leave out any mention of their good-night in the hall, it would only make Jane think things were more serious than they were; but it was too late.

“Told Anne what? Emma, you are keeping something from me. I insist on your telling me everything at once—what has that girl been doing?”

Jane’s voice was loud and clear, and she sat up, fixing Emma with her clear stern eyes.

Emma sat down on a chair with a loud sigh. For once she felt inclined to rebel and not suppress her sighs, even if they did annoy Jane. After all, why should Jane cross-question her in this fashion? There was nothing to be ashamed of so long as it wasn't a question of Sir James and his compliments.

“Really, Jane, there is nothing to tell; the child behaved very nicely; nothing happened; she did nothing. I only told her she must behave nicely at Mrs. Taylor's, and not do anything you would disapprove of.”

“It's all very well trying to turn it off in that manner, but I feel sure something did happen. If not, why should you and Sir James have talked so much about the young man, and why should you be so confused? Telling Anne, too, to behave herself nicely—I should think *our* niece would always know how to behave nicely! Well, well, I shall know better another time than to let you chaperone her alone, however bad my head may

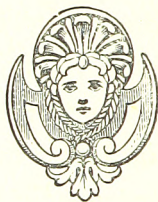
be. And why, pray, should you tell her not to do what *I* disapprove of? putting it all on me. Don't *you* disapprove of anything? But you like to make out I am hard upon that child."

"Jane, indeed you speak wrongly, I meant nothing of the sort; but you know I regard your opinion as the best I know; you know I always refer to it as better than my own."

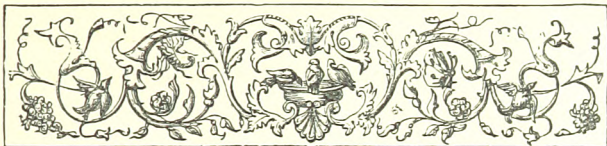
Emma's voice ended in a choke of tears, for she was unstrung and worn out with all the emotions of the evening. This made Jane feel slightly repentant of her severity, and she lay down again on her pillows.

"Well, well, Emma, you needn't take all I say too hardly; of course I don't mean that you don't try to do your duty by the child; you see, what with this close evening and my head, and Henry banging that door, loosening the handles and the hinges too, I really think you might be more considerate, and not fly off into tears and tantrums at everything I say. There now, good-night; you

look tired," she concluded, graciously. They gave each other their usual nightly kiss—a kind of peck at each other's cheeks, and Emma went to her room, closing the door softly behind her—so softly that Jane felt sure it could not be latched, and lay awake, feverishly expecting it to burst open again.







## CHAPTER IV

**T**WO days after Mrs. Taylor's dinner-party, as Sir James Haughton was walking along Pall Mall towards his club, he ran against a tall man in a brown suit, who looked like a refreshing whiff of the country in the midst of the hot streets, full of black-coated men with tall hats. He had kindly-looking brown eyes, with a friendly twinkle in them, and a reassuring way of looking straight at you while he talked, as if you were some one worth talking to and listening to—with no uneasy searching glance round you and behind you, as if to find some person or object more worthy of attention.

“Why, Forbes, you're just the man I want! Come and have a glass of sherry with me at the

club. I've got some news that will interest you I know, so come in."

"Young Forbes," as Anne had called him, gave a faint sigh as he followed Sir James up the steps. He knew the old man's passion for gossip of any kind, and felt sure that for the next hour he was to be regaled with tiresome scandalous stories which would bore him intensely. That he was the very man Sir James wanted, he knew was only a form of words, for any one who would listen, any one who would allow himself to be victimized, would do. Unluckily, he was the first person Haughton had met that afternoon who had allowed himself to be thus fastened upon. However, it was at least cooler indoors than it was outside, so Bernard Forbes settled himself into the most comfortable chair he could find, and stretched out his long legs, hoping he should be able to have a quiet unobserved nap. But Sir James's words gradually roused him.

"Well, I was dining at the Taylors' the other

day, and a very good dinner it was too. Taylor's port is something worth drinking, I can tell you. Miss Emma Blake was there, and her niece—a good-looking girl she has grown into, though not as handsome as Miss Blake was at her age. There was a pretty carrying-on between her and that young Stevens—an empty-headed young fellow he is ; and I could see it was something serious, too, by the way Miss Emma snapped me up when I spoke of it to her. A nice flare-up there'll be when Miss Blake hears of it ! 'Pon my honour, I wouldn't be Miss Emma for a good deal. Anne can hold her own, you'll see, for she's as obstinate as Jane herself. However, she's to leave Mrs. Taylor's to-morrow, and I think I must call on the Blakes on Sunday, and then I can find out exactly how the land lies. She's a fine woman, that Miss Jane, and knows her own mind, but Miss Emma's more to my taste ; and she's better preserved too ; why, to look at her, you would never know she was more than five-and-thirty, and she must be fifty if she's a day."

As Sir James paused a moment to lift his glass of sherry to the light and gaze attentively at it through one eye, Forbes drew in his legs and slowly rose out of his chair.

“Why, you are surely not going before you’ve heard the cream of the whole story—how I went to the Blakes to call yesterday, and found Mrs. Taylor calling there too, with a request to Miss Blake to let Anne stay a few days longer with her? You should have seen Jane’s face, and that poor gentle Miss Emma’s look of dismay at such boldness—the Blakes, who think the Taylors honoured by their mere acquaintance! How ever Anne was allowed to stay in their house, I don’t know. I can see Mrs. Taylor is all for the match by the way she tried to patronize Miss Emma. Miss Blake was too much for her, for it would be a fine come-down for Miss Anne to get into Stevens’s set; now that the mother is dead, no one visits them much. However, Jane refused point-blank, and the long and the short of it is that the Blakes are all going



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back into the country on Monday, a month earlier than usual. I wouldn't stand in Miss Emma's shoes for a great deal, 'pon my soul I wouldn't; that sister of hers will bully the life out of her. It really rouses even an old fellow like me sometimes, to see the worried look that poor thing has on her face, when Miss Jane has been harder on her than usual."

Forbes looked meditatively out of the window, still without speaking: he was turning over in his mind what he could possibly do to protect Emma from further bullying, and save Anne from Cyril Stevens. He had known the Blakes all his life; their estates in Lancashire adjoined one another, and his father and mother had been very fond of Jane and Emma's mother—a gentle, tender-hearted woman a good deal younger than Mr. Blake, whom her husband had worried and scolded into her grave after a lingering nervous illness. He remembered Anne when she first came to live with her aunts, a silent little girl of seven years old. He could see

her now, standing in the dark-panelled hall at Monkshalton, just arrived from her home in London, her fair hair shining like gold as a streak of sunlight fell on it, and an expression of terrified interest in her blue eyes whilst her two aunts stood looking at her, Jane remarking in a satisfied tone that it was a good thing she was more like her father than her mother.

The look of sorrow which came over the little face at the words went to his heart ; he had never forgotten it, nor how the blue eyes filled with tears, which Jane wiped away with her handkerchief, saying, as she did so, that little girls shouldn't cry when they came to see their kind aunts, that good little girls never cried.

Bernard, who was then a shy sensitive youth of nineteen, had lost his own mother, whom he adored, the year previously, and the sight of this motherless little stranger filled him with a deep pity that subsequent years never weakened, but which, in the shape of a strong devotion to Anne, had

unconsciously become the central point of his life.

For Miss Emma he had always entertained a feeling of reverential tenderness. He used to pour his childish troubles into her ear, for her sympathy was always boundless, and she never regarded any of his griefs as too trifling to be discussed. Now, the sight of her nervous little ways with Jane greatly touched him, and he was constantly trying to smooth her path and rouse in her some interest in exterior things.

All these remembrances were passing through his mind as he looked out of the club window ; he thought particularly of the rusks and jam Emma used to give him when he rode over on his pony with messages. He pictured her again standing at the hall door shading her eyes from the sun and stroking his pony's neck while he ate a crisp rusk well covered with strawberry jam and poured out tales of his lop-eared rabbits.

“ Well,” said Sir James at last, slightly aggrieved

at his silence, "what's your opinion, Forbes? Which will win—aunt or niece?"

Forbes gave a little start, for he had forgotten Sir James's presence.

"Really I hardly know; you see Miss Blake holds the purse-strings, I suppose, and I don't think from what I know of Stevens he is a fellow who will marry any one who hasn't plenty of money, for he's generally over head and ears in debt. I think, when Anne hears more about him, she won't admire him much, and when Stevens finds out that the money won't be hers unless her aunt leaves it to her, he won't be so keen about making himself agreeable. I don't think there's any cause for anxiety after all. I might drop in on Stevens, though," he continued, reflectively, "and give him a hint about it, for he's not the man for Anne at all, or any other nice woman for the matter of that, and anything that can be done to save her, ought to be done."

Sir James felt that after all his story had not



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been wasted, and if he could only get hold of Forbes after his call on young Stevens, and find out all that had passed between them, he would then have a splendid second chapter ready to tell his sister. His insatiable love of gossip arose at the bottom more from a restless kindly interest in his fellow-creatures than from any malicious intent. He never read anything but the newspaper, so all his thoughts were turned on his neighbours and their affairs ; and as his sister was rather an invalid, and often spent most of her day in her little sitting-room upstairs, he found immense pleasure in collecting long stories to be afterwards retailed to her over a cup of afternoon tea. He considered indeed that he was fulfilling a duty in thus entertaining "poor Maria"—not in the least suspecting that "poor Maria" was often rather bored with his gossip, and only refrained from checking him because she divined his kindly motive, and because she considered this failing as the best outlet he could have. All men, she thought, must have

some outlet for their lower nature, and, after all, James's passion for long stories was a harmless one, better than the turf or cards. Then, too, she thought it wiser to hear all his news, so that she might revise it and prevent him as far as possible from becoming scandalous and mischief-making, his mind being too indiscriminating to discern all the poison there might be lurking in his stories.

"Yes," continued Forbes, "I might as well turn into Stevens's club now, and see if anything can be done."

He walked out of the room without any further good-bye, forgetful of Sir James's presence even, rather to that gentleman's surprise, but as he said to Maria afterwards about it, "Forbes always was rather a queer fellow, you know, always rather abrupt in his manner; and if he doesn't like you, or you bore him, he as good as says so."

Bernard, when he got outside into the hot street again, began to reflect that after all he would be acting on somewhat feeble evidence if he went and

upbraided Stevens for paying attention to Anne Blake for the sake of her money, merely because of Haughton's account of Mrs. Taylor's dinner-party. It would after all be better, perhaps, to go to the Blakes and see Emma—"Aunt Emma," as he had learned in his boyish days to call her—and ask her what was the truth of it all and what he could do in the matter. Yes, he would do that; it was only four o'clock, Jane might be out of the way, for she was often not visible before five. So he turned up away from Pall Mall and Haughton's club with long rapid strides.





## CHAPTER V.

**L**UNCHEON was always a stately meal in the Blakes' house. Henry stood solemnly behind Jane's chair, and the footman behind Emma's. When Anne was not there, no sound broke the hushed silence, except a subdued voice saying, "Any sherry, mum?" or in Miss Blake's firm tones the demand, "Henry bring me the bread." Emma hated this formality, and thought that surely at the mid-day meal discipline might have been relaxed; but Jane said, "No, it was better for the servants always to have things done properly, besides, our poor father always had it so," two quite unanswerable reasons, Emma supposed, and especially so when announced by Jane in her concise, emphatic



tone, a tone which somehow impressed the most rebellious hearer with a sense of hopeless finality—as hopeless as the old cry of “Thumbs down.”

To-day, however, which was Thursday, the day before Anne’s return, and two days after the eventful dinner-party, there was a feeling of suppressed excitement in the air of the dark dining-room.

Jane was sitting more uprightly even than usual, an expression of stern rigidity on her well-cut features and in her pale blue eyes; Emma’s face was flushed, and the lace on her cap was trembling and vibrating. Still, if you had sat long in that room, you would have gradually felt that a kind of magnetic current was being projected at you by the immovable Jane, filling you with an intense desire to contradict everything she might say or think—for indeed in time you would even have found yourself believing that your two minds were arguing and wrangling with one another without the medium of words. It is strange how some people’s mere presence is irritating and exhausting.

An outward show of decorum was always strictly observed before Henry, so no conversation was going on to-day, not even the usual formal remarks about the weather and topics of a like nature, for a stormy morning had been passing in Jane's room. Henry, of course, and the whole household, were perfectly aware that something was going on, and that "Missus had been giving it to Miss Emma ever since Miss Anne had gone to stay with them Taylors who give themselves such airs."

The continual sound of wheels passing outside, muffled by the drawn venetian blinds and by the red and yellow masses of geraniums and calceolarias which stood on each window-ledge, added to the hushed solemnity inside, and Emma's eyes began to look hazy with repressed nervous tears.

"Henry," said Jane's firm voice suddenly, making Emma's heart jump and her knife and fork fall with a crash on to her plate, "tell Jenkins I wish to have the brougham at half-past three punctually. Do you intend to accompany me,

Emma? I am going to order a new mantle and bonnet and various other things, for as we are going back to the country on Monday, I must get all my things ordered to-day, if possible—I think you had better do the same.”

“Well, no, I think not, Jane, if you will excuse me ; I feel tired, and the heat is so great to-day, I really would rather stay at home. Perhaps you will kindly tell Madame Josephine to send me some bonnets to choose from to-morrow morning.”

“Very well, just as you please, of course, though I must say I consider your wiser course would be to come yourself this afternoon—one never knows what may happen to-morrow. However, I know advice is generally best kept to oneself.”

At half-past three Jane drove off, leaving Emma wondering how she could best fill the time of Jane’s absence with the largest possible amount of enjoyment. She went into the large drawing-room, where the windows stood wide open and the awning over the balcony kept out the afternoon glare ; the

air inside was cool and fragrant with flowers. An occasional fly, hurriedly buzzing in and out, added a peaceful slumbrousness to the room, and in a few moments Emma was quietly asleep in a large arm-chair.

She was still there when Forbes was announced by Henry. At first his eyes, blinded by the brilliant light outside, could scarcely distinguish her, as she sat trying to waken herself up, and smoothing down the lace on her head, which she was sure must be ruffled.

As she rose to meet him and gave him her hand he was filled afresh with a sense of the patheticness of her face, and sat down on a chair beside her with an inward glow of rage against Jane, who he guessed had been more than commonly hard on her during the last few days.

"Aunt Emma," he said, "I have come to have a chat with you; Miss Blake isn't in, is she? I want to have you to myself and talk to you about Anne."



“Oh dear me, Bernard, every one talks to me about Anne—I am sure I wish I had never been near Mrs. Taylor’s house! Oh, if only you had been there and had taken Anne in to dinner as usual, it would have been all right. Oh, why didn’t you come? and what is it you have to tell me about that poor child? Is it something fresh—something I shall have to tell Jane about? She is out shopping just now, and won’t be home for an hour or more yet.”

“Well, I am glad of that,” Bernard began, but a slightly grieved look on Emma’s face checked him. Each sister was most strict in never allowing any one who was not a relation to speak at all slightly of the other in her presence. Abuse Emma as she might to her face, Jane never allowed any one else to so much as hint the least disparagement of her sister. “It’s an ill bird that fouls its own nest,” was a favourite maxim of hers.

“I am glad of it,” Forbes went on, “because I want to talk about Anne to you only. Miss Blake

would be very much annoyed and think me very impertinent if I were to say anything about her niece to her. Besides it was you who were at the Taylors' the other night and saw that fellow Stevens. What did you think about him and Anne? Did she seem to like him? Of course he would admire her—every one does, you know ; they must."

"Oh, my dear, I have been so unhappy ever since that miserable night. I wish I had never been to the Taylors', for Jane has been so much annoyed about it all ; and that poor Mrs. Taylor came here yesterday to call and ask if Anne might stay longer—and somehow it has all seemed to be my fault, and I have reproached myself ever since with my neglect—I ought to have watched over the child more, but how could I, at dinner, you know ?—and then such a very uninteresting person as he looked, it never occurred to me seriously, until Sir James noticed it, that there could be anything in it ; but as soon as ever I got home, Jane

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seemed to find it all out and see it so clearly. I never can see things so quickly as Jane does."

She paused for a moment, and Forbes hastily took the chance of trying to return to the main point.

"Well but, Aunt Emma, does Anne like him? for what Stevens thinks doesn't matter so long as Anne is indifferent about him."

"But that's just the point I am so unhappy about, for it seems from what Mrs. Taylor said when she came here that he is always at her house, and has been with Anne nearly every day, at lunches and afternoon teas and balls! Oh, dear me, I tried to warn her as I was saying good-night, and the child was in such a hurry to leave me, I could hardly get a word in, and then what I did say didn't seem somehow to have the right effect—and that beggar I gave the shilling to, Henry knew him quite well by sight, and tells me he was locked up next day for being intoxicated in the streets! Oh, dear me, everything I do seems to come to a bad end!" and her tears began to overflow.

“Well, I don’t think Anne will come to any bad end,” said Forbes, consolingly, and touching her hand gently for a moment. The allusion to the beggar of course he did not understand, and avoided referring to it, lest Emma should embark on long explanations, leading him still further from the point he wished to ascertain.

“If I can help it, she shall not have anything to do with Stevens any longer. He’s a gambling, spendthrift kind of fellow, and if I get hold of Anne to night at Mrs. Carew’s ball, I’ll tell her all about him ; that will cure her of any admiration she may have for him. I know he can talk about art in rather a clever way—he’s picked it up from his father ; and he’s rather good at that kind of spurious metaphysical talk about life and beliefs which is so taking with young ladies, so no wonder poor Anne liked him as you seem to think she did, though I don’t myself believe she thinks about him any more than you do, Aunt Emma.”

“Well, as I said before, I’m afraid she is seeing



a great deal of him. Mrs. Taylor wanted to keep her longer, but Jane wouldn't hear of that; really I do think she was a little too severe with the poor woman, but then any one with Jane's high principles couldn't be expected to tolerate Mrs. Taylor's vulgarity. However, we go home on Monday, and Anne comes back to-morrow, so we must hope that perhaps not a great deal of harm has been done," ended Emma doubtfully, wishing Forbes would corroborate her hope; but through Miss Emma's words and manner he had gathered a feeling that matters were more serious even than he had expected, and he leaned back in his chair absently watching the flowers softly waving in the window. He felt very unhappy—too unhappy to say anything.

"It will be very terrible at Monkshalton," said Emma in a low tone; "I am sure I wonder how it will all end."

Bernard roused himself with a start.

"Aunt Emma, I think I had better tell Stevens

that Anne has no money except what Miss Blake chooses to leave her, and I am certain she won't leave her a penny if she marries that fellow! If he knows that, I don't believe he will go on with it, for he cares more about money than about anything else in the long run—he's always betting and gambling."

"My dear boy, what a terrible idea that he should only admire Anne because of her money! But you don't know Anne if you think that anything you may say to her against him will make her like him less, if she has once begun to care for him. Oh, my dear," she went on, her hands nervously stroking her gown, "I don't think any one can hinder or prevent these things—they are something stronger than you have any notion of." Bernard smiled to himself rather bitterly, but Emma did not see his face, and went on in a still sadder tone. "I foresee nothing but unhappiness for us all three. Anne's life will be spoiled by that dreadful young man, and Jane will never forgive

her and never forget it, and I"—she paused and added in a lower voice—"I can become a nurse or join a sisterhood, it doesn't matter which."

Bernard looked at her silently, surprised at the complete hopelessness her words expressed. As he looked at her, and looked round the room, at the large gilt timepiece, whose heavy tick seemed to emphasize the general dreariness Emma's face expressed, at Jane's armchair, with its wide, expectant arms, and her little table with severe-looking workboxes on it, he began to feel as if the coil were closing round him too, as if Stevens, Mrs. Taylor, and Miss Blake were irresistible arms of fate which were softly fastening on to him. He stood up suddenly to shake off the idea, and went across to the open window and on to the balcony. Miss Blake's carriage at that moment drove up, and he saw her stately figure slowly get out and come up the steps. He hurriedly returned to Emma's side.

"Dear Aunt Emma, Miss Blake is coming in, and

there is only a moment left. I will see what I can say to Stevens ; and don't feel so unhappy. I don't think it is so bad as you imagine. I shall run down to my father's next week, and tell you how things are going on ; but I don't believe Anne cares for that fellow."

"Thank you, my dear Bernard. You are a great comfort to me, my dear ; but I am afraid you are wrong—I believe I know best."

As Jane's footsteps were heard mounting the stairs, Bernard felt as if the coils were again closing round him : he hastily bade Emma good-bye, and bowing to Jane as he passed her at the door, fled down into the cheerful sunny street.

"Really," thought he, as he walked along, "when Miss Blake comes near one, she seems to refuse one leave even to exist, though I don't know how she manages it !"





## CHAPTER VI.

**I**T had rained all Monday at Monks-halton without cessation, and even at six o'clock in the evening, as the Blakes were driving from the little railway station at Halton, through four miles of lanes with high hedges and tall trees, and grey walls covered with dripping moss and ferns, it was raining as steadily as ever. As Anne looked out of the window, she caught glimpses through the trees of a grey sky with here and there delusive patches of brightness in it, which to all country folk illustrate that description of the Scotch climate, "rain with showers between." The air was full of the delicious odour of wet woods and things growing, and now and then a thrush burst into joyous singing; but

Anne felt nothing, saw nothing save the heaviness and gloom of the grey sky, for she was filled with the thought that each mile along the muddy roads meant for her a mile nearer the old dull life, a mile farther from freedom and joy. To-morrow, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, would bring the old familiar round of dulness. She pictured the daily drive at the same hour, along the same roads, seated with her back to the horses, a sickening position at the best of times, but especially so on a scorching day ; Emma and Jane sitting opposite her, wearing the same bonnets, the same gloves and mantles every day, and with the same look on their faces. Jane rigid, but observant of all the defects in the agricultural proceedings of their neighbours. Emma, absent and melancholy, nervously anxious to answer Jane's remarks with intelligence, and at the same time to temper the severity of her judgments on Hodgson's turnips or Mr. Forbes's reckless felling of timber. How dull it all was, and how she hated it ! Anne gave her feet a restless

stamp of impatience most unfortunately on Jane's gown.

"My dear Anne," began that lady, but a sudden look of despairing misery on Anne's young face brought a slightly softened feeling into her heart, and she abruptly stopped and cleared her throat.

After all, the child was only young, and young things, especially in the present day, could not help being tiresome; one must bear with them in this world, she thought, with an unconscious implication that in the next more summary dealings on the part of the Almighty might make forbearance on hers unnecessary.

The carriage turned in at the old-fashioned white gates with tall stone posts and balls, which Anne used to think so beautiful, but which to-day did not look half so interesting or picturesque as Mrs. Taylor's grey pillared porch in Kensington.

"Morson hasn't cleared away those felled trees yet," said all-seeing Jane, as they drove rapidly through the finely timbered park. "I must have

him in first thing to-morrow, for I have no doubt he has done nothing but waste his time since we went up to town, and I must insist on a thorough account of everything."

Her voice had a sound of prophetic relish of the unfortunate Morson's discomfiture.

As they drove up to the door, the peacocks on the terrace walk uttered their discordant melancholy shrieks—"like Aunt Jane's voice," as Anne used to say when she was a little girl.

The housekeeper met the travellers in the hall with a nervous smile of welcome. She was rapidly running over in her mind all the maids' misdemeanours, all the breakages which had occurred during her mistress's absence, and trembling at the thought of Miss Blake's remarks and questions concerning them.

"Nothing escapes missus's eye," they all knew to their cost ; but in spite of their awe and fear of Jane, the old servants had a curious feeling of worship for her. Scold or tyrannize as she might, they all



admired her, for they recognized the spirit of justice which showed through her sternness ; and though they perhaps loved Emma most, yet their feeling of feudal adherence to Jane was firmer and deeper.

“ She’s one of the old sort, she is, she’ll tolerate no nonsense, and any one as doesn’t do his duty had better keep clear of *her*,” they said. The rigid righteousness which softened to no weaknesses of her own or other people’s, and which oppressed Emma’s morbid soul, found an answering voice in their more sturdy natures.

Tea was waiting in the drawing-room—a melancholy-looking room which ought to have been cheerful, for the windows were down to the ground, letting in plenty of light ; the furniture was Chippendale, and the chintz of a pretty old-fashioned pattern ; while here and there Chelsea shepherds and shepherdesses were standing on old Japanese cabinets, keeping guard over china bowls full of dried rose-leaves and lavender. But the blinds Miss Blake never allowed to be drawn quite to the

top, and the chairs always had to stand in certain places, which produced a cheerless uninhabited look; and just now the flower-garden outside, though full of gay sweet-smelling carnations and roses, was looking muddy and dragged in the rain, and beyond in the park the cattle were standing forlornly sheltering under the trees and keeping an anxious eye on the gate, for it was milking-time. It all tended to intensify the usual depression of the room.

Emma stood and looked out at the well-known landscape, keenly conscious of the familiar scent in the room of Japanese cabinets and dried rose-leaves which pervaded the house and which the very sound of the word Monkshalton always brought to her mind. This house, then, and the London house, constituted her whole world—a narrow, warped, comfortable untroubled world. Why could she neither feel happy in it, nor yet brave enough to venture forth into another one more active and complete? Jane's voice broke in on her thoughts.

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“I see this teapot hasn't been thoroughly cleaned lately, and the spoons don't seem very bright either. Really I am glad we have come back in this sudden fashion, it lets one see how things go on in our absence. I do believe that Nankin bowl has a crack in it ; now I'm sure there was no crack when *I* left home.”

Her emphasis on the “I” somehow impressed Emma with a feeling of guilt, as if she had cracked the bowl or was in some way answerable for it.

“Well, seeing that both Aunt Emma and I left home when you did, Aunt Jane, we couldn't have cracked it.”

“Anne, you don't speak in a very pleasant tone, I think, nor are your words very becoming from a niece to an aunt. I think, my dear, you had better finish your tea, and then retire to your room to rest after the journey.”

Jane spoke with restrained irritation. Though she would not have acknowledged it for the world, she really felt a little sorry for Anne. Her heart

was not quite so dead to all sentiment and romance as Anne supposed, and the suggestion that she should go and rest in her room was really the outcome of this concealed sympathy. It was in fact a great concession, for her general rule was that young people should never give way to any feeling of fatigue or illness.

She found it somewhat difficult to be altogether considerate after a long tiring railway journey, particularly with two companions who regarded her as the tyrannical cause of their flight; for she was aware of Anne's attitude of rebellion and of Emma's sympathy with the child. A particularly exasperating state of things, she considered, when in reality she was the only one who was properly upholding the family dignity.

Anne received her rebuke with an angry sigh. This, then, was to be her far-stretching future—the sound of steeping rain, a vista of sleepy cattle under trees, and beds of old-fashioned fragrant flowers, and a smell of dried lavender, with Jane's



clear masterful tones overshadowing the whole. She rose abruptly from her chair, and, seizing her scattered gloves and hat, went up to her room. She felt a pang of dismay when she opened the door and looked in. When she had left it only four weeks ago it had worn a bright, pleasant look, and it had always been a quiet sunny harbour of refuge from Aunt Jane's presence ; but now it was changed, and seemed full of a dreary emptiness. What was it that was changed, she wondered—the house, the room, or could it be herself? Coates, with her back to the door, was on her knees unpacking Anne's boxes.

“What dress will you wear to-night, Miss Anne, the white one you were wearing before we went to London?”

Anne did not answer, and the maid, turning round to repeat her question, saw her suddenly lean against the doorway and burst into tears. With Coates' words a sudden rush of realization had come of the cause of this horrible blackness, of its

never-endingness. She would have to go back to the old ways, the old dresses, the old sights and sounds, just as before, but with a new kind of discontent in her soul. Everybody at Monkshalton was so old and so uninteresting. Oh, if she could but see some one like Cyril Stevens again, for his language had been the same as her own, and their minds had met on a common ground of youth and unreasoning lightheartedness. It was in this kindredship, and this alone, that, unconsciously to Anne, had lain the charm of their intercourse. Cyril had a quick mind, and he could converse with that ready sympathy which requires no ponderous explanations, and which can catch and return a half-expressed thought with pleasant readiness. To Anne, who never saw any one but old people, who regarded a man of thirty-two, like Bernard Forbes, as a person of advanced middle age, such a vision of youth and brightness was delightful and astonishing. Would she ever again meet any one like him—would she ever again have any young

sympathetic companionship? Alas, no! She had come back to the old stifling atmosphere which always reminded her vividly of the stories of prisoners chained for life in dismal dungeons with which the old gamekeeper used to terrify her long ago. Part of the house was very old, and the servants had traditions of skeletons and dungeons underground. The skeletons seemed to be creeping up to her now, pointing at her, and jeering at her for thinking she could escape them. No, no, she had come back; she could never, never escape. Her sobs grew more gasping.

“Have some of this sal volatile, Miss Anne, it will do you good. You’re quite wore out with the journey and the heat—and missus always a worritin’ at you, poor dear,” she added to herself. Coates knew all about young Stevens, and she rather admired him, and wished him well, being of a sentimental disposition herself. Henry and the other servants sided with “Missis,” and thought with the usual conservatism of servants that “he only

came of a rubbishy lot like them Taylors, and that Miss Anne should do better than take up with such a one."

"Don't take on so, Miss Anne dear, but lie down on the sofa and drink this, for it will revive you," said the faithful Coates, holding a tumbler in one hand and a shawl in the other to wrap over Anne's feet. Anne obeyed, and presently lay quite still and quiet on the sofa, watching the maid unpack her things and put them all in the old familiar places. No more questions were asked about her dress for dinner, but Coates did not put out the old white dress, her ready tact divining that somehow her words were connected with Anne's outburst of sorrow.

After dinner Jane disappeared to have a searching interview with Mrs. Wilton, the housekeeper, when various trying discoveries were made concerning cracks and snips which had occurred during the house-cleaning. Jane was an adept in the art of cross-questioning, no prevarication, no elusion



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was possible before her, and victim after victim came out of Mrs. Wilton's room that evening in tears. Deep was the admiration expressed in the servant's hall at missis's cleverness in getting to the bottom of everything. "No more use to try and get over her than to try to cure a fox o' stealin' chickens," was Henry's verdict.

So absorbing were the scenes enacting in the servants' department that Henry had not brought the lamps into the drawing-room as soon as usual, and the gloom there was growing deeper and heavier; the chairs, with their light chintz covers and straight legs, were growing more and more like dim figures with outstretched arms waiting expectantly for the ghosts of those who had been used to sit in them in long past years. Fires were not allowed after the middle of June, no matter how cheerless the weather might be, so Emma and Anne sat near the window, gazing out at the flower-beds and the dim figures of the cattle moving under the dark trees.

No sound came through the open window but the peacocks' harsh cry, or the hoot of a distant owl, and now and then a half-human cough from an asthmatic sheep. The rain had ceased and the clouds were slowly thinning.

The house had been built, or rather rebuilt, from a much older one, in the days when a pleasant, cheerful view was thought quite unnecessary, and the only thing to be considered was shelter from all possible wind, so that, although lovely wide sweeps of hills and flat mosses and sea were within a stone's throw of the garden, the house itself stood in a hollow with tall heavy beech-trees and sycamores on one side. On the other side, into which the drawing-room looked, was a flower-garden with a sunk fence dividing it from the park which swept up to the horizon line, while in front was a grey stone terrace and more park sloping up to some wind-blown Scotch firs, standing out against the sky. Behind, were extensive stables and farm-buildings.

The iron gate between the garden and the park now and then swung to with a heavy click, and steps tramped away into the darkness down the drive, as some gardener or farm-labourer went home, leaving the silence more impressive than before.

Behind the house, it was much less melancholy, sounds of talk came out of the servants' hall and the kitchen, a horse now and then neighed and stamped in his stall, a calf bleated, and the house dog uneasily growled in his kennel and rattled his chain as some of the servants passed in and out, talking in a subdued manner. All sounds of talk or laughter were subdued when Miss Blake was at home, as if a superstitious fear prevailed of her omnipresence.

Emma was wondering, as she and Anne sat together in the growing darkness, what she had better say to the child ; whether she had better say something sympathetic and consolatory about the hurried flight from London, or whether such a

course would not be disloyal to Jane, making her wholly responsible for it all, and whether it would not be also taking Anne's interest in Stevens and sorrow at leaving him, too much for granted. Emma thought it most indelicate to suppose any young lady could be really interested in a young gentleman who had not decidedly proposed to her, and till Forbes came to see her, as he had promised to do, she felt quite in the dark as to what had really passed between Anne and Cyril.

Anne meanwhile was longing to talk to her aunt, longing to tell her some of the trouble which was in her soul, for in the darkness and the silence that choking air of the dungeons was again creeping around her. Neither knew how to begin, and the silence reigned undisturbed till they heard Henry lighting up the hall. Soon the lamps would come in, then Jane would return and no more could be said. Emma took a sudden resolution.

"My dear child," she said, crossing the room to Anne's chair and leaning over the back of it so



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that the child could feel her words if she could not see her, "the world is very sad, it all looks so beautiful and we might be so happy ; but somehow, if we have no troubles in our outside lives, we seem to make them, to bring them, and it seems to me as if all we can do is to help each other and love each other. I only say this, dear, because I want to help you ; I am very helpless myself, but I know one's troubles are more in oneself than in one's circumstances, and I want you to think of that."

Anne was deeply moved, for Aunt Emma very rarely spoke so unreservedly, and, without turning round, she put up her hand to stroke Emma's face.

The door opened and Henry came in with the lamp, followed by the footman carrying the heavy branched candlesticks. As the glare of light came in, the darkness seemed to sweep past out of the window, the chairs lost their rigid look of expectancy and fell back into mere chairs again ; the windows were closed and the shutters barred, shutting out the peacocks and the motionless trees,

and in came Jane, carrying some china to be mended by herself, for no one else, not even Emma, she considered could be trusted to do it properly.

The heavy feeling of misery seemed to vanish, and as Anne sat sipping her coffee and turning over some new magazines, the skeletons and the prisons no longer had any reality.





## CHAPTER VII.

**I**T seemed to Anne, during the next few weeks following their return home, that she had never before half realized how monotonous life at Monkshalton was, how tyrannical Jane was, and how surprisingly submissive Emma was. Day by day the outlook grew more gloomy, and the fracas with Aunt Jane more frequent; it seemed indeed as if a regular demon of rebellion had settled in the girl's soul.

Emma was so anxiously awaiting Forbes' promised visit, which never took place, that she hardly observed how serious things were getting, till one morning, about three weeks after the flight from London, a terrible outbreak on Anne's part took place.

It was a brilliant hot morning in July ; the sunshine was streaming in through the open windows of the breakfast-room. Jane was seated behind the table severely reading her letters, and Emma was beginning to take some bacon, when Anne burst into the room, saying, in an excited voice, "Aunt Emma, do you know the Forbes came home last night, and Sir James Haughton and his sister have come with them and are going to pay them a long visit ?"

"When will you remember, pray, to come into a room quietly and not to address remarks to any one till you are within speaking distance, not shouting distance ?" said Jane ; "and I should like to know why you inform Emma of the Forbes' return more particularly than me ; am not I supposed to be interested in them too, or have you some special reason for informing Emma ?"

Anne's exuberance, born of the brilliant sunshine and the hope of the Forbes' bringing London news with them, was effectually quelled, and Emma



dropped a large piece of bacon on the snowy cloth, the implication of a guilty alliance between her and Anne producing her usual sensation of nervous heat and flurry, which this morning the fragrance of the summer air and the cawing of the rooks in the great trees had somewhat dispelled.

Breakfast in summer-time is a peculiarly sensitive hour of the day. The awakening from the delicious death of sleep and the beholding again of the splendid sunlight creates a feeling of intense happiness, which one's fellow-humans are apt to dissipate by unsympathetic crossness or bustling plan-making about matters which seem tiresomely trivial compared with the joy of beginning a new day in this eternally wonderful world.

Anne sat down with a smothered snort and began to make signs to Emma under cover of the urn expressive of general hatred of Jane. Emma grew more and more agitated, thinking that something terrible must have happened to the Forbes of which Anne was trying to secretly inform her ;

till suddenly Jane, feeling that something was going on, shot a rapid glance over the coffee-pot at Emma's vibrating head-dress.

"What are you doing, Emma, whispering and grimacing at Anne? Really, I am surprised at you, behaving like a schoolgirl at your age! How can you expect Anne to behave herself properly at Mrs. Taylor's when you yourself set her such an example? Tell me what it is all about at once!"

An awful pause ensued, for cautious Jane herself had for once overshot the mark, and felt she had said more than was discreet in her reference to Mrs. Taylor's. How terrible was Jane's memory, thought Emma, for that unfortunate conversation had never been referred to since, and Emma was beginning to hope Jane had forgotten it.

"How mean of Aunt Emma to have been abusing me to Aunt Jane!" thought Anne. "Then every one is against me, and I must fight my own battles;" and, with the sudden glow of anger which swelled in her soul, her courage leaped up

to an unprecedented height. "We weren't whispering; I was making faces at Aunt Emma about you, Aunt Jane, about you! You spoil everything, you turn the sunshine into gloom, and you scold us, till some day you'll kill us, at least you will kill Aunt Emma. I know you will never forgive me for speaking in this dreadful way, and I know I oughtn't to do it; but I can't help it, it is as if there were some demon inside me making me say it!" she ended breathlessly, clutching the table with both hands in her excitement.

Emma got up quickly, terrified at the awful bombshell which seemed to have suddenly exploded. The child must be ill, she was sure, and she must get her some water or sal volatile.

"Don't touch me, Aunt Emma! even you have turned against me now," said Anne, in a hoarse whisper.

"Anne, I insist on your leaving the room at once. I never heard of such dreadful, disgraceful behaviour before. Go into the winter parlour and

sit there quietly until I come to you. Henry shall bring you some breakfast there."

Jane's stern voice, trembling with indignation, had to be obeyed, Anne felt, and she rose and disappeared out of the door.

"What has happened to the child, Emma? What have you been doing? Now, tell me immediately! I know there is some mystery about the Forbes'—what is it?"

"I know nothing about it, nothing more than you know yourself, Jane. The poor child was making signs to me at breakfast, but I didn't know what it was all about. I am sure she meant no harm; but, oh, why did you say anything about Mrs. Taylor? I am afraid she does feel a little upset about that young Mr. Stevens, and flying down here in such a hurry—and, after all, you know, we are rather old people for such a bright young thing as Anne is to live with. I think it would almost be better for her if you were to let her go out more and see more people of her own



age. She thinks too, now, that I've been saying things against her, and I am sure I never did, Jane, you know I did not! I somehow think Bernard was right in saying"—but here Emma's courage failed, the awfulness of having reproved Jane, however mildly, broke in upon her tremulous mind; she hesitated, stopped, and looked anxiously at Jean's clearly cut face.

"I cannot think what all this tirade is about! you and Anne seem determined to say everything that is rude and improper to me—to me, of all people, when I am the only one of the family who seems aware of what is becoming to a young lady's dignity. It's all nonsense about that young man, she must get over all that, and the sooner the better; and pray, if you did not complain to me of her behaviour at Mrs. Taylor's, how is it I found out all about what was going on, so that, when that ill-mannered woman came to call, I was prepared with what was proper to say to her? Of course you told me. Now let us hear no more of

these high-flown harangues and nonsense, and leave me to settle matters with Anne. She must be treated with suitable severity, and I forbid you to interfere, Emma—do you hear me? I am your eldest sister, and know much more about the world than you do. And what do you drag in young Forbes' name for? What has he got to do with it all, I should like to know?"

The entrance of Henry with a tray for Anne's breakfast prevented further talk, and Jane presently left the room to interview Wilton. Now was Emma's time for trying to get hold of Anne and set matters straight about Mrs. Taylor and Jane's misleading statement. She crept to the door of the winter parlour and softly opened it. Anne was seated on the floor by the open window, eating her breakfast with great haste. Her favourite cat was sedately sitting by her side, reproachfully watching each mouthful his mistress ate.

"My dearest child, I never said one word about your behaving badly at Mrs. Taylor's, I am in-

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capable of such a thing, as you ought to know. Your Aunt Jane has entirely misunderstood something I said; don't let your heart be sore with the thought that I have been in any way against you."

"Yes, Aunt Emma, dear, I know I oughtn't to have said what I did to you; but it doesn't seem to matter much," said Anne, stopping eating her breakfast a moment to kiss softly the cat's head, "I feel as if I couldn't bear everything any longer; why don't you do something to stop it all, Aunt Emma?" she continued with a sudden burst of energy; "how is it you can bear all this grinding and worrying? It is really ridiculous that two grown-up women like you and me—for I am grown up, though you won't believe it—should calmly give in to one tyrannical one! She doesn't know any better about the world and things than you do! Indeed, you know, Aunt Emma, you really are a much better woman than she is. Why do you look so miserable always, and never do

anything in your own way? I mean to hold my own this time. I know you think," she continued, turning rather red and speaking more rapidly, "that I admired Mr. Stevens very much; I don't think I did, at least it was not that sort of thing, it was only because I found it so wonderful and delightful to be able to talk freely to some one about all kinds of things, anything, without being told you were silly or tiresome; and then, you know, it was so pleasant to find some one who said 'I don't know' sometimes. Aunt Jane always says she knows—and I don't believe she does—or else that I know 'nothing about such things and ought not to talk about them.' Oh, Pussie dear," she said, as the cat reached up a stealthy paw to draw down a piece of toast on her fork, "let us drown Aunt Jane and enjoy ourselves!"

"Oh, my dear, don't say such dreadful things even in fun—they make me feel as if we were doing wrong in sitting here talking!"

There was a pause whilst Emma was thinking



whether she had better tell Anne something about her own life which might perhaps be of use to the child. Would it be of use? Was it worth while to torture herself by speaking of old sorrows?

A bird flew past out of the roses climbing outside the window; the cat's eyes dilated and his tail began to vibrate gently.

"Aunt Emma, did you see that fly-catcher? She's flown off her nest. Now do just stand upon the window-ledge and look into the rose-tree; you'll see the nest and four gaping throats in it," said Anne, pushing away her breakfast-tray and eagerly stretching her head out of the window.

"My dear, how frivolous you are to be thinking of birds' throats and nests when there is this terrible state of things going on! It may be nothing to you, but it is terrible to me. You say why do I look unhappy and yet do nothing to alter my life?" Her mind was made up, she must try and explain matters to Anne. There was a resolute tone in her

voice which made Anne look at her wonderingly and listen attentively.

“I cannot alter my life now, it is too late. I tried to rebel when I was young like you, but our father thought differently about what young ladies ought to do, and you see, my dear, daughters living at home never have any money. What was I to do? I knew nothing; I was never clever like Jane, and he knew I wasn't, and he knew I had ideas he did not like about women and their lives, and so he left to Jane the entire management of the estate and the money after your father died—you have never known, my dear, that I have only what your Aunt Jane allows me.” A slight flush came into her cheeks and a light into her eyes. “Jane is so generous, you would never know I have not an equal right to everything. She did not think it right, nor did I, to disobey our father's will, so every quarter-day I find a certain sum on my dressing-table, neatly tied up—exactly the same amount that Jane allows herself for personal expen-

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diture—we never mention it to each other, so in return for such goodness and delicacy I must try to live more in accordance with her views and our father's than I otherwise should. You see, my dear, as you get older you will more and more realise that it is the intangible threads that bind us together and shape our lives more than mere outward circumstances, and we can never, never get away from them. I ought not, perhaps, to tell you all this, my child, but I felt if you knew more of my life it might help you. And there is something else"—her eyes began to fill with tears, and her voice trembled—"when I was two-and-twenty I very nearly ran away with a gentleman to whom I was very deeply attached, and whom I was forbidden to marry because he had no money ; but your grandfather found it all out, and he was very angry, oh very, very angry ; I don't think he ever quite forgave me, and Jane always said I had irrevocably disgraced the family. We had driven twenty miles before we were overtaken, and a great many of the

neighbours heard all about it. Since then I have never felt the same. You see, Jane is so proud and high-principled she has never quite forgotten it, I see it in her face when she is displeased with me about anything. But don't think," she added, as Anne, who was listening breathlessly, made an indignant exclamation, "don't think she has ever referred to it or ever reproached me. Oh no—Jane is too noble to do that! You see," she went on more calmly, "I am over fifty now and I have calmed down, but the constant friction has worn my heart out and I have no energy or courage left to do anything. I love the dear old people in the village; but they are not in great need of love, I think, for somehow in this world it's the sinners one has most at heart, and it doesn't fill up the gap in my life as something else might have done; and then London is so large, everything seems endless, it frightens me and brings home to me how old and feeble I am."

"Dear, dear Aunt Emma," bursts in Anne,



falling on her knees beside her, kissing her hands and half sobbing with sympathy and excitement, "don't say that, don't think it! You are not old and feeble, you're my dear, dear Aunt Emma whom I love more than anything else in all the world. Why, Aunt Emma, I should have murdered Aunt Jane long ago if it hadn't been for you! Think of what use you are," she went on, laughing excitedly—"you've kept Aunt Jane out of her grave, and me from prison or the gallows! Oh, she's coming—she's coming! Run away quickly, dear—run, for she will think we are plotting and planning something dreadful if she finds you talking here!"

Emma hastily disappeared through a door which opened into the next room, whilst Jane's measured step came along the stone-flagged hall. The cat heard it and leisurely got out of the window, carefully shaking his hind paws as he went; no animals loved Jane's presence, and her stiff silk dresses were not inviting to sit on or to softly rub against, even if such familiarities had been allowed.

“Now for it,” thought Anne, as the door opened. Her heart beat and her hands shook in spite of herself, and the old remembrances of those far-away unhappy prisoners chained in the mouldy dungeons again rose between her and the sunshine outside, where the munching cattle were staring sleepily through the rails, and the gardener was mowing the lawn, filling the air with the smell of the freshly-cut grass.

“Anne, I wish to speak to you very seriously ; sit down on that chair. Now tell me why you spoke in such an improper manner to me this morning ? First of all, tell me whether you feel ill in any way. Young people in my day never made illness an excuse for improper behaviour, but I know that times are changed, and I see young ladies and young gentlemen sitting in lounging-chairs and saying their backs ache in a way which my poor father would have thought most ill-bred.”

She paused for Anne’s answer, which came nervously.

“No, thank you—I am quite well.”

“Then what does it all mean? Am I to receive an apology from you, or do you intend to persevere in a course of open rebellion against my authority?”

“It means, Aunt Jane,” said Anne, looking boldly at her and with a feeling of “now or never” in her heart, “that I must have something to do—some more liberty. I want to be good, but I feel as if all my goodness were being eaten away—all my strength is taken up in trying to keep myself down; and, Aunt Jane, one must live, one must; I believe I want to be free more than to be good. Oh, please help me!”

She had forgotten all her nervousness now, and the ghosts of those old prisoners seemed to be around her, urging her on to cry for liberty.

“I am always expecting, always longing for something nice to happen,” she went on—“something which will make me feel I am really living, and now it has come suddenly to me that *this* is

living, that time is flying fast, and when I do wake up out of this stifling monotony death will wake me, and I shall never have lived at all. You've killed Aunt Emma ; don't, oh, don't kill me too !”

In the passion of her earnestness, Anne stretched out her hands imploringly. Jane was motionless—Anne's hands fell. There was a deep silence, and the cat suddenly peeped over the window-sill, making inarticulate mewes at Anne, but, catching sight of Jane, it hastily disappeared again.

At last the silence was broken, Jane rose slowly from her seat and came close to Anne, gazing steadily into her upturned face.

“Anne, I never heard such wicked words in my life before—never but once,” she added, as the remembrance came to her of a far more terrible and passionate appeal on Emma's part, when all hope of marrying the man she loved was taken from her, “and I intend never to hear them again. How dare you say I am killing you—you, whom I took in when your reckless, spendthrift mother died,



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after she had broken your father's heart"—a deep flush spread over Anne's face, which brought a harsher ring into Miss Blake's voice and a paler gleam into her blue eyes—"you, whom I resolved to bring up as our father's grand-daughter ought to be brought up, so that by your good conduct you should in part atone for your mother's faults? Hitherto I have regarded your outbreaks as mere childish naughtiness, and have borne with them; but now I shall adopt a different line of behaviour. It is fourteen years since you first came here, and yet I have not been able to make you understand that you are to do as I tell you, and not to set up your own ideas and wishes against mine. You shall not go outside the park gates till you tell me you are sorry for the way in which you have been behaving, and till I see a more obedient and lady-like spirit in you. It is all for your own good I say it," she continued, sitting down again in her chair; "for I know what is best for you. You must learn that you are not put into the world to do just as

you like, but to learn to do as you are told. When I was a girl I did just as my father bid me—”

“But, Aunt Jane,” burst in Anne, “did you never want to have your own way, and did Aunt Emma never want hers either?”

Jane’s brow darkened at this mention of Emma’s name.

“Your Aunt Emma and I did not always agree about what was right, but whatever happened our father always knew best.”

She sat still a moment, wondering how many more wrong-headed people bent on self-destruction she would have the care of; what an excellent thing it had been for poor Emma, and was now for Anne, she thought, that she was there willing and able to restrain them and set them in the right path.

“Now, let us have no more of this nonsense, but be a better girl in future, and till I see some improvement, remember, I forbid you to go outside the grounds.”

The sight of some one coming up the drive and through the iron gate made her anxious to finish the interview ; so, clearing her throat and straightening the rustling folds of her gown, she left the room with a heavy measured tread.

Anne looked out and saw Bernard Forbes coming towards the house. She leaned out of the low window, and, seeing no one but a gardener, made eager beckoning signals to Forbes.

He came up softly whistling, and began stroking the cat, who had appeared on the window-sill again as soon as Jane had left the room and was standing loudly purring.

“ Bernard, do you know I’ve got into the most dreadful scrape with Aunt Jane? She says I’m not to go outside the park, and she has been perfectly furious with me, and I am so miserable, so dreadfully miserable, and Emma’s been nearly crying, and what is to become of us all I don’t know. I think I shall run away—only, where shall I run to? Oh, Bernard, I do so hate and

detest Aunt Jane—she makes us all so wretched! I think grandpapa must have been a dreadful person; I am so thankful he died before I came here!”

“My dear child, how excited you are! What dreadful sentiments to express on such a splendid morning! You had better have your horse round, and I’ll come with you to gallop off this explosiveness.”

He was accustomed to strong expressions on Anne’s part, and did not think there was anything the matter worse than the usual quarrels between Miss Blake and her niece. He had come to see Emma and explain his long absence, and to assure her there was nothing to fear from Cyril Stevens, so that he was not wholly attending to Anne. She saw he was not, and her heart swelled within her.

“Nobody cares, nobody thinks it worth while to help me,” she thought; “I shall certainly go mad if I am to be shut up here!”

Finding her silent, Bernard looked up and was



startled at the unusual expression of misery on her fair young face, for young misery has sometimes a look of appalling keenness.

“Why, what is the matter? What have you been doing to bring down all this hurricane upon you?” he said.

“Bernard, if I were to leave home could I find something to do, or somewhere to go to? Could I find some place to live in where I could think and talk as I liked and work at something?”

“Well, it depends on what you want to work at,” he replied, ignoring the first part of her question, as being less easy to answer. “Do you want to be a hospital nurse, or a type-writer, or a crossing-sweeper, or what?”

“Don’t laugh at me, please don’t—it is unkind of you not to see that I am seriously, deeply in earnest! I must do something besides enjoying the sunshine and soft grass—something more than reading to the old people in the village and knitting them endless comforters and mittens. If I could

ever talk to any one it might help me, but I never see any one, never, and Aunt Emma is just as miserable as I am."

"My dear child," said Bernard, leaning his elbows on the window-sill and looking at her flushed face, "I know you have a dull time of it here, and I know, of course, that Miss Blake is not what one could describe as a charming person to live with; but you've got a certain duty to fulfil even towards her, and much more towards Aunt Emma. She is very fond of you, and she would be dreadfully cut up if you gave them the slip and ran off somewhere. Besides, you must remember no one would take you in; no one likes to have a stray young lady turn up asking for a home—it's worse than finding a kitten curled up on your doorstep when you come home at night; chloroform may be a merciful remedy for the latter; but one couldn't try that on you. This world is not a very cheerful place somehow—at least, it doesn't seem so to you; but you've got to live in it and make the best of it,

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and really," looking round as he spoke, "you are not as badly off as if you were a starving sempstress in a London attic."

"Yes, oh yes, I know all that, 'not more than others I deserve' and all the rest of it. But I think the world is really a cheerful place, a most wonderful place, and it is only we who cramp ourselves up and shut out all the air and light till we see nothing but our miserable prison-house. You know you think so too really, you know you despise all the fuss over things that don't matter a bit—over what is proper and what isn't. I am ashamed of it all and I am sick of it all, and I shall go! I shall go right away, and I don't care if Aunt Jane never forgives me, and I don't care what any one may say, I don't care a bit, only I must and I will go!"

She stopped, breathless with excitement, and buried her hot cheeks in the cat's soft fur, much to the annoyance of that dignified animal, who was earnestly engaged in washing a most important paw.

"Well, I never heard such a serious outburst

from even you before!" said Forbes, thoroughly aroused now to the sense that Anne meant every word she said, and rapidly turning over in his mind what he could say that would most effectually check any rash proceeding on her part.

"It is quite true what you say about people making themselves unnecessarily miserable, but you will find you must give in to the ties and threads which bind you. For instance, if you were to run away now and find something to do which would make you happy and give you a larger life, what would become of Aunt Emma? Why, she would droop and fade away without you here! You are sunshine and light to her—to all of us," he added, under his breath. "And then when you realized that, and found she had died because you had deserted her, that in fact you had killed her, what would you feel? Could you ever enjoy freedom again? Wouldn't all the world be poisoned to you? You will find that all your life is a struggle between following your own bent and being dragged back and down by intangible

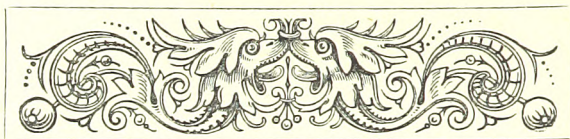


appealing hands—only sometimes I think that after all, as Aunt Emma says, it is not downwards they drag you, but upwards.”

They were both silent, for the mowing was close to them now, passing and re-passing under the window ; but Bernard saw by Anne's face that she had listened to his words, and was thinking about them. He resolved to go and talk it over with Emma at once, so with a smile and a nod he moved away towards the front door. To enter a house without ringing and being formally announced, however intimate you might be with its inmates, was an unpardonable sin in Miss Blake's eyes.

Anne drew a long breath as he disappeared round the corner of the house.

“ Well, I've never had such an awful morning in my life—three sermons on the duty and necessity of stifling my soul ! Bernard is very good and kind, but he doesn't quite understand how impossible it is—perhaps a man hardly could ! ”



## CHAPTER VIII.

“**M**Y dear Maria, I assure you it must be true—I heard the postman telling the butler all about it on the doorstep not an hour ago. You know my room is over the front door, and I was shaving with the window wide open—it’s such a hot, close morning. They had a good long chat, for there never seems to be any hurry about letters in this place, and I heard all they said. Miss Blake is setting off to town by the morning train, and Miss Emma has taken to her bed. The postman said he had been told it all by Jenkins, their coachman, and I am sure Miss Blake wouldn’t keep a man in her service who didn’t speak the truth!”

Sir James paused, feeling his last words were

quite unanswerable—even Maria must feel them to be so.

The air was heavy and sultry though it was barely nine o'clock, and dark clouds were slowly gathering on the horizon. Sir James, who was rather short and inclined to be stout, always felt the heat very much, and stood gently fanning his bald head with his handkerchief, waiting for Maria's verdict. She was lying in bed propped up with pillows, her breakfast-tray before her. She always breakfasted in bed, and spent all the morning in her own room, for her stock of strength was very scanty, and required much careful tending. Her brother did not often look in upon her at so early an hour, but to-day the news he brought was so important he felt it could not possibly wait until tea time, or even luncheon. Anne Blake had disappeared the evening before.

“What a ferment it will cause in the neighbourhood! Why, my dear Maria, Jane Blake won't be able to hold up her head again, and as for Miss

Emma, it will kill her, 'pon my soul it will! A nice ending it will be for that little headstrong hussy to break her aunts' hearts and set everyone by the ears! Now I shouldn't wonder if we find she's run off to join that young Stevens, you know he was always hanging round her whenever he could get the chance at Mrs. Taylor's, and he's a young rascal if ever there was one, and quite capable of such a thing. Now mark my words, Maria, you'll find that Anne has cut herself off from all her relations, and no one will see her or hear of her again."

There was positively a tone of relish in his last words which grieved Maria's upright mind even more than his appalling news.

"My dear James, I am thankful there is no one near to hear your words, for you speak as if something most terrible and disgraceful had occurred, and as if you positively enjoyed it. Now do remember that we have heard nothing and know nothing beyond the mere fact that that poor child



has left her aunt's house rather suddenly ; and, you see, after all it is only through the postman that you've heard it, so even that may be exaggerated ; but if it is not, there is nothing dreadful or scandalous in the news. That poor girl must have had a dreary time of it. I've often wished we could have seen more of her, though an old woman like I am, and an invalid too, could not perhaps be of much use in brightening the world for an impetuous young girl. I'm often sorry for young things, for they have a hard time of it. Perhaps she has gone off to see her mother's relations. You remember how unfortunate her father's marriage was, and how his wife's family was never recognized by the Blakes. Wasn't Mrs. Blake an actress? I once saw her, and thought her a very nice clever woman."

"'Gad, she was a splendid woman ! I remember her at a party at her own house. None of Blake's old friends would go but Forbes and I, though I know lots of men who wouldn't have cut him for the matter of that, confound them, if she had not

been his wife——” He did not finish his sentence, for Maria was one of those people in whose presence it seems impossible to use any evil word.

“James, dear, I think you exaggerate; I can hardly think things were so bad as that, for you know the Blakes are most honourable people, and would have considered him much more disgraced if he had never married her. You know she rescued him from that terrible life of dissipation he was leading; indeed they all felt grateful to her, as I remember once hearing Emma say, but old Mr. Blake and Jane could never forgive him for marrying out of his station—and you know I believe his wife’s mother was a very vulgar disagreeable person. Ah, well, old Mr. Blake had to suffer dreadfully, poor man, for bringing up his family so strictly, and now Miss Blake will have to suffer too! Poor little Anne! Now do remember, James, that we have heard no dreadful news of her yet; so do not let your imagination run away with you downstairs, and do not be so unjust to yourself as to make them

think you relish gossip in proportion to its amount of scandal ; you know you're the kindest and best of brothers, but you will always do yourself such terrible injustice ; you're as sorry for Anne in your heart as I am."

Sir James stooped and kissed Maria's forehead, and his throat required a good deal of loud clearing before he said he must go down to breakfast.

"You're the best woman I ever met, Maria, 'pon my honour you are,"—she heard him mutter as he closed the door.

Downstairs at breakfast with Colonel Forbes and his son, and two or three other guests, he strove hard, in accordance with Maria's injunctions, to restrain himself from adding any daring and original conjectures to the tale of Anne's flight. It was a difficult task he found, especially as Colonel Forbes seemed to know even more about it than he did, and denied that Emma had taken to her bed, or that Anne's destination was unknown, for she had left word that she had gone to London.

Really something must be done to add flavour to Colonel Forbes matter-of-fact statements, so very soon he was once more gliding off into more exciting speculations.

“ I wonder now what Mrs. Taylor will say to it all ; she did everything she could to make up a match between Miss Anne and that young scamp Stevens, but if she finds now they've run off together she'll be in a terrible dilemma ! Whether to recognize them, or turn a cold shoulder on all the Blake family will be her difficulty ! Whether to offend against the laws of propriety, or offend Miss Jane ! 'Pon my soul I should like to be there and hear all she says to that gouty old husband of hers ; she'll be nagging at him for an hour together about it.”

Sir James's flow of talk was suddenly checked by his catching sight of Bernard's face. Bernard always found it immensely difficult to tolerate Sir James and his gossip. He recognized the kindly spirit at the bottom which belied his words,



but the reckless manner in which speculation grew into certified fact in the old baronet's mind annoyed and irritated him.

Conversation flagged, for the other guests did not know Mrs. Taylor. They were country squires, one of them with his wife, and belonged to that now dying-out class of society which does not bow to an aristocracy of wealth, and which totally ignores "trade" of every form, considering that all buying and selling, however remote in your genealogy leaves an uncleansable stain of soapy servility, and a certain brutality of manner towards inferiors.

A remark on the prospects of the grouse shooting—for this was the first week in August—caused an immediate glow of animation, which Bernard steadily kept up, and poor Sir James was obliged to finish his breakfast in silence.

He would have been much delighted could he have known that his suggestion about Stevens had struck a deep chord of apprehension in Bernard's

mind, causing him to set off instantly after breakfast to Monkshalton.

As he walked rapidly along over the short soft grass, for his path lay over a sheep-cropped hill-side and through a wood full of stately beech trees, he thought over the last few weeks, and what had been silently growing and ripening which neither he nor anyone else had been wise enough to observe or understand. His talk with Anne three weeks ago at the winter parlour window came back to him with startling clearness. Why had he been so blind, so dense, he thought bitterly, as not to realize the earnestness and the misery underlying the poor child's words. He remembered the sound of the mowing, the soft rubbing of the cat's smooth fur; why, even these trivial things seemed more vivid to him now than her helpless appeal to him. What a cursed egoist he was, everyone was, to live and live beside fellow humans and never understand, never even see the mute appeals for help and sympathy with which their words and looks are ever ringing!

But then what could he have done? It would have been of no use his telling Anne how he worshipped her, she would only have laughed at such an idea, he sadly reflected. Jane's rigidity and Emma's weakness had tightened the coil round the child, and neither of these chains could he have burst asunder ; all the more as he felt he was but a most clumsy and blundering creature.

He took off his cap so that he might the better feel the soothing power of those strong helpers, wind and sunshine, but to-day neither wind nor sun beat on him. Thunder-clouds were gathering, and the topmost leaves, in the wood he was entering, were turning up white melancholy edges, whilst round him all was still and close.

He hurried on and reached the Blakes' door very hot and decidedly cross ; very unlike the usual kind, rather reverential nephew Miss Emma found him, when he was shown into the drawing-room, where she was tearfully studying Bradshaw, with all the blinds drawn down.

“I drew them down,” she said, as he walked to the window, and began rather fiercely to pull them up, “for I couldn’t bear to see those cows staring at me through the railings ; besides, it doesn’t seem quite right to have all this light in the room—and noise,” she added, as Bernard threw up the window with a loud clatter, for the air in the room seemed almost to stifle him.

“Tell me where Anne is and what you are doing—not a moment ought to be lost. We’ve all been wasting time enough these past ten years, ever since she came to live with you indeed. Why did nobody see it before, or do anything?”

His own remorse, which grew keener every moment, as he looked round the room where everything spoke to him of Anne, made him eager to put the blame on to every available person, to scold some one—any one—furiously, so that the severity of his words and tone startled Emma and brought an unlooked for fear to her mind. Was



Bernard, her one true friend, going to turn against her too?

The same feeling working in Jane's mind had caused a quarrel between her and Emma this morning before the former set off for town ; and Emma still felt shaky and unstrung, even though Jane, at the very last moment, had tried to smooth things down a little by giving her sister a decided kiss instead of the usual peck, and saying in a kindly tone, "Take care of yourself whilst I am away, and, as it seems likely to rain, you might have a fire in the sitting-room (Jane never said drawing-room) to-night ; tell Henry to light it." Who had ever before heard of a fire in August at Monkshalton !

But not even that concession could wipe out the remembrance of the first outburst of wrath, when Jane came down to breakfast with a note in her hand in Anne's writing, which she had found tied on to the handle outside her door. In it Anne stated that she was going up to London to try and

do something, for she was so miserable at Monkshalton, and caused nothing but unhappiness to both her aunts. She had ten pounds with her, and they need not be at all anxious about her, for she was going to some friends, and would write again when she had decided what to do.

“Emma, this is your doing, your indiscretion and weakness with that foolish girl have ruined her ! I told you, when you insisted on her going to the Taylors, that we should live to repent it, and now you see what has come of it ; but, of course, I cannot expect *you* to see or care about these things as I do, after what you did yourself.”

Jane knew in her heart that her words were unjust, and the allusion to Emma's youth most ungenerous, and she longed for her sister to stand up and upbraid her ; it would be so much easier to respect Emma if she would but get angry sometimes.

For a moment a wave of rebellion, strong and deep, flowed through Emma's soul, followed by

such a bitter hatred against Jane, that it seemed to scorch her like a flame ; but she could find no outward means of expression for it, beyond a sudden keen look into Jane's stormy face. Jane met the look and for an instant felt uneasy, as if some alien force had suddenly sprung up which was beyond her ken. It was a survival of this uneasiness which made her order the fire, though she knew somehow, as Emma also knew, that that moment could never be forgotten, and that some flash had passed over them whose fiery trail would never be effaced.

“ My dear Bernard, everything has been done. Jane has gone off to town with Coates ; Coates seems to have an idea that Anne may be at Mrs. Taylor's, though I cannot help thinking she may be with her mother's people. You know she has never been told about them, as Jane thought it was better not, but I fancy she must have found out something about them lately. You remember old Hodgson, who was a farm-labourer till he was

too old to work and had to be pensioned, he adored our dear brother, and always took his part in everything, and Anne has been latterly constantly taking him soup and jellies and things, and now I begin to think he must have been telling her something about her mother. I thought it was nice for her to find something to do, that seemed to interest her, since Jane forbade her to go outside the gates and I really didn't mention her visits, so that Jane knows nothing at all about them ; and now I find the poor old man is beginning to wander in his head—he has been bed-ridden for a long time—so that, when I went down this morning to question him, he couldn't understand a word of what I was saying. I don't know what to do. I begged Jane to go to Camden Town where those people live, and though she was very angry with me for mentioning them, I am quite sure she will go to them."

"But have you never thought of that fellow Stevens," interrupted Forbes ; "where is he, what



is he doing? has Anne heard anything of him lately?"

There was an eager sound in his voice which surprised Emma : she suddenly felt as if all these years she had never quite known Bernard after all, for this hurried irritable manner was quite a new phase of him, which she had never seen before, and the thought flashed through her, could he have been in love with Anne and have only just now waked up to a consciousness of it? The idea grew stronger when he seized Bradshaw, and, turning over the leaves, began to find out the London trains.

"I can just catch the 1.40, I see, if I hurry home at once and drive down to the station. Good-bye, Aunt Emma, I'll see what I can do, and if she can be found and brought back, she shall."

"If she can, oh, my dear boy, you don't think, you don't mean that anything terrible has happened? You know Anne is very bright and capable ; she cannot have lost herself or——"

“My dear Aunt,” broke in Bernard, eager to be gone, “don’t be anxious; it will all come right. Good-bye—but oh, what fools we’ve all been,” he muttered to himself, as he went out, leaving Emma standing on the front door steps tearfully watching him as he strode down the drive.

“What can Bernard mean?” she thought; “surely he doesn’t think Anne would run away to see Mr. Stevens!” but suddenly came the remembrance of her own flight long ago. Was it possible that life was as dull to Anne as it had been to her in her youth? no wonder, then, that Bernard was angry with her, for neither he nor any one else would ever know how much she cared for the child, no one ever saw anything but her stupid inexpressive exterior.

“I think Anne guessed, but she has left me.”

A vivid flash and a loud peal of thunder made her fly back into the house and shut herself into the library, as being the darkest and therefore the safest room in the house. She always suffered

greatly during a thunderstorm, but less when Jane was not present to scold her for her terror. Great book-cases lined the room and tall-backed chairs stood in a gloomy row : Emma sat on one of them trembling, and holding tightly on to the arm, shivering as the thunder grew louder and more incessant. Suddenly there came a rush of rain, a flooding downpour, tearing up plants, dashing the gravel over the grass borders, bending the flowers into the mud. Emma's hands relaxed their hold, and she leaned back with a deep sigh, feeling as if a heavy bond had loosened its hold on her heart, as if the pouring of the rain had brought peace to her mind.





## CHAPTER IX.

**J**ANE arrived in London at about three o'clock, and drove straight to Mrs. Taylor's house in Bayswater, feeling slightly nervous as she drew near the house, for she began to realise that it might be difficult to announce her errand without letting Mrs. Taylor guess that something serious was the matter. She sat, however, as uprightly and looking as impassive as ever, so that Coates, who was sitting opposite with her veil drawn down trying to hide the tears which would flow as she thought of poor dear Miss Anne, could not detect that anything unusual was passing in her mistress's mind.

Mrs. Taylor came rustling into the dining-room where Jane had been shown in, feeling extremely



anxious as to what it could be that brought Miss Blake up to town at this time of year. She and her husband were starting for Scotland that night, and she felt rather annoyed too, that Jane should come and find the best rooms all tied up in dust-sheets. She began profusely apologising, as soon as they had shaken hands, for the confusion in the house.

“I am so sorry, dear Miss Blake, that you have to come into this room ; it really isn't fit for any one to sit in ; you must have some tea, you really must, and then—” “Thank you,” broke in Jane, “I never take tea so early in the afternoon, and as for the room being untidy I suppose every one house-cleans, though I must say it seems rather late in the year to begin. We always have it done in May, and then you feel clean for the summer. I merely called in, however, to enquire whether my niece had been here this morning. She came up to see her relations and I thought she might have called to see you on her way to them.”

Jane had planned this version of Anne's flight during her journey, with much care, but the slight tremor in her voice as she made a statement so revolting to her severely literal mind, made Mrs. Taylor suspect something was wrong. In spite of her delight at the idea of finding out some thrilling piece of scandal, she began to feel a little sorry for the dignified old lady sitting opposite her, for she saw on looking attentively at her that there was a look of fatigue and sadness on her face, which she had never seen there before, and the feathers in her bonnet were trembling as with some emotion the proud figure was endeavouring to suppress. Still she had an irresistible desire to find out all about it. She had always wanted to know more than she did about Anne's relations and her parentage, and this was a most golden opportunity. Perhaps, too, Miss Blake would feel relieved by a few sympathetic questions and would gradually be induced to unburden herself.

“No, indeed, your niece has not been to see me ;

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what a lovely girl she is! and has she really gone to see her relatives? Her mother's people I suppose you mean. How proud they must be of her! every one admires her so. Cyril Stevens was quite over head and ears in love with her! When did she leave Monkshalton? Mr. Taylor is at home, I'll ring and ask him to come in and tell you if he knows anything about her. I'm afraid you feel quite anxious."

Before Jane could speak the bell was rung. She saw Mrs. Taylor had found out that something was wrong, but the fatigue of a five-hours' railway journey had somewhat unnerved her, and she could only feel wearily how difficult and repulsive was the task before her.

Mr. Taylor came stumbling in immediately; he was always glad of having an opportunity to talk with Miss Blake. "She doesn't pester you with silly gossip like other women do," he always said of her, "and she has the best head for business I ever met; why she knows more about investments and

what pays and what doesn't than I do myself, and yet with all that there isn't a better manager of her house to be found anywhere."

"Well, my dear Miss Blake, how are crops getting on in your part of the world?" He knew nothing about such things, being entirely town-bred, but he liked to think he did and to make others think so too.

"Miss Blake hasn't come to talk about crops, Mr. Taylor, but about her niece; she has come up to town to find her, I think. We shall be only too glad to be of any use to her that we can, I am sure. It's most unfortunate that we are leaving for Scotland to-night, but we might perhaps——"

Jane drew herself up; this dreadful woman and her vulgar probing after the truth must be silenced, cost what it might.

"Thank you, but you have entirely misunderstood the whole case. *You* will quite understand, Mr. Taylor," she went on, turning towards him, "that sometimes business requires one's presence



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in town even in August, and I never leave anything to others which concerns my affairs. As Anne has gone to see her mother's relations, I merely called in here, in passing, to see whether she had been here, as I particularly wished to see her, and hoped thus to save myself the long drive to Camden Town."

She brought out the last words clearly and firmly, for she could never, she hoped, be guilty of the extreme vulgarity of ignoring obscure relations just because they were obscure, as Mrs. Taylor did. A relation was always a relation, and perhaps this might be a good opportunity for reading the silly woman a lesson.

"We have never visited with my brother's wife's family, because we did not approve of their mode of life; besides, to us they are only connections, not relations; but it is only right and proper that Anne should see her relations sometimes, even though they are in a different rank of life from herself. No one has a right to be ashamed of any

position in which Providence may have seen fit to place them, and none but vulgar persons wish to ignore their forbears and force themselves into a different level in society."

She rose from her chair, and, looking straight at Mrs. Taylor, shook hands with her, and before that incensed lady could collect herself sufficiently to make a suitable reply, was in her cab, bowing most graciously to Mr. Taylor, whom she left standing at the hall door.

As he came back into the room, Mrs. Taylor, who was eagerly awaiting him, burst into bitter abuse of Miss Blake.

"I never knew such a rude, ill-mannered woman as that Miss Blake is! giving herself such airs, laying down the law and behaving as if all the rest of the world were mere *parvenus*—mere vulgar upstarts! Why, Anne Blake's relations, from what she said, must be dreadful people, living in Camden Town! people whom no one visits, no one, and *we*, why we know everyone——"

“My dear,” broke in Mr. Taylor, “did you imagine Miss Blake was referring to us, for if you did you were quite mistaken ; Miss Blake and I are very old friends, I have the highest esteem for her, and she always behaves in the most courteous and dignified manner to me.”

“Do you mean to imply by that, Mr. Taylor, that she reserves her snubs and her insolence for *me?*”

“I mean to imply nothing beyond what I said, nothing—nothing except that I wish you would let me have some peace. Now you’ll go on nagging at me all the afternoon about Miss Blake ! it will be Miss Blake, Miss Blake, all the time, till I shall wish I had never set eyes on her or her family,” growled Mr. Taylor, forgetting in his rising anger his former expressions of esteem for Jane Blake.

“Well, I only hope that niece of theirs will bring them all into trouble, and make them feel that after all they’re of the same flesh and blood as other people ; it will only serve them right if she has

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run away with Cyril Stevens and disgraced herself."

"Mrs. Taylor," thundered out her husband, "I won't have such scandalous words said in my house! You heard what Miss Blake said about her niece, you know perfectly well there's not an atom of truth in such a notion, and if you ever repeat it, madam, by George, I'll make you repent."

He stood leaning on his stick which the gout compelled him always to use, glowering at his wife from under his shaggy white eye-brows, his red face looking almost purple with excitement, till Mrs. Taylor, not unused to such outbreaks, retreated sulkily upstairs, to superintend her packing.

"What a fool I was to marry that woman!" he thought as he stood alone in the gloomy room with its rows of light oak chairs and light oak sideboard. "I wish Jane Blake would have had me," he sighed; "but I wasn't good enough for her I suppose. She was a deuced fine girl in her young days, plenty of spirit too; but I hadn't enough brains for her, let



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alone other things. I wonder why she never married. I should have thought a fine woman like her might have had her pick of all the men."

Jane, driving along to Camden Town, was also thinking of the days of her youth, when Collingwood Taylor was an elegant young man who wore his hair rather long and read Byron aloud to his lady friends.

"I sometimes think I might have overruled my father's objections and had him, if he hadn't always read so much Byron, I so vastly preferred Pope. I never could make much out of 'Childe Harold,' nothing ever could compare with the 'Rape of the Lock,' to my mind! But I am thankful now that things were ordered as they were, for any one who could marry such a woman as that Mrs. Taylor, and not see through her, could not have been a man of much sense.

"'She who ne'er answers till a husband cools!'

Well, well, poor Collingwood Taylor!"

An immense load was lifted from her mind when the little maid of all work, who answered the cabman's thundering knock at No. 17, Hunter Street, Camden Town, said yes, Miss Anne Blake was in, had arrived that morning very early. She had not realised how heavy the load of anxiety had been, till it was thus suddenly taken away, and it was with renewed vigour that she stepped into the dingy parlour and sat awaiting her niece's appearance. She looked at the ugly furniture, at the wax flowers on the mantel-shelf, at the cottage piano with green silk panels, and wondered how Anne could have possibly chosen to come to such a place ; but then, of course, she had not known what she was coming to, and perhaps now that she had seen it and realised it, she would be amenable to reason, and would come quietly and sensibly home, and not talk any more silly nonsense about being stifled at Monkshalton. Perhaps, after all, it would have been wiser to have let her see something of these relations of hers before, and let her know for

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herself what unsuitable people they were ; but there, you never could trust Anne to arrive at any sensible conclusion. She was always so high flown and Quixotic in her notions. Her reflections had just reached this point when the door opened and in came Anne.

She was looking very pale, but her eyes were very bright and eager.

“ How pretty the child is ! ” thought Jane, as she noticed the bright expression on the face, which, now she thought of it, generally looked rather cross and gloomy when they were all at Monkshalton. The remembrance shot a slight pang through her, and somewhat neutralised the gradual softening towards the run-away which her mind had been experiencing whilst she had been waiting in the little parlour.

Anne stood nervously by the table, covered with albums, uncertain whether to shake hands, or kiss her aunt, or what to do. What could she be going to say? Would she tell her Emma was ill, and

that her flight had caused her illness? She saw Jane's face was grey and full of lines; how old she looked too! At Monkshalton she had never seemed old or feeble, but in this little hideous room, without anything to soften down her outlines, her age suddenly started into sight. Anne's heart began to beat faster, and her eyes to fill with tears as she looked at the stern upright figure before her, with a face haggard and worn as she had never seen it before. Nervously she began to tell how she had heard from old Hodgson about her mother and her mother's people, and how it had all surprised and overwhelmed her, and made her feel miserable, and ashamed that she should be living in comfort and luxury whilst they were poor and neglected; and that when she heard her grandmother was still alive, and living in this tiny house with only one servant, she felt she must come and share her lot, she must come and give her some of that love and service which she felt was owing to her.

"I don't care about riches and comfort, Aunt



Jane, I would rather be poor, I would rather stay in this hideous place, and feel I was doing something, really living for some one."

"Anne," said Miss Blake suddenly, in her usual firm voice, "Hodgson omitted to mention that your relatives are only poor through their own fault. Your uncle, your mother's brother, is an incurable drunkard, and his family, in consequence, are badly off—the others are all dead, and your grandmother receives £150 a year from me, which she mostly spends on her son. However," she continued, before Anne could reply, and with a tremble of indignation in her voice, "since you prefer to be with these people instead of with your father's relations, and as you seem to think Monkshalton is the last place you wish to live at, you must abide by your choice. I will therefore give you up to the care of Mrs. Turner. I do not wish to entertain any of these people at Monkshalton, and, of course, you will not care to come to any place where they are not received; as you say yourself, you have cast

in your lot with theirs. How your Aunt Emma will receive the news, I do not know, but I hardly imagine you will care, for you must have foreseen the consequences of your clandestine behaviour before you planned it out. But perhaps you had informed your aunt of this romantic escapade, for I remember how she strongly advised me to come here to seek you. I must congratulate both you and her on the success of your scheme. Of course you will now consider yourself, I suppose, free to marry any one whom you please, but you must fully understand that you will inherit nothing at my death ; £100 a year, when you come of age, is all you will ever receive——”

“ Aunt Jane,” broke in Anne indignantly, “ don’t speak so, you know I don’t want your money ! I would rather starve than touch your money if you don’t approve of my conduct. I came here because I felt I ought to do so, and I knew, if I asked you, you wouldn’t let me come, and it might get Aunt Emma into a scrape, or make her ill ; she knows

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nothing about it, I never told her anything. You know, you must know, I don't care about your money, and I don't want any of it."

Jane rose from her chair, trembling with anger and disgust.

"It is useless to waste further time here; I must go back to my hotel. To-morrow morning I return to Monkshalton. It is to be hoped that your scorn of money and good breeding will stand you in good stead all your life."

She went to the door without even holding out her hand to say good-bye. Anne seized hold of her cloak to stop her for an instant.

"Do you mean I am never to see Monkshalton again—never to see the flowers and woods again—never to see Aunt Emma again?" she said in a hoarse whisper.

Jane coldly drew away her cloak, and smoothed out the crease Anne's fingers had made.

"It is your own doing, not mine. I came prepared to take you back with me, but your own

words soon dispelled that idea. Probably Emma will now find out that she despises money as much as you do, and will join you in this house you both seem to find so desirable, since you scheme and plot behind my back to come to it. You cannot return to Monkshalton unless you give up these people, so I leave the decision to you."

"Then good-bye, Aunt Jane," retorted Anne, anger and indignation completely getting the better of her. "I thank you for your care of me and the money you have spent on me ; but if you had made me love you I would never have left you. I shall never come to Monkshalton again ; I shall stay here, and work and be free instead of being chained up there."

They had reached the street door, and Anne saw Coates' tearful face looking out of the cab window. She ran down the steps to her.

"Good-bye, dear Coates, good-bye ; I am never coming back. You may have all my dresses, and



do take care of my dear cat ; don't let him get lost in the woods, or caught in traps."

She could say no more, for Jane got into the cab, and the door closed ; but Anne leaned over the window, and said in a low, clear voice,—

"Aunt Jane, you know as well as I do that Aunt Emma had nothing whatever to do with my coming here. How you will break it all to her I don't know—I daren't think, but remember, it is all your doing, and if she suffers it is your fault, not mine."

Jane drew up the window, the cab drove off, and Anne returned into the little dull house and shut the door. Upstairs she heard a feeble, querulous voice saying,—

"Anne, what a long time you are away ! Why don't you come and give me my medicine ? Why, you're more forgetful than Kezia."

She went up the narrow staircase with a sigh.



## CHAPTER X.

**T**HE next morning at about ten o'clock Bernard Forbes stood outside the dingy yellow door with a black knocker, of No. 17, Hunter Street.

He had found the evening before that Stevens was out of town, and had been abroad no one knew where for the last fortnight ; so, relieved from his anxiety about him in connection with Anne and her disappearance from Monkshalton, he had come to find out if she were with her grandmother, Mrs. Turner, and if she were, whether anything could be done to induce her to come home again. He felt rather ashamed of himself for having supposed she could have had anything to do with Cyril Stevens, and was wondering what could have suggested such

an absurd idea to him, when the door was opened by Anne herself.

As had been the case with Jane, his relief was so great at seeing her again safe and well, that he found it difficult to speak to her, till Anne had showed him into the same little parlour where she had had her interview with Miss Blake the day before, and shut the door. She then instantly began a long string of eager questions about Emma.

“Has Aunt Emma sent you here? Is she very miserable? Does she hate me for running off like this, or does she understand? Please tell me all about her, and what she thinks, for I have hardly thought of anything else since Aunt Jane left me yesterday afternoon. I wrote to Aunt Emma last night—she would get the letter this morning—and I said I should work to make a home for her and me, where we could live happily together without Aunt Jane; and I told her how I love her.”

“Then Miss Blake has been here! What a pity!

how I wish I could have seen you first, for I know she will have turned everything exactly the wrong way. I saw Aunt Emma yesterday morning, and she told me she thought you might be here. No, she doesn't hate you—no one could ever do that—and she isn't angry. She is very unhappy; you have made her very unhappy, but that of course you can imagine. To have lost you is to have lost everything she cares for most. Anne, my dear child," he went on, with a very gentle tone in his voice which seemed to Anne to reproach her more than any anger could have done, "don't think I am going to scold you or find fault with you, for I have felt ever since I heard you had gone how much, how very much, I ought to, and do, reproach myself for not having tried to help you out of your repressed life at Monkshalton. But tell me, did you not reflect how miserable you would make your aunts, yes, both your aunts? Don't shake your head so defiantly, for Jane is very much cut up about it too, I am sure. Did you not see that it was not a



right thing to do, to run away secretly and leave your guardians—parents I might call them? Don't you see one can never shirk one's duties in an illegitimate manner as you have done without causing suffering somewhere, to some one who probably has no right to suffer?"

"Yes, yes, Bernard, I know what you mean," broke in Anne eagerly, "I thought much about all that, but then you see I suddenly heard about my mother, and how her people were poor, and how her mother, my grandmother, was here alone and miserable. Hodgson said so——"

"Confound Hodgson," muttered Forbes, under his breath.

"And I was, oh! so desperate at home. Things had been growing worse and worse. I believe Aunt Jane really hates me, and I only made constant quarrels between her and Aunt Emma. Aunt Emma has been really becoming quite ill, you know she is always having palpitations or something. I thought if I were really to leave them, they might

get on more peaceably together. And I was becoming wicked, for all day long I never could think of anything but of how I hated Aunt Jane, and how I wished she were dead. Whatever I did, or wherever I went, that thought followed me. Oh, Bernard, what was I to do?"

The pain in the sound of her voice made Forbes shiver, he felt he could bear the repression he had always kept over himself no longer, and what had been growing steadily within him for so long must be told.

"Anne, dear Anne, is there nothing, nothing which could fill your life, nothing which could make you happy even at Monkshalton? Don't misunderstand me, don't think I am saying something which I have only just thought of. For years, I believe since I first saw you at Monkshalton standing in the hall holding Emma's hand, I have cared for you, worshipped you, with every fibre of my heart and being; but I knew you have always looked upon me as quite an old person, and

I have tried with all my strength to repress it, and never let you know, for I was afraid you would detest me if you found it out. Like a selfish brute, I have been thinking of myself and my own pain, and never seen your unhappiness growing greater each day! Now is it all too late, can I do nothing? Oh, my dear, my dear, don't say I can be of no use to you, for even if you can never care for me, at least let me care for you, and let me try to help you; there is nothing in the world can give me so much happiness."

Was this really Bernard who was speaking, Anne thought, thoroughly aroused, and aghast at what he had said. She had never heard such a deep passionate ring in his voice before, and now he was standing looking at her with tremulous eagerness and his eyes full of a brilliant light.

Her surprise was so overwhelming, she could not speak, she could only hold on to the back of a chair with both hands and look at him in a dazed manner. There was a breathless silence; overhead

Anne heard Kezia dusting her grandmother's room, and outside in the street an old-fashioned, rather wheezy organ was playing "A chè la morte."

"Bernard," she said at last in a trembling voice, "how sorry I am! oh, how sorry I am!" she repeated as she saw the light fade out of his face. "What can I do, what can I say? I cannot—no, I cannot, say what you will like to hear, for such a tremendous idea never occurred to me before—never; it seems so very, very strange, so impossible that you—you and I——" she concluded brokenly.

"Yes, Anne, I know, I know of course you never thought of such a thing and I am a fool. Will you never, can you never think of it? Don't shake your head, don't say anything, for anything, any uncertainty is better than that. Do not let us say any more about it now, forget it all for a time, only don't forbid me to speak of it again to you, don't——"

He stopped, and Anne felt she could not answer him, could not deny him such a seemingly doubtful



privilege. A quieter look stole over his face at her silence and his voice sounded more like himself when he asked,—

“What did Miss Blake say yesterday, and what conclusion did you both arrive at?”

He walked to the window and stood with his back to Anne, looking out into the sunshine. The organ played on, but the tune had changed to “Life on the Ocean Wave” and sounded less melancholy. Anne felt very guilty and miserable, and still more so when he turned round and looked at her with the old friendly smile in his brown eyes, his face somewhat paler than usual and with rather a drawn look round his mouth.

“Well, what did you both say?” he repeated.

“We had a dreadful quarrel, and it ended in her saying she would never leave me any money, as if I cared for that! and that she supposed I should never come to Monkshalton again. I must choose between that place and Mrs. Turner here, and of course I cannot desert this poor thing now—you

don't know how glad she is, she says, to have me. Aunt Jane was very horrid about Aunt Emma, very horrid. She made out we had planned my coming here and that Emma had helped me, and knew all about it. I told her she knew it was not so at all, but I feel very miserable about it. I can never live with Aunt Jane again—never—it is useless to try and persuade me to do it, but I don't know what to do about Aunt Emma. Can you advise me—can you help me? What would you do if you were me?"

In her renewed interest in the old question of how to settle her difficulties, she had forgotten Bernard's passionate appeal.

"I think you ought to come back to the Blakes. Why do you consider the claims upon you here are stronger than the claims there? Don't you find, too, that the feeling of being tied up, is as strong here as there? I think that you exaggerate your duty to Mrs. Turner simply because her poverty and obscurity give her a charm in your

romantic eyes. You have such a very decided scorn, at least you think you have, for the comforts and luxuries of life, such a strong love for asceticism, like most ardent young minds, that you have invested your grandmother and her belongings with a halo of sanctity which really I don't believe exists. Your grandmother never claimed you, never asked for you to come and see her. I know you will think me hard and unsympathetic when I say that I believe she will get some money out of you ; for she adores that son of hers, and he is always getting every penny out of her that he can."

"It's not a question of whether she wants me or not, so much as that I feel I ought to be here ; I ought to be living her life and not leading a false existence of idleness at Monkshalton ; I ought to share her lot, for her people are my people, and what they suffer I ought to suffer too."

Bernard sighed, for he knew Anne's obstinate nature of old.

"But why," he said, "why exile yourself in this

absurd manner, and grieve those who have looked after you during most of your life for the sake of a romantic idea of self-sacrifice; a self-sacrifice that does no one any good, only harm, as far as I can see? Mrs. Turner's people are not any more your relations than are Miss Blake and Miss Emma. But it's not that which determines you not to return to Monkshalton, it is the depression and enforced idleness, as you say, and Miss Blake's overwhelming personality."

He paused a moment, but Anne looked as resolute as ever, so he continued in a resigned tone,—

"Well, well, perhaps you had better stay here for a time, and I will go back and tell Aunt Emma about you, and we will talk over together what can be done. But what do you mean to do here?"

"Oh, I have not had time yet to think about anything. I do some of the house work, and I have a plan which I have often thought about at home, but I will write and tell you about it later,



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when I have arranged things more. It is about my singing, for that is the only thing I can do well, and it is the thing I care for most. But don't let us talk about it, for I want to think it all out first, before I tell any one about it."

Forbes sighed as he stood up. "When shall I see her again?" was the chief thought in his mind, but he dared not put it into words.

"Well, I suppose I must be going now if I mean to catch the one o'clock train home again," he said, taking up his hat. He felt awkward about saying good-bye, with the remembrance of his impassioned words to Anne vibrating within him; ordinary words he could not use, for he had been too much stirred to fall back into them as yet.

He longed to say something more, but he dared not, lest he should make her refuse that small concession he had gained concerning the future.

Anne dimly divined something of what was passing in his mind, but did not know what to say; partly from a feeling of shyness, partly because she

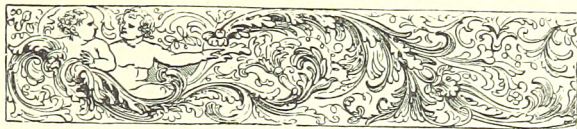
greatly feared any return to that strange, and to her, incomprehensible outbreak on Forbes' part.

Their good-bye was rather hurriedly said, and Forbes felt somewhat aggrieved when Anne closed the door on him almost before he could answer her unnecessarily profuse messages to Emma.

He would have minded less had he known that she ran instantly to the parlour-window, and watched his tall figure walking rapidly down the street. When he was out of sight she looked round the empty room and wondered at its forlornness.

The organ had come round to "A chère la morte" again, but had moved into another street, and the notes came to her ears with a mournful intermittence.





## CHAPTER XI.

**W**HEN Miss Blake returned to her hotel after her interview with Anne, she wrote to Emma, announcing her return next day by the train arriving about four o'clock in the afternoon at Halton, but she made no reference to Anne beyond the news that she was safe and well, though not returning to Monkshalton.

All day long Emma's nervousness and agitation steadily increased. She had received Anne's letter, but it contained no definite news, only incoherent protestations of affection, and plans for a distant future of happiness, which Emma and she were to share together, unclouded by Aunt Jane's presence, so that she still felt completely in the dark as to

what had really happened and why Anne was not returning home. Her efforts to subdue her excitement, for she knew how annoyed Jane would be if she were not quite calm, only made it worse, till by five o'clock, when Jane was due, she felt really ill.

Henry, and Sarah, the head housemaid, were in Mrs. Wilton's room, discoursing over their tea upon Emma's restlessness, and admiring the superior class of mind to which Miss Blake belonged.

"Now you never see Missis flustered," said Mrs. Wilton, "never; only once do I remember such a thing, and that was when one of the Chelsea Shepherds was broken into small pieces by one of the housemaids. I shall never forget that as long as I live. It was before you came, Henry, and you may be thankful it was, for none of us had any peace day or night for a week afterwards. She seemed to be everywhere, seeing everything and hearing everything, you durstn't lift a finger lest Missis should be on you scolding about something. It was before Master died, and even he trembled



that week, I fancy," she concluded in a triumphant tone, for old Mr. Blake had never been beloved by his household, and any one who could make him tremble was consequently an object of admiration and respect.

"It's a pity that Miss Emma takes on so," said Henry, "it only makes Miss Blake all that harder on her. If she'd only stand up to her and have it out with her, things would go a deal more easily between 'em. At luncheon-time, when I see Miss Emma's hand tremble so as she can hardly hold her knife, I wish as some one would tell her to be firm, and give as good as she gets. Miss Blake likes them best as stand up to her and aren't frightened of her domineering ways."

"Well, I'm not so sure of that, Mr. Johnson," interposed Sarah, "for she's a hard one is Missis, and she likes to be the head. It's a sad pity about poor Miss Anne, she's had a dull time of it here. Many's the time when there's been some fun going on at supper, down in the kitchen, I've thought as

how that poor young thing would have liked some fun in her life too."

Sarah was of rather a romantic disposition like Coates, and, together with that lady, had long cherished secret hopes of obtaining Henry's affections; the rivalry between the two aspirants chiefly served as fuel to keep alive the flame which, owing to Henry's decided preference for Mrs. Wilton, would otherwise have died out. Sarah's sympathy therefore with Anne's seclusion at Monkshalton, and the rapid retreat from London and Cyril Stevens, was deep and warm, though in Mrs. Wilton's presence she dared not say so openly, as that worthy person was very severe on any sort of "courting and nonsense," as she termed it. Mr. Wilton was a wholly imaginary person, for she had never married, and was called Mrs. by courtesy.

"I must say though, Sarah, even you can hardly approve of Miss Anne's running away," said Mrs. Wilton in a reproving tone, "it seems a most extraordinary thing for a young lady to do, and I'm

afraid Missis will never get over it, she's that proud."

Wilton's first thought was always for Missis, for whom she had a deep reverence.

A bell loudly ringing caused a general hurried breaking-up, for it was the announcement of Jane's return.

Emma heard it, sitting in the dark library, and her heart stood still and her legs trembled so that she could scarcely walk straight across the hall, to meet her sister. She nervously put up her cheek to receive Jane's salute, and was startled when she saw how pale and worn her sister looked. She longed to begin questioning her at once, for she felt sure something most terrible must have happened to make Jane look like that; but she wisely forbore, knowing that questions asked immediately she arrived would only irritate her sister, and she would receive no answer but a reproof.

They walked solemnly into the sitting-room,

flooded with afternoon sunshine, and through the open windows came the drowsy murmur of bees in the flower-garden.

“Well, really, Emma, you ought to have drawn those blinds down, the sun does so fade the carpet; however, perhaps it does look rather nice to see the flowers”—and Jane sat down with a sigh in a large easy-chair facing the window.

Emma felt more alarmed than ever, for the softening clause about the flowers was an almost unprecedented thing. But Jane was thinking of the dreary little room in Hunter Street, and wondering more than ever how Anne could be so utterly lost to all common sense as deliberately to prefer it to this lovely scene. A great peacock walked slowly past the window with his tail well spread out.

“Well, you see the child has not come back with me. I went first to the Taylors’. What an ill-bred woman she is, to be sure! But they knew nothing about her there. Mrs. Taylor was very inquisitive



but I soon let her understand she would learn nothing from me! However, when I got to Camden Town, there was Anne with that woman Mrs. Turner—in Hunter Street.”

Miss Blake paused to loosen her bonnet-strings. Tea was brought in, and merely comparative remarks upon the weather in London and at Monkshalton were considered suitable whilst the men-servants were in the room. A most useless precaution, since Coates was solemnly and tearfully holding forth in Mrs. Wilton's room, where Henry's return was anxiously expected.

“Well,” said Emma, as the door closed and they were alone again, “how did she look? was she well?”

“Why, yes, I told you she was well in my letter—but she has behaved very wrongly—very wrongly. She declared she could never come home again; she talked a great deal of nonsense about being stifled here; I don't know what she means, I'm sure, nor what she wants! However, I gave her

the choice of coming back here with me, or living with those Turners. I said of course I should never receive any of them here, and at that she fired up and said her lot was with them ; very great nonsense I think it, and most unsuitable. I told her she would never have any of my property when I am gone. £100 a year is all she will ever get from me ; and when I got back to the hotel I sent for Pawson, and made him draw up a codicil then and there expressing my intentions with regard to her."

Emma's tears had been gathering slowly whilst Jane spoke, and when she paused for a moment after the announcement about the codicil, to drink her tea, her strongest efforts could not hide them, or prevent Jane from hearing a little bitter sob.

"Emma, I'm really surprised at you," said Jane severely—few things embarrassed or annoyed her so much as tears—"I really believe you think Anne is quite right, and that I, as usual, am behaving like a tyrant. Do you not see how ungrateful, how

inconsiderate her behaviour is, and how necessary it always was for her to be under strict control? But all your life you have opposed me and tried to thwart me; you always took Anne's part both secretly and before my face, so I suppose this is only what I must expect from you now——”

Jane's fatigue and disappointment that Anne had not come back with her made her tone intensely bitter.

“Jane, I will not bear it, I cannot, you have said such cruel, unjust things to me lately, things which you know are not true!”

Emma's voice was choked with tears, for all the weary restless waiting of the day had worn her out; and she could say no more, but sat gazing at the sunshine with blinded eyes, and shaking with sobs. The future looked so hopeless, so hideously dreary to her. They two for breakfast, for luncheon; they two for the solemn daily drive; no bright young face to come between them, no young arms to wrap themselves warmly round her neck.

Jane stirred her tea in grim silence. She would not answer Emma's petulant, hysterical accusations. Silence was more dignified and better suited to her position as older sister. Besides, there was no doubt she was in the right, and Emma must know that. She was always ready to dissolve into tears about nothing, and it was always best to be severe with that sort of people, for it did them good ; so there was profound silence in the room. Outside, the birds were silent too, for it was still hot and oppressive, in spite of the thunder the day before, and only the bees kept up their deep hum. Anne's cat suddenly leaped on to the window-sill and looked in cautiously, but, seeing no young mistress, jumped down again and sat curled up in the flower-beds.

"Even the animals don't love us like they love Anne!" exclaimed Emma involuntarily.

"Really, Emma, you talk great nonsense, and I consider, after all I have done for the child, gone up to town to bring her back and behaved with the



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greatest consideration so that people should not gossip about her, that your conduct to me is not what I have a right to expect. You don't seem to think the child's behaviour is a trial to me too. However, I shall know what to expect in the future!"

What was the use of saying anything to Jane? reflected Emma, she always turned anything the wrong way, and it was best to be silent. Still, there was more to learn about Anne, some more questions must be ventured on, however much they might irritate Jane.

"Did you see Mrs. Turner?" she said, in a conciliatory tone.

"Why, of course not; the woman's bed-ridden, and if she were not do you suppose I would have seen her? My business was with Anne, not with her, and, as Anne refused to come back with me, I could say no more and drove away. You see she will be twenty-one next week and can do as she likes then. I suppose she thought of that when she defied me so fiercely. It's a great pity our

brother did not leave her under my guardianship till she was some years older! However, it's all settled now, and there's no use in discussing it any longer. Anne knows what to expect from me, and Pawson has drawn it all up and I have signed it."

"How much I wish I had some money of my own!"

Emma's voice was passionate and eager, making Jane put down her cup so as to be able to look at her better. Emma really seemed to be coming out in an entirely new light, and would have to be treated in a different manner from what had been customary hitherto. The subject of their money had never been discussed between them before, being regarded as of much too delicate a nature, so that Emma's abrupt infringement of this unspoken rule was all the more startling.

"Yes, Jane, I do, for I should leave it all to that poor child. What have we ever done to make her love us? you don't love people simply because they feed and clothe you! She was shut up here

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and made to lead a dreary, narrow existence. It may be enough for us, but it is not enough for a young growing girl, and a bright active girl too, like Anne is ; and now, when she has chosen a harder and less luxurious lot with people of whom she knows nothing, but feels she might help, you must go and cut down her future in this cruel manner."

"Well, Emma, you know it is not my fault that you have no share in the estate, I hardly think you ought to reproach *me* for it. I think, when you have reflected on your words, you will wish them unsaid."

There was a dead silence after Jane's words, which were spoken in a deep voice which went to Emma's heart and stirred in her again the old love for her sister which had been slowly dwindling during the last few weeks. She remembered the little roll of notes placed with such unfailing regularity on her dressing-table. No, she thought, it was no use saying anything more about Anne, for Jane had certain fixed ideas about the child and

what was to be done for her, and it was useless trying to make her see things in a different light—besides—and again the old mistrust of herself and habitual deference to her sister's opinion returned to her mind, making her look timidly after Jane as she rose with a more stately step than usual, rang the bell, and began to collect her gloves and bonnet, which she had laid down.

“Let me carry them for you, dear Jane ; I should like to help you,” said Emma tremulously.

“Thank you, no, I prefer to do it myself,” said Jane in a cold voice. “Henry, tell Wilton I wish to see her in my room at once,” she added as the men came in to remove the tea-things. She sailed out of the room with her usual firm rather heavy step, without another word or glance.

Well, this was a most terrible state of things, reflected Emma as the door closed and she was left quite alone. Jane was evidently most deeply offended ; during all the years they had lived together, the subject of Emma's pennilessness and



the reason of it had never even been alluded to in the most distant manner, and now that it had thus suddenly leaped into notice, the breach it made was too deep, too dreadful ever to be bridged over again. Things would never settle back into their old grooves again, of that she felt sure, and now that there was no Anne left to relieve the close pressure of their minds, to relieve the sensation of being stifled by each other's presence, the future was too miserable to be thought of or dwelt upon.

She sat in a kind of stupor till the sun glided away from the flower-beds and long shadows stole across the grass. The cat jumped up into the room with a little appealing mew, and crept up to Miss Emma's side, rubbing up against her dress. She raised herself up a little and mechanically stroked the animal's soft fur.

How tired and worn out she felt, what a long, long day it had been! what an immense time since she and Bernard Forbes had sat looking at Bradshaw in the library, and yet that was only yesterday.

Would all the days seem so long, she wondered. Perhaps if Jane knew how tired she always felt in this hot weather, and how difficult it was to get her breath properly, she would not be so hard upon her and would overlook her tiresome irritating ways. But then, of course, she could never tell her, Jane would only think she was making silly excuses. No, the wall they had involuntarily built between each other was too strong to be destroyed now, it was all too late.

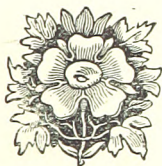
The curtain swayed gently in the evening breeze which stole in at the window; what was the gloomy shadow standing behind it she wondered; it couldn't be only one of the tall-backed chairs, it must be something living, for it seemed to move. Perhaps it was Jane's soul standing watching over her, and it would always be there, it would never leave her, and some day it would slowly, slowly creep up to her and strangle her.

The cat jumped up on to her knee, and its soft rubbing recalled her wandering senses. No, no,

she murmured, of course it was nothing, she was alone, quite alone, why she could never be anything else now that Anne was gone.

Oh, how tired she was ! she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes with a gentle sigh, it was really very nice to be in such a comfortable chair. The cat curled up comfortably on her knee and purred himself off to sleep, and soon Emma slept too.

The sunlight faded away altogether, and the evening breeze again stole in through the window laden with the scent of honeysuckle, but Miss Emma never stirred and the peaceful look on her face grew deeper, as the darkness increased.





## CHAPTER XII.

**B**ERNARD FORBES was walking home from the station by a short cut which led him through the Blakes' fields soon after seven o'clock that same evening, when it occurred to him that he would look in at Monkshalton, and tell Aunt Emma something of his interview with Anne. He could, at least, give her all the messages of love Anne had sent, which he knew would cheer and refresh her in her forlornness. "And then," he thought, "if they ask me to stay to dinner, it may make her first evening alone with Miss Blake less unbearable, for I fancy that lady must be in a most exasperated state of mind."

Just as he arrived at the door and rang the bell,



he heard a terrible sound in the house, a terrible cry which rang out in the still evening air like the cry of a lost soul. It came from the open windows in the drawing-room he was sure, and without waiting for any one to answer the bell, he rushed round the house and leaped in through the window—a cat tore past him and fled far away into the woods.

Then he saw in the gathering gloom Emma lying still and white in an easy-chair, and, bending over her, Jane, with an expression of agony such as he had never thought he could see on any human being's face. The door into the hall was half open, and he could hear the servants collecting outside it, whispering together, uncertain, so great was their fear of Miss Blake, whether to come to her aid in that supreme moment, or not.

He heard afterwards that it was Henry who had found Emma lying motionless in her chair, and had rushed with the news to Miss Blake's room.

“Bernard,” said Jane, in a hoarse voice, so different

from her usual clear tones, that it made Forbes shiver, "what is it, what has happened—tell me—is she, is she, oh!" she burst out in a loud terrible tone, "is she dead? Anne said I should kill her, Anne said it—tell me, is it true?"

She seized his arm and looked into his face, but so terrible was her look that he could not meet it, and he turned instead to the peaceful face below him.

"Hush!" he said, "hush, don't disturb her, she is quiet and happy—don't speak so loud; no; Anne didn't mean that, no, no; don't say that, don't——" for Jane had let go his arm and was standing gazing at Emma, repeating, "killed her, I've killed her," in a low tone.

He hastily crossed the room and closed the door, lest any one should hear her words. What could he say, what could he do? His own sorrow seemed something not to be thought about now, in the presence of this terrible agony.

"Yes, Bernard, you think so too—I know it, I

know it. You think I've killed her—I've seen her look at me with fear and terror in her face, and now, is this her, this, this"—and she laid her hand on Emma's cold forehead—"and is it my doing?—don't leave me!" she shrieked, "don't—they've all left me, Anne and Emma, and now you're going too!"—as Forbes went to the door meaning to ask Wilton for some brandy, for Jane seemed as if she were half out of her mind; and he thought the old housekeeper's presence might calm her.

He came back to Jane's side and took her hand in his. How withered the stern old face looked, he thought, how forlorn in its stony despair! better to be Emma, and away from it all, than to be this iron soul whom no one could ever reach, and who must live on in complete absolute loneliness. How should he find any words with which to comfort her, when he had never in his life before spoken to her except with a feeling as if an icy barrier were between them; and now that the barrier was momentarily thrown down, and he could look at

her soul face to face, how paralysed he felt at the terrible sight! For it was like gazing over a waste plain full of benumbed and frozen wrecks which once might have bloomed into love and happiness! Why, there was hardly a common language between them.

To Jane the air seemed full of a terrible kind of speech, terrible words; it was as if Emma's lips were moving, and saying again, "I cannot bear it—I cannot; you say such cruel things to me." She sat down, for the room seemed suddenly to reel and grow misty, and rocked herself backwards and forwards with her hands in her ears, and her eyes shut to keep out both sights and sounds.

Bernard bent down over her and, gently removing one of her hands, said in a husky voice—

"Dear Miss Blake, don't say that, don't think that. Aunt Emma loved you more, far more than you know; she always loved you, and never thought any one was so noble as you—she often said so, often; do be comforted—remember it was



no one's doing, no one's, and that she is happy and peaceful now—look how peaceful she is. Let me call Wilton, and she will take you upstairs ; and let me help you in this terrible trouble, and do all I can for you.”


Jane rose from her chair and, taking his arm, which he held out, they walked to the door. Wilton was outside with her black silk apron over her face, sobbing and moaning ; but as soon as she caught sight of her mistress's haggard face, she checked her sobs, and, putting her arm round Miss Blake, began to lead her gently towards the staircase.

“ Oh, my dear missis, come and lie down for a bit. You know she wouldn't have liked you to take on so for her ; why, it would have broke her heart to see you fretting so.”

Bernard heard them slowly mount the stairs and reach Miss Blake's room, and the door softly close after them.



### CHAPTER XIII.

N the day of the funeral the sun shone with a scorching heat, the roads were thickly covered with white dust, and all the hedges by the roadside were powdered with it.

Bernard, as he sat in a large mourning coach with his father and Sir James Haughton, felt stifled both with the heat and the awful solemnity of the proceedings. Sir James was every now and then putting his head as far out of the window as he felt was consistent with propriety, in order to see as much as possible of the procession, and how it was forming, and then in an eager whisper informing his companions of what he had seen.

Jane had insisted on everything being done as it

had always been done by the family for generations past—mourning coaches, plumes, mourners with long scarves, the school children drawn up in a solemn line through the village. She forgot nothing, not even the leaden lining to the coffin; for, as she sternly remarked, “We have always been buried in lead.” All the villagers had been “bidden” to the ceremony the evening before by a man with a long staff, who went round to each house, rapping with his staff and “bidding” the inmates, in a solemn voice, to Monkshalton next day at ten o’clock. As the Blakes were one of the oldest families in the county, all the neighbours had come or sent their carriages, so that an enormous train slowly wound through the lanes and the village to the little church, which was about a mile away from Monkshalton.

“Forbes, do you see all the blinds are down everywhere? Why, old Drake has even shut up his shop, and you know you told me Miss Blake had refused to renew his lease after Michaelmas!

Bless my soul, if there isn't Thompson walking with the mourners in front, and he only told me last week that Miss Blake hadn't even bowed to him for the last ten years, ever since they quarrelled about the wood on Halton Point!"

Colonel Forbes received these and all such items of information with which Sir James every now and then favoured him with an impatient sigh and a face of immovable gravity. He was feeling profoundly moved by Miss Emma's death; another of the old friends of his youth was gone! How near it made it seem to his own turn, he thought, with a deep sigh, and unconsciously to himself that was the bitterest part of it in his mind.

Sir James began to feel that his remarks did not somehow please his companions, and tried to restrain his interest in the proceedings and settle his face into the same blank, almost vacant look that Bernard's wore. But when the carriages drew up at the church gate he could no longer resist the temptation to watch everything, and sat looking



out of the window, gazing openly at the crowd and internally noting down who was there and who was not, of the neighbours, in order to pour it all out to Maria at tea-time.

Miss Blake had insisted on coming to the church. The terrible remorse which filled her made her determined to do everything and see everything, and in no wise to spare herself. Everything that could be done, must be, to show respect and honour to her sister, and to stifle the misery in her own soul.

Firmly she got out of the carriage, and upright as ever was her bearing as she took the arm of her cousin, an elderly man who was the next heir, after her death, to the property, and who never came to Monkshalton except on such occasions as the present one; for between his father and old Mr. Blake had been a lifelong quarrel, and in the Blake family a quarrel once begun lasted through several generations. He had consequently seldom seen Emma, and had no particular feeling either of pleasure or regret about her death, except that its

extreme suddenness had rather shocked him ; but he was very anxious to fulfil his post in the proceedings in the most correct and proper manner possible. He carefully handed Jane out, and gave her his arm most respectfully ; but even he could hardly help feeling surprised at the rigid stateliness and calmness of her demeanour.

“ Dear me, I suppose she doesn't feel much sorrow about it, and still she was her only sister ! it seems rather odd, but these Blakes are a hard set, and would sooner die than show any emotion,” he reflected, as they slowly moved up the little pathway to the church.

Long afterwards the village people talked of Miss Blake and of her stern face and figure on that day : how she neither trembled nor moved, nor shed one tear, but walked stonily, rigidly, with no haste, but how, as the coach door closed on her when all was over, those nearest thought they heard a moan.

Wilton and Coates were at the door to receive

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her, and took her up to her room—the room which she never left again.

The next morning early, the village doctor—a stout man with an impressively bald head, on the strength of which Sir James always declared he had obtained his practice—was hurriedly sent for. Miss Blake was ill, very ill, and for two whole years she lay in her large sombre bedroom, waiting for the day when she would have to be carried downstairs and across the quiet little churchyard to Emma's side.

No one ever saw her but the servants, and nothing very definite was known about her illness ; but Sir James, who always seemed to find out everything, and whose stories were generally built on a truthful foundation, declared she had had a stroke of paralysis which had affected her speech, and that she had lain during those two years silent and immovable on her bed. When Anne's name was mentioned to her, he declared that he heard she showed signs of horror—anyhow, her niece was

never again admitted to her presence—and when Miss Blake died, no forgiveness or relenting had induced her to alter her will in Anne's favour. Anne's words came true, she never lived with Aunt Jane again.

When Anne heard the news of Emma's sudden death, she instantly set off to Monkshalton, stricken with grief and full of a terrible fear that she would find that her flight had been the cause of it. When she reached the little railway station at Halton she found Bernard waiting for her with his dog-cart. It was he who had written and told her the news, and he had guessed she would come by the earliest possible train and had driven to meet her; for he was very much afraid Miss Blake would refuse her admittance to Monkshalton, and he longed to be of some use to the poor child and comfort her if possible.

The great sorrow which overwhelmed them both swept away the remembrance of their last meeting, and there was no shade of embarrassment between



them as they drove silently through the dusty lanes. As they drew near the lodge, Bernard slackened his horse's speed, and looking down at Anne laid one of his hands on hers for a moment to attract her attention. She looked up anxiously.

“What is it, Bernard? is there something else which I don't know—some other trouble?”

“Yes, dear Anne, I want to prepare you for what Miss Blake may do or say—she is not responsible I am sure for anything she may say, she is so much upset by grief that I fear she may refuse to see you. She won't see any one nor speak to any one except Wilton or Coates. All her orders she sends through them, and I fear she won't even see you. But I want you thoroughly to understand that it is because, as I consider, her mind is really unhinged by the shock, and you must not regard her behaviour as that of a responsible person.”

He was silent, and watched Anne's face. She was looking straight before her, and never moved whilst he spoke.

“I understand, Bernard, and I understand how good you are to me, how you wish to spare me every new pang that may be—that is,” she said in a lower voice, “in store for me. But as we drive nearer and nearer, I feel more and more sure that it is all my doing. I am to blame. I am a miserable, guilty wretch.”

Her hands were tightly clasped together, and she still never neither stirred nor moved her glance.

“I knew you would feel that, so I went straight off to see the doctor, and he told me that he never expected her to live even as long as she has done. He used to wonder that she held up so long, for it seems she has been secretly under his care for some time—ever since last summer I believe—but she never allowed it to be known or mentioned, and no one knew anything at all about it ; so do not think you are to blame ; do not let that grieve you.”

Anne’s tears were falling fast now, and Bernard touched up his horse, leaving her time to recover herself before they reached the door.

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As they passed through the lodge gates, Anne thought of the time she had driven through with both her aunts on their way home from London, and her heart had been so heavy. How trivial all the miseries of those days seemed to her now! How curious it was that she should have cared so much and felt so heart-broken about them!

The door was opened by Henry, who received Anne in a solemn, almost tearful manner. Bernard waited for her in the hall as she crept softly up the darkened staircase to Jane's room. He heard a whispered consultation going on between Anne and Coates, and Anne's voice gradually growing louder and more insistent, till it rose to a despairing cry of "Oh, Aunt Jane! Aunt Jane! let me in; forgive me and let me in! Dear Aunt Jane, I must come in! I must see you! oh, let me in!" He could even hear her rattling the handle of Jane's door in her despair. He could not bear it, and rushed up the staircase to the room. Anne

was outside with Coates, and a clear firm voice inside was speaking. It was Jane's voice.

"Go away! go away! I will never see you again! You've made your bed, and you must lie on it. You said I should kill her, and it's done, it's done. Go away, go away!"

"Dear Miss Anne," said Coates, her face streaming with tears, "don't mind her, don't, Miss Anne dear. Come downstairs and wait a bit; she's that upset she doesn't know a word of what she's saying. Come down and have a cup of tea, and perhaps she'll come round soon and see you."

But the door suddenly opened and Jane stood there, upright as ever, but with a dark flush on her usually pale face, and a dull look in her pale blue eyes.

"Go away, Anne, and don't wait downstairs one moment, but go away out of this house; go back to the Turners, and never darken my doors again. You yourself cut the bonds that joined us together,



and now you must reap the consequences. It was you who made Emma hate me, and I can never forgive you—never ! Do you think my forgiveness would bring Emma back ? No ! I can never forgive you either in this world or the next !”

“ Aunt Emma never hated you. She loved you, as I want to love you, and care for you always, all my life.”

“ I don't want your love ; what good will it do me, I should like to know ? Go away, I tell you, go away !” The door was closed and locked, and they heard Jane walk across the room and drop into her great arm-chair with a heavy thud. Wilton was inside, and she called out to them, “ Go away, dear Miss Anne, you're making her ill, do go away for the present.”

Bernard took Anne downstairs, but before they could reach the parlour, Coates came running down with a further message from Miss Blake that “ Miss Anne was to leave the house instantly, and go back to London. She was not to stay in the neighbour-

hood, as Miss Blake didn't wish her to come and see her any more."

"Anne, dear, come down with me," said Bernard tenderly, leading her to the hall door, where Henry was holding his horse. Coates rushed after them, and, throwing her arms round Anne's neck, they kissed each other.

"Dear Miss Anne, you must let me come and live with you—I don't want any wages—and I'll bring Jemmie, for he'll fret without you."

"No, Coates," whispered Anne, "you must stay with her as long as ever she wants you, and you must nurse her and love her for my sake."

She could say no more, and Bernard helped her into the dog-cart, for she was trembling so much that she could hardly walk. Henry wrung her hand silently, and they drove away.

"Let me take you home ; my father will welcome you with all his heart ; you had better not go back to London to-day," said Forbes, as they drove through the park.

“No, Bernard, please take me to the station, oh! please do, I must go back at once—it is all I can do for her now; isn’t there a train in an hour?”

“Yes; but, my dear child, you are so tired you are not fit to travel.”

“Please don’t say any more,” said Anne in a weary voice; “if you don’t take me to the station I must get out and walk there.”

It was useless to say any more, he felt, so to the station they drove. When the train came up Anne found Bernard had sent his cart home by some one, and had taken a ticket to London, and was going up with her. He put her into a carriage by herself, and she saw him get into a smoking compartment next to her own.

Silently, in the middle of the night, they drove to Mrs. Turner’s house. He would not come inside the house, for he was obliged to return to Halton by the next train, and would barely have time to drive back to the station. He bent down as she gave him her hand, and kissed her forehead.

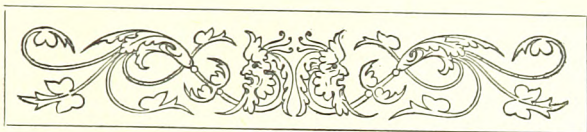
“Remember, dear, I am always ready to serve you in any way you wish, and at any moment.”

Anne pressed his hand and tried to speak, but the words would not come ; she looked into his face, and then softly bent down her cheek against the hand she held.


A great tremor ran through him at that gentle touch, but no word was spoken, and Anne closed the door, leaving him staring at the place where she had stood, and feeling nothing but the soft pressure of her face against his hand.







## CHAPTER XIV.

NE afternoon in January, about a year after Miss Blake's death, Sir James Haughton was standing in Maria's sitting-room, with his back to the fire and a cup of tea in his hand, holding forth on some gossip that he had just heard at lunch that day.

They had been travelling abroad for the last two years, and were now staying at Mentone for the winter, and amidst the usual colony of English, he had found some one who knew the Blakes, and could give him fresh details concerning Monks-halton, and the cousin who had been living there since Jane's death.

"Do you know, Maria, they told me that that fellow who has the place now has actually done

away with the peacocks, couldn't bear their noise, he said, it made him feel low-spirited! Why, they've been there as long as the Blakes themselves! and he's pulled out the black oak wainscoting in the hall, and done it up in modern style!" Sir James's voice trembled with disgust. "And he's cut a lot of the timber, to let in fresh air, he says. Fresh air indeed! it makes me feel disgusted to think that a man can be such a fool as to destroy an old place like that, it won't be worth anything now. And by-the-bye, they gave me some more details about poor Miss Jane's funeral. All the old servants were there, and the housekeeper and Henry—you remember Henry, that solemn-looking old butler who had lived there for twenty years or more; they both cried and sobbed like children, and who else do you think was there?"

Maria did not speak, knowing no answer was needed, and Sir James went on in an excited tone—

"Why, Anne! Anne Blake, who had been forbidden the house—turned out neck and crop I may

say! There she was, all muffled up in a cloak, but her old maid saw her, and ran up to her, and they tried to make her come back to Monkshalton. She went up to the door, but she wouldn't go into the house, nothing they could say would make her cross the doorstep—she said she daren't disobey her aunt even now. They say she looked as white as a corpse, and much older than she did two years ago, and I'm sure I don't wonder! Living in Camden Town, of all places——”

“You forget, James dear,” said Maria's quiet voice, “you forget she doesn't live there now. She has got on so well with her singing—you remember she always had a lovely voice, and it had been carefully trained, even in her aunt's time, whenever they came up to town—that she earns a good deal by giving lessons, and can afford to live in a better part of London now. And I think Mrs. Turner is dead.”

“Do you mean to say, Maria, that you have known all this and never told me? Why, you know

I am always trying to find out news of that child, only we've been out of England so long. I never can hear anything, and that fellow Forbes never writes."

"Well, James, I really thought you knew, you always seem to know everything; but tell me what else you have heard."

"'Gad, I had nearly forgotten the most important part of all, that it seems there is a report that Bernard Forbes and Anne are engaged to be married, though I can't make out that it's more than a report at present. Anne has been broken-hearted ever since Emma died, and says she was to blame; but I really can't see that she was, it was that nagging sister of hers that did it, *I* believe! However, if those two are making it up, I must get them a wedding present. Women like lace; don't you think that black——"

"My dear James, I do think you are a little premature, for we really don't know anything about it, and I hardly think it can be true, for I made



Anne promise when we left England to tell me if such a thing should ever happen, and I haven't heard from her yet; she would not forget her promise, I am sure. I know Bernard was deeply in love with her, and I always wanted her to marry him."

"Well, well," said Sir James, putting down his cup; "what abominable tea one does get in these places! However, I am sure it would be much better for her to be safely married, than going about teaching and singing at concerts, as you say she does. I don't half like these new-fangled ways of women earning their own livings. Why don't the men support them, I say? In my young days you never met a woman running up and down the country, working and supporting herself, as seems to be the fashion now; well, well, I think I'll go and have a cigar before dinner."

Maria, left to herself, leaned back in her easy chair and thought over Sir James's news. "I think James is wrong," she reflected, "the only thing for

Anne to do was to take up some active occupation, otherwise she would perhaps have grown up like her Aunt Jane, for she had somewhat the same disposition, poor child ; and I'm not sure too that it isn't a good thing to have, as James calls it, destroyed the old place—for cruel thoughts and cruel deeds seem to saturate the very walls of the places they inhabit——”

“Maria, Maria,” she heard Sir James's voice eagerly calling, and he burst into the room, “those people tell me Anne *is* engaged ; and the afternoon post has just come, and here's a letter for you with a black edge, which I believe is from her, so it will be to tell you all about it ; well, now I can get her that lace I was telling you about !”



THE END.









