

*Irene Owen Andrews*

*April 19*

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# OLDBURY

BY

## ANNIE KEARY

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. 1

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

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COLLECTION  
OF  
BRITISH AUTHORS  
TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 1398.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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BRITISH AUTHORS

“Well did the Wisest of our time write, ‘It is only with Renunciation  
that Life, properly speaking, can be said to begin.’”

SARTOR RESARTUS.

# OLDBURY.

BY

ANNIE KEARY,  
AUTHOR OF "JANET'S HOME."

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG  
BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1874.

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O. L. D. B. U. R. Y.

BY

ANNIE KILBURN

AUTHOR OF "LITTLE LADIES"

CONTEMPORARY

IN THE VOLUME

VOL. I.

EDITED

BY HENRIETTA TAYLOR

1871

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CONTENTS  
OF VOLUME I.

---

	Page
CHAPTER I. Margaret . . . . .	7
— II. Oldbury at Church . . . . .	18
— III. Alice Pamela Neale . . . . .	29
— IV. A first Visit . . . . .	41
— V. Oldbury Tactics . . . . .	51
— VI. Steenie . . . . .	71
— VII. Visitors to Oldbury . . . . .	89
— VIII. A Breath of Spring . . . . .	101
— IX. Miss Berry has a Secret . . . . .	121
— X. Father and Daughter . . . . .	136
— XI. The slow sweet Years that bring us all Things good	144
— XII. A Warning . . . . .	162
— XIII. A long Summer's Day in Oldbury . . . . .	179
— XIV. Moonlight in Oldbury . . . . .	191
— XV. Flower Aspect . . . . .	201
— XVI. A Dreary Day . . . . .	216
— XVII. An Evening of Misunderstandings . . . . .	227
— XVIII. First Days . . . . .	239
— XIX. Miss Berry's Diplomacy . . . . .	253
— XX. Summer Rain . . . . .	271
— XXI. The Neales . . . . .	282
— XXII. Mrs. Lutridge at Fault . . . . .	290

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CONTENTS

OF THE VOLUME

CHAPTER I. THE STATE OF THE COUNTRY	1
CHAPTER II. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	15
CHAPTER III. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	35
CHAPTER IV. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	55
CHAPTER V. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	75
CHAPTER VI. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	95
CHAPTER VII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	115
CHAPTER VIII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	135
CHAPTER IX. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	155
CHAPTER X. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	175
CHAPTER XI. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	195
CHAPTER XII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	215
CHAPTER XIII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	235
CHAPTER XIV. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	255
CHAPTER XV. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	275
CHAPTER XVI. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	295
CHAPTER XVII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	315
CHAPTER XVIII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	335
CHAPTER XIX. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	355
CHAPTER XX. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	375
CHAPTER XXI. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	395
CHAPTER XXII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	415
CHAPTER XXIII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	435
CHAPTER XXIV. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	455
CHAPTER XXV. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	475
CHAPTER XXVI. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	495
CHAPTER XXVII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	515
CHAPTER XXVIII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	535
CHAPTER XXIX. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	555
CHAPTER XXX. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	575
CHAPTER XXXI. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	595
CHAPTER XXXII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	615
CHAPTER XXXIII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	635
CHAPTER XXXIV. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	655
CHAPTER XXXV. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	675
CHAPTER XXXVI. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	695
CHAPTER XXXVII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	715
CHAPTER XXXVIII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	735
CHAPTER XXXIX. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	755
CHAPTER XL. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	775
CHAPTER XLI. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	795
CHAPTER XLII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	815
CHAPTER XLIII. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	835
CHAPTER XLIV. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	855
CHAPTER XLV. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	875
CHAPTER XLVI. THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY	895



# O L D B U R Y.

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## CHAPTER I.

Margaret.

IT was one of those clear days towards the end of October, when the sunshiny air has a pleasant keenness, and the newly turned-up earth a fresh, growing scent, which makes one feel as if one had slipped back through the long summer to the enjoyment of a pleasant April, or unusually genial March day. The two ends of the summer seemed to have met and shaken hands, for there were plenty of autumnal tokens to be noted, even in the suburban gardens that skirted the main road leading from the little town of Oldbury; laburnum trees raining down dark pods instead of flowers; holly berries showing red among their prickly leaves; bright dewy cobwebs festooning the primly cut privet hedges that divided the gardens from the road.

Old Mrs. Blake, who had come out in her shadiest poke-bonnet and brown holland gardening apron, to spend the afternoon in gathering flower-seeds, was not a person to pay much attention to any of these particulars; but she was taking advantage of the brightness of the day to stay out a good deal beyond her usual hour; and her little granddaughter Elsie was beginning to be distracted from her happy observation

of the road through the bars of the gate, by fears lest Grandmamma should at last notice how long the shadows were getting, and suddenly order herself and her little companion into the dull house behind.

Elsie had a strong secret conviction that Grandmamma liked to stand by that furthest garden-bed (uncommanded by any of the house windows) and look out into the road quite as much as she did, perhaps a little more; for looking out into the road seemed to be almost the only recreation that poor dear Grandmamma allowed herself; whereas Elsie could be equally happy trundling her hoop among the dry leaves, or making imaginary houses between the lilac bushes, where Grandmamma could not come.

The dissipation of looking out into the Oldbury main road was not one, apparently, to which the most ascetic person could reasonably object. The sights which pleased Mrs. Blake and Elsie were of an entirely unexciting and ordinary kind, such as might be seen from the same post of observation at any time, only to-day the broad white road, fringed on each side by pleasant garden shrubs, was flooded with a brighter than ordinary sunset light, and a few extra pedestrians had come out to enjoy it.

The little Lutridges, with their attendant nurses, man-servant, and donkey, wended slowly up the road to the imposing white house at the top of the hill. Six children Elsie counted, and wondered how it must feel to have five playmates instead of one Grandmamma.

Then Mr. Pierrepont, the rector of Oldbury, passed the gate, and little Miss Berry, who was on the watch for him, and who so nearly missed him by stopping

to kiss the youngest little Lutridge, that Mrs. Blake could scarcely refrain from calling out, darted across the road, and detained him in eager conversation for full ten minutes, almost within earshot of Elsie's post of observation.

"I wonder what Miss Berry wants," Elsie observed, when she had watched several sidelong attempts of Mr. Pierrepont to bow himself away, and admired Miss Berry's clever generalship in keeping her advantageous position in full command of the pathway. "Whatever it is, I hope Mr. Pierrepont will let her have it. I wish he would not make himself so tall to her. I have seen him quite short when he was speaking to Mrs. Lutridge. Have not you, Granny? Ah, he has got away! and I am afraid Miss Berry is disappointed, for she is looking after him, and her curls are shaking so!"

Granny approached the garden-gate to get a better view of what was going on; and Miss Berry, catching sight of two interested faces turned in her direction, came up to exchange a neighbourly greeting.

Of course they wanted to know what she and Mr. Pierrepont had been talking about. It would not have been considered neighbourly in Oldbury, not to want to know everything that one's acquaintance said to each other, and Miss Berry would have felt alone in the world indeed, if she could have passed a day without having to account for her sayings and doings to some one. She plunged at once into the expected explanation.

"Yes," she said, "I don't suppose you can have overheard much; but I have no doubt you have guessed. It *was* about the mother of the boy who

threw a stone at Mrs. Lutridge's donkey that I have been speaking to Mr. Pierrepont. Do I look a little ruffled? My dear, I know it is the old Adam in me rising up; but to have it hinted to one by one's clergyman that one is talking nonsense, is enough to flutter one's spirits. I daresay I did not express myself very clearly, for it is a most agitating business indeed. Dearest Mrs. Lutridge's donkey! stoned by a boy, whose mother is receiving relief from the fund! What a conjunction of circumstances! When one thinks of the numbers of donkeys in Oldbury that might just as well have been hit instead of hers, and of the boys throwing stones continually, whose mothers are not on the sick-fund, one sees how fearfully active and ingenious the enemy of mankind must be. If there are any infidels in Oldbury who doubt his 'finding mischief still,' I should just like to put the case to them."

Mrs. Blake not being an infidel however, the conversation was allowed to take a less argumentative turn; and Elsie was presently despatched to the house by Grandmamma to fill Miss Berry's flat basket with broken meat for the sick woman, in order to soften the news of her rejection from the fund.

She looked so brilliant with health, and satisfaction in her own doings, when she returned from her rapid journey, that Miss Berry could not resist taking the rosy, glowing face between her hands and bestowing a hearty kiss upon it.

She did not say in words how fair a sight, the dimpled cheeks, the laughing mouth, the blue eyes looking back at her, were in her estimation, but every line of her good-humoured face expressed admiration,

and Elsie was not by any means slow in reading it there.

"I like Miss Berry very much, Granny," she said, as she watched the little lady's brisk figure moving down the street; "and I wish Aunt Margaret would let her come to see us oftener; but after all, I like you better than anyone. You don't worry about things as other grown-up people do. You and I are happy, Granny; but other people are not. We like being together in the garden, better than sitting with Grandpapa and Aunt Margaret in the house—don't we?"

Elsie jumped down from the gate as she spoke, and threw her arms round Granny's slim waist; but Mrs. Blake did not take the caress or the compliment in quite such good part as usual.

"Yes, it's all very well for us to be out together; but we don't forget those that are in the house. It's a toilsome world, Elsie, and people must work and be sorrowful in it."

"It's a very pretty world out of doors I think," Elsie said, staring up through the drooping yellow laburnum leaves, now burnished into gold by the sunset light, to the deep blue of the sky above; "and if you and I could always play out in the garden, and Grandpapa and Aunt Margaret *always* sit writing in the library without ever coming out, I think we should be very happy in it."

"Hush, hush, child," Granny said, with a quick shake of her head, and a look of pain crossing her kind face; "you must not speak so. It is time to go in now. Grandpapa will have finished writing, and will want me. Come."

Elsie turned to pick up the seed-basket; and, as she could always catch up Grandmamma, she mounted the gate again to take a last look at the out-door world Granny had so strangely maligned.

The outlook from her grandfather's garden gate, down the little old-fashioned town street, and away over its grey house-tops to the bare green hills beyond, had attractions for her such as might not have been felt by a less solitary child.

She watched the little lights starting up one behind the other down the long vista of the street, the trees in the old churchyard grouping themselves together into strange shapes as the twilight deepened, and the last rays of the sun spreading upward from behind the western hills, like a great golden fan tapering fainter and fainter, and losing itself in the sky; and then she heaved a great sigh of full satisfaction. "Good-bye, beautiful day! come back to us again," she whispered, as she jumped down to the ground, and set off to run across the grass-plot, so as to meet Mrs. Blake at the front-door.

Elsie did not wish to enter the dusky hall of the old house in the twilight alone. It was one of the oldest houses in Oldbury, and had been built in times when the ancient town was a place of greater importance, and owned richer inhabitants than was the case at present. A part of the building had been pulled down when the Blakes came to live there, but the passages and staircase were still more in accordance with the past than the present pretensions of the place.

The wide entrance-hall, with its white and black pavement, was a favourite resort of Elsie's later on in the evening, when the swinging lamp from the ceiling

was lighted, and old Mr. Blake came from his study to take his nightly promenade up and down the length of the hall, his hands clasped behind him, and his head bent down, abstractedly muttering as he walked. Elsie liked then to curl herself up on one of the shallow stairs, and find amusement in wondering what sort of a story Grandpapa was telling himself; but now she preferred following Granny to the dullest room in the house, the study where Mr. Blake and Margaret spent so much of their time together.

The sound of Margaret Blake's clear voice reading aloud, was what one usually heard as soon as the study door was opened; just now there was silence in the room.

Margaret was seated at the window, with a closed book lying on her lap, and Mr. Blake leaned back in his arm-chair by his high writing-desk, his thin white fingers, from which a pen had rolled away, resting idly on an open sheet of paper before him.

Mrs. Blake went up to him, put her arm round his head, and stroked the grey hair hanging low on his neck, with a tender reverential gesture, such as she might have used timidly for the first time to different coloured locks, many long years ago.

"Well, dear," she said cheerfully, "you have been getting on well with your writing as usual while I have been away."

"Yes, you are right, my dear. I have been getting on; at least I think so," Mr. Blake answered, sitting a little more upright, and speaking in the wide-awake tone, which was now only heard from him when he answered a question of his wife's.

"Oh, I know it; you have been getting on beauti-

fully, you and Margaret together," Mrs. Blake continued, drawing her hand again and again down the grey hair, and nodding towards Margaret, who turned her head languidly at the mention of her name. "But now you are both very tired, and you have nearly let the fire out between you, as you two always do, and the room looks quite dismal. You must come to the drawing-room with me at once, and Margaret will follow when she has put your papers away."

Elsie ran out of the room after Mr. and Mrs. Blake, to seek the cheerful companionship of the old servant Crawford in the kitchen; and Margaret, left alone, sat long in the window-seat, watching the deepening of the twilight into darkness, before she roused herself and began her task. Every evening Margaret Blake carefully arranged and put away papers on which her father had jotted down abstruse problems he had spent the day in working. Every morning she arranged his desk with books and mathematical instruments for the same work to begin again, and nearly all day she remained by his side, to give what help she could by writing, or reading aloud for him.

There had been a time when this task had been gloried in by Margaret as the proudest privilege of her life. She had been her learned father's pupil from earliest childhood, and when Mr. Blake resigned a public office he held, in order to devote his whole time to the completion of a treatise on an abstruse scientific question, to which he had long given much thought, she made it a first object with herself to lighten his labour, and to that end sacrificed every other pursuit and interest.

Several years of patient study passed without any



weariness to her. She had made herself capable of following, to a certain extent, the workings of her father's mind. She saw the obstacles to the success of his work which had to be overcome; she was always at hand to buoy up his heart with hope when it was ready to fail; she threw herself into his ambition with that enthusiasm, born of combined devotion to the worker and glory in the work, the capacity for which makes some women such valuable associates in prolonged mental labour.

At length, after many disappointments, the hour that was to bring reward approached. Her father pronounced his undertaking all but completed. A few experiments had to be verified, a few months must be given to patient revision of the earlier portions of his book, and then the result of so much study was to be given to the world. Margaret's heart danced for joy. She was childishly, wildly happy. She opened her heart to delights of companionship which she had carefully excluded hitherto. A sweet clear future, all golden, with a new, hitherto undreamed-of light, seemed to be opening out before her.

And then a crushing family calamity fell upon them all. It swallowed up Margaret's prospects, and so much else, that her own private share of the sorrow was scarcely recognised by any one.

After the first confusion of misery was over, when they had separated themselves from the old scenes, and broken every link with those who could, by a chance word, recall old joys and present pain, Mr. Blake had the courage to resume his long-suspended labour, and Margaret fell into her old habit of waiting upon him. For some months the assistance she gave

was chiefly mechanical, so that a considerable interval elapsed before she perceived, that while her father devoted as much time as ever to his studies, he was making no real progress. His mind, shattered by suffering, was no longer equal to deal with the questions on which he was engaged. One day's work was little better than a repetition of the last, and it became clearer, week by week, that the final revision, without which his previous labour was useless, would never now be given to his great book.

The discovery was not so crushing a blow to Margaret, as any one who had known her a year before would have supposed. The great work was nothing to her now; if her father had been capable of completing it after what had happened, she could not have sympathised with him as she did in contemplating his failure. She had at one time absorbed herself too much in intellectual pursuits, and now nature avenged herself, and she could see nothing in the world but the individual suffering and wrong-doing with which she had been suddenly brought face to face. If her father had been working successfully she could hardly have borne to help him. To be the sharer of his resultless labour was sweeter to her than any other occupation she could have had now.

The little dark study which Elsie found so gloomy was a harbour of refuge to her. She could look back on the past most calmly there, and was there sheltered from the petty cares and annoyances that had come with the new life.

When she had finished putting the books away she sat down on the hearth-rug with her hands clasped round her knees, and looking intently into the red

caves of the dying fire, saw the course of her past life unroll itself before her. A quiet smoothly-spun, richly-coloured thread of life it ran on, till a sudden blow divided it. Then it had to begin again.

Margaret could just then look at the contrast between the two eras quietly, as if she were following the events of another person's life, and unconcernedly speculating what the end would be. Even when the last faint spark died out in ashes, she could not bring herself to move, till Elsie had twice been to the door to summon her to the drawing-room, where the lamp was lighted, and they were waiting tea for her.

"It is not a sign that grown-up people have been naughty when they sit alone in the dark, I know, Aunt Margaret," Elsie said, slipping her hand into Margaret's as they crossed the hall together; "but I wish you did not like the dark so much. I wish you liked warm pretty places and merry people as much as I do."

"We each like what suits us, I suppose," said Margaret, stooping down to kiss the child's beaming upturned face. Elsie tripped across the hall, half-awed, half-pleased at the unusual favour of a quite voluntary caress from grave, stately, beautiful Aunt Margaret.

## CHAPTER II.

## Oldbury at Church.

THE Blakes had been living in Oldbury two years when our story begins, and during that period they had conferred a great boon on its inhabitants, by affording a constant subject for conversation at all their social meetings. Everybody in the town knew the members of the family by sight, and many of them could have passed a creditable examination on their habits, the hours at which they took their meals, the contents of their wardrobes, and their weekly consumption of butcher's meat and groceries; but no one, except Miss Berry, had ever, in all that time, been invited to enter their house, or succeeded in passing beyond the limits of the most formal acquaintance-ship. By dint of much nodding and smiling Miss Berry had established a right to enter into conversation with Mrs. Blake and Elsie whenever she met them; and was occasionally, after a walk, invited to come in and spend part of the afternoon in chat with Mrs. Blake.

At such times she had momentary glimpses, through the open study door, of old Mr. Blake seated at his desk, and of Margaret reading aloud to him; and once or twice Margaret had bowed ceremoniously to her when they encountered each other in the hall.

This was not much, but it was so much more than was vouchsafed to any one else in the town, that Miss

Berry was uneasy lest she should be puffed up by such distinction, or tempted by her desire to satisfy the natural curiosity of less favoured acquaintances, to give minuter details than actual observation warranted.

A great deal of pity was bestowed on Elsie Blake by the Oldbury people, which she did not altogether need. It went to Miss Berry's heart to meet her, taking her daily walk, hand-in-hand with Aunt Margaret. It would indeed have been a terrible cross to Miss Berry to have had to walk an hour every day beside silent Margaret Blake, the very sight of whose beautiful grave face froze up even her perpetual current of speech; but Elsie could patter along, hanging on to Margaret's hand, and amuse herself quite happily by peering down into the holes in the hedgebank, and wondering what sort of an under-world she should find, if she could only make herself small enough to creep down them; or by building castles in the air, about the splendid orange groves, and fair Rosamond bowers, that probably lay behind the high garden walls she passed nearer the town.

When the afternoon walk was over, and she retired into the kitchen to play with the cat, and edify Crawford by reading aloud a chapter in Rollin's "Ancient History," she had visions of the houses and people she had seen in her walk still in her eye, and realized the ancient kings and heroes all the more vividly for seeing them dressed in the clothes, and walking about in the familiar ways of actual acquaintanceship.

Between studying and dreaming her time would have passed pleasantly enough, if it had not been for one unattainable desire that frequently troubled her.

During her walks, and while she was peering through the garden-gate; she sometimes encountered sly glances from eyes on a level with her own, that made her heart beat very quickly, and caused a lump to rise in her throat.

In all her life she had never, that she could remember, spoken to any one of her own size, and at times a terrible longing came over her, just once, to break away from Margaret and join the rosy groups of children, who stopped their play in the road to stare at her. Would they acknowledge her as one of their company? Elsie wondered; she did so want to be taken into fellowship by some one. The grown-up people at home showed her plainly enough that they did not consider her one of them.

"You are but a child," Crawford used to say when Elsie had posed her with an inconvenient question. "You are a child," Margaret would exclaim in a tone of wonder, when Elsie's gay laugh reached her ears. "You are a child, darling—a child still," Grandmamma had a way of saying over and over again, as she twisted Elsie's crisp golden curls round her finger. "How pleasant!" Elsie thought, to be in a society where the fact of being a child would not be singular enough to be remarked upon so constantly.

Once, when she and Crawford were walking down Oldbury High Street on a marketing expedition, they were stopped by Mrs. Lutridge, with six little daughters following two and two behind. "So this is the little Blake child," Mrs. Lutridge said, forcing up Elsie's reluctant chin with her resolute forefinger. "Do you know who I am? I am Mrs. Lutridge! You should stand still when you are spoken to, and not

try to wriggle away into the gutter. If your grand-mamma had taken my advice, and let you attend my class at the Sunday-school with my own children, you would have known how to behave, and we should all have been fond of you. It is a great pity you keep away; it grieves us all to see such an unformed, awkward child in Oldbury. You may tell your grand-mamma that Mrs. Lutridge says so."

The very sky darkened over Elsie's head as Mrs. Lutridge spoke, and her eyes filled with tears as she watched her walk away, followed by her train of daughters, no one of whom condescended to glance at Elsie, standing mute in the gutter, with her shy finger in her mouth. After that encounter Elsie began to feel afraid of the children who played in the road; they might shake their heads at her, and say she was not a proper Oldbury child. She also noticed, as she had never done before, many little ways in which the habits of her household differed from others. She observed that Margaret never nodded to passers-by as Miss Berry did. Even when Mr. Pierrepont raised his hat to her (and Elsie fancied he lifted it higher for Margaret than for any other lady in the town), she did not look pleased. She moved her head the least little bit in the world, and lowered her eyes gravely.

Other people's door-knockers looked bright and shining, as if they were always being lifted up, but theirs remained stiff and rusty in its place all the year round. The opposite neighbours sometimes had four or five sets of visitors in one afternoon; Elsie, seated at her bed-room window, counted them. Ladies came with children by their sides, who were welcomed by

noisy playmates, and carried in triumph to upper regions, where Elsie saw their merry faces looking from the windows; but no one of all the number ever seemed to think of crossing the road, and lifting the latch of their gate.

Sometimes Elsie brooded over these things till she grew almost sad—at others she forgot all about them, and was happy in her own way; but whatever mood she was in, she felt glad when Sunday came, for on that day of the week the Blake family laid aside their singularity, and took part in what everybody else was doing.

Elsie enjoyed the walk to church, towards which so many other happy-looking families were hastening, and the services were not a bit too long for her. She enjoyed the sense of companionship so much. It must be confessed she looked about her a good deal, and gathered much knowledge of her contemporaries among the congregation to brood over during the week.

There were few eyes in Oldbury church that could help returning with kindly glances the wistful gaze that fell on them Sunday after Sunday, from the bright-haired child in the mourning dress, who stood up among the other dark-robed figures in the Blakes' pew; and Elsie's little heart danced with pleasure sometimes, she felt as if she had so many friends.

Old Mrs. Blake's eyes were a little given to wandering too; but she did not find that the knowledge she gained by studying the faces of her neighbours at all hindered the fervour of her prayers.

When the thanksgiving came she could join all the better in it for knowing that the matron whose absence from church for several Sundays had oc-



casioned her some uneasiness, was seated at the head of her flock once more, pale, but happy-looking; and that the sad-faced widow in the free seats, with whom she regularly exchanged a glance at a certain sentence in the Litany, had her sickly boy at home again from school.

The electric current of kindness flowing out of her eyes, and returned by her nameless friends, kept a glow of warmth round her heart, that the unsociable character of her week-day life might have chilled. Holding Elsie's hand in hers as they stood up and knelt and sat down together, old Mrs. Blake had no heart to check the little one's roving glances, even when Mrs. Lutridge made it quite plain that their frequency met with her disapproval.

Margaret and Mr. Blake sat on the opposite side of the pew, and seemed bent on bearing testimony against the offences of the other two, by maintaining a perfect unconsciousness of the presence of anyone in the church but themselves. Yet their conduct did not entirely escape Mrs. Lutridge's animadversions. The charge against them was that they did not look, and seemed as if they would never learn how to look, like Oldbury people.

No one could have pointed out precisely where the fault lay, but even kind Miss Berry could not successfully defend them from the charge; and strangers to Oldbury were apt to ask who they were directly the sermon was ended, and thus expose the inhabitants to the mortification of furnishing unsatisfactory information. They hardly deserved severe blame for this, however, as the attraction they exercised was entirely of a passive nature. Mr. Blake could not

help his tall thin figure towering over the edge of the pew, higher than most of the other male figures. He lessened his height to the best of his power, by the stoop of his shoulders, and the down-drooping posture in which his grey head habitually fell. The Oldbury people were hardly observant enough to be much struck by the beautiful shape of the bowed head, certainly very unlike any other in Oldbury, or the scholarlike refinement of the thin features they seldom saw but in profile.

He stood up, and sat down, and knelt, at Margaret's instigation, usually in a mechanical dreamy sort of way; but now and then the whole congregation were startled by hearing from his corner of the pew a deep voice repeating a word or two of a Psalm, or a response, with a strange, passionate, wailing emphasis, that broke upon the even, mechanical, repetitions of the decorous worshippers with an uncomfortable sort of thrill.

"Old Mr. Blake might have been a great sinner in his youth; he most probably had been," Mrs. Lutridge said, "and it was satisfactory to know that he was troubled by a sense of his past misdeeds; but, as Oldbury was not used to great sinners, except in the free seats, it would have shown a more becoming deference to the rest of the congregation if he had restrained his feelings better."

Mr. Blake always subsided completely in sermon time, and sat with his hands behind him, and his eyes immovably fixed on one particular square of the chancel pavement; but Margaret threw back her crape veil when Mr. Pierrepoint got into the pulpit, and lifted her large brown eyes to the preacher. Considering

that the Blakes' pew was precisely in front of the pulpit, and that Margaret was taller, and had a more beautiful complexion, and blacker hair than any one else in Oldbury, the ladies thought it would have been better taste in her to keep her veil down during all the service. A good many eyes in various parts of the church watched for the raising of that crape veil, but the delicate peach bloom in Margaret Blake's cheek never varied by a shade however many people were looking at her.

She lifted her veil at that period of the service because she wanted air, and found that listening to the sermon was a safer occupation for her than following her own thoughts; but if anything could have made her smile, it would have been the notion of her being affected in any way by glances from Oldbury eyes. She never drooped her head having once raised it, for she had acquired a habit of remaining immovable for long periods in a posture she had once assumed, but a close observer might frequently see that the effort to attend was not a very successful one. The raised brown eyes had a stony, indrawn look that told of thoughts very far away. Now and then, however, a sudden life sprang into them. A word of the preacher's had arrested her attention, and she waited for the next sentence as if she expected it would solve some problem for her, or strengthen her hold on some half-despairing hope. Her whole face took an anxious imploring look at such times, as if life, or what was more to her than life, hung in the balance, and might be decided by the next-spoken words.

The sudden animation often died out as quickly.

as it came; but it was frequent enough to awaken the preacher's interest in so intelligent a hearer, and to dispose him to glance downwards towards the Blakes' pew while delivering the most emphatic sentences of his discourse, more frequently than strict justice warranted.

Unfortunately, Oldbury had a habit of watching the direction of these glances rather jealously. There was only one pew in the church towards which Mr. Pierrepoint had every lady's leave to look as often as he liked.

This was the rectory pew, where Sunday after Sunday the widower clergyman's only son sat in solitary state. When he had first made his appearance there under his nurse's charge—a curly-haired boy of three, over whom Mrs. Lutridge, from the pew behind, exercised careful supervision—he had been by far the most conspicuous and interesting object in the church to every female eye. There used to be quite a flutter of white handkerchiefs whenever any allusion occurred in the sermon to early piety, or little Samuel, or Timothy's knowledge of the Scripture. If, in mentioning these subjects, Mr. Pierrepoint failed to glance momentarily towards his own chubby-faced little son, whom Mrs. Lutridge had perched on a high cushion on purpose that he might be convenient to look at, the ladies felt themselves defrauded of a pleasant sympathetic emotion, and went home with a less exalted idea of the tenderness of their pastor's heart than it pleased them to have. But boys, even the sons of widowed clergymen, cannot be kept at the curly-headed, interesting stage beyond a certain number of years, and at the time when Margaret Blake became a

regular attendant at Oldbury Church, Steenie Pierrepoint had grown much too big to be perched on cushions, and had developed a disposition to spin buttons in sermon time, in defiance of Mrs. Lutridge, which was enough to discourage the most solicitous of fathers from preaching at him. He was a handsome, open-faced lad, whom people could not help liking; but it had to be acknowledged, even by Mrs. Lutridge, that he was not growing up as much like little Samuel as Oldbury had expected of him.

Elsie's attention was first drawn towards the solitary boy in the red-lined pew by sympathy for him, as a fellow-sufferer under Mrs. Lutridge's active supervision.

She quite understood the feeling that made him twist himself into the darkest corner of the pew, and grow suddenly red in the face, when a glance from the pulpit chanced to be directed towards him, and Mrs. Lutridge's emphatic hand on his shoulder impressed the fact upon him; and on sunny mornings, when the sermon was longer than usual, she was kept in a continual state of anxiety on his account, so daring were the manœuvres by which he sought to work off the superfluous activity that possessed him.

One fine February morning, when the sun and the west wind had made all the children's hearts dance, by promising to bring summer to Oldbury all at once, an antiquated white butterfly woke in a corner of the old church, and began its summer career by paying bewildered visits to the flowers in the ladies' spring bonnets. Elsie's and Steenie's eyes met once or twice, in their rapturous following of the intruder's erratic flights; and at last Elsie grew so

absorbed in watching a daring effort of Steenie's to capture the prize, when it rested on a bunch of yellow roses in Mrs. Lutridge's bonnet, that she let a heavy hymn book she was holding fall to the ground.

Mrs. Lutridge stood up to frown at her, and covered with confusion, she crouched down, and hid her face on Grandmamma's shoulder. But when all was quiet again, her interest in the butterfly obliged her to raise her head and peep over the pew side, just to see what had become of it.

Steenie was holding it lightly between his finger and thumb, and as she looked up, he actually stretched out his hand to show it to her.

Their eyes met and spoke to each other quite unmistakeably now. Question and answer quicker than words could have conveyed them. Then the finger and thumb parted. The butterfly fluttered up above Mr. Pierrepont's head, carrying the children's eyes with it. They met again coming down; the boy's bright, bold eyes brimming over with fun, and quite confidently claiming Elsie's companionship in his amusement. It was a wonderful joy to Elsie.

"We are children," Steenie's eyes had said to her, instead of the old sentence she had heard so often, "You are a child."

She had made one real living acquaintance in the child world; and the dreams and visions she moved among every day took a sort of substance from that recollection, which made them more satisfying.

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## CHAPTER III.

Alice Pamela Neale.

THE monotony of the life led by the Blake household had two noticeable breaks in it.

At a certain time in the early spring, and again in the autumn, Mr. and Mrs. Blake and Margaret left home together, and were absent several days.

They never spoke to each other or to Elsie about this journey before the day of their departure came, or alluded to it in the most distant manner on their return, but Elsie gradually learned to understand certain premonitory signs which showed her what was about to happen.

She knew what she had to expect, when, on peeping through the bed-curtains in the morning, she saw Margaret occupied in transferring some of the contents of her drawers to a small portmanteau that only saw the light at those two seasons of the year. Elsie generally laid her head back on the pillow and drew the curtain aside that she might watch all Margaret's movements.

To see her do something she did not do every day in the year was in itself quite interest enough; and as Elsie grew older the very thought of going beyond Oldbury, of actually seeing what was in the world behind the grey hills, had a charm for her which made the invisible things that were to share the journey worth looking at.

Elsie concluded that Margaret always put precisely the same things in her portmanteau, for she never seemed to be thinking of what she was doing while she filled it. Her face was stiller, colder, more impenetrable than usual on these mornings. A slight frown often contracted her forehead, but it seemed quite involuntary, as if some physical pain brought it there. When she had finished packing, she came to the bed, and called Elsie, and helped her to wash and dress, precisely as she did every day.

Elsie could not help feeling a little provoked, while Margaret went through the usual routine. It seemed such a pity that a journey should be thrown away upon her who (Elsie thought) could not care about anything. The departure of the three travellers never occurred till the middle of the day. There was not any pleasant, excited bustle of preparation in the house, but there was a general air of unusualness everywhere, which made the day seem to Elsie like the concentrated essence of Sunday.

Old Mr. Blake paced up and down the hall with his hands behind him; not looking down dreamily and talking to himself, according to his ordinary habit, but keeping his lips closed, and showing with his eyes a consciousness of Elsie watching him from the second stair, that was far less comfortable than his usual perfect abstraction.

Sometimes he used to pause in his walk at the foot of the staircase close to Elsie, put out his thin white hand, lay it on Elsie's head, and remain quite a minute looking down into her face as if it had been a book he was reading. Elsie felt very frightened when he did that.



Grandpapa's eyes, which generally seemed as if they saw nothing, used to grow very large and dark and sad, she fancied, while he stood looking at her; then he used to shake his head, and sigh very loud, and begin his walk again, tottering a little at the first step or two.

What could be the matter with her face Elsie wondered, to trouble such an old man as Grandpapa so much; she wished she dare ask him not to look at her in that way, or that she could get quite a new face before the next time.

She could seldom bring herself to endure more than two such inspections, before she deserted her post on the stairs, and retired to Grandmamma's bedroom, where Mrs. Blake always shut herself up with Crawford, till the carriage that was to take them to the station came round to the door. Elsie could understand Grandmamma's demeanour in the prospect of a journey better than Margaret's. She was almost as much excited as Elsie herself would have been; there was always a bright spot of colour on each of her cheeks; and her hands shook so at the last moment, that Crawford had to tie her bonnet and pin her shawl round her. Then, before leaving the room, Grandmamma turned round and took a long look at herself in the cheval glass, that stood in a dark corner of the room. No one but Elsie even noticed the glass except on those travelling days, but then Grandmamma put her face quite close to it, and smoothed back her grey hair, and pulled the soft lace of her cap into pretty folds round her face.

"I don't look so very old, Crawford," Elsie heard her say once; "not like a broken-down woman, old

before my time. I am not so very much altered as to be a reproach to anyone."

Crawford had to hurry Grandmamma from the room at last, and when she got down stairs Grandpapa and Margaret were waiting for her. Margaret, with her thickest veil drawn over her face, but Mr. Blake wearing a look of determination and presence of mind that for the moment made him seem to have changed places with Grandmamma.

Child as she was, Elsie perceived that just on these occasions it was he who took charge of the others, and that they looked up to him and turned to him for directions, as they never did at any other time. It was he who gave the word when they were to go. He put Margaret into the carriage first, and then came back for Mrs. Blake, and once (in the spring of the year of which we are speaking) when Elsie in her curiosity ran to the gate to see the carriage start, she noticed that as they drove away he held one of Grandmamma's hands and one of Margaret's in his, and that he was talking earnestly to them. Could Margaret be crying under her veil? Elsie wondered, as she walked back through the garden when the carriage was out of sight. There had certainly been a suspicious round bright drop on her dark dress; Elsie had seen it fall. But Margaret crying! Margaret, whose face so seldom changed, crying because she was going to leave the dark house and be carried away up those swelling soft purple hills beyond the town, and down into the unknown wonder-world behind them, which Elsie so longed to see. Oh! she would not believe such a sorrowful thing. She put the thought far from her, and danced back to the

house again, jumping up to catch the budding ends of the laburnum shoots as she passed under the trees, and finding a hundred excuses for lengthening the journey.

Already, when Elsie re-entered the house, the sort of change had come over it which she recognised as the natural consequence of the absence of its master and mistress. The air seemed to be lighter, the sunshine freer to look round and penetrate into all the corners. The hush that usually reigned everywhere was broken by brisk commonplace sounds.

Crawford had lost no time in calling in a band of active coadjutors, and setting on foot the half-yearly turn-out of the whole house, in directing which she indemnified herself for having, during the rest of the year, no one to order about but Grandmamma and Elsie.

She had set all the windows in the house open; the spring wind was fluttering the papers on Mr. Blake's desk, and blowing the dust from his bookshelves, and two red-armed damsels had taken Margaret's place in the study, and were chatting and laughing over their work of pulling down the dingy brown curtains, which shut out the sunshine and made summer and winter alike there.

Elsie enjoyed the bustle quite as much as Crawford. She wandered through the transformed rooms, and made friends with the strange work-people, puzzling them sorely with her questions. When Crawford interfered, as she did now and then, and banished her from the scene of action, she found Grandpapa's study a pleasant place to retire to, now that the furniture, which usually seemed to look gravely at her with

Aunt Margaret's eyes, was safely covered up, and ladders were perched against all the book-shelves.

On the day before the travellers returned, Elsie betook herself to the study early in the afternoon, and became so engrossed by a discovery she made there, that she had no idea how late it was, when Crawford, suspicious of the long quiet, put her head into the study door and called her.

The corners of the room were growing uncomfortably mysterious, and the draped furniture looked awful in the middle of the room when Elsie looked up at the summons, so she made haste to replace a little heap of volumes she had been studying, and ran up into Aunt Margaret's room, where Crawford was busy sewing rings on to the bed-curtains. The candle-light looked quite cheerful, and Elsie was glad to have it and Crawford's company, while she followed out some thoughts her afternoon's discovery had roused in her mind.

She leaned her arms on the table and watched the sewing on of half a dozen rings in silence. Then she said suddenly—

“Crawford, do you know a girl called Alice Pamela Neale, aged ten? did she ever live in this house? and why are all her pretty story books hidden away in that darkest corner of the study, behind Grandpapa's great red dictionary?”

Crawford let the curtain-rings fall to the floor as Elsie spoke, and did not make any attempt to answer till she had picked them up again, one by one; then she said, in an unconcerned tone of voice—

“Whatever do you mean, Miss Elsie? how should

I know anything about what's behind your Grand-papa's books?"

"Oh, Crawford, you are very tiresome," cried Elsie; "whenever I ask a question you pretend not to understand. You might be kind just once. I never wanted anything so much as I want to know about Alice Pamela Neale. Do tell me where she is. I know there is such a girl. She has a father and a mother, and two brothers, and they all give her books on her birthdays, and she draws funny pictures of them under their names. Oh, if she would only come back here one day to fetch her story books I could show her where they are. Do you think she will ever come back, Crawford?"

Crawford shook her head. "There is no such person, Miss Elsie; you must not think any more about her. I was afraid you were in mischief this afternoon, but I'd no notion you'd managed to rout out them books. Whatever would Miss Margaret say?"

"Did Aunt Margaret hide them?" said Elsie. "Did she take them from the little girl? Crawford, there must have been some one who drew those pictures and read the books. Do, do tell me where she is now."

"Well, if you must know," said Crawford sharply, "she is dead this long while; and unless you wish to vex your poor Grandmamma beyond anything, you won't ask any more questions about her."

"Dead, aged ten!" said Elsie; "and she had two brothers, and all those story books! Oh dear! how sorry she must have been to leave them all. And I have been hoping she might come back for her books some day and play with me."

Elsie's head dropped down on to her arms as she finished speaking. It was but the hope of an afternoon, but it had taken a curiously strong hold on her.

The inscriptions and names on the blank leaves of the books had pleased her fancy first, and afterwards, as she turned over the well-read pages, and discovered childish pencil drawings here and there, and comments on the stories, scrawled in a straggling hand on some of the margins, it almost seemed to her as if Alice Pamela herself had stepped out from behind the red dictionary, and was sitting by her side, pointing out the places where she was to read, and imparting in confidence her private thoughts about the stories. Elsie had a complete picture of her in her mind: ten years old, with father and mother, and brothers and cousins; so bright, and rosy, and gay; such an ardent lover of story books, and sharing Elsie's thoughts about them so exactly. She felt as if she had just found a friend, and could not bear to give her up.

"Did she die aged ten?" Elsie asked after a minute or two, lifting up her face quite wet with tears.

The strange thing was, that Crawford's face had changed while Elsie was hiding hers. She had thrown down the pile of curtains, and her eyelids were winking, and her lips twitching, in a fashion Elsie had never seen in them before.

"Miss Elsie," she said solemnly, "if I let you talk more than you ought, and your Aunt Margaret is displeased with me, you'll please to remember how you teased me beyond anything, and how determined you were."

"Yes, yes, I am determined, dear Crawford. Did she die when she was ten years old?"

"No, Miss Elsie, she lived to be grown up and married; and I went away with her, and was her own maid. Miss Elsie, Miss Elsie, I will tell you the truth, whatever Miss Margaret may say to me. She was your own mamma."

"Alice Pamela Neale? Oh dear." The vision of the rosy-faced, laughing reader of story books vanished from Elsie's mind, and left a blank there. She had no delightful visions of motherhood to fill it. Grand-mamma had been quite enough for her in that relationship; it was not maternal tenderness she was pining for. Crawford, who was rather fond of exciting emotions, and who had for years been fretting at the prohibition, which had withheld her from rousing in Elsie's mind the regrets which she thought were due to the young dead mother, was much disappointed at the blank in Elsie's face.

"You had a great miss of your dear mamma, Miss Elsie. You will never know all about it, that's one thing," she said disapprovingly.

"But she was a grown-up woman," said Elsie, "she would not have read story books; a grown-up woman like Aunt Margaret."

"Not so much of a grown-up woman as she might have been, poor dear," Crawford answered; then suddenly rising, she went to a closet at the further end of the room, took a small square parcel from a high shelf, drew off a paper, and put a purple case in Elsie's hands. "Just for once you shall look at her, Miss Elsie, just for once; and then I shall have done all I can for you, and you had better never tease me

or ask me upsetting questions again, for there now, I've done talking."

Crawford touched a bright spot in the leather case as she finished her sentence. Up flew the lid, and from underneath, two bright saucy eyes, two smiling parted lips, a beaming, sparkling girl's face looked up at Elsie.

Elsie drew a long breath. "Oh, Crawford! are mammas like that?" she said. "Alice Pamela Neale. Mamma! mamma!" she kept on repeating to herself, and all the time the sweet eyes laughed, and the golden curls hung softly round the bright face, as if some one had been playing with them a minute ago.

"Oh, Crawford, how much nicer blue eyes are than black ones," Elsie said; "and little pointed noses than straight ones, like what every one has in this house. Oh, if every one could look like this, how happy we should all be."

"Folk are as God made them," said Crawford. "And it's not always just the bonniest that's the happiest. You must give it me now, Miss Elsie; it's none of yours or mine, and I can't answer it to my conscience not to put it back directly."

Elsie resigned the case reluctantly, and followed it with her eyes, while Crawford folded it up, and restored it to its place in a corner of the top shelf of the closet.

It seemed very strange to her that it should have been there so many years, and that she should not have known about it. She should always know just exactly where it was now, and fancy it looking at her through the closet doors. No wonder Margaret shut it up. She felt sure Margaret would never like to



look at such a pleasant, pretty thing. Elsie resolved that she would never speak to Margaret about Alice Pamela Neale, and then it came into her mind that there was one other question she must ask—one thing more she could not do without knowing—"Did Alice Pamela Neale—did mamma ever come here? Did she live in this house before she died, with Grandmamma and Aunt Margaret? I never remember there being anyone else here than just ourselves."

Crawford was sewing brass rings on diligently by this time, and her usual impenetrable expression had returned to her face.

"I've done talking, Miss Elsie. Maybe I've said what had best have been let alone."

"Oh, but just this one thing. I do so want to know whether she ever saw me. You say she was *my* mamma."

"Well, of course she did, Miss Elsie, but you was but a little thing when—when—she was took from us. I don't suppose you can remember anything that happened before that."

"Oh, *how* I wish I could," Elsie said vehemently, and then she shut her eyes and tried to call up and arrange certain dim, fitful notions, that made a cloudy region at the very bottom of her mind, behind the point where conscious memory began.

A coherent recollection came back to her at last by dint of long looking into the dark. A scene rose distinctly before her eyes, which she knew had been part of her own life long ago, but the sweet face of the picture did not come into it. She only saw a large room; somehow or other very different in appearance from any room she had seen since; and her-

self a very small child sitting on a brightly-flowered hearthrug crying bitterly. She seemed to remember that she had been a long time alone in the room, and had wearied of all the beautiful toys scattered round her, and that there were noises in the house that had frightened her. The forlorn, injured feeling the little child had had came back quite strongly to her, and she could have cried again to think how wretched it had been. Then the door had opened and Grandmamma—yes, Elsie was sure it was no one else than just Grandmamma—had entered hurriedly, and snatched her up, and rocked her in her arms, and cried over her. Then everything had grown quite dark Elsie thought, and she seemed to herself to have awakened a year or two afterwards in the little Oldbury house.

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## CHAPTER IV.

## A first Visit.

MR. and Mrs. Blake and Margaret returned home the next day, and the usual still routine of life began in the house; but one or two circumstances combined to keep alive in Elsie's mind the curiosity her conversation with Crawford had roused. Margaret was unwell for many weeks after their return, and could not walk out with her in the long spring afternoons. She had to take her exercise while following Grand-mamma about the house and garden; and she came in the way of overhearing some scraps of conversation respecting Margaret's illness that gave her a great deal to think about.

She gathered that something unlooked-for had occurred to her grandmother and aunt while they were away. They had met some one they never expected to see again, and Margaret had been so much startled at the encounter, that she had slipped down some steps they were mounting at the time and sprained her back.

It was very difficult to Elsie to picture her grandfather and grandmother and Margaret doing anything she was not accustomed to see them do every day, or moving about among people and in places of which she had never heard.

Most children have a background to their own experience, painted out for them by the stories their

elders tell of their own doings; but Elsie had never listened to such stories, and was only just now beginning to be inquisitive about past events.

She used to bring her stool to the sofa, where Margaret was now obliged to recline for the greater part of the afternoon, and sit looking up into her face when her eyes were shut, wondering how she had looked long ago; whether she had been young when Alice Pamela Neale was a child; and whether she had ever read any of the story books that were hidden behind the dictionary.

When Margaret lay with closed eyes for long together, the temptation to cross-question her grew strong in Elsie's mind, but it always lessened with the first upward movement of the dark lashes from her cheek, and vanished altogether when she turned her gaze full on Elsie. Not that there was any severity in her eyes, but there was a weary, absent expression in them that thrust Elsie very far away—to a distance too great to speak from. Mrs. Blake would have been a more available confidant, but Elsie had a strong conviction it would not be wise to disturb the happy relationship between herself and Grandmamma, by beginning conversations on possibly agitating topics.

Grandmamma sometimes came out of her room, when she and Crawford had been closeted there together, with very swollen eyes, and a trembling about her lips that her little granddaughter did not like to see. She would speak quite cheerfully to Elsie at these times, and take her out into the garden to show her which of the lettuces she might cut for tea; or to pronounce upon the condition of her crop of mustard and cress; and Elsie, rejoicing in the cheerful words

and pleasant looks, felt strongly that she had rather fill her own place towards Grandmamma than Crawford's.

Possibly, however, though no questions were asked, Mrs. Blake did discover something of what was passing in the child's mind; for as the spring advanced she sent her out more frequently into the open air, and one evening made her almost wild with joy by telling her that she intended to take her on a shopping expedition into Oldbury next day, to purchase summer clothing for her use.

Mrs. Blake did not often walk as far down the hill as to that part of Oldbury where the principal shops lay. It had hitherto devolved on Margaret to transact all necessary business there.

She had never seemed to enjoy the task, and Elsie thought it rather perverse of her, to spoil the edge of hers and Grandmamma's pleasure in their excursion, by looking anxiously after them when they came to the study to say good-bye. She even followed them to the front door to say gravely, though hesitatingly—

“You will take care, mother, you will not buy Elsie anything unsuitable.”

“My dear,” Mrs. Blake answered softly, “she is such a child; we must not make her remarkable, whatever our own feelings may be.”

“No, not remarkable; but there is a suitability that one ought always to keep in view. I could not bear to see it violated.”

“Well, well, she is a child,” Grandmamma answered. “We cannot go very far wrong in what we

get for her; but I will be careful, and not go against your wishes, my dear."

The sun was shining very brightly when they got out of doors, and the air was full of floating pink and white blossom leaves from the apple-trees in the gardens, and Elsie was too happy chasing them to trouble herself about her aunt's mysterious warning.

Her first speech was an exclamation of pleasure at espying Miss Berry, with her parish basket in her hand, nodding energetically at them from the opposite side of the street.

"She is crossing to speak to us, she is *so* pleased to see you and me out together; that is why her curls shake so far over the side of her bonnet. It is well they can't possibly fall off altogether. Is it not, Granny?"

Miss Berry had, apparently, less confidence in her head appendages than Elsie, for she paused to give them a steadying touch before she offered her hands, her basket, and her tract bundle, to Mrs. Blake.

"Now you really must not ask me to turn back and walk with you," she said, "for I have so much in hand this morning. Yes, actually in hand, you see, though I did not mean to be so light-minded as to make a pun. Dear Mrs. Lutridge would have been quite shocked if she had heard me. She is always saying, 'What a snare my nimble tongue is to me!' Dear! I have turned round, I declare! Well, well, a little way, since dear Miss Elsie has seized my hand, and seems determined on having my company."

When the nature of their business in Oldbury was eagerly explained by Elsie, Miss Berry confessed that she should feel justified in putting other duties aside to help them with her advice; and once, in the linen-

draper's shop, she showed a keen interest in their employment that roused long-suppressed sympathies in Mrs. Blake's mind. Such a cordial, common-sense talk about dimities, and damasks, and pretty patterned jeans, she never thought to have enjoyed again.

Elsie's interest was almost worn out before Grand-mamma and Miss Berry began *seriously* to examine the little garments and hats produced for their inspection.

Mrs. Blake conscientiously confined her attention to the darkest and plainest; yet Elsie perceived she cast admiring glances towards the gayer-coloured heap Miss Berry piled before her on the counter.

The apparent contrast in their taste struck Miss Berry at last.

"Now I do admire consistency," she began. "I am not as consistent myself as I could wish. To the last day of my life, I am afraid, I shall always go on wishing that pink and yellow were not such worldly colours; but if I had known you were such a decided Christian, I never would have asked to have that brightest pink muslin taken down from the shelf. I felt a little ashamed myself of pointing it out to the man. However, even Mrs. Lutridge's consistency does not go so far as to confine her strictly to striped blacks and browns. She calls the rose in her spring bonnet stone-coloured; but between ourselves, my dear—I am sure I don't wish to be scandalous—but if I had seen it anywhere else I should have said it was yellow."

"It is yellow," said Elsie, decidedly. "An ugly yellow, like her own hair."

This speech brought on her an anxious, though good-humoured, shake of the head from Miss Berry,

while Mrs. Blake, who apparently did not see the connexion between Mrs. Lutridge's bonnet and Elsie's summer dress, stooped down, lifted her on a high chair, and proceeded rather reluctantly to fit the ugliest of the hats on her head.

Elsie indignantly wriggled her curls from under it, and Miss Berry seized the opportunity of substituting one trimmed with pink rosebuds on which, as she divined, Elsie had all along vehemently set her heart.

"I am sure I should be sorry to mislead anyone," she said, "but I have heard that all the little Lutridges are to have silk dresses with lilac rosebuds on them for Sunday wear this summer. And after all, my dear, it is most natural for rosebuds to be pink, and for children, bless them, to wear them. Only do look how natural they look falling on her hair."

"Grandmamma," said Elsie vehemently, "do let me have the pink rosebud hat; all the other little girls in church have pretty hats—why should not I?"

"Why not, indeed?" cried Miss Berry, with a glance and a nod at Mrs. Blake, which clearly implied that a pretty hat could not anywhere be better bestowed.

The appeal was made in all good-humour, and need not (Miss Berry thought afterwards) have moved Mrs. Blake so extremely as it did. Quick tears actually sprang to her eyes at the words—and in the shop, with all the shopmen looking at her. She threw her arms impulsively round Elsie, and said in a trembling voice—

"Why not? my bright-haired, innocent darling, why should not you be as brave and gay as other children? What have you done that you should be left out?"

"To be sure—why, indeed?" reiterated Miss Berry, a little agitated and incoherent, between her wish to



avoid a scene, and her anxiety not to omit improving an occasion that seemed to have a serious and emotional tendency. "To be sure, as we were saying, rosebuds and children—my memory is so bad, or else I have no doubt I might have thought of a text, or, at least, a verse from Watts' hymns, that would have sanctioned our putting them together. I am sure the number of toy sheep-folds, with appropriate texts outside, that Steenie Pierrepont had given him by the ladies of the congregation, till he got to hate the very sight of a lamb! Only one does not see how that applies, except that rosebuds and lambs are both young things. However, I can look out for a text in the Concordance when I get home; and meanwhile, as I see you have made up your mind, I will tell the man to send this hat, and the pink muslin with the innocent white sprig, that goes so well with it, up to your house."

Elsie left the shop radiant with delight at seeing such unexpected splendours of attire put aside for her wearing. But no sooner was the excitement of the contest over than Miss Berry's scrupulous conscience began to trouble her, lest she should have erred in her encouragement of youthful vanity. As she walked down the street, she searched her memory anxiously for some antidote in the way of depressing hymns or texts, that she might hasten to administer.

"If I had but dear Mrs. Lutridge's memory," she began. "I assure you now, she will hardly ever speak to a poor child without bringing in one or other of Watts' beautiful verses, which may stick to the memory, you know, and do such incalculable good; whereas I—though I know there is a sweet little poem of his about 'silk attire' and the 'poor worm,' and 'I a

wretched child,' which would have been so exceedingly appropriate to dear little Miss Elsie just now—cannot bring the words rightly to my mind. 'Rob the poor worm!' such a touching way of putting it! and so often as I have heard that hymn repeated.

"However, here we are at the door of my little house, and dear Elsie is dragging back a little. The hill is steep for little feet to climb. Dear Mrs. Blake, I don't venture to ask you to come in, and partake of my early dinner: to tell the truth, it consists to-day of sausages and mashed potatoes and rolled jam pudding; for Steenie Pierrepoint is to dine with me, and that is the dinner he likes best, within my means to provide. I don't venture to ask you, but Miss Elsie might not dislike—the sausages are home-made, and remarkably wholesome, and after dinner I could look out that poem about the worms, and read it to her, which would be such a satisfaction. My memory is against me; but dear Mrs. Lutridge sometimes does me the favour to look in and speak a seasonable word, as she knows so well how to do; and there is my great map of Palestine against the wall, to give the conversation a Scriptural turn, and sometimes I really do hope that the afternoons the dear children spend with me are not so very unprofitable."

"Oh, Grandmamma," gasped Elsie, for Mrs. Blake stood on the door-step with a hesitating expression on her face, which induced Miss Berry to ramble on, and wound Elsie up to an agony of anxiety. Miss Berry's proposition was like the sudden opening of heaven to her; and she thought, in her childish, passionate little heart, that she should die on the spot of sorrow if it were not accepted.

"You see she has led such a secluded life, she has never made acquaintance with other children, she would be shy," Mrs. Blake said.

"Grandmamma, I should not," Elsie broke in vehemently. "Let me, O Grandmamma, Grandmamma!" Elsie threw her arms round Mrs. Blake, and lifted up a face that actually trembled and quivered with the vehemence of her entreaty.

Grandmamma stooped and kissed her forehead softly. "Well, darling," she said, "if you wish it so much, I will take the responsibility on myself. It is the first time I have let you go anywhere alone, but I hope no harm will come of it, and that you will be happy."

Only the first and the last words reached Elsie's ears, and interpreting them into consent, she prevented any more, by dragging down Grandmamma's face for a kiss of gratitude.

She was extremely happy and triumphant, till Mrs. Blake had left her standing on the door-step alone with her friend, and then, while Miss Berry fumbled for her latch-key, and opened her door, she watched Grandmamma's figure lessening as she toiled up the steep street, and felt her heart, that had been beating so wildly, suddenly compressed with a chill sense of desertion and loneliness, which half disposed her to take sudden flight, and never pause till she was clinging to Grandmamma's skirts again. If Steenie Pierrepont should refuse to speak to her, or make a face of derision at her, as she had once seen him do to another boy in the street!

No discoverer on the verge of gaining the result of long years of labour ever felt more agitated than

Elsie did, while Miss Berry was preparing to open the door of her house, which seemed to her the entrance into an utterly unknown world. It was, indeed, absolutely the first house, except her own abode, and the house of God, open to all, which, within her memory, little Elsie had ever entered.

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## CHAPTER V.

## Oldbury Tactics.

THERE were few people in Oldbury, whether old or young, who would have felt curiosity at the prospect of entering Miss Berry's little house, though, to say the truth, its interior was as little conformable to the established Oldbury type as an abode that came under Mrs. Lutridge's censorship could well manage to be. Everybody was used to the oddities of the place, and had left off remarking upon them. Every little child in the neighbourhood had stood upon a chair to twist round the great ostrich egg that hung in the window instead of a flower-basket. Every school-boy had admired and coveted the curious pieces of mechanism, in the shape of miniature water-mills and sand-clocks, which had been left in Miss Berry's charge by an ingenious brother, who had quitted Oldbury to make his fortune forty years ago, and never came back again. Every little girl had been delighted with the bead baskets and dancing cork-dolls on which Miss Berry had exercised her ingenuity, in what she called her dark days; and all the Sunday-school children in the place had been edified by pondering over a pictorial chart of Scripture history, that filled an entire side of the little sitting-room, and to the designing of which Miss Berry had devoted her artistic powers since the sinfulness of an existence given up to bead baskets had come home to her.

She regarded this map as the great work of her life; and she used to say that she could never be thankful enough to Mr. Pierrepoint for the descriptions of Palestine in the first sermons he had preached at Oldbury, which had set her upon the task.

The drawing of the very original little pictures which now covered every inch of the wall had interested her, more than the fashioning of bead baskets had ever done, and then the possession of such an educational treasure gave her an excuse for inviting the neighbours' children to her house oftener, and giving them more frequent slices of cake and new six-pences, as stimulants to memory, than Mrs. Lutridge would have considered justifiable under other circumstances. The neighbours, who had watched her exits and entrances for the last forty years, would have said that it was impossible to imagine a more monotonous existence than hers; yet it seemed to herself that she had pasted and painted a great many crises of her life in among the little pictures; and when sometimes in the twilight she allowed herself to sit idle and contemplate her great work, as artists love to do, it was not always the events the drawings were meant to represent that came before her mind as she gazed.

"Ah!" she would say, "it was while I was putting those many colours into Joseph's coat that I got the letter to say my poor brother William was dead. I was in the desert when I heard about that failure of the Bristol Bank which lost Arabella and me nearly all our fortunes. I was drawing that oak at Mamre—it has got a great blot upon it now—when Mrs. Lutridge came in to say that Mr. Pierrepoint was actually going

to be married, and *not* to an Oldbury lady. I had just begun the bordering, when Mrs. Pierrepoint called the first time, and stayed so long, and admired my drawing in such a friendly way; and I had only got round the corner when I heard that Steenie was born, and she was dying. Ah, dear! what a lesson that the brightest lots are unstable! How dreadful it would have been, to be sure, if any one in Oldbury had ever envied her. I wonder whether some of us were quite as friendly to her,—pretty, gay, little thing,—as we might have been. To be sure, it was a surprise, when we had made up our minds to some one so different, to have a stranger come among us after all!”

“After all” did not in Miss Berry’s inmost thoughts mean an accusation of flirtation with any Oldbury lady against Mr. Pierrepoint. His arrival, in the past time, had no doubt been a great event to many of the female inhabitants of Oldbury.

He came into the midst of a very stagnant spiritual and intellectual life, a young, eloquent preacher, who, if he had not at that time gone through any very deep spiritual experiences himself, had been brought up under a much more exciting and emotional system of religious teaching than had been given to Oldbury before his coming.

The phrases he used, and the doctrines on which he especially insisted, did not perhaps mean as much to him as they had done to the teachers who had first given them prominence, but he was sincere in his advocacy as far as it went. His hearers had more spiritual conceptions of duty, and higher aims in life, presented to them than they had ever known before; and

if the scruples he suggested about matters of dress and social amusement were somewhat trivial and exaggerated, it was the prominence given them by his female admirers, and their elevation into badges of party feeling, that did the real harm. Oldbury was not a place where a change, wise or foolish, in social practices would be carried out without an immense dust of contest and heat of party spirit being raised and blown about it.

Miss Berry took her side—what the Oldbury ladies called “the serious side”—after the very first sermon. It was a real epoch to her—the beginning of a higher, or at all events a more active and conscious, spiritual life. But having taken her side at once, she was too humble and kindly to form harsh judgments of those who held back, as some of her friends were disposed to do.

It was pure benevolence, untinged with any love of victory, that made her rejoice ecstatically, when about a year after Mr. Pierrepont’s advent it was whispered about among his adherents that Mrs. Lutridge, the rich banker’s wife, hitherto the leader of all the gaities in Oldbury, had resolved to give no more card-parties, and had actually taken the ostrich feather out of her winter bonnet. She never thought of claiming any superiority over her friend for having been beforehand with her in choosing the right way, and she very soon allowed herself to fall as completely under Mrs. Lutridge’s guidance in spiritual as she had formerly done in worldly concerns.

Even when Mrs. Lutridge’s new zeal and devotion eclipsed that of all Mr. Pierrepont’s earlier friends, she could still go smiling about, and shame the other



serious ladies out of their latent jealousy by her congratulations on the benefits that must accrue to the whole town, now that two such superior people as dearest Mrs. Lutridge and excellent Mr. Pierrepont had found each other out, and were willing to take the direction of everybody's concerns into their own hands.

The remaining ladies of the worldly party retired from the contest when they found themselves deserted so conspicuously by their leader; and though the few gentlemen of Oldbury were rather less amenable, and stuck to some of their old-fashioned amusements after Mrs. Lutridge had definitely declared against them, they were too small a minority, and just then of too little account in Oldbury, to form any serious obstacle to the general harmony.

It only served to make Mrs. Lutridge more interesting, and to rally the hearts of her female friends round her, when it was known that Mr. Lutridge, hitherto the Oldbury ideal of a well-conducted family man, had insisted on giving one of his odious dinner-parties on a Thursday lecture-night: and there was but one united sentiment of triumph and congratulation telegraphed from bench to bench on the evening when the final victory was won, and Mr. Lutridge was observed following his wife into the lecture-room, with that touch of added stateliness in his bearing, which Oldbury understood to signify that he had found it advisable to succumb in a domestic contest, and wished to warn outsiders against presuming on his defeat.

The halcyon days of peace and universal goodwill that followed Mr. Lutridge's capitulation were too per-

fect to last for ever; but the storm that ended them burst from a quite unexpected quarter.

Of course everybody knew that Mr. Pierrepont must marry some time, and it cannot be denied that this certainty was hardly ever mentioned in Oldbury society without causing a good many hearts to flutter. Miss Berry congratulated herself that she had passed the age for "all that sort of thing," as she phrased it, and could listen to the confidences of her female friends without any trouble on her own account. "Though, to be sure," as she sometimes said, "very extraordinary things did happen to people at all times of their lives, and one never knew when one was quite safe." Even to her the uncertainty of conjecture was harassing enough to make it quite a relief when the advent of a sister of dear Mrs. Lutridge, on a long visit to Oldbury, pointed Mr. Pierrepont's way to a wife so clearly, that it was hardly worth while to waste another conjecture on the subject. There was a rumour in Oldbury afterwards, that Mr. Lutridge had once said to a confidant in the privacy of his sitting-room at the bank, that he believed it was the coming of Mrs. Lutridge's sister to Oldbury that frightened Mr. Pierrepont into matrimony. Only a few people had courage to believe that such a speech had been made with impunity; yet the facts remained. During the summer of Mrs. Lutridge's sister's residence at Laurel House, Mr. Pierrepont was observed to make frequent short absences from Oldbury, and on his return from one of these, about harvest time, it was noticed that instead of walking up the hill as usual to call on Mrs. Lutridge, he paid a visit to Mr. Lutridge at the bank, and on going away was followed to the door by that

gentleman, and shaken very warmly by the hand on the door-step in sight of several Oldbury passers-by.

Before evening the thunder-clap had fallen. Every man, woman, and child in Oldbury knew that in three weeks' time a Mrs. Pierrepont was coming to Oldbury—a perfect stranger to the place, of whose very existence no one, not even Mrs. Lutridge, had ever heard before that day. Putting all personal considerations aside, Oldbury could not feel that it had been treated with proper confidence; nor could the ladies of the place regard that hearty shake of the hand, bestowed by Mr. Lutridge on the culprit, as other than a melancholy display of mean-spirited triumph over their discomfiture.

Somehow or other all the gentlemen of Oldbury seemed to grow an inch or two taller, and to feel warranted in taking more upon themselves after Mr. Pierrepont's marriage was declared. Before the evening was over there was hardly one who had not vexed the soul of wife or sister by declaring that he had known all along how it would be: Talk of men being more magnanimous than women, and less disposed to recur to vexatious topics! The Oldbury tea-tables could have borne signal testimony to the contrary at that period; but then, to be sure, the unclerical masculine portion of the community had had to put up with a long course of disregard, and might be expected to take so signal an opportunity of re-asserting itself.

Miss Berry being so fortunate as to have neither husband, brother, nor lover to work on her feelings, recovered the shock of the first surprise more quickly than other people; and though she was unable to keep her congratulations free from embarrassing allusions

to past possibilities, she could express her goodwill with a fervour that was actually grateful to Mr. Pierrepont amid the general coldness.

"It was no doubt dreadful to think of any of dear Mrs. Lutridge's plans falling to the ground," she observed; "but, to be sure, what was she thinking of—there never had been any plan; and if there seemed to be any little backwardness or shyness on the part of certain people—the idea of a stranger coming among them—dear Mr. Pierrepont would understand—quite accounted—and it was said used to a different way of life; the daughter of a lady of rank; of a Lady Selina Deane! To be sure, how it sounded! Not enough perhaps to embarrass Mrs. Lutridge, who had been used to the best society, and was not to be surpassed for elegance—but humbler people—however, if gratitude and goodwill counted for anything in a simple way, Miss Berry could answer for there being a large store awaiting the young bride in Oldbury."

All down the steep street of the little town, from the top of the hill, where he had passed Mrs. Lutridge's house without calling, to the door of Miss Berry's abode, Mr. Pierrepont walked in the golden light of the last October afternoon he spent in Oldbury before his marriage, listening to this incoherent chatter, and to a great deal more like it, with a smile of genuine pleasure on his handsome face. And when they shook hands on the door-step, and he replied with fervent thanks to her timid "God bless and prosper you," there was actually a sudden upspringing of moisture to his eyes. He was a very fervent, impressionable, sympathetic tempered man, wearing his heart on his sleeve more openly than is convenient in our chill

English climate, and having in his character a certain necessity for living in the warm sunshine of universal goodwill and applause, which made his position in Oldbury a somewhat perilous one.

He had been a good deal pained by the cold turning away of so many friendly faces; pained, and puzzled, and rendered anxious about the future success of his ministrations among his people; doubtful even concerning the wisdom of his choice—which was, he admitted to himself, a little inconsistent with former professions. Even Miss Berry's timid support and fluttering goodwill was welcome, and came like a ray of sunshine that day.

She, on her side, thought she should be grateful all her life for the way in which he had received her poor words. She would never, she promised herself, care again for the little necessary slights, which in other moods it was so natural he should put upon her.

It takes very little to bind some hearts for ever—hearts that have been very much starved of love and kindness. A little crumb of consideration, a faint show of goodwill, will buy all their long-accumulated stores of devotion cheaply enough.

From that day forth Miss Berry's championship, such as it was, was secured to the little bride, who soon after came to Oldbury.

Almost everybody else had a great deal to say against her; and it cannot be denied that, as Mr. Pierrepoint's chosen wife, she was a puzzling apparition to the "serious" ladies of Oldbury. She wore a longer and better curled ostrich feather in her hat than the one Mrs. Lutridge had laid aside. Her pretty little head was decked out of an evening with all manner

of fluttering knots of ribbon, and elaborate braids of hair. She did not scruple to say that her favourite head-dress had come from Paris, and to offer the pattern of it to Mrs. Lutridge's sister. She made the direst confusion in the tract cupboard, and mixed the tracts for the converted and the unconverted with hopeless want of discrimination. She gossiped with the cottagers instead of scolding them, and she played with the little children at the infant school, and curled their hair, when she ought to have been teaching them their Watts' catechism.

She was enough to cause a whole army of professors to backslide, Mrs. Lutridge said, more especially as Mr. Pierrepont seemed strangely blind to her shortcomings, and might be seen smiling down into her face with the utmost complacency, while she clung to his arm, and laughed and chatted to him up to the very threshold of the vestry door of a Sunday morning. Mrs. Lutridge considered that he could not walk with pitch and not be defiled, and began to discover a lamentable falling off in the fervour and fulness of doctrine of the Sunday sermons. They no longer edified her, and she lamented having to spend so many of the precious Sabbath hours in listening to them.

Some scruples about the lawfulness of using a form of prayer suggested themselves to her mind, after Lady Selina Deane came to Oldbury, and twice passed her in the street without bowing; and if the preacher at the only Dissenting chapel in the town had not also been the principal grocer of the place, whose weekly bills Mrs. Lutridge was always disputing, her allegiance to the Church of England (such as it was) might have been undermined at that period of her life.

It was in the autumn of the year succeeding the marriage that Lady Selina Deane turned Oldbury upside down, by bringing her carriage, and horses, and livery servants to the Rectory, and dashing about the streets quite furiously, as if she (or at any rate her coachman) thought that people were ever in a hurry, or could have anything particular to do in Oldbury. Parties ran very high after Lady Selina came, and there seemed to be a danger of the old distinction of serious and worldly being forgotten, in a new division of the parishioners into partisans and non-partisans of the parsonage ladies.

Miss Berry humbly hoped it was not because Lady Selina kept her carriage standing at her door an hour at a time, while she admired the map, that she could not help discerning some very valuable qualities in that lady. And Mrs. Lutridge was quite sure that her decided opinion as to Lady Selina's frivolity and worldliness had nothing whatever to do with her having had the unaccountable stupidity and insolence to stop her in the street one day, and give her a message to herself, under the impression that she was her own parlour-maid. Mrs. Lutridge was so eloquent one day at a tract meeting on the sinfulness of paying homage to worldly rank and distinction, in preference to spiritual gifts, that Miss Berry shed tears of remorse at her own supposed inconsistency, and had to go to bed with a headache as soon as she got home.

It was a pity; for, as it turned out, that was an evening when tears might well have been spared in Oldbury, so many had to be shed in the days that followed.

In the midst of all this excitement, when the quarrel

was at its height, a sudden hush came. People spoke the names of Lady Selina and Mrs. Pierrepont low when they met in the streets. The knocker at the Rectory was tied up, and the Doctor's face looked grave as he left the house. Things were not going on so favourably there as could be wished, people said mysteriously to each other as they stood round the church door after service on the next Sunday, and commented on the effort it had cost poor Mr. Pierrepont to get through the sermon. A fine healthy son was born at the Rectory, whom Oldbury adopted as an object of interest at once; but the fair little mother—several people's hearts smote them as they named her; and not a few resolutions, almost vows, were registered under the Sunday autumn sunshine, by her late critics, that they would not notice so very exactly how near she was to the church door when she laughed up into her husband's face, or how trippingly her feet danced down the aisle, if only she would come and repeat those offences among them again.

In the evening a stranger performed the service, but he might as well have preached from the top of Snowdon for anything the Oldbury people heard of his discourse.

It had been whispered by the pew-openers and beadles, as the congregation went into church, and everybody knew it,—she was dead. She would never scandalize any one in Oldbury any more; the pretty little thing; the gay little thing; people had fancied they had not liked her, but she had managed to fill up a great space in their thoughts, and now it was just as if a bright beam of sunshine had faded sud-



denly, leaving them all very conscious of the blank darkness.

There was nothing to be heard but tears and sobs in the church as long as the service lasted; and Mrs. Lutridge had to keep her face buried in her handkerchief the whole time. She wished, perhaps, that she had not held her lips so rigidly drawn down that *last* time when Lady Selina's carriage passed her in the road, and Mrs. Pierrepoint looked out and nodded with such a coaxing, bright little smile. Yet, by dint of dwelling a great deal on the extent of her own sorrow, she contrived to persuade herself, before her tears were all shed, that she, and that dear childish little Mrs. Pierrepoint, had been very good friends on the whole, and had understood and appreciated each other at bottom after all.

She made up her mind that she would forget any little uncomfortableness there had ever been; and, at all events, no one should prevent her doing her duty to the child. She was firmly resolved on that. No slights from Lady Selina should induce her to deprive the motherless babe at the Rectory of the advantages of her constant supervision. If, by and by, anything of his poor mother's lightness of disposition should betray itself, it might be well for him that there should be some one at hand with firmness to repress the incipient fault in time. To be sure, things were wonderfully ordered; it might be a great blessing to that poor little Pierrepoint to be guided from the first by firmer hands than would have been over him if his dear mother had lived.

Mrs. Lutridge's sobs grew less distressing as she followed out her thoughts; and though her eyes were

red and swollen with weeping when the final blessing was pronounced, and she raised her head from her handkerchief, yet she was able to talk with considerable eloquence on the wisdom of the inscrutable decrees during her walk home; and she rather startled Mr. Lutridge by the sharpness with which she reproved him for characterising the late event as a "*mysterious Providence.*"

Lady Selina Deane did not dispute the possession of her grandchild with Oldbury and Mrs. Lutridge, as some people feared she might. She was in a great hurry to get away when the melancholy event was over, and professed herself too much overcome with grief for her daughter's death to have any attention to spare for the "unhappy child," as, to Miss Berry's indignation, she persisted in calling the baby.

She even went so far as to say something to Mrs. Lutridge when she called on the day of the funeral, which that lady interpreted into a formal making over of all responsibility concerning her grandson to her. A very few days afterwards the handsome bay horses and smart chariot that had attracted so much attention, were seen for the last time in Oldbury streets; and people began to look back on the time when they were always dashing about everywhere as a past brilliant era, such as Oldbury must never expect to know again.

There was only the baby at the Rectory, and a something in Mr. Pierrepont's face, as he stood up in his pulpit on Sundays, and moved about on his week-day ministrations, to prevent everything being precisely as it had been a year before.

The breach (to give it a more serious name than

it had perhaps deserved) was quite healed between the pastor and his people.

Mrs. Lutridge took longer notes than ever of the Sunday sermons; and when Mr. Lutridge recurred to some of the difficulties respecting the doctrines of the Established Church she had once professed to be troubled with, it cost her a flood of tears to discover that her husband was capable of misunderstanding her state of mind so entirely.

When Mr. Pierrepoint recovered from the first stunning effect of his great domestic trial, it was some comfort to him to find shed around him the same sunshine of admiring goodwill and confidence that had made the first years of his ministrations in Oldbury pass so pleasantly.

He felt positively grateful to Mrs. Lutridge for forgetting her late grievances, and showing herself willing to resume her old dictatorship in school and charity club affairs. He was in no mood of mind to resent the usurpation of authority which his pre-occupation tempted her to achieve. He was passing through a crisis of great mental struggle, and the daily routine of outward existence slipped past him like the events of a dream.

In common with many people who have been accustomed to look at religion chiefly from the emotional and subjective side, and who have adopted the phraseology of highly spiritual doctrine, without having individually experienced its power, his first real sorrow came in the character of a great shaker and disturber of old beliefs.

The heavenly lights which he had always supposed to be there, beyond the flood of earthly sunshine in

which he was walking, refused to show themselves distinctly, now that his sun had gone down in sudden night, and his soul was, for a time, wrapped in a cloud of thick darkness.

It was often torture to him to have to get up and preach of comfort, and assured hopes, which he could not feel, the more especially as he had been accustomed to teach that the very existence of these hopes for each individual depended on his power of appropriating them.

It would have been well for the future integrity of his character, and firmness of his faith, if he had had courage to give up his duties for a time, confess his inefficiency as a teacher, and go away to battle out his difficulties to an honest issue; but such a course of conduct did not lie within the scope of his nature. He could not break up old ties; he could not come down from the height on which he stood, and disappoint and bewilder those who were looking up to him as the awakener of their spiritual life, by confessing that he had taught what he did not experimentally know. It would have been death to him to attempt this. He did what he could; he struggled, and worked, and thrust away thoughts that looked like temptations to him, and gradually a calmer state of mind came back, and a certain measure of light. But his character suffered, his sympathies were narrowed by what he went through instead of widened, as they might have been, had he been able to meet his trial in an honest way.

Meanwhile the baby at the Rectory struggled through infancy to childhood, not filling up any great space in his father's thoughts. He had so many self-

appointed guardians that Mr. Pierrepont might be excused for feeling himself absolved from bestowing much personal care upon him. Little Steenie Pierrepont was the child of the whole town, and every lady in it considered herself more or less responsible for his well-doing.

From three years old to six, he paid more visits than any other inhabitant of Oldbury. The devout single ladies coveted his company almost as much as that of his father, and would give up a Thursday evening lecture to entertain him at tea.

It was much talked of among them, that he early showed a delight in arranging their drawing-room chairs into pews, and in delivering harangues from supposititious pulpits. Miss Berry took the trouble to write down some of his childish discourses, and found so many well-known phrases strung together with a certain coherence, that she could not but regard them as delightful evidences of early enlightenment.

Mrs. Lutridge was beginning to consider that such very precocious spiritual development might probably be the precursor of an early death, and that she might as well be collecting materials for a future memoir, when some lady, a little more discerning than the rest, pointed out that the child was amusing himself during the whole exhibition by mimicking his father's voice and gestures with extraordinary skill.

Mrs. Lutridge could not believe in such depravity in one so young, till one day it came into Steenie's head, at her house, to diversify his entertainment by acting the members of the congregation listening to the sermon, and she caught sight of certain emphatic gestures made by the curly head, and a swelling im-

portance assumed by the childish figure that, somehow or other, brought a very uncomfortable flush of self-consciousness into her face. She gave up all thought of the memoir from that day forth; had more confidence in the stability of Steenie's health than heretofore; and instead of regarding him in the light of a possible "folded lamb," or "gathered flower," gave way at times to most melancholy prognostications respecting his future career, and the heartaches he would occasion his father.

Poor Mr. Piérrepoint, who had been accustomed to nothing but the most rapturous congratulations on his young son's dispositions, was a good deal puzzled by the sudden change. He showed a paternal disinclination to see his little son's faults in the worst light, which rather scandalized Mrs. Lutridge; but he put a stop to Steenie's promiscuous visitings in the town, and began to try to have the child more with him than formerly. Seated on a little chair in the study, with his spelling-book or his Latin grammar in his hand, Steenie had opportunities of studying his father on week-days as well as in the pulpit. He did study him a great deal, and read more in his face than he did in the book. He got to know exactly what he thought of the different visitors who came in, how glad he was when some of them went away, and what twinges of disgust he sometimes endured while making the usual civil replies to their criticisms of his sermons.

It was a curious sort of companionship between the two, with so much more of comprehension and sympathy on the side of the younger than the elder.

Mr. Pierrepoint was puzzled sometimes at the considering look in the bright young eyes that he often surprised watching him from the stool in the corner; and he would lay down his pen in the middle of a sentence and call Steenie to him, and put his hand softly on his curly head and ask him some babyish question, such as he thought suitable to his understanding. The boy's heart grew hot, with a strange mixture of love and indignation and pain on these occasions. He would have given anything in the world to be able to say something to convince his father that he was not so foolish as he seemed to suppose; but he only looked sulky and injured, and muttered his answer so unintelligibly that Mr. Pierrepoint gave up the attempt at conversation in despair, and wished, with a sigh, as Steenie retreated to his stool, and began to count the marbles in his pocket again, that he had better spirits, or that there were any study in the world which could teach him to make himself agreeable to his son.

Times improved for Steenie, when he was old enough to attend the Grammar School of the town as a day scholar. He was quick enough to have no difficulties with his lessons, and soon climbed over the heads of elder scholars, while his gay humour made him popular in the playground. If the busybodies of Oldbury had but let him alone, and had not thought it their duty to report every boyish misdemeanour of which he was guilty to his father, he would have been quite happy. As it was, his temper was kept in a constant state of irritation, by the knowledge that his incomings and outgoings were spied upon, and his affection for his father was weakened by the continual

collisions of wills that other people's interference brought about.

Mr. Pierrepoint could not divest himself of the notion which the Oldbury ladies were always impressing upon him, that somehow or other his son was bound to set an example of especially correct demeanour to the other youths of the town; and Steenie rebelled sturdily against the idea of being looked at in the light of a walking sermon.

He would have restrained his mischievous propensities for the single purpose of pleasing his father, for whose affection he often vehemently longed; but he looked on the extra strictness imposed on him as a weak yielding to Mrs. Lutridge's influence on his father's part, and felt as if he were asserting the independence of the family by kicking against it.

But all this time Miss Berry has been putting her latch-key into her door, and there, just as the door flies open, Steenie Pierrepoint comes running up the street from the schoolhouse with his satchel over his shoulder, and an unmistakeable grin of pleasure on his face.

The only house in Oldbury that he liked visiting now was Miss Berry's, and he had made up his mind to spend a jolly afternoon, in turning over her brother's old mechanical toys, and reading some volumes of old-fashioned fairy tales, that, by dint of much coaxing, he had persuaded her to take down from her uppermost book-shelf.



## CHAPTER VI.

Steenie.

ELSIE was disconcerted to perceive that the broad smile disappeared from Steenie's pleasant face when his eyes fell on her.

"Oh, you have some one with you," he said in a dismayed voice; then, brightening up as he scanned Elsie from head to foot, "but never mind, it's not one of the little Lutridges."

"My dear Steenie," said Miss Berry, "I do wish—that tongue of yours—if it had been one of the dear little Lutridges, I know quite well you would have been—but it is only Elsie Blake, who is so good as to come and dine with us."

They were in the tiny vestibule of the little house by this time; and to Elsie's surprise (he had seemed such a formidable rough schoolboy a minute before) Steenie threw his arms round Miss Berry's neck and bestowed a hearty hug upon her. Then, as an after-thought, he gave an experimental twitch to the curls, that had been blown by the spring wind a little too far over her forehead.

"Now, Steenie dear," said Miss Berry in an expostulatory tone, "I have confided to you frankly that it *is* a front, and gone the length of showing you exactly how I fasten it on, so you need not look so curiously at it every time."

"It is such an odd concern, and you are such a

delightful old Berry. I like you up to your front better than all the other sour Oldbury people put together—you know I do.”

“But, my dear, when there are others so much more worthy—though certainly I can venture to say that I have felt like a mother to you ever since you were born.”

“No, not like that,” said Steenie, throwing back his head, and considering her gravely. “My mother would not have looked like you. She would never have worn a front if she had lived to be ever so old.”

“My dear, of course I did not mean that I was like your mother, only my feeling. She was, oh! *so* different from me, I have told you often.”

“Yes,” said Steenie, proudly; “the prettiest, nicest, happiest-looking person that ever came to Oldbury,—that’s what you say she was.”

“You are a fortunate boy to have had such a mother; and then your father, such a good man!”

“Oh, I know all about that,” said Steenie abruptly. “Let’s go into the dining-room and look at the map. Have you put in that strong man killing a lion in a pit on a snowy day that I found out for you?”

“Yes, here he is,” said Miss Berry, opening her sitting-room door. “I have been obliged to screw him up into a corner, and make the lion more like a puppy dog than I could have wished artistically, for I am getting short of space. You can explain some of the pictures to little Miss Blake, while I take off my bonnet and help Caroline to bring the dinner.”

The two children looked at each other shyly,

without speaking, for some minutes after they were left alone.

"I say," said Steenie at last, "you ain't any relation to Mrs. Lutridge, are you?"

"No, no," cried Elsie emphatically.

"Then come along," said Steenie.

Elsie was rather puzzled to know what "come along" meant, as they neither of them went anywhere; but she concluded that it was equivalent to saying, "Let us be friends," and she allowed herself to feel all the ecstatic happiness that such a proposition was calculated to give her.

When Miss Berry, following her small maid-servant with the dinner-tray, re-entered the room, she found the two children kneeling close together in a corner, and laughing heartily over some grotesque faces Steenie was surreptitiously introducing among the scroll-work bordering of the map.

Their mingled joyful voices, filling the shabby dark little room, gave her the keenest pleasure, as if a flood of sunshine, and delicious flower-scents, and purest air had come round her; and though she suspected danger to her greatest treasure, she could not bring herself to inquire what they were doing.

Elsie was in paradise too. She could hardly believe her eyes as they followed the motions of Steenie's fingers.

There, with down-drawn lips and up-turned eyes, Mrs. Lutridge's face looked out from a rose—the leaf near it turned, by magic, into the man who kept the turnpike on the Bath-road; and positively, there, walking down that great coil of flourishes as if it were a road, her own figure and Aunt Margaret's grew up

under the pencil. Their poke bonnets, their straight dresses, the very way she hung back staring round her, and Aunt Margaret looked straight on.

"Oh, how clever you are! What a wonderful boy you are!" she sighed admiringly. "How I wish the pencil would do like that with me!"

"Why should not it?" asked Steenie condescendingly. "Some girls draw—my cousin Cecil Russel does. I've lots of little pictures she has sent me in letters. I'll show them to you some day."

"You have a cousin!" said Elsie, with admiration and envy increasing at every word. "How nice to have a cousin; and what a nice name Cecil is!"

"Yes," said Steenie hesitatingly; "but I'll tell you something. She has not half such a nice face as you have. I've often thought of that when I've looked at you in church. Cecil's jolly enough, but you somehow or other, you are altogether different."

"Am I? Oh, dear, I don't want to be different," said Elsie, her little face lengthening. "Don't say I am so very different."

"You are, however," said Steenie stoutly. "But you have a great deal the nicest face."

Elsie was doubtful whether or not the second part of the sentence atoned for the first, but Miss Berry called them to take their seats, and the conversation could not be pursued further.

"Oh, I say," observed Steenie when the covers were taken off the potatoes and sausage-rolls, and a perspective of pudding and dessert on the sideboard presented itself before him. "I say, I met Mrs. Lutridge as I was coming out of school. She saw me turn in here, and she's sure to call just now, to see

what you are giving me for dinner; so if there is anything you don't want her to see, you'd better put it away at once."

"Anything I don't want her to see, Steenie dear! You do flutter me dreadfully by putting things in such a coarse way. Anything I don't want dear Mrs. Lutridge to see——. To be sure, almonds and raisins for dessert and preserved ginger are luxuries more suited to Mrs. Lutridge's position than to the state into which it has pleased——; but why you should think me capable of hiding—and oh, my dear Steenie! I cannot see clearly through the blind, but is not that her bonnet coming up the steps?"

"Yes, it is; and you left the door on the latch, so she will be in upon us in an instant, the prying old——"

"Friend," interposed Miss Berry quickly; "and most unthankful should we be for all her efforts after our good, if we did not make her welcome at all hours. To be sure, the preserved ginger—it was very inconsiderate in me—that large fly is getting into the syrup; and the closet would certainly be a safer place."

"No, no, it is too late now; you had better sit still, she will catch you with it in your hand," said Steenie, laughing. "After all, she can't do anything but jaw. Give us something to be eating while she goes on at it."

Miss Berry's hands were shaking too much to enable her to fill the plates quickly, and before any one was served the door flew open, and Mrs. Lutridge, followed by her usual train of pale-faced daughters, sailed into the room.

A good deal of commotion followed. The six little girls had all to be kissed by Miss Berry, and accommodated with seats, and meanwhile the dinner grew cold, and Mrs. Lutridge stood upright in the middle of the room, and acquainted herself, to the minutest particular, with the condition of everything in it; from the preserved ginger on the sideboard, and the vacant space in the book-shelf whence Steenie had abstracted the fairy tale book, to Elsie's worn winter dress and shabby black sash.

Elsie, who trembled all over under the sharp look that finally rested on her, was made the subject of the first observation.

"So you have invited the little Blake child to dine with Steenie Pierrepoint," Mrs. Lutridge said, with raised eyebrows directed towards Miss Berry.

Miss Berry could bear a great deal, but an attempt to limit her hospitality was the one offence that roused her to something like self-assertion.

"Yes," she said, with a certain dignity, as she drew Elsie a little forward. "Dear little Elsie Blake, her good grandmamma has been kind enough to trust me with her for this afternoon. I have not much to offer in the way of entertainment, but I do my best, and the dear children all seem glad to come to me."

"That we are," cried Steenie defiantly; "a great deal better pleased, I can tell you, than when we have to go to some other places."

His face had grown quite red and eager; his curls seemed to be bristling up all round his head; and he looked a good deal like a pugnacious little turkey-cock watching an opportunity to fly at somebody.

Mrs. Lutridge looked down on him from under her eyelids.

"Hum!" she said; then contemptuously declining the proposed combat, she turned back to Elsie.

"What is your name?" she asked in a solemn tone, that suggested an intention of putting her through the Catechism.

"Elsie," said Elsie gravely, as she did when Grand-mamma called her up to go through that exercise on Sunday afternoons.

"Elsie is not a name at all," objected Mrs. Lutridge. "It is a short. I suppose your real name is Alice, and you ought to have said so; but I have observed that little girls kept at home as you are, seldom know how to answer a straightforward question properly."

"Is Elsie the short for Alice?" said Elsie, suddenly flushing up, and in her eagerness taking hold of Mrs. Lutridge's rustling dress. "Oh, do tell me; I should so like to think I was called Alice, like mamma! I never knew before."

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Mrs. Lutridge, in a loud aside to Miss Berry. "Extraordinary! that the child should not know what her name is, or whether she is called after her mother or not; *most* extraordinary, and, I should say, *very* unsatisfactory indeed! Ursula and Maud, sit still where you are; I don't wish you to come over to this side of the room. No, no, Sophia, you need not trouble yourself to hold out your doll. You have not the pleasure of little Miss Blake's acquaintance, and I daresay she does not care for dolls; besides, it is time for us to go home."

"But the dear children," said Miss Berry, glancing

anxiously at the dish of almonds and raisins on the sideboard, and making a rapid mental division of its contents. "To be sure there is not any great supply, but I can't bear the thought of their all going away without tasting anything; and if you would only allow me to give them each a bunch to carry in their hands——"

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Lutridge, emphatically; "they go home to a plain, wholesome dinner, such as I consider it my duty, as the head of a Christian household, to provide for my family. *Luxuries* and *dainties*" (with a severe glance at the preserved ginger) "do not come within *my* means. Other people, I suppose, make their own calculations, and I can only hope that no carnal love of display, or desire to vie with their superiors, leads them into unjustifiable expenses. In our conspicuous position in the town we are, unhappily, obliged to keep up a certain appearance, and live in a certain style; but how often do I, dear Miss Berry, when weighed down, as I so often am, with the cares my station entails, envy people like you, whose safe, humble position in life sets them free from so many burdensome necessities. With no claims on one's time, and no responsibilities, how easy it might be to lead a simple, happy, self-denying life, taking no thought for the morrow, restricting one's wants to the fewest necessaries, in order to bestow one's superfluity in good works; enjoying the spiritual blessing Mr. Pierrepont expatiated on so delightfully last Sunday, of 'having nothing.'"

"We have dessert every day at our house," struck in Steenie. "Almonds and raisins, and preserved ginger, and guava jelly, and—prawns, and—and" (searching



his memory desperately for further items, and stumbling by mistake on the principal products of St. Petersburg) "isinglass, and caviare; we have all that, every day, for dessert at our house."

Mrs. Lutridge, who had gently closed her eyes during her exordium to Miss Berry, opened them so suddenly that Elsie had a fancy she heard the eyelids click. "Steenie," she said, "I shall be sorry to feel obliged again to recommend your poor dear father to set you the third chapter of James to get by heart; but unless you learn to bridle that unruly tongue——"

"He quite forgot to hear me say it the last time," cried Steenie triumphantly.

The delayed encounter threatened to become serious now, and Miss Berry, all agitated and fluttered as she was, threw herself between the combatants.

"Now, Steenie dear, you really are—and, dearest Mrs. Lutridge, boys, however well brought up, and with the best of clergymen for their fathers, will still be boys. I am sure I don't mean to excuse them for it, but I am very much afraid it is the case with them all; and if I might suggest, since it is most likely past the dear children's dinner-hour, will you not all sit down, and do me the favour to partake of what there is on the table?"

Mrs. Lutridge was, however, unpersuadable on the subject of sitting down; and as she had now kept the little party standing till their dinner was completely cold, she took her departure, sweeping her train after her, and carrying a good deal of the sunshine and comfort out of the little room she had so abruptly invaded.

Miss Berry dispensed the cold viands with a con-

cerned, crestfallen face, which had a momentary effect even on Steenie's spirits; and Elsie forgot to look forward to the afternoon's reading of the fairy tales, while she wondered why Mrs. Lutridge had been so sure that she would not care to play at dolls with her little daughter.

The appearance of the dessert unlocked their tongues, and tended to raise their spirits a little.

"Steenie dear," Miss Berry began, as she divided the preserved ginger, "you know quite well that I never like to cast a gloom over the time we are together, but I am so very much afraid you went beyond the truth about the guava jelly and the prawns, and those other things you mentioned. I am sure I don't pretend to judge as to what a gentleman might fancy for dessert, but isinglass! I wish I could think you had not gone beyond the truth."

"She should not have begun jawing at you, then," said Steenie gloomily.

"Oh, my dear Steenie, but if you knew how it hurts me to think that for my sake you should have told a——"

"'Cram,'" interrupted Steenie. "Well, Elderberry, I'm sorry; but she does make one tingle all over so, and feel in such a rage. One has not time to think what one is saying, and geography or anything that comes into one's head does for her. To please you, I'll behave better next time I see her."

This concession entirely banished the cloud from Miss Berry's kind face. Sunshine and content came back into the little room, and Elsie kept all her life a glowing recollection of the delights of the afternoon that followed.

Steenie took down, and explained to Elsie, the dilapidated mechanical toys that Miss Berry revered, not only as relics of her lost brother, but as the most wonderful inventions of the age. He made the wheels of all the little sand-mills run round, and got the water-clocks to tick, and the tumblers to tumble, and the painted paper ladies to dance to a tune Miss Berry played on her wheezy old piano; and Elsie felt as if she were transported to enchanted ground, with Steenie for magician, and thought she should never find it difficult to believe anything wonderful after this.

When they were tired of play, the two children sat on the floor in the cosiest corner of the window recess, where the afternoon sun shone over their heads on to the fairy tale book held between them; and Miss Berry took up her knitting, and sat in an easy-chair at the end of the room, and looked at the two rosy faces, and the two golden heads touching each other as they bent over the same page, and had a vision of herself—not being herself, but a different person (who might have existed surely)—living in a house where children did not come and go, but stayed always, and called her “mother.”

The children chattered a good deal at intervals in their reading, and Elsie discovered that Steenie’s enjoyment of fairy tales was not lessened by the scruples and difficulties that troubled her. It was not that he was the more credulous of the two; but with him it was less a matter of vital importance to believe thoroughly, and live over again all that he read. A hazy, half-belief was quite enough to carry him along with the story.

“What does it matter?” he said: “perhaps the

white cat would have died in reality if her head had been cut off; but let us turn over the page and see how it goes on."

"Ah, but it would have been so dreadful if she had died," objected Elsie. "I wonder how the Prince could. Would you have done it, if you had been he?"

"Well, I don't know," said Steenie. "It would have been for her good, as Mrs. Lutridge says; but do let us finish the story."

After tea, Miss Berry sat between the two children in the window recess, and as the spring day faded, they watched the lights springing up in the houses and shops of the old-fashioned, irregularly-built street; and Miss Berry told them how she remembered it when there were no lamps, and people went about with lanterns after dark; and from that she drifted into the history of a flood which had occurred thirty years ago, when the waters of the Idle had filled all the lower streets of the town to the Market Cross; and related how her brother had jumped into the mill-weir by Black Pool, when the waters were most disturbed, to save the lives of two little lambs that were being carried down the stream.

Elsie was so eloquent in praise of this action, that Steenie grew somewhat critical, and would not acknowledge that mill-weirs were such very dangerous places to jump into, even at flood time, or that there was any such great merit in saving the lives of lambs that were sure to be killed in the end.

The Rectory stood just opposite Miss Berry's house, and as the self-willed rows of houses, in their determination to avoid every semblance of regularity, approached each other with a sudden curve at this part

of the street, a person sitting in the dark at Miss Berry's window could command a very complete view of everything that passed in the Rector's study when the fire burned brightly, or the lamp was lighted.

Miss Berry was very conscientious about drawing down her blind, to save herself from the temptation of overlooking her neighbours; but to-night, with Steenie sitting by, there did not seem much harm in watching for the lighting up of the opposite window, as it was to be the signal for Steenie's return home.

"There's our lamp!" cried Steenie. "Papa has come into his study, and is going to settle to his books, and I must go in there too and learn my lessons. It's a great bore. You can't think how dull the evenings are. I mayn't speak a word for fear of disturbing him. It's a great bore."

"Oh, Steenie! and he says he liked to see you sitting there with your books, and he has no one else. My dear, don't go this minute: I want to say something I have had on my conscience for a long time. Steenie, you know I don't like to cast a gloom——"

"Fire away," interrupted Steenie rather gloomily. "You may jaw me as much as you like, Elderberry, because I like you, and you ain't Mrs. Lutridge."

"My dear, I don't know what you mean by 'jaw.' I hope you may be able to relieve my mind. It was a fortnight ago, Steenie, at the Spring Fair time, when the giant, and the lady with two heads, and all the shows were on the Green, and your dear father gave it out as his opinion that the school children and everybody should be discouraged from going to the fair, because the shows and things partook of the

nature of vanities. Oh, Steenie, I am so sadly afraid you went one Saturday evening on the sly."

There was a moment's pause, and then Steenie burst out, "Bob Lutridge told you! the sneak! I dared him to tell his mother, so he comes to you."

"No, it was not Master Lutridge. I went down that Saturday night to one of the cottages on the Green to take some wine to a sick person, and as I came back I saw a boy I was afraid was you coming out of a show with a crowd of rough people. Oh, Steenie, it gave me such a turn to see *you* in such company, and your father such a good man."

"I wish my father was a bad man," said Steenie, passionately. "Oh, you need not shake your head at me, Berry, for I do—I do. I should not have everybody interfering with me then, and spying about me, and doing all they can to make me hate him. And he—he would care more for me; he would have taken me to the fair himself, as Jack Thompson's father took him. Yes, I do wish my father was a bad man."

"My dear, you don't know what it means to have a father who is a bad man," said Miss Berry, sighing, and glancing round her little room, which would not have been as poor as it was if her early family experience had been what it ought to have been.

Steenie felt more uneasy in the grave silence that followed, than a prolonged lecture would have made him.

"There was no harm in it all," he said. "I never should have gone if Bob Lutridge had not boasted so; and he saw without paying by looking through the chinks. The giant was not worth seeing, and the lady had not two heads."

"Oh, Steenie, I don't mind so much about what you saw; it's your going on the sly that hurts me so. Your father is too busy to look after you. He has our instruction to think of, and you should not blame us for being anxious over you. We think of him shut up in his study studying to teach us—and—and—of your mother being in heaven. Steenie dear, if I were you I would just walk into the study now, and tell him all about it."

Steenie jumped up and stood silent for a few minutes, looking into the room, where he could see his father's figure pacing up and down. Even in the dim light Elsie could see that his lips were pressed tightly together and his hands clenched.

"He would scarcely listen to me when I began first," the boy said, "and then he would look so, and there would be such a great deal of talk. He would not punish me; I should not mind that half as much, but he would talk. It would be much harder than jumping into the mill-weir after the lambs."

"Yes," said Elsie quickly, "but you said you should like to have something harder to do than that."

"Well, good-night, Berry; good-night, little Elsie, I am going now," the boy said.

"And you will tell your father? Nothing will set you right but that," Miss Berry insisted anxiously.

"I can't promise; perhaps I shall, and perhaps I sha'n't," said Steenie roughly. He slammed the room door, then opened it, and poked his head in for half a second.

"I say, you may look at our house, and if you see me go straight into the study, you'll know I'm doing

it, but I shall be wishing it was the mill-weir all the time."

He darted off again, and the two left behind sat in their places watching the street silently.

They heard the front door shut, saw Steenie's figure flash across the street and enter the house opposite, and for the next minute they hardly breathed.

"He has done it!" cried Elsie triumphantly; "there he is going into the study. I see his head between the lamp and the wall. Mr. Pierrepont is sitting down now. Steenie has gone to him. He is beginning to speak. Mr. Pierrepont looks up from his book, so suddenly."

"My dear, I think we ought to draw down the blind now," said Miss Berry. "I am always very particular about not looking across into the Rectory rooms. You shall get your hat and cape, and I will take you home myself, for I never let my little maid Caroline go out after sunset."

It was long past Elsie's bedtime when she reached home, and Grandmamma did not encourage any talk about the day's adventures, but hurried her to bed at once. The drawing-room looked a little darker, and Aunt Margaret's face a little sadder and stiller than usual Elsie thought; but perhaps it was the contrast with the other rooms, and the other faces, she had seen that day, that struck her.

However, when she got upstairs she found, on the drawers opposite her bed, the package of pink and white muslin, and the rosebud hat, to console her, and remain lasting witnesses of her happy adventures. Grandmamma seemed rather out of spirits about the purchases, and did not encourage Elsie to admire them while she was being put to bed.



“Aunt Margaret does not think them suitable,” she said sorrowfully. “Let them stay where they are, dear; I don’t want to think of them any more to-night.” But when Grandmamma had left the room, Elsie got out of bed in her night-dress, and tried the rosebud hat on before the glass. The little pink buds looked very nice, she thought, among her tumbled curls; and when Steenie drew another picture of her walking along the road with Aunt Margaret, he would certainly put the rosebud hat into his drawing, and make her look as smart as any other Oldbury child.

It was a long time before Elsie fell asleep after she got to bed again; and when the slumber came, it was troubled with curiously mixed-up pictures of what she had seen during the day: the map, with all the scroll-work in it, forming fresh scenes every minute; Steenie jumping into the mill-weir; herself, the white cat, and Steenie drawing a sword to cut her head off. She woke with a start, and thought what a long night it had been, and wondered why there was candle-light instead of day-light in the room. Then she peeped through the curtain, and saw Aunt Margaret seated at a table with a candle before her. She had Elsie’s hat in her hand, and a pair of scissors, and she was deliberately cutting out all the rosebuds, and the pretty pink bows from the trimming inside and out.

Elsie felt, for a moment, quite strong and brave in the swelling of her anger, as if she must jump out of bed, and snatch the hat from Margaret, and punish her somehow. Oh, it was cruel, it was unjust, she would not bear it! Then she began to tremble very much. On a second glance there was something in Margaret’s face as she sat at her work of destruction,

something solemn, before which even Elsie's childish passion fell back baffled. Margaret was not, Elsie knew by a sort of instinct, thinking of her, or of the hat mainly, as the bright scissors wrought such havoc. Nothing she could say on the matter, no argument she could bring forward, would have anything to do with Margaret's thoughts.

Elsie lay back on her pillow fascinated, and watched one pretty bud after another fall to the ground, till the poor hat had lost all its beauty. Then she saw Margaret replace the hat on the drawers, cover it up, and kneel down at a chair, a little distance from the bed, to say her prayers. She covered her face as she knelt; Margaret never looked up to pray, but, oh! the way in which she threw herself down, the agony of supplication her up-stretched arms and hands expressed!

Elsie let the curtain fall, and buried her face in the pillow. She felt very cold, and sick, and shivery; she did not care at all about the rosebud hat now. Steenie, and Miss Berry, and the bright little room where she had spent the afternoon, seemed to have moved a long way off from her.

She wished that Margaret would be quick, and get into bed. She wished she dare put her arms round her and kiss her when she came. She had been so excited by the different events of the day, and was now so frightened she would have been glad to get near any one, even Margaret. Hitherto the shadow that enshrouded the household had lain outside little Elsie; to-night for the first time the cold chill of it fell on her heart.

## CHAPTER VII.

## Visitors to Oldbury.

ABOUT a week after Elsie's visit to Miss Berry, Lady Selina Deane arrived at the Rectory to pass a month with her son-in-law, as she had been in the habit of doing once in every two or three years since her daughter's death. Her coming and going no longer made a commotion in Oldbury, though on this occasion it brought a little variety into the lives of Elsie and Margaret—the last people in the place whom such an event might have been expected to concern.

The Oldbury people had grown accustomed to Lady Selina by this time, and had learned to regard her complacently as a credit to the place. She had aged a good deal in the last twelve years, and no longer dashed along the roads in her chariot. She was wheeled by a tall footman along the sunny side of the street in a Bath chair, with could not run down any one, and was yet rather a nice object for the Oldbury people to point out to strangers.

"That is Lady Selina Deane, our Rector's mother-in-law. Yes, I know her very well—she is nodding to me from her chair, and I should cross over the road to speak to her, only she is such an invalid we never like to tempt her to stop in the street," was a speech made many times a day, while Lady Selina was staying at the Rectory, by all sorts of people, from Mrs,

Lutridge herself to Mrs. Adams the dissenting brewer's wife, who was not at all accustomed to the distinction of bows from the genteel church-going portion of the community. So long as she was not required to expose herself to draughts at the corners of the irregularly built Oldbury streets, Lady Selina was quite ready to nod and smile at everybody who claimed her acquaintance.

She had forgotten all about the old feuds, if indeed she had ever clearly understood them, and at the bottom of her heart considered distinctions between Oldbury people as far too microscopic to be taken into account by her. They were all just Oldbury townfolk; and if they liked to come into the Rector's drawing-room of an afternoon, while she rested on the sofa and sipped her tea, one was as welcome as another.

She talked quite affably to every one who came. Lady Selina always talked, from the moment she woke till she slept again—about her own health; about the difficulty she had in finding a hair-wash to keep her hair from turning grey; about her never having had the measles till she was turned twenty, and her having nearly died in them the year after she married; about the fright she had felt when a fire broke out in the stables at Compton Deane forty years ago; about the offers of marriage her daughters had refused, and the lack of worldly wisdom they had all finally displayed in their choice of husbands. She said the same things in the same evenly flowing patter of words to whomsoever happened to be with her; and though she preferred discoursing to the intimates of her own circle,

she would rather have had Mrs. Adams for listener than be left in solitude.

The Oldbury people took her condescension in good part, and attributed the monstrous ignorance respecting their names, and the circumstances of their families, she frequently betrayed, to the growing infirmities of age rather than to indifference as to their individualities.

Mrs. Lutridge, indeed, would sometimes break the thread of a story to remonstrate with Lady Selina on a habit she had of calling her friends "good souls," and "excellent creatures." "When we are none of us good, but altogether evil, and conceived in sin, you know, dear Lady Selina," she would interpose; but Lady Selina took up her discourse quite composedly when the interruption was over. She did not care to argue the point. Mrs. Lutridge and the other Oldbury ladies might be quite as corrupt and abominable as Mrs. Lutridge said they were. It did not matter in the least to her; she went on calling her own acquaintance "good souls," with a serene conviction that they belonged to a totally different order of creation.

Observing the little impression her words made, Mrs. Lutridge had naturally a poor opinion of Lady Selina's spiritual state, and was disposed to be severe on Mr. Pierrepont for not dealing faithfully with his mother-in-law. Yet she herself was obliged to endure her misgivings in comparative silence. Even while Lady Selina was telling her the silliest stories, and showing the most deplorable ignorance on the religious questions of the day, there was something about her that made Mrs. Lutridge find it impossible to cross

question her, and put her down, and lay her faults in order before her, as she would have done if she had been an Oldbury washerwoman. She called many times at the Rectory with a full intention of speaking the truth in love; but she always found Lady Selina's bland impenetrability too much for her, and had to go away somewhat crestfallen, and surprised at herself.

This year there was less chance than usual of Mrs. Lutridge's finding the long-expected opportunity for plain speaking. Lady Selina brought with her to the Rectory, besides her maid and her footman and her Bath chair, a little grand-daughter, who was always to be found seated on a stool by Lady Selina's sofa in the drawing-room, during the two hours when visitors were admitted. A dark-eyed, thin, mite of a child, with bony little shoulders sticking out (as Mrs. Lutridge would not have allowed the shoulders of any of her daughters to stick out) from a fantastically fashioned but rather shabby afternoon dress, and with silky black hair strained back from her face, and tied with crimson ribbons, in a fashion quite new, at that time, to Oldbury.

Mrs. Lutridge pronounced that she looked like nothing but a bedizened French doll, and though French dolls were not familiar objects in Oldbury, the comparison was generally considered a very happy one.

Lady Selina bestowed very little attention on her grand-daughter after the first introduction of her to the visitors was over. "This is my poor dear daughter Lady Russel's only child," she would say to each person who entered. "She is called Cecil, after her

father, Sir Cecil Russel. Small for her age, you see, and brown, remarkably brown, as all the Russels are. We were all tall and fair in my family, and Steenie Pierrepoint promises to be like us; but poor little Cecil is a thorough Russel: no one will ever take her to be my grand-daughter." After saying this Lady Selina would forget all about the child; and if the conversation happened to drift that way (it never seemed a matter of *will* with her), she would expatiate on the disappointment she had suffered when her youngest and prettiest daughter insisted on marrying Sir Cecil Russel, and going out with him in the embassy to Russia, when she might have made a better match and stayed in England, and been alive now. From that she would perhaps pass on to bemoan Sir Cecil's want of consideration towards her, in throwing the charge of his disgracefully brown little daughter on her hands, while he accepted diplomatic appointments at the ends of the earth, on pretext of being too broken-hearted to stay quietly at home.

All this, and a great deal more of the same description, she would at times pour forth in her quick inflexible voice, with as little thought about the small figure at her feet, as if it had been the bedizened doll of which it reminded Mrs. Lutridge.

No one of all the visitors, perhaps, ever remarked how the quick dark eyes kindled and flashed, and how indignantly the little brown fingers twitched the thread through the work while the talk went on.

A bedizened doll was Oldbury's first verdict on little Cecil, but before she had been a week at the Rectory she had contrived to be seen by almost every-

body in the place, in circumstances that caused Mrs. Lutridge's comparison to be forgotten.

She did not look at all like a French doll, the day she and Steenie were dragged by the miller's man out of the Idle, where they had fallen, one over the other, as they were trying to creep across the mill-dam.

Mrs. Adams was present at the disrobing of Cecil in the miller's kitchen afterwards, and she edified all Oldbury with an account of the dilapidated state of the child's under garments. After that day, Mrs. Adams believed everything the radical newspaper her husband studied said about the extravagance and vices of the aristocracy. She had seen it with her own eyes, she said. That child's clothes (good clothes tumbling to pieces for want of a stitch in time) proved to her what the whole set of titled ladies, and their mis-managed servants, were worth.

Mrs. Lutridge had soon as much to say against Cecil's manners as Mrs. Adams had about her clothes. She was making Steenie Pierrepoint more unmanageable than ever. There seemed to be nothing too preposterous for the two children to venture upon when they were together.

They dressed up Miss Tomlinson's fat poodle dog in Miss Berry's front and a pair of Mr. Pierrepoint's bands, and turned it into the national school-room, where Mrs. Lutridge was giving a Scripture lesson. They nearly frightened their next door neighbour, Mr. Bolton, the oldest Oldbury inhabitant, into a fit, by climbing over their garden wall into his cherry-tree, and peeping at him through the window just as he was taking his false teeth out after dinner.



The most aggravating feature of the case (in Mrs. Lutridge's opinion) was that Mr. Pierrepont received the numerous complaints that reached him of his son's misdemeanours rather indifferently.

The plain little brown child, who never seemed the least bit afraid of him, but would run up to him in his most absent moods and force him to notice her by pulling at his hand, had managed to bewitch him somehow.

He was out in the garden among the June roses and lilies that year almost as often as in one other summer of his life; and such pleasant sounds of laughter and mingled voices floated over the wall, that it required some resolution on Miss Berry's part to keep her rule of not looking across the road towards the Rectory premises more than was needful. Of course Steenie had taken Cecil, the very day after her arrival, to Miss Berry's house to show her the map. And Cecil soon fell into a habit of running in there whenever she felt dull at the Rectory, and of repairing to Miss Berry to have the misfortunes to her dress, which were the usual consequence of a ramble with Steenie, set to rights.

It was during the darning of a terrible rent in Cecil's frock that the little scheme was concocted which drew Margaret and Elsie into the sphere of interest and excitement created by Lady Selina's visit to Oldbury that year.

Old Mrs. Blake had walked down the hill, and called on Miss Berry to thank her for her kindness to her little grand-daughter; and in the course of conversation she lamented Margaret's continued indisposition, which she feared would prevent her taking

her usual outdoor exercise while the pleasant weather lasted. "And going out in the air is the one only thing Margaret cares for," Mrs. Blake added, with tears rising in her kind old eyes.

Lady Selina's Bath chair and her footman were standing before the Rectory door at the moment, and a bright thought flashed into Miss Berry's head. The chair was only in use an hour or so during the day, and the footman had been hunted out of three several public-houses by Mrs. Lutridge during the last twenty-four hours. Why should not Margaret Blake find employment for both in their idle time? She opened the matter to Cecil, who ran in to have her frock mended just as Mrs. Blake went away, and the outspoken, fearless child, who could say exactly what she liked to everybody, undertook the negotiation gladly, and returned in the course of the afternoon with a favourable answer. After tea Miss Berry put on her bonnet, and walked up the hill to the Blakes' house to propound her plan.

She was shown into the drawing-room, and, for the first time, found all the members of the family together: Mr. Blake in an armchair, with a great book on his lap, the leaves of which he fluttered nervously all the time she stayed; Margaret on a sofa placed where the air from the window could blow on her face, her hands lying idle before her; Mrs. Blake and Elsie at a side-table a good deal withdrawn from the other two; Elsie playing a game at solitaire, and Mrs. Blake looking on through her spectacles.

Here were the elements of a happy family group; old people and young looking at and speaking to each other with an anxious tenderness of voice and

manner, which struck Miss Berry as denoting a more than usually deep mutual affection: yet, somehow or other, this household picture did not leave the happy impression on her mind that peeps into other family rooms had done. Her own solitary sitting-room had a more cheerful air, she thought.

Margaret sat upright on the sofa as soon as Miss Berry began to explain her errand, with a refusal hanging on her lips; but before she could speak Mrs. Blake struck in—

“My love, Margaret, you know it is the only thing to do you good, and you have longed for the fresh air so. It is Miss Berry’s own thought; I said nothing. Lady Selina Deane offers us this accommodation from friendliness to Miss Berry, not to us. Think of it, Margaret.”

Then Margaret dropped her head on her hands, and a sharp struggle went on in her mind. It was bitter to her, and contrary to all her resolutions, to accept a favour *now*—from strangers too, who knew nothing about her or her family. Her proud, upright spirit revolted, as against a sort of fraud. She, at all events, had meant to be so independent, to stand aloof from all favour and pity so clearly. Was she conquered like the rest? Must she accept considerations, consolations, that she had promised herself to do without for ever?

Yet what her mother said was true. She did long for the fresh air with a feverish, thirsty longing. There was a certain spot, about a mile from the town, where a break in the swelling green hills that shut Oldbury in allowed the eye, on a sunny day, to catch a gleam on the furthest horizon; a steely glitter against the

quiet blue of the sky, which showed that the sea was there, miles away. Margaret would stand on that spot at times, and gaze till all the stony despair passed out of her face, and Elsie would often look up at her in wonder, and say, "A bit of the blue sky has got into your eyes, Aunt Margaret."

To catch that far off glitter once more—to look away, out of prison, and know there was free space beyond—would make her strong again, Margaret thought, and the temptation to accept Miss Berry's kindness increased as she pondered. Her habitually denied and crushed down inclination cried out for that one indulgence.

"And it is not what any one could call a favour to you," Miss Berry here broke in on Margaret's reverie. She had seen the colour slowly mounting into Margaret's forehead, and had been turning over in her mind how to put her proposal in the most favourable light. "I'm sure it's just as much, or indeed I might say rather more, for the benefit of that unfortunate footman of Lady Selina's, that I urge this plan upon you. Such a true kindness it would be to fill up his idle hours; for in spite of all Mrs. Lutridge can do, 'Satan finds some mischief still,' you know, dear Mrs. Blake; and the number of public-houses there are in the High Street you must have heard mentioned as a scandal to the place. If Miss Margaret would but be brought to see the matter in the light of a charitable work."

Margaret looked up and smiled; she was not a person to be reconciled to a course of conduct by trying to see it in a "light," but the kind-heartedness

that prompted Miss Berry's little exaggeration touched her.

"It is a very great favour you are offering me," she said, holding out her hand, "and I accept it gratefully. You must make Lady Selina Deane understand how true a kindness she is conferring."

Old Mrs. Blake followed Miss Berry to the front door when she went away, and loaded her with thanks; but it was the tone of voice in which Margaret had spoken, and the expression on her face as she held out her hand, that dwelt in Miss Berry's thoughts all the time she was walking home.

She had gone as near disliking Margaret Blake as she could dislike anybody, and now she found herself obliged to reverse all the opinions she had formed of her. It was almost as if she had beheld an actual transformation take place under her eyes.

"I wish I could explain it to you," she said to old Mrs. Bolton, who beckoned her from the window as she passed, and made her come across the road to explain why she had got on her visiting bonnet so late in the day. "I wish I could make you understand what I feel about Margaret Blake to-night. There have I been calling her cold and proud ever since I knew her, and when she spoke to me this evening there was a look on her face—I'm not clever at putting things into words, but I can't recollect it without the tears coming into my eyes; it was almost dreadfully humble, as if she wanted to beg my pardon for taking hold of my hand; and I have been calling her proud."

"Ah, I daresay hers is the pride that apes humility,

as some poet cleverly puts it," remarked Mrs. Bolton, shaking her head knowingly.

Mrs. Bolton had been the literary character of Oldbury in her youth, and she still retained a store of quotations in her memory, though she was apt to introduce them somewhat at haphazard now-a-days.

Miss Berry made no answer, for she had a hazy impression that a well-known quotation carried an authority with it, that settled a dispute without further appeal, but her puzzle respecting Margaret's character was not by any means set at rest.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## A Breath of Spring.

THE phenomenon of Margaret Blake taking an airing in Lady Selina Deane's chair afforded occasion for an immense amount of speculation in the town.

It was very strange, the gossips said to one another, these Blakes made a pretence of keeping in the background, and here they were receiving an attention such as no one else in the place would have dreamed of aspiring to.

By and by it came out that the loan of the chair was the least part of the distinction with which Margaret was honoured. Two or three days after she was first seen in it, there was a rumour going about the town that Mr. Pierrepoint had been seen walking beside the chair, and that he had actually helped the footman to wheel it up a steep bit of road to a certain spot on the downs. Miss Blake had set her heart on reaching.

Some of the ladies looked quite curiously at Margaret when she appeared at church the next day, to see if she were not a little altered by such an extraordinary occurrence. *They* could not have lifted their veils, and looked composedly up into the preacher's face, if he had distinguished them in such a marked way a few hours before. They wondered very much what Margaret thought about it.

Margaret thought enough about the encounter to

take the precaution of choosing a very straight, even road for her ride the next time she went out; but her care did not secure her against having to accept Mr. Pierrepont's escort again. It might be accident or it might be design, but just as Margaret in her chair, and Elsie, who was walking by its side, were turning away from the town street, he overtook them with Steenie and Cecil for his companions, all evidently bound for the same quiet path by the river-side Margaret had chosen. It was impossible to make any objection when Mr. Pierrepont proposed that the three children should join company and search the bank for wild flowers together. After this second meeting it became an established custom, that on every particularly fine day, when the chair made a longer excursion than usual, Mr. Pierrepont, Steenie, and Cecil should join the party somewhere.

Margaret thought at first that this unlooked-for companionship would quite spoil the pleasure of her rides; she often said to herself that she must give them up, or restrict them to the immediate neighbourhood of the town. - Yet though she said this almost every day, she did not make any change. She allowed herself to be tempted to visit one hitherto unexplored spot in the neighbourhood after another, of which Mr. Pierrepont vaunted the beauties.

One day it was a wooded hollow among the hills he took her to see, where a mimic waterfall leapt out from the cliff side and lost itself among the rushes and yellow flags and blue forget-me-nots that carpeted the bottom of the ravine; then it was a shaded pasture field, where the children could gather cowslips, and where some very ancient yew-trees and the traces of



an old abbey were to be found. Everywhere up among the hills and in the sheltered lowlands there was the fresh young summer calling Margaret to turn her back on sad thoughts, and come out into the sweet sunshine and be healed of her wounds. Never yet since the sad crisis of her life had she felt so tempted towards happiness and forgetfulness. Might not memory sleep a little space while nature was so busy covering up and putting away every trace of her winter bareness? Margaret did not ask herself the question, but for the next few weeks she let the tranquil hours slip past her without looking backwards or forwards.

During these walks the children played, and quarrelled, and kept out of the way of their elders, as children will; and meanwhile Margaret and Mr. Pierrepont, without exactly knowing how it came about, fell into easy, pleasant, intimate talk with each other.

The good Oldbury people, who watched the party coming back through the town in the cool of the evening—Cecil perched on her uncle's shoulder, and Elsie and Steenie, with their hands full of wild flowers, running on before—would have been very much puzzled if they could have had their wish, and overheard the conversation which Mr. Pierrepont lingered at the Blakes' gate to finish with one sentence more. It was very different from any talk they could have conceived of as likely to pass between people in the state of mind which they attributed to Mr. Pierrepont and Margaret.

It never touched on any personal topic, and yet day by day it grew more intimate, and more familiar, in fact, than Margaret meant it to be. "There is a

sort of conversation that can be carried on with very little revelation of the inner self; but solitary people, given to reading and thinking, seldom have the art of keeping it up for long. Being scantily provided with counterfeit coin, they are soon forced to bring out their gold. Margaret was one of those persons who, if they speak at all, must speak on subjects that really interest them; and before long Mr. Pierrepoint discovered that he had a companion with whom he might venture to discuss topics out of the ordinary range of Oldbury interests. It was a delightful discovery to him. It was long since he had ventured to speak out his thoughts freely without fear of being misunderstood; longer still since he had conversed with one who could suggest as well as follow, who could catch at and supply a half-remembered quotation, and make a hazy thought clear by a graceful, apt comparison.

He fell into a way of recalling Margaret's sayings as he was walking up and down his study in the twilight, and of mentally continuing the conversation that had, perhaps, been left unfinished at the Blakes' gate; till somehow the dark study looked less empty and forlorn than it had done of late years. Other thoughts than sad memories, thoughts that had to do with pleasures to be enjoyed next day, began to weave themselves about the book-cases, and to fill the dusky corners; and he would go to the window when the dew began to fall, and call the children to the house in a gay voice, and laugh and play with them for the rest of the evening. As the long June and July days wore pleasantly away, the Oldbury people began to remark frequently on the change this summer had wrought in Mr. Pierrepoint's appearance. He was

growing young again, they said. His good looks had come back to him; his shoulders lost the stoop they had acquired from poring so long over his books; his step had the spring in it that people remembered twelve years before; he stopped his acquaintance in the streets to chat with them, in the pleasant, cordial way that had made him so popular when he first came to Oldbury.

Steenie adored his father at this time, and defied Mrs. Lutridge ever to make mischief between them again; and Cecil retained all her life a vivid recollection of Uncle Stephen's pleasantness and kindness during that summer's visit to the Rectory.

The gossips thought they understood the cause of Mr. Pierrepont's restored spirits well enough, and had few doubts about what was to be the result of the new turn things had taken; whereas the truth was, that but for an accident that occurred just before Lady Selina Deane left Oldbury, Mr. Pierrepont might never have made the discovery about his own feelings that was so clear to them, and might have allowed circumstances to drift him away from intimacy with Margaret Blake as easily as he had been led into it. The pleasant June days would have remained a happy memory to him, clouded only by the wondering regret one feels in recalling an agreeable acquaintanceship one has let slip without apparent reason.

The circumstance that altered the character of Mr. Pierrepont's recollections of that summer, occurred the very day before Lady Selina's departure would have put a stop to the Bath-chair excursions in a natural way.

The hay-harvest was over, and the bare, still fields

by the river made such a charming play-ground for the children, that Margaret found it difficult to tempt them away for longer excursions.

There was one especially pleasant field behind the Rectory garden, through which a lazy, willow-shaded curve of the Idle flowed, and no persuasion could draw the children from the water when once they had got to play there. Margaret usually had her chair drawn under the shade of the hedge, and resigned herself to await her companions' pleasure. When she was quite alone she liked it; there was no prettier spot near Oldbury. The town, though close at hand, was hidden by a curve of the hill, only the tall spire of the old church could be seen springing up into the sky. The wide fields were very still now the hay-making was over, and the little Idle could be traced for miles up and down the valley—a tiny silver thread woven in and out among the rich greens, and browns, and yellows of the fields, widening here and there into lazy pools where the cattle stood ruminating.

Margaret could sometimes recline in her chair and look over all this peace, till an answering peacefulness stole into her heart; at other moments it had a contrary effect on her. She would hide her eyes suddenly, while a spasm of pain passed over her face. A contrasted picture had risen before her mind and blasted all the beauty; she would do penance for forgetfulness by shutting out the sunlight and seeing only that.

When the children were her sole companions, she could indulge her changeful moods secure from observation; but when Mr. Pierrepont came and sat on the grass at her feet, she had a feeling that it would

be better to be moving on. She talked to him because it was safer for her to talk than to follow her own thoughts in company; and sometimes she grew animated, and felt an excitement and interest in his society such as she had imagined could never come to her again. But the interest was only momentary. When she thought over the interview afterwards, she was surprised and angry with herself for having been surprised out of her usual reserve.

One sultry, thundery day, she was rather annoyed at the urgency with which Mr. Pierrepont seconded Elsie's request that the path to the fields, instead of the road to the downs, should be chosen for their walk.

Politeness obliged her to yield, but she was vexed. The party could have kept together on the upland road, and she was that day particularly indisposed for the long *tête-à-tête* that an afternoon in the fields was sure to bring.

She was a little more stately than usual during the ride, a little more silent, a little more anxious to prevent Mr. Pierrepont from troubling himself to steady the chair while they were going down the steep street. Mr. Pierrepont was far too sensitive to changes of manner not to perceive this difference in her. When they turned into the fields, he went straight to the river with the children, instead of seating himself by her side when the servant left her in her shady corner.

He was not offended, but he had been struck, and his attention had been turned to her as she affected himself in a way that had not occurred before. As he stood leaning against a tree by the river pretending

to watch the children's manœuvres with their boat, he thought more of Margaret—of Margaret herself, not of the subjects they discussed together—than he had yet done.

He recalled sudden gleams of pleasure that had come into her eyes, when one or another beautiful view had opened on her first; little quick turns of her head, disdainful or approving, when they had argued together; sympathetic glances that had passed between them when the outbursting of some bird's song, or the brightening of the landscape by an unexpected sunbeam, had charmed them into sudden silences.

He must have felt these things at the time, yet it seemed as if he were only now conscious how deeply they had moved him. It would be blindness indeed not to see how superior Margaret Blake was to anyone in Oldbury. In Oldbury! Had he ever in his life seen anyone to be compared with her anywhere? He did not choose to pursue the thought further just then. He stooped down, gathered a branch of flowering willow herb, and walked with it in his hand towards Margaret's chair, intending to make her observe its delicately-tinted leaves and carved ivory pistil. Margaret was not as ready to listen to a lecture on botany as usual. She was sitting forward, looking uneasily at some object in the next field.

"I have been wishing for you," she said. "Is not that a bull there behind the hedge? I am not foolish enough to expect every bull I see to run at me, but this creature seems very restless. He has been gradually coming nearer to us for the last ten minutes,

and I think the flutter of the children's dresses as they run about the field excites him. There—listen!"

An angry, sullen bellow coming from behind the hedge, close to Margaret, made Mr. Pierrepont turn sharply round.

"I don't think the creature can get at us," he said, "but I will wheel you nearer the gate."

"No, no, never mind me—the children. Ah! here they come. Cecil screaming—how unlucky!"

The child's cries, and the flutter of her red ribbons, as she flew hatless past the hedge, completed the animal's exasperation. Fortunately for them they succeeded in reaching Mr. Pierrepont and Margaret a second or so before it burst through the hedge, a few yards from where the chair stood.

"Run to the gate with the children," Margaret said again. "Never mind me. What *can* it signify about me?"

Mr. Pierrepont did not altogether lose his presence of mind, but he was bewildered by the conflicting claims of the party he had to protect. He could not bear to leave Margaret, helpless as she was, and Cecil clung to his hands and prevented his doing anything.

Meanwhile Margaret, by a great effort of strength, twisted the Bath chair round and sat facing the bull, which was approaching slowly, stopping after every few paces to toss his head and roar. The gaze of her steady eyes brought him to a standstill at a little distance from her chair.

"Now, now!" she cried again.

By this time Steenie, who had lingered to secure his boat, came up walking leisurely to show his con-

tempt for the girls' terrors. Mr. Pierrepoint disengaged Cecil's clinging hands from himself and put them in Steenie's.

"Run as fast as you can with your cousin to the gate," he said. "Don't drag her down; be careful of her. And send some one to us. Go at once;" for Steenie, with a boy's curiosity to see what would happen next, hesitated.

A loud roar and another advance on the part of the bull decided him, and gave wings to poor little Cecil's feet. As they flew down the sloping field together the bull half turned to follow them, but Margaret snatched a scarf from her neck, and directed his attention from them by waving it in the air. Elsie stood quite still all this time. She had not screamed or clung to Mr. Pierrepoint as Cecil did; and since no one had said anything about her running away, she supposed she was to stay where she was. Steenie had not held out a hand to help her; she was sick and trembling with fright; and it was easier to stand still by Margaret, though she did not seem to know she was there, than to run away alone. To her surprise Margaret stretched an arm back, drew her into the shelter of the chair, and held her close, all without once moving her head or relaxing her steadfast gaze.

The strain did not continue many minutes. As soon as Mr. Pierrepoint's hands were released from Cecil's grasp, he proceeded to drag a stake from the hedge, and attacked the bull behind. Some labourers from another field shortly came to his assistance, and in a little time the enemy was driven off, and secured from attempting further mischief.



Margaret leaned back in the chair when the danger was over, perfectly composed and quiet; the colour in her cheeks had neither deepened nor faded, and she did not say a word to Elsie, though she kept her arms clasped round her.

When Mr. Pierrepont returned from the further corner of the field where the bull had been finally captured, he was a little disappointed to find such a very unconcerned face turned towards him.

He came up brandishing his stick lightly in his hand, with a countenance all flushed and beaming. It had been decidedly an exciting adventure to him. Clergymen of his way of thinking have few opportunities of exercising personal prowess, or giving vent (except by words) to the combativeness they possibly share with other men. He had not done anything so muscular as dragging a stake from a hedge, or chasing a live creature across a field, since he left school.

The exertion had made his blood flow more quickly, and had given him a sense of being fully alive, and of having a body, which he did not often experience. It was a disagreeable check to his complacency to see how very quietly his companion in danger took it all. A little eager talk over the adventure, a congratulatory hand-clasp to celebrate their escape, would only have been natural between them after what had happened, he thought. It surprised and did not altogether please him to hear Margaret begin to speak in an indifferent tone on another subject directly he came near.

"I fear our troubles are not quite over yet," she said. "I have broken one of the wheels of the chair

in turning it round, and shall find it a difficult matter to get home. Perhaps I can manage to walk as far as the field-gate, and a carriage might be sent to meet me there. Will you help me up, and let me try what I can do?"

The first attempt to move, however, brought a look of suffering into Margaret's face that caused Mr. Pierrepont to insist on her remaining where she was, while he hurried home for help.

In a little time he returned with two men-servants, who undertook to carry Margaret and the chair as far as the Rectory garden, where it was agreed she and Elsie were to remain till a carriage could be got ready to take them up the hill.

Margaret and her bearers left the field first, and Mr. Pierrepont followed carrying Elsie in his arms.

It frightened her a good deal when he stooped down and lifted her up. She thought every one in the town would know about it, and point her out always as the little girl the clergyman had carried in his arms. But often afterwards, when she was very tired, she remembered how firmly and tenderly he had held her, and what a kind face it was into which she was forced to look closely up; not at all like the face in the pulpit she stared sleepily at on Sundays. She often wondered how it came to look so different that day, and whether she really had seen the happy smile she fancied had beamed down on her as she laid her head on his shoulder. It helped Elsie very much in an after-trial that she had treasured up the kind look in her memory, and could recall it more easily than

any other look the same face came to wear to her in other times.

Steenie and Cecil were peering from the Rectory garden-door when Mr. Pierrepont and Elsie came up. Margaret had already been carried in, and was resting on a garden seat.

Mr. Pierrepont let Elsie down softly from his arms, and hastened towards Margaret.

"My Uncle Stephen carrying you!" said Cecil, opening her eyes wide, and ruffling with jealous dignity.

"You left me," said Elsie reproachfully; "you ran away both of you, and left me to be tossed by that fierce bull. I would not have left you."

"Oh! I say," cried Steenie, "when you know it was all his fault. I did not want to go."

"You did not want to go with me?" pouted Cecil. "You like Elsie best."

"Yes, I do," said Steenie, putting an arm round Elsie's neck and kissing her roughly; "she's a thousand times prettier than you, I can tell you. I will like her best if I choose, and you may tell Grandmamma and Papa that I say so if you please—there, now."

The little dark-browed maiden's lips pouted and trembled; then she gave her small head a miniature toss.

"Come away, and let us feed the rabbits," she said suddenly, with the air of a person who has taken her position and means to make the best of it. "You may like Elsie best if you please, cousin Steenie. I am going away to-morrow; and Grandmamma says

you are a very awkward boy. Let us play with the rabbits."

The children were soon quite happy together again; but Margaret waited impatiently for the carriage that was to convey her home. She had refused to enter the Rectory; she had never entered any house in Oldbury but her own, and never meant to do so; yet she did not like her present position on one of the Rectory garden seats, with Mr. Pierrepoint standing near, much better than a visit to the house. And just then, the thought that she had taken her last ride in the Bath chair came vividly before her, and filled her with sadness.

"It had been very pleasant," she said to herself, "but such a break in her life must never come again—never. If her health failed, and she became permanently disabled from walking, and had to confine herself altogether to the house, she must just bear it. She would not accept any more favours; she would not see any more fresh faces, or allow the faintest germs of interests, and likings, that must be crushed ruthlessly in the end, to creep into her heart again; not again—never again."

She sat, looking fixedly at a high bank of trees beyond the garden, longer than she was quite aware of. Mr. Pierrepoint broke into her reverie at last.

"You are admiring my favourite prospect," he said; "I am very much attached to that particular bank of trees. It is a constant delight to me all through the summer, as long as there is a leaf left. There is such variety in the foliage, such delicious tints and shades of green, I am never tired of looking."

“But it is less beautiful just now than usual I should think,” said Margaret, rousing herself to speak with difficulty. “I don’t know whether you have remarked it, but it strikes me that in midsummer, when the spring freshness has died away, and the autumnal tints have not come, there is a harsh uniformity of colouring in the woodlands—a dead, dull green, that is at times almost painful to the eye. I was noticing it as you spoke. The summer has climbed to its height, and is wearying over its work; feeling spiritless and heavy, as if it had nothing more to hope for. Just as we middle-aged people feel sometimes tired of life; but oh! such a long, long way most likely from the end.”

The last sentence came out almost involuntarily. Margaret would have given anything to have recalled it, when she realized how it sounded.

There was a moment’s pause, and then Mr. Pierrepont bent down lower over the garden seat, and spoke quickly.

“Miss Blake—Margaret—listen to me. I know what you mean. A little while ago that was the way the rest of my life looked to me. I thought all sweetness and brightness had gone out of it for ever. It is not so with me now, and I found out the reason of the change in my feelings only an hour ago. I love you, Margaret. You could make all the years that remain to me beautiful and bright if you would—and for yourself—I would do my best. I would never ask what had saddened you in the past, but I would protect you as far as lies in the power of man from sorrow in the future. We would not pretend to the feelings of the spring-time we have left behind us; we

would be content with the tender, tranquil, autumnal sunshine that may be ours yet. You could give it me; could my love and care make it for you, Margaret? Don't refuse in haste, if you think it possibly could."

He added the last sentence hurriedly, because of a sudden movement Margaret made—a start, almost a recoil, from him to the furthest corner of the seat on which she was reclining.

When he ceased speaking, she covered her face with her hands. Mr. Pierrepont could only judge of the agitation she felt by the trembling of the slender finger-tips that touched her hair; but a sharp struggle went on in her mind during the moment her face was hidden. Could it possibly be? Could it possibly be? A month ago she would not have believed that such words would have had power to raise a storm in her; that the necessity of turning away from a home of her own, and the offer of protection and love for *herself* would have cost her anything; that she could have felt tempted to cling selfishly to a friendly hand stretched out to her. A time would come when she would want the help and protection sorely enough, but had she any right to take it?

She had shut out the light and the sunny flower garden from her eyes when she began to think; but a faint green radiance stole through her fingers and dazzled her still, and soft summer airs full of the fragrance of July roses and lilies clung round her, and seemed to woo her to take pity on herself. The fragrance of the white belladonna lilies, which were in full flower in the Rectory garden that day, always afterwards recalled to Margaret the struggle she then went

through, and the final words conscience spoke clearly, "Not for me, not for me."

After all it was hardly a minute before she took down her hands, and glanced up into Mr. Pierrepont's face. He was watching her very anxiously, and as her eyes met his she seemed to take the measure of him, and read him down to the core of his heart.

A kind, sympathetic, impulsive man, conscientious too, and trustworthy, fit enough to make a woman happy under ordinary circumstances, but not the sort of person to bear up under such a burden as anyone must take who would share Margaret's inner life—not strong enough, too much bound by the opinion of his own little world.

Margaret could not help a smile dawning on her face, when she saw with what breathless eagerness he was waiting for a favourable answer, and reflected how little he knew what it was he was wishing for.

She held out her hand as she spoke, and there was a queenly sort of pity expressed in the gesture, which might well have puzzled anyone who had not followed the course of her thoughts.

"I don't mean this for 'yes,'" she said, smiling, "only to thank you for your kind feeling towards me. You have made a mistake, and I am glad to know it has only been the thought of the last hour. I should not bring sunshine into your life; I should bring a deeper shadow than has ever fallen on you yet. If you knew more about me, you would understand why I say this. After to-day we shall probably not see so much of each other as we have done lately; but if you ever think again of what has passed this after-

noon, be glad and not sorry that it has not influenced your life."

Mr. Pierrepont did not take Margaret's offered hand. A very bitter revulsion of feeling came over him while she was speaking. Her steady look up into his face, her smile, the quiet tone in which she had spoken, all stung him, more perhaps than any other manner of refusal would have done.

He had a sense—he could hardly account for it, but there it was—of having been weighed in the balance and found wanting. No thought could have been more bitter to a man who lived in other people's opinion as he did. He believed that Margaret had disdained him; and his love for her, which after all had only come into conscious existence a few hours before, died in the light of her smile; her contemptuous smile, as he read it. He was too good a man to allow hatred or any other evil passion to take the place of the suddenly extinguished preference, but there remained deeply rooted in his mind a feeling of impatience at the thought of Margaret, and a dislike to everything that recalled his discomfiture, which influenced his conduct in after-times more than he was himself aware of.

Margaret withdrew her hand when she saw he did not mean to take it, and an embarrassing silence followed. Mr. Pierrepont stood upright behind the garden seat, looking on the ground, and Margaret turned her head towards the door to watch for the signal of release.

It was an equal relief to both when the children ran up to say the carriage had come. Elsie carried



a little white rabbit in her arms, and her face was flushed with delight.

"Aunt Margaret, look what Stéenie has given me. His prettiest lop-eared rabbit; and he is coming tomorrow to build a house for it in our garden. Oh, I am so happy! Do look at it, Aunt Margaret!"

Aunt Margaret put out her hand, lifted the little creature by its long ears from Elsie's arms, and returned it to Steenie.

"I am sorry, Elsie," she said, "very sorry, but you cannot take that rabbit home. You must let Steenie have it back again; I cannot allow you to take it from him."

Elsie's face became an image of dismay.

"Oh, Aunt Margaret, Aunt Margaret, do you really mean that? But he gave it to me;" and a sudden shower of tears burst forth.

Elsie did not often cry, but this conduct of Margaret's seemed such wanton cruelty, she could not understand it. Steenie looked at her compassionately for a minute, and then walked round to the other side of the garden seat, and touched his father's arm.

"Do you see?" he said. "Papa, ask Miss Blake to let Elsie have the rabbit. She will listen if you ask her."

"You greatly overrate my influence, my boy," Mr. Pierrepoint said, smiling rather bitterly. "I am sorry for you. You did a kind thing in offering your pet rabbit to your little playfellow; but you must be prepared to have your attempts at kindness ill received and disdained sometimes. It is a lesson we must all expect to have to learn sooner or later. Miss Blake,

I am afraid I must ask you to accept my arm to walk to the carriage; it is but a step."

Margaret rose and took the offered arm without a word. She was obliged to lean rather heavily upon it, for she was in great pain, and she found that the careful support and help she needed were given to her; but though she glanced once or twice into her companion's face, as she moved along slowly by his side down the gravel-walk, she never got the answering farewell look, of which she would have been glad.

It took some time to place Margaret in the carriage, and Elsie dried her eyes just before they started, that she might get one last look through the open door into the Rectory garden.

Stenie and Cecil had carried the little white rabbit back to the grassplot, and begun to play with it again, just as they had all three been playing a few minutes before. The golden afternoon sun shone full on the grass, and on all the waving white lilies and deep-coloured July roses in the garden-beds behind.

It looked like a little bit of paradise to Elsie, and somehow she knew by Margaret's face that she should never be allowed to enter it again.

When the garden-door closed, and there was nothing to look at but the hot-stony streets, she was disposed to burst out again into a passion of tears. But Margaret drew her into her arms, and bent her face over her, and Elsie felt one large tear after another fall on her cheek from Margaret's eyes. She lay still, hushed and frightened, her childish anger and sense of cruel wrong thrust aside by a dim perception of a deeper sorrow than her own near her.

## CHAPTER IX.

Miss Berry has a Secret.

LADY SELINA and Cecil took their departure from Oldbury on the day following the events recorded in our last chapter, and the townspeople had the satisfaction of seeing the old routine of life, which her coming had invaded, re-established at the Rectory.

Mr. Pierrepont spent as much time in his study, and was as seldom seen half a mile beyond the precincts of his parish, as formerly. The hollyhocks and spicy clove carnations and great Malmaison roses in the Rectory garden died out one after the other, and hung their withered heads forlornly on their stalks, without anyone taking the trouble to cut them off, just as they had done every summer since Mrs. Pierrepont died; and about the house itself there was no sign of preparation, not so much as a fresh coat of paint given to the sun-blistered garden door, to suggest to the busiest head in Oldbury that its master had a motive for putting the best face on his dwelling. Of course, everybody talked a great deal about this, only a little less than they would have talked if measures of renovation had actually been set on foot in the old house.

Close observers, comparing notes during long morning calls, could not but come to the conclusion that a very abrupt termination had been put to the

intimacy all Oldbury had watched and speculated about during the summer.

It became quite certain at last that a week, a fortnight, a whole month had passed without Mr. Pierrepont's having once walked up the hill as far as the Blakes' house, towards which his steps had so invariably tended a few weeks ago.

Mrs. Lutridge professed not to feel the smallest curiosity about the matter, and would not allow conjectures to be uttered in her presence. She knew what had taken place, she said, as well as if she had stood between Mr. Pierrepont and Margaret during every one of their interviews, and heard all they said to each other. The history of their intimacy and rupture was only too plain to her. Miss Blake had had a design on Mr. Pierrepont ever since she first came to Oldbury; nobody could deny that her efforts this summer had been desperate indeed. Her want of delicacy had at length opened Mr. Pierrepont's eyes to her designing character, and he was now, very properly, manifesting his displeasure, by withdrawing his countenance from her and her family.

Mrs. Lutridge could only hope that the lesson would not be lost on other young ladies she could name, and that the culprit herself would feel the disapproval of her fellow-townswomen in a becoming manner.

When the invigorating autumnal weather set in, Margaret's strength was so far restored that she was able to resume her walks down the hill to church, and was occasionally to be met on the roads near the town, hand in hand with Elsie.

More than one of the tract-committee ladies had the satisfaction of witnessing a *rencontre* in the streets

between her and Mr. Pierrepont. It was an agitating moment for the observers, who were naturally very much afraid of missing anything there was to be seen; but the principals conducted themselves with perfect coolness. Mr. Pierrepont lifted his hat perhaps the eighth part of an inch higher for Margaret than he would have done for any other lady in the town, just as had been observed before, and Margaret bent her beautiful head gravely; and then they had passed each other, and the keenest-eyed bystander had nothing further to say about their meeting.

Only Elsie could have told how tightly Margaret's hand closed over hers when Mr. Pierrepont first came in sight, and how she raised her handkerchief to her lips after he had passed to hide even from her eyes that they were trembling a little.

All the time this gossip about Margaret circulated in the town,—and it lasted quite through the autumn, till the appearance of the winter bonnets and mantles in the shop windows gave a new turn to thought in Oldbury,—the person who really suffered from its prevalence was Miss Berry. Her misery in listening to it was not caused chiefly by the certainty she had that Mrs. Lutridge held her partially responsible for the scandal, on account of her officiousness in procuring the loan of the Bath chair; she was troubled by a question of duty, which perplexed her mind every time Miss Blake's conduct was commented upon in her presence.

She found herself in the peculiar position of being the one person in Oldbury besides Margaret and Mr. Pierrepont who really did know what had passed between them, and she could not make up her mind

whether she should be doing them the truest kindness by concealing her information, or by making it public.

It was the most embarrassing event that had ever occurred to her in her whole life; and sometimes when she was sitting alone in her own little room she grew so agitated, going over all the little circumstances that had brought the knowledge to her, that she was obliged to put her work down and walk about the room to quiet herself.

To think of Mr. Pierrepont having told *her* something about himself that nobody else in Oldbury knew! It was almost awful, but at the same time it was so interesting, and gave her so much to think about, that she could not help being glad it had happened.

The first link in the chain of events that led to so important a result, was her having taken upon herself to call at the Blakes on the day Lady Selina left the town, just to let dear little Elsie know that her young friend had borne the pain of quitting Oldbury better than might have been expected.

She sat chatting with Mrs. Blake till late in the afternoon, and just as she was taking leave the study-door opened, and Margaret and Mr. Blake came out together. Mr. Blake hastily shuffled back into his sanctuary when he caught sight of Miss Berry standing in the drawing-room doorway, but Margaret came forward, moving slowly across the hall with the feeble step that took something from her stateliness at that time, and made her a more approachable person in Miss Berry's estimation.

She had a book in her hand, and instead of passing into the room she waited, supporting herself against the door-post till Mrs. Blake concluded some last words.

All at once it flashed into Miss Berry's mind to remark, what a singularly beautiful person Margaret Blake was, after all. The Oldbury ladies had spoken disparagingly of her beauty one to another; but just now looking up at her as she stood, it was very difficult not to acknowledge how striking it was.

The effort of moving across the hall had brought a lovely flush to her cheeks; her lips were parted, and trembled as if with some words she was eager to get said; her large dark eyes had a softening dew over them, which made them look tender and wistful beneath their thick silky lashes, and exquisitely curved black brows.

The handsome features were familiar enough—yet this was a new sight. It was the perfect lifeless statue changing into a tender, suffering, and loving woman under her eyes. If Miss Berry had been a classical scholar, she might have been reminded of Pygmalion; as it was, she thought of Mr. Pierrepont; and acknowledged suddenly to herself that his admiration for Margaret Blake was not such an utterly incomprehensible infatuation, as the Oldbury ladies had been accustomed to call it.

"I am going to ask you to do me a kindness," Margaret began as soon as Mrs. Blake's sentence was ended. "You have frequent opportunities of seeing Mr. Pierrepont: will you return this book into his own hands? It is one for which he has a special value, and I do not like to send it to the house by a servant for fear it should be mislaid. I shall be easy if you undertake to deliver it."

"But, my dear Miss Blake," Miss Berry interposed, too much taken aback by the contradiction this speech

gave to her thoughts to conceal her surprise; "my dear Miss Blake—anything I can do, I am sure—but Mr. Pierrepont—I cannot claim anything like the intimacy—an old and deeply indebted friend no doubt I consider myself, and always on the pleasantest of terms—but with you—though I don't pretend to know anything about gentlemen under these circumstances, I am nearly sure he would prefer your giving him back the book yourself when he comes here again."

Margaret drew herself up from her reclining posture to her stateliest height. "I am not likely to see Mr. Pierrepont again at present," she said coldly; "and as he will probably want this book—it is a manuscript book; you see—you will be really doing him a kindness by undertaking my commission."

She placed the volume in Miss Berry's hand, and moved on into the room as if there was no more to be said. Miss Berry turned to Mrs. Blake for an explanation, and discovered, by the lengthening of the old lady's kind face, that she too had been disagreeably surprised by what she had just heard. She gazed wistfully and sadly after her daughter, as she threw herself down into an arm-chair by the open window, and leaned her head back with closed eyes; and Miss Berry fancied she read a great deal in the mother's look.

While she walked down the hill to her own home, she meditated on the little scene till the right explanation of it grew quite clear to her mind.

There had been a quarrel between Mr. Pierrepont and Margaret—a lovers' quarrel. Mrs. Blake, knowing the true state of her daughter's heart, was grieved to hear that they were not likely soon to meet again. Miss Berry did not pretend to much experience her-



self, and she never read novels, but she was fully penetrated with the popular opinion that lovers, even when, like Margaret and Mr. Pierrepont, they did not happen to be quite young lovers, must go through a certain amount of misunderstandings and mutual tormentings before their courtship could come to a satisfactory termination. She remembered long ago having transcribed in her copy-book that the "quarrels of lovers were the renewing of love."

But then, Miss Blake did look so very resolute, and Mr. Pierrepont was not just the man to get over a rebuff, or slight, all at once. A man of his consequence, so accustomed to be looked up to by every one in the town, could not be expected to be very placable, even when he was in love.

Miss Berry grew quite excited, and her heart beat very quickly, as she walked down the hill. Taking this book back to Mr. Pierrepont appeared to her quite a serious matter. The happiness of two people's lives might depend on the way in which she acquitted herself of the task. A very judicious person, or one who had had the experience of Mrs. Lutridge for example, would probably be able to put in some little conciliatory word that might change the whole aspect of affairs.

Miss Berry wondered whether it would be given to her to say anything when the right moment came. She felt very solemn and nervous, as she mounted the Rectory steps, and gave her timid knock at the door.

The lamp was already lighted in the study, but Mr. Pierrepont was only pacing up and down the

dark end of the long low room when Miss Berry entered.

While he came forward to meet her, she sent a rapid glance round, which brought the characteristic aspect of the place vividly before her: the hopeless accumulation of dust on the ornamental knick-knacks which had been introduced into the study to give it a cheerful air in Mrs. Pierrepoint's time; the narrow track in the carpet worn threadbare by the restless pacing up and down of a single pair of feet; the ink-stains on the cover of the loaded centre table, where just one corner had been hastily cleared for the tea-tray, with its two cups, and untidily cut plate of bread and butter. Steenie was keeping his father waiting for tea as usual, and it was not a sufficiently inviting meal to make anyone impatient to sit down to it.

"To be sure," Miss Berry reflected, "what helpless creatures men are when they are left to themselves; a single woman can manage to live in tolerable comfort, but a single man!—And those good-for-nothing servants at the Rectory *do* so want the eye of a strict mistress over them. Yes, it would be a pity to let the opportunity slip."

By this time Mr. Pierrepoint had come within the circle of the lamp-light, and was holding out his hand. "You wish to speak to me. Pray take a seat. I trust there is nothing wrong in your district; no case of serious illness you have come to tell me of."

It never occurred to him that she could possibly have anything to say personally interesting to him. Miss Berry felt dreadfully embarrassed in opening her mission.

"I—I have not been into my district this after-

noon. I have been up the hill to call on the Blakes."

"Indeed!" There was an icy chilliness in the tone; but to set against that, Miss Berry did not fail to observe that Mr. Pierrepont started at the mention of the Blakes' name and that the colour rushed rapidly into his face, which had struck her as somewhat paler than usual when she entered the room. He had very little command of countenance; he was at the mercy of anyone who chose to study him.

Miss Berry was too considerate and reverential to give more than one rapid glance, and then she hurried on,—

"Yes, I have been up the hill to the Blakes' this afternoon; just a little neighbourly visit of inquiry, you understand. They are not well any of them, and it struck me that Miss Margaret in particular looked a good deal out of spirits. It may be the weather—most likely it is the weather that affects her, but——"

Mr. Pierrepont leaned over the table to turn down the lamp, which flared uncomfortably in his eyes; and as Miss Berry could not talk to him while his back was turned, and did not know how to take up the thread of her sentence, when he faced her again there was a long pause. Mr. Pierrepont broke it.

"You did not come here to tell me that Miss Blake was out of spirits, I suppose?" he asked gently, but with the touch of sarcasm in tone and manner which was his only weapon of defence in moments of extreme provocation. Miss Berry was pushed to the last degree of nervous incoherence.

"I said I should feel intrusive," she exclaimed almost tearfully; "and I do. I was as sorry as a

person could possibly be, when Miss Blake insisted on my bringing back this book to you. 'I am certain Mr. Pierrepont would prefer,' I remonstrated; but there was no manner of use in my speaking, and if I did remark to myself, that Miss Blake looked disappointed when she spoke of not seeing you again soon, it was, I assure you, quite without any impertinent intention—I might have been more guarded perhaps, but when one's feelings are concerned——"

Mr. Pierrepont put out his hand to receive the volume Miss Berry tendered to him; then perceiving that no end to her sentence was likely to come, he said deliberately, "I should wish to know exactly what took place. When you speak of disappointment, do you allude to any remark intended for my ears? Had you any message to deliver to me with this book?"

"No," said Miss Berry reluctantly; "there was not anything that could be precisely called a message, but Miss Blake spoke of not seeing you again. Oh, dear! I know I am very wrong. I have no right to say a word, or interfere in any way;—but such an old friend! and having yours and Steenie's interests so at heart! and the room and everything looking so forlorn!—if there is anything I can do, dear Mr. Pierrepont, I am sure you comprehend—if there has been any little misunderstanding that a mutual friend might clear up; any little, if I may use the phrase, friendly quarrel, you know, that only wants a word of explanation to set it right."

More vividly than before the colour flew to Mr. Pierrepont's face, and his fingers grew white with the

energy with which they closed over the book he was holding.

Miss Berry stood panting with excitement for a full minute after she had fluttered to the end of her sentence, before he could command his voice; and when he spoke there was more passion in his tone than any one in Oldbury had ever heard in it before. "I am not in the habit of quarrelling with my parishioners," he said. "You misunderstand this matter entirely. Nothing has passed between myself and Miss Blake that requires explanation or interference of any kind. If I can at any time be of use to her, as the clergyman of her parish, I shall be as ready to serve her as any other member of my congregation, otherwise I must beg you not again to couple our names together."

Mr. Pierrepont turned away as he finished this speech, and began to pace up and down the room in great excitement, and all sorts of terrible thoughts rushed through Miss Berry's brain. What had Margaret Blake done? What could Mr. Pierrepont have found out about her, to make him speak so severely and look so angry? What an inexcusable liberty this mistimed attempt of hers proved to be. She should never be able to hold up her head again. She wished she could sink through the floor, or escape by the window, without having to say good-bye.

When Mr. Pierrepont came up to her again, he was struck by the perplexed, awestruck expression on her face, and his vexation on his own account was checked by a sudden compunctious thought for Margaret.

He remembered that Miss Berry was the only

friend she had in the busy, gossiping, uncharitable little town. His rupture with the Blakes would set innumerable tongues wagging against her, and she would certainly never take the trouble to defend herself against any scandal, however monstrous. It was only right there should be some one in possession of the true state of the case who could speak in her defence if necessary.

It was a very unwelcome conviction to him. He paced back into the dark part of the room to try to reason it away. Hardly anything could have galled him more than to feel obliged to open out such a passage in his life as his rejection by Margaret Blake to such an auditor as Miss Berry. Every sensitive nerve in his body winced, as he imagined to himself how the story would sound when it re-issued from her lips, interlarded with exaggerated expressions of pity and wonder. He told himself that within twenty-four hours after he had spoken, the whole history and her comments on it would be affording amusement to every one in Oldbury.

It was a hard struggle, but there was much generosity in his character not as yet extinguished by the adulation to which he had been exposed in Oldbury; and when he had completed a second turn down the room, and come back to the spot where Miss Berry stood, his resolution was taken.

"Miss Berry," he began, "I must not allow you to carry away a false impression from anything I have said to-day. You are a friend of Miss Blake's. It will gratify you to know that, though I shall probably see little of her in future, nothing has occurred to lessen in the slightest degree my esteem and admira-

ration for her character. The case is quite simple; it may be well that you should understand it. I have made Miss Blake an offer of marriage, and she has refused me."

Mr. Pierrepoint drew up his head, and stood very upright and tall before Miss Berry as he spoke, but his face was all glowing and trembling with the effort and emotion it cost him to speak, and a suspicious moisture gathered in his eyes. In recalling the scene afterwards, Miss Berry could never make out, to her own satisfaction, whether it was very humble or very proud he had looked. She only knew there was something in his face, the remembrance of which she was sorry to think she must always keep to herself; it did her so much more good than any of his Sunday sermons. She never had a clear idea what answer she made, or how she got out of the room. She had an impression that Mr. Pierrepoint marched to the front door and set it open, before she had recovered her astonishment enough to frame a coherent sentence, and that she had passed into the street with nothing but a curtsey by way of farewell.

It was foolish, when there was so much that might have been said, and when, with a little presence of mind, she might at least have ascertained whether Mr. Pierrepoint wished the communication he had made to her to be kept secret or published abroad. Few people who knew Miss Berry would have given her credit for strength of mind to resolve on secrecy, and maintain it as she did all through the autumn. She had some qualms of conscience whenever she heard Margaret spoken against, but she was tolerably well convinced that her accusers would not really be mol-

lified towards her if the truth were made known, and that she was serving her best by keeping her own counsel. Margaret Blake, defeated in her hopes and forsaken by her admirer, might come in time to be forgiven, and regarded by her neighbours with a certain sort of kindness; but Margaret Blake beloved, and yet scorning the lot other people coveted, was an object that Oldbury could not be expected to regard with any degree of tolerance.

In the lengthening autumn evenings, Miss Berry did a great deal of gentle moralizing on the strange freaks of fate as she sat by her window and watched the reflection of Mr. Pierrepont's figure crossing and recrossing the blind in the house opposite. She thought of that patch in the study carpet which must be getting more and more threadbare every day, and of the dust on the ornaments, and of the general misdoings of Rectory servants, and then pictured how different it all might have been by this time if only Margaret Blake had been like other Oldbury young ladies, or if Mr. Pierrepont had had the good fortune to fix his affections in one of the many quarters where they would have been properly appreciated. Dear! dear! dear! and the lonely years of people's lives slipped by all the same as if they were happy. Two, who might have been one, but for some unspoken word or misunderstood gesture wore out their solitary hours apart, year after year, and had no beautiful history of mutual help and perfected destinies to carry away with them when the end came. Well, it was a comfort to know that all was ordered, and that there was a sufficient reason for everything that happened if one did but know it.



Miss Berry roused herself to ring for candles when she reached this conclusion, and detained the little maid who brought them for an hour's instruction in Scripture history and geography illustrated by the map.

It would not do to let oneself grow melancholy, she said to herself; and in counting up Joshua's battles, and telling over the deeds of lion-hearted men of old time who slew lions in pits, and rent bears and wolves asunder, Miss Berry escaped from Oldbury cares for a while, and went to bed happy, with a little glow of enthusiasm in her mind, which lifted her to a greater height above the Oldbury atmosphere than her neighbours for the most part ever succeeded in attaining.

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## CHAPTER X.

## Father and Daughter.

CHRISTMAS passed before Oldbury had anything fresh to excite itself about, and then in the sharp, short January days, when the country was looking its worst, Sir Cecil Russel came to pay a visit at the Rectory, bringing his little daughter with him.

He slipped into the place so quietly, and looked so unimportant, that it was only gradually in the course of a day or two that Oldbury awoke to the importance of the event that had occurred.

Sir Cecil Russel, the great traveller about whose explorations in the far East so much had been written and conjectured; who had had the honour (so it was affirmed) of being questioned about his adventures by the Queen herself; to think of his having been four days in Oldbury without anyone discovering who he was, or paying him any special attention!

Mrs. Lutridge was aghast. She wished it to be generally understood, however, that she did not feel herself in any degree to blame. What can the ladies of a place do, she expostulated, when the gentlemen are so taciturn, and so remiss in imparting news to their wives when they come in of an evening, as some people she could name? And now for Mr. Lutridge and his friends to be talking of giving one of their odious public dinners to Sir Cecil! where the ladies were to be thrust into a gallery apart, and compelled

to listen in silence to their husbands' speeches, as if any fair idea of the intelligence of Oldbury could be given to Sir Cecil by such a proceeding. She herself proposed a decorated tea in the girls' school-room, at the close of which Sir Cecil might be requested to give an account of his travels, with such information about the lost Tribes as he must, doubtless, have gathered during his sojourn in Scripture lands. Understanding the subject thoroughly herself, she should have no objection to cross question him and draw out his views.

How Sir Cecil managed to escape both the dinner and the tea, without turning all the inhabitants of Oldbury, male and female, into deadly enemies, Mr. Pierrepont never was able to understand. There was a very marked contrast in appearance and in character between the brothers-in-law. Sir Cecil was short and dark, like all the Russels, as Lady Selina was fond of saying, a brisk, alert, little man, whose keen eyes seemed to see everything. He explored Oldbury and its neighbourhood as if it had been Central Asia; and by the end of the first week had had long conversations with most of the townspeople, and knew more about their circumstances and understood their characters better than Mr. Pierrepont had contrived to do after living among them fifteen years.

While Sir Cecil remained at the Rectory, Miss Berry was in no danger of being depressed by sad thoughts about her opposite neighbour. When the wind blew in a certain quarter, and obliged her to open her window to keep her fire from smoking, she could hear sounds of laughter, quite boisterous, boyish laughter, coming across the street.

Certainly, she reflected, men get over their love troubles more easily than women. It is hardly worth while to pity them much. So long as they have companionship it does not much matter to them whether it is one person's or another's.

It was not sentimental, but it was cheerful, and Miss Berry got many pleasant dissolving views of what went on in the opposite house during the short dark days of Sir Cecil's visit.

People who had not such vantage-ground for observation, contented themselves with admiring Sir Cecil's kindness of heart, as evinced by the care he took of his little dark-eyed daughter, and by the close intimacy and affection that seemed to subsist between the pair.

It was a wonderful sight, they said, to see the little maiden walking up the aisle on Sundays between her father and her uncle, with that air of ownership in them both she put on, and then to observe the soft look that came over Sir Cecil's face as he lifted her on a hassock and smoothed her blown hair from her face with dexterous fingers like a woman's, and to notice afterwards how he kept her little brown hand close clasped in his throughout all the service.

No one in all Oldbury, however, thought as much of Sir Cecil, or envied his little daughter the possession of such a father, as did Elsie Blake. She had not thought much of fathers hitherto; she had fancied them either fat, red-faced, and gruff-voiced, like old Mr. Adams, who frightened her by chucking her under the chin when he met her in the streets; or thin, grave, and bald-headed, like Mr. Lutridge, who walked behind the rest of his family into church, carrying the Prayer-

books, and never seemed to be much regarded by anyone.

When she had seen Sir Cecil she changed her mind, and resolved, that in all the stories she invented for the future, the children should have fathers who should look at them as Sir Cecil looked at his child, and mothers with light curls, and precisely the same laughing eyes she had seen in the picture Crawford had shown her.

Once or twice, just as she was dropping to sleep, she fancied that a figure, taller and handsomer than Sir Cecil's, but with the same kind face, came to the side of her bed, and looked fondly at her, and when she jumped up wide awake, and saw only the white bed curtains, and the night-light on the table showing dimly the doors of the cupboard opposite where the picture was, she wondered whether there might not be on the same shelf another portrait wearing just the fatherly look she had seen in her dream. Crawford had not chosen to say anything about that other picture, but it might be there, and the person it represented might not be dead. Why should he be dead? Cecil's father had been away a long, long time, and had come back. Why should not a father come back to her, and make all her beautiful dream-stories true? So Elsie argued with herself till she dropped asleep again.

One day Elsie and Margaret met the Rectory party walking by the river, about a quarter of a mile from the town. The path was too narrow for either group to slip by without fairly confronting the other.

Cecil, who was perched on her father's shoulder,

looked down with a little patronising nod and smile at Elsie.

"See, I have got my father now," her look said; "I don't care for anyone else. Don't you envy me?" and Elsie's speaking face grew red and wistful as she glanced upwards, and did not smile in answer to her former playfellow's greeting. She felt somehow that there was a great, an immense distance between herself walking on the path by Margaret, and Cecil perched on her father's shoulder.

Sir Cecil's quick eyes read the pitiful entreaty in Elsie's face, though he did not quite understand what it meant.

"There," he said good-naturedly, "that pretty little girl looks as if she wanted to speak to you. Go and shake hands with her."

An awkward pause of a minute followed. The two little girls held each other's hands in shy silence; and Mr. Pierrepont, after clearing his voice twice, addressed some commonplace remarks to Margaret about the seasonableness of the weather, and the long continuance of the frost.

Sir Cecil heard the constrained tones with wonder; and though, after a quick glance at Margaret, he turned to the children again, he could not help listening curiously for her reply. The clear low tones struck agreeably on his ear. He must look once again. Could that be an Oldbury lady? Why had he not heard a great deal about her before?

Margaret's reply was spoken with more composure than had been Mr. Pierrepont's question, but Sir Cecil detected something in her tone and manner that showed emotion of some sort.

He smiled to himself as he glanced from one speaker to the other. Was this an incipient romance he was getting a glimpse into, or how was it? Had he been wasting a good deal of sympathy on his friend all this time while he was supposing him to be still dwelling on the old sorrow?

At any rate his curiosity impelled him to make a few leading remarks, when they resumed their walk.

"What a lovely child!" he began. "How Leslie would like to paint her. The mother is very handsome too, but in a different style. Is she a widow? I observed she was in mourning, though not widow's mourning."

"Widow's mourning—Miss Blake," Mr. Pierrepoint answered rather confusedly and colouring a little. "Oh, she always wears a dark dress; I did not notice anything particular about it to-day. The child is her niece."

"She is not an Oldbury person, surely?"

"Her family has been living in Oldbury some years."

There was clearly nothing further to be learned from Mr. Pierrepoint; but Sir Cecil was not satisfied.

During the two or three days he remained in Oldbury after this *rencontre* he contrived once or twice to introduce Margaret Blake's name while conversing with his acquaintance in the town, and was very speedily put in possession of all that was known, and a great deal of what was being said and conjectured about her and her family by the ill-natured gossips of the place.

He either attached some importance to Mrs. Lutridge's mysterious inuendoes, or was more disgusted

than he had hitherto been by the uncharitable dispositions evinced by his brother-in-law's parishioners, for the effect of his investigation was to make him take leave of his friend with a somewhat anxious heart.

"I wish I could take you away with me to-morrow—you and Steenie," he said on the last evening. "I don't know which of you the place disagrees with most thoroughly. Steenie will be the most unmanageable, conceited little rascal in England if he and Mrs. Lutridge are allowed to pit their wits against each other much longer; and you——"

Sir Cecil put his hand on Mr. Pierrepont's shoulder as he spoke, and smiled the sudden sweet smile that made his thin dark face so pleasant to look at sometimes. "As for you—well, I suppose, since you have chosen to curl yourself up in a hole for fifteen years and never move, it is natural you should not perceive how rusty you are getting, and what a number of weedy crotchets are growing over you, for want of something to rub against. I don't know whether you or Steenie require the friction of your equals most."

"Never mind me," Mr. Pierrepont said, wincing a little. "The mould and the rust you speak of must stay; it is too late, I could not bear the rubbing process. I know so much of myself as that, and am quite convinced, not only that I have become unfit for more active work, but that I am doing my duty here very imperfectly. You would not think me in danger of growing vain, however, if you knew how the flattery bestowed on me by my friends here weighs me down, and oppresses me."



"Of course it does. I can imagine perfectly how it must feel to be standing on a high pedestal, an inch wide, with hundreds of stupid faces staring up. How giddy the head, and cramped the limbs must become in time! Why don't you step down and face your equals?"

"You forget my sacred profession; how can I step down? I am differently situated from you, with different temptations, and different helps and privileges."

"Ah, there it is, the helps and privileges! You have surely a discipline of your own, superiors to obey, and fellow-workers to sympathise with all over the world. Why need you stand alone, feeling as if Oldbury were the only place in the world, and your church the one spot where truth was spoken; with all the doctrines coming straight out of your own head? No wonder you are weighed down with responsibility."

They were approaching a line of thought where they had often disagreed before. Mr. Pierrepoint shook his head quickly. "No, no, you shall not plunge me into a theological discussion to-night. Come back to Steenie: I really do want your advice there."

He proceeded to relate some escapades of his son's, at which Sir Cecil would only laugh heartily, but the result of the conversation was that Sir Cecil carried a point he had long had in view, and Steenie was made supremely happy the next morning by being told he had taken leave of the Oldbury Grammar School for ever, and was to begin his career at Eton as soon as the Christmas holidays were ended.

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## CHAPTER XI.

The slow sweet Years that bring us all Things good.

TIME passed on, and, as Miss Berry expected, the ill-will of the Oldbury ladies towards Margaret Blake gradually died away.

They forgave her her grand air, and her pink-and-white complexion, and her brilliant eyes, when they were once thoroughly convinced that these advantages were not likely to obtain for her anything they coveted. In spite of them all she was, year by year, slipping down into an unmistakeable old maid as securely as the plainest middle-aged lady in Oldbury; it was really hardly worth while now to make disparaging remarks upon her.

As the brilliant complexion faded, and lines of care deepened on her brow and about her mouth, people began to say it was a pity, and to wonder that such and such an Oldbury gentleman had never thought of marrying Margaret Blake.

She and her father continued to hold themselves aloof from their neighbours, and to look as unlike other people as ever; but, then—"Yes," people began to calculate, "they had actually been living eight, ten, twelve years in Oldbury, and all that time they had walked out at the same hours every day, and passed and repassed other Oldbury people in the streets, and dealt at the same shops, and gone to church regularly every Sunday. They could no longer be looked upon

as aliens, and if they were odd and exclusive, had not Oldbury as good a right to have eccentric people living in it as any other town?"

After all has been said that can be said about the disadvantages of living in a narrow, gossip-loving circle of acquaintance, it must be allowed that other feelings besides rancour and ill-will spring up in the heart from a habit of close observation of one's neighbours. One can't watch a young face fading into a middle-aged one, and know pretty well the nature of the disappointments and cares that are graving the wrinkles on it one by one, without having a certain fellow-feeling for its owner, who is slipping down-hill side by side with ourselves.

On the Sunday when Mrs. Lutridge first found it necessary to use an eye-glass to read the lessons in church, she looked across at old Mrs. Blake fixing her spectacles deliberately on her nose, with a feeling of complacency towards her she had never experienced before.

She felt constrained to stop her as they left the church together, and inquire particularly after her health, and express her hope that Mr. Blake did not find the walk up the hill too much for him this summer.

So it crept on, one little neighbourly attention after another, offered with a genuine good-will, which even Margaret had not the heart altogether to repulse; and when Elsie grew up into even greater beauty than her aunt had possessed on first coming to Oldbury, no over-critical eyes were bent on her to spy out faults, and no disparaging tongues employed themselves in her dispraise.

Her loveliness did not dazzle the Oldbury people's eyes any more than did the beauty of their own river, or the sunsets on their own downs, which strangers made such a fuss about, and which natives took as a matter of course.

Her fellow-townswomen had watched her grow up, and were used to her. They remembered when her golden curls were first gathered up from her neck, and twisted into the shining coils that bound her head now. They had seen the modest maiden shyness grow into the blue eyes that had stared frankly at them from the unconscious child's face. One style of beauty had slid into another before their eyes so gradually that they found nothing to remark upon or find fault with.

Elsie reached her seventeenth birthday, and was almost as tall as Aunt Margaret before it occurred to any one to observe that she was growing up.

The uneventful years that changed her from a child into a woman glided swiftly by with the elder members of the Blake family. Margaret marked their passage with a sort of surprise. The grief that had darkened her life was as ever present with her as in former years; but she had grown accustomed to its weight, and it no longer hid everything else from her as it had done at first.

When she was reading and writing for her father, her old pleasure in the studies he still unweariedly pursued came back to her almost against her will. She could not help acknowledging that there were things in the world worth living for, that had no connexion whatever with her personal loss and sorrow.

When she came out on a summer's evening after

a long day's work, and paced up and down an avenue of trees at the end of their garden, she often entered into the peaceful spirit of the hour with a fulness of sympathy that surprised herself. She was no longer Margaret Blake, with terrible recollections lying behind her, and sorrowful anticipations stretching out far into the future: she was part of the golden glowing sunset that flooded the fields and the river, part of the musical rustle of the trees rocked backwards and forwards by the soft wind. Escaped from the prison of her own individuality, she could look down on Margaret Blake and Margaret Blake's sad life, and see it merely as one little dark spot in the golden glory—one little dark spot about which neither she nor anyone else need concern themselves much. There were plenty of bright successful lives if some failed, plenty of brave workers labouring joyously at their tasks, if here and there one or two fell back, broken and maimed in the struggle. Still the great march went on—God's great ends would be attained without their aid. As Margaret walked up and down in these peaceful moods, it seemed to her as if a great hand were laid over her heart, hushing and regulating its beatings, that had been so wildly rebellious once, and had racked her with such terrible pain.

There was no rebellion now. The calm resignation which became year by year a more and more marked feature of her character was a constant puzzle to her niece Elsie. It was just the mood of mind with which it was least possible for her to sympathise. She could not understand anyone's being indifferent about their own personal share of this world's happiness, she had such an ardent longing for joy herself, and

such a happy confidence in what the golden future had in store for her.

The years that had passed rapidly with the elder members of her family looked long to her; her thoughts had been so busy in them. She had lived through so many lives with the heroes and heroines of her favourite books—dream lives, which always had the vista behind them of the actual real life which some day Elsie meant to begin to live.

A discovery she made when she was about thirteen gave a certain coherence to her fancies. About twice a year a box of new books arrived at the Blakes' house. It was the only thing from beyond Oldbury that ever came to them, yet no one remarked on its appearance, at least not in Elsie's hearing; and it sometimes remained in the library unopened for days together. On one occasion Elsie chanced to be present when Margaret first raised the lid, and after that she always took care to secure a glance at its contents before they were disturbed. She discovered that the volumes must have been selected by some one well acquainted with the habits of the different members of the family; by some one, too, who was aware of her existence, and took thought of her. There were scientific works for Mr. Blake, volumes of history or poetry directed to Margaret, and occasionally a gaily bound octavo labelled "Little Alice." When this happened Elsie was beside herself with exultation and excitement. "Little Alice," she repeated over and over again, trying to realize herself under that designation. It was a sort of triumph to her to know there was some one in the world to whom she was "Alice," like the beautiful lady of the picture.

She used to take possession of her story-books rather fiercely, and hide them away in a drawer from everyone's eyes but her own. Margaret, on the contrary, never claimed the books sent to her—she left them about on the drawing-room table for anyone to read; yet when Elsie took up a volume in the evening, she had a conviction that Margaret's eye was on her all the time she held it, and that she knew whenever she turned a page.

During one of these readings Elsie came suddenly upon the empty envelope of a letter lying between the leaves of the book she had taken up. The direction was in such a legible handwriting that she read it at the first glance:—"Gilbert Neale, Esq., Sutton Woods, Thorsby, Yorkshire."

Elsie closed the book softly, and replaced it on the table. She was too much surprised and startled to tell anyone what she had found; but often afterwards, when she was alone in the drawing-room, she opened the book in the same place, and looked long at the written words, "Sutton Woods, Thorsby." There lived the unknown relative who thought of her as Alice, and loved her for her mother's sake; her Paradise had a locality and a name now. She studied the Ordnance map of Yorkshire till she knew the names of the villages round Thorsby, and the roads leading to the Hall as well as if she had lived there all her life. Into the house she imagined herself to be always looking through a long aerial telescope, which enabled her to watch the doings and overhear the conversation of the ideal people who inhabited it, and who were to her the cherished companions of every unoccupied hour.

That was the dream side of Elsie's life; but there

was another Elsie, a sensible, dexterous-fingered maiden, who followed Mrs. Blake about the house, and helped Crawford in the housekeeping, and studied with Aunt Margaret, and longed as vehemently as ever for Oldbury companionship and favour.

In these moods Elsie contrasted herself with the six Miss Lutridges as sorrowfully as she had done in her childhood. She had a fit of despondency whenever Miss Berry's good-nature, or Mrs. Lutridge's love of patronage, procured her a chance of spending an evening in company with the other young ladies of the place, and of contrasting her quaint dress and out-of-the-way knowledge with their fashionable attire and boarding-school accomplishments.

A new generation was rising up in Oldbury now, and no one, not even Mrs. Lutridge, could avoid being influenced by the spirit of innovation that came with it. Miss Berry accommodated herself to circumstances better than most of her contemporaries. She could bear to be contradicted or patronised by young gentlemen and ladies to whom she had given cakes a few years before, but she suffered seriously when Mr. Richard Lutridge and Mr. Stephen Pierrepoint, during one of their vacations from Eton, called at her house and had the cruelty to criticize the geography and chronology of the map; and, in the course of conversation about it, to advance statements respecting the age of the world, that actually made her hair stand on end.

She would not allow herself to repeat the offensive remarks to Elsie Blake, who called a quarter of an hour after the lads had left, and found her tearfully



fastening a muslin curtain across the wall to which the map was pasted.

"If it was likely to become a snare," she said, "and tempt young people to speak on sacred subjects irreverently, it had better be put out of sight and forgotten altogether."

Elsie went away with a vague idea that some great insult had been offered to her dear old friend, and was so hot in her indignation against Stephen Pierrepont that she turned her head quite another way whenever she met him in the street during all the time he stayed in Oldbury that summer.

"Stupid, ridiculous, ill-tempered little thing!" Steenie called her a dozen times a day in his thoughts, and scolded himself for being such an idiot as to hurry up the street whenever he got a distant glimpse of her figure, just for the sake of finding out whether the absurd, angry, lovely little face would again be turned indignantly away, or whether he might not once more obtain the friendly nod and smile that had hitherto been his greeting when he and Elsie Blake encountered each other in the streets, or met in Miss Berry's little sitting room, where, during other holidays, they had occasionally exchanged a few shy, stupid, memorable words.

Steenie need not have troubled himself much about Elsie's defection, for he won golden opinions for himself from almost everybody else in Oldbury during the latter part of his Eton career. The ladies who had given themselves so much trouble about him when he was a little child could not help feeling grateful to him for growing up so straight and tall, and being

altogether such a favourable specimen of the masculine good looks of the place.

Mrs. Lutridge, to be sure, was not satisfied with these merely outward signs of well-being. She would have liked to probe the heart, and satisfy herself that the young man's views were all they should be; but the rest of Oldbury allowed itself to feel honoured, and to rejoice without being troubled by any misgivings when news of the distinctions Stephen won at Cambridge reached the Rectory term after term.

Mr. Pierrepont was a very proud and happy man when he set off on a round of calls on his parishioners, with the newspaper in his pocket where his son's name was printed as the gainer of some fresh distinction. He never went up to the Lutridges' white house at the top of the hill, or turned into the bank on these occasions, and it was well understood in the town why he abstained from so doing.

Richard Lutridge had gone to the same college as Steenie, and a great deal of information respecting his doings reached Oldbury too, but it was not altogether of a satisfactory kind.

Old Mr. Lutridge was sometimes seen now sitting in a very forlorn attitude in his arm-chair in the bank parlour, where he had hitherto appeared so unapproachably prosperous and dignified; and though Mrs. Lutridge braved it out the better of the two, and declared that for her part she assigned very little value to mere outward morality, she aged rapidly during that period, and began to have more numerous and deeper-graven wrinkles about her eyes than the other matrons of her standing in the town.

Stephen Pierrepont spent his long vacations in

travel abroad with Sir Cecil Russel's family, but he paid two winter visits to Oldbury, and satisfied tolerably well all the expectations that had been raised about him. He had by this time quite left off looking sulky and injured when his old friends of the tract committee testified their interest in his doings; and as Mrs. Lutridge was less keen-sighted than she had been in former days, she failed to detect the roguish twinkle in his eyes, and the odd little smiles that went in and out of his mouth while she talked to him, though some people said they were exact counterparts of looks and smiles that had struck her as betokening such melancholy light-mindedness in his poor mother long ago.

Miss Berry's little room was quite a centre of gaiety while young Pierrepont stayed in Oldbury; he came very frequently to visit his old friend, and when this became known in the town, several other people fell into a habit of dropping in upon her in the afternoons, just to see what the handsome young collegian and Miss Berry could possibly find to talk about to each other. On the first of these visits Steenie insisted on taking down the curtain which had hung before Miss Berry's Scripture map ever since he had made the unfortunate remarks which had put its owner out of love with it. As Elsie Blake happened to be spending an afternoon with Miss Berry, and as nothing would serve Steenie but that they two should set to work at once and furbish up the discoloured face of the drawing themselves, a great deal of laughter and merriment resulted from the undertaking. Old Mrs. Bolton rapped on the wall with her crutch to inquire what could be going on in the next house, and Miss

Berry grew a little nervous, and observed that she feared, if Mrs. Lutridge were to look in, she would say they were hardly justified in enjoying themselves to such an extent.

It was a relief to her that Steenie's spirits never carried him away quite so far after that first evening. He haunted the little house in the afternoons as long as his vacation lasted, but he did not always seem to have much to say when he came. He would sometimes stand for quite half-an-hour at the window looking up the street, and hardly speaking a word,—even when the three elder Miss Lutridges had dropped in, and were engaging Miss Berry in very agreeable conversation, in which he might have taken part if he had so pleased.

On the day before he left home for Cambridge, Steenie deferred his visit till long after the Oldbury hour for paying calls, and strolled in unceremoniously while Miss Berry was musing over her fire after tea. He sat down on the opposite side of the hearth, and did not seem in any hurry to go away. He listened while Miss Berry told him a long story about the slippery walk up the hill to call on the Blakes she had undertaken that afternoon, and he seemed as curious about the inside of the Blakes' house, and as glad to know exactly what they were all doing when she came in, as the most arrant gossip in Oldbury had ever been.

Just at the last, when he had risen to take leave, he made her show him the very leaf of the map she had been drawing when his mother had visited her little room, and stood by her side for the last time in

her life; and he persuaded her to describe his mother to him, as she had been accustomed to do long ago.

He did not seem to have forgotten any of the little incidents of the often repeated tale, but he would hear them all over again exactly as Miss Berry used to say them. How gay and happy Mrs. Pierrepont had looked during the one short year of her life in Oldbury; how she used to run across the street to Miss Berry's house without her bonnet, and shake her curls at her, when she remonstrated on her imprudence; how in wishing good-bye that last time, she had laid both her little white hands on Miss Berry's—like little white birds they were, so soft and fluttering—and how she had turned back on the door-step to smile and kiss her hand over and over again.

It was growing quite late before Steenie had heard all he cared to hear, and Miss Berry had to scold him away, she was so afraid his father would grudge her so many hours of his last evening.

When the door had closed behind him she put up her fingers, still tingling with the strong masculine clasp they had undergone, to wipe some tears from her eyes. The gay little face of the long dead bride came up before her out of the darkness of the room, and she had a strange feeling of compunction towards her, as if she had been enjoying a happiness that ought to have been hers.

“What a good son he would have been to that sweet little creature, if she had only lived to see him grow up,” she said to herself, “since he makes so much of an old woman like me, just because I knew her, and loved her better than some other people did.”

Something of the same sort of feeling was stirring

in her heart, and mixing her exultation with pain, when Elsie called one early spring morning a month or two later, and found her laughing and crying over a letter, and a strip of printed paper that lay spread out on the table before her.

“My dear, I am so very glad it is only you!” she exclaimed, as soon as she caught sight of Elsie’s face in the doorway. “When I heard your knock at the door I got my knitting ready in my hand to throw carelessly over my letters if it should prove to be Mrs. Lutridge, or any other of the leading ladies, who might have thought they had a better right to hear than I have. Not that I approve of concealments, but I can’t bear people’s feelings to be hurt; and that *I* should be singled out for such an attention does seem——. The first letter he wrote, he says, after seeing his name at the head of the Cambridge list of classical honours. Do just look! Stephen Deane Pierrepont at the top of the page in large letters; there cannot be the smallest doubt about it. I always knew he would turn out something superior. The way he managed his little knife and fork, when he was two years old, seated in that very chair! I said then, if only his poor mother could have seen him! and I have precisely the same feeling to-day. Do come and look at the paper, my dear, and read the names to me. Magister Stephen Deane Pierrepont, you see it is printed. Is that what we shall have to call him for the future? Dear me! and I bought him his first reading-book, ‘Joseph and his Brethren,’ not so very long ago!”

Elsie knelt on a footstool beside Miss Berry’s arm-chair, and looked curiously at the names in the honour

list; a lovely pink flush came into her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled. To have any visible tokens of the world beyond Oldbury, any glimpse into its struggles and pleasures, was always an excitement for her. To Elsie, every place that was not Oldbury was dreamland, all vague and glorious, with wonderful possibilities; and everything that testified to the reality of the outside world brought her, as it were, face to face with her dreams. She smiled as she glanced down the printed paper, and let her eyes travel slowly up till they rested on the Stephen Deane Pierrepont, in capital letters at the top. There they stayed till Miss Berry recalled her thoughts by beginning to speak of the letter she was still turning about in her hand.

“I can’t get over his having written first to *me*,” she said. “Such a favour! so thoroughly undeserved. Now I should like to read this letter to Mrs. Adams and Miss Tomkinson, and perhaps to one or two other friends, but all the kind expressions are unfortunately so mixed up with jokes and nonsense—and I have observed that dear Mr. Pierrepont is always a little nervous about Steenie’s nonsense being repeated in the town. Here is something about a wooden spoon that he says he quite expected to have won for a prize, but the examiners have gone and given it to Mr. Richard Lutridge instead. Steenie seems to think that we good Oldbury people, as he calls us, will be much gratified at having one of our townsmen so distinguished, but I must say it does not seem to me a respectful sort of prize for these Cambridge examiners to have given to an Oldbury young man, and I cannot think that Mr. Richard Lutridge’s dear parents will approve of his being so treated.”

"It's a shame to puzzle you by writing such nonsense," cried Elsie, lifting up a crimsoning face and flashing eyes from the letter. "You good Oldbury people indeed! He must have grown as odious as Richard Lutridge. I can't bear his making a joke of you."

"My dear, he knows I like it. It has always been so between us. His playful ways do make me a little anxious sometimes, but it is only because I know that so many of the good people of the town think them unbecoming in a clergyman's son, who ought to set an example of seriousness. There's no use in mentioning that to Steenie, however; for if there is one thing he has always set his face against since he could speak plain, it is being made an example of to the town. Mrs. Lutridge will tremble for him when she hears of his success. She will not be able to think of anything but the temptation and snare it may prove to his soul, and will hardly consider it a matter for congratulation. Dear! dear! I hope I shall be enabled to write a judicious letter that will not puff him up. I think I will write at once, before Mrs. Lutridge comes in and says something to damp my spirits."

Elsie volunteered to assist in the composition of the letter, and took pains to keep all unnecessary allusions to Mrs. Lutridge out of it, and to prevent the congratulations and warnings entangling themselves too perplexingly together. It was no business of hers, but she grew eager as the work progressed, and set her heart vehemently on saving her kind old friend from exposing herself to the ridicule of so supercilious a personage as she just then took it into her head to believe that Stephen Pierrepoint had become.



"Well, it is shorter than I could have wished," Miss Berry said as she signed her name; "and I still think I had better have put in that verse about 'He that is down need fear no fall.' However, you shall direct the envelope. It is to go to Sir Cecil Russel's house in Eaton Square. Mr. Pierrepont has gone up to London to-day to meet his son there. I will put the printed paper away in my desk drawer, for perhaps I had better not let Mrs. Adams and the Miss Tomkinsons know about his sending it to me, jealousies are so soon aroused in Oldbury. Yet I think some one else besides just you and me ought to have seen it before it is hidden away. One feels that its coming should have made some one so very glad. How his mother would have looked at it if she had been alive! Some day, I suppose, there will be another person who will care to read his name here, but I shall not be alive most likely to take the paper out of my desk and show it to her."

"Her! What do you mean?" asked Elsie, looking up from the direction of the letter, over which she was lingering with some interest.

"Oh, my dear! It is very silly of an old maid like me to think of such things, but they *do* happen. Some day, I suppose, Stephen Pierrepont will fall in love and marry, and his wife will care to hear everything that happened to him before she knew him. To be sure, it may possibly be some one who knows him already, and has read his name in the class list to-day. There is his cousin Cecil, and Sir Reginald Deane, I understand, has two beautiful daughters. Miss Tomkinson cut out and showed me a paragraph from a newspaper about their presentation at Court,

and the dresses they wore on that occasion. One can't help conjecturing——; but, my dear Elsie, what am I thinking of? This is gossip, and, apart from my own scruples respecting idle words, I have promised your Aunt Margaret never to talk about anything of the kind with you. Dear! dear! you must promise me to forget every word I have said immediately, and then no harm will have been done."

Elsie laughed as she promised. She was certainly not in the habit of pondering Miss Berry's sayings. Her own thoughts were generally a great deal more interesting.

To-day, however, as she walked up the street with the letter to Stephen Pierrepont in her hand, and while she dropped it into the post-office, her fancies did not take quite their usual shape. She could not prevent her thoughts from following the letter on its journey. She looked regretfully after it as she let it fall into the letter-box, as if she hardly liked to part with such a link between herself and the unknown, dazzling, outside world that was not Oldbury.

Who would be near when the letter was opened? Would Cecil Russel take it out of Stephen Pierrepont's hand and laugh over it with him, and would the two gorgeous young lady cousins who had been presented at Court join in the conversation? Oh, how happy people were who could go where they pleased, and see all sorts of splendours; and how hard it was that they should sneer at Oldbury folk for being obliged to stay at home!

As Elsie came in sight of her home she checked herself. What was she doing? She was breaking her promise, and transgressing Aunt Margaret's wishes

in dwelling on the images Miss Berry's words had called up.

The reflection caused her a disagreeable twinge of conscience, and made her feel hot and angry as she toiled along the last few paces of her steep walk. But why? but why? she asked herself; why should Aunt Margaret object to her even hearing of things that did really happen to other young people, to actual live people, not merely to people in books? Why was her aunt determined to draw such a hard line round her, and shut her in by herself? Real live people; Elsie dwelt on the thought. She had been very happy in her dream world, she would be very happy in it again, but just now for a moment or two its glory faded from before her eyes. The visionary companions that had satisfied her hitherto looked cold and misty. She began to be, just a very little, "sick of shadows," and to long to turn from the reflections in the magic mirror to the objects themselves. They were certainly there, outside her enchanted island, waiting for her to turn towards them, if Margaret would only let her look.

## CHAPTER XII.

## A Warning.

ANOTHER year had passed. Stephen Pierrepont had gained a fellowship at Trinity the autumn after he had taken his degree, and had spent the succeeding winter in foreign travel with a friend, to whom he was acting as tutor. No date had been mentioned for his return, and the Oldbury people began to say it was quite time he came home again, and to conjecture that his father must feel a little hurt at his keeping away so long.

His London relatives, with whom he had hitherto spent the greater part of his holiday-time, did not perhaps trouble themselves so constantly about him. At all events, a little dark-haired young lady, who was very busy copying letters in the back drawing-room of a house in Eaton Square, gave a great start of surprise when a footman came up to her and presented a card, on which was printed, "Stephen D. Pierrepont, Trinity College, Cambridge." Her eyes, the most remarkable feature of her thin dark face, grew very large and bright, and her mouth, which had been puckered up over her writing, broke into a radiant smile as she looked for a second fixedly at the name.

"Show the gentleman up here immediately," she said. Then, when the servant had left the room to execute her order, she began to collect and arrange

the scattered papers on the desk with agitated, fluttering fingers; and long before the visitor had had time to mount the stairs, she ran out on the landing, and stood with outstretched hands and sparkling face to welcome him.

A tall young man sprang quickly up the steps when he caught sight of her, and their hands met in an eager clasp. "You ridiculous fellow for sending up your card!" were the first words Cecil spoke.

"Well, why should not I? You have a new set of servants. I had positively a difficulty in getting in," was the nonchalant answer.

There was all the extreme pleasure at meeting again which a strongly attached brother and sister might have felt, expressed in the faces of the two speakers, but it was tempered by a bantering playfulness of manner, banishing all sentiment, which would have told a bystander that the relationship between them was of a less close kind.

"Come in here and let me look at you," said Cecil, drawing her cousin into the room she had left.

She retreated a step or two from his side when they had entered, put her two hands behind her, and stood with her head thrown back looking considerably up into his face.

Her own grew grave again all at once, and wore the thoughtful, observing expression, childlike in its perfect freedom from self-consciousness, which was habitual to it in repose, and which gave a sort of quaintness to her look, that made some people say it was impossible to guess Miss Russel's exact age, and others complain that, small and delicately formed as

her features were, her face was more like a boy's than a girl's.

Steenie returned her studying glance gravely for a moment or two, but his countenance began to change first. "Come now, what is the verdict?" he asked, laughing, and colouring a little too, even through the sunburn of his cheeks.

"Yes, I think the Wanderjahr has done you good," said Cecil; "it has rubbed something of the college rust off. There was undoubtedly a flavour of donnishness coming over you before you went away."

"Much you know about it. You are not the least changed at all events."

"Oh dear, no!" said Cecil; "that's past hoping for. 'So remarkably small and brown.' I shall never be anything else—never anything but a Russel. However, you need not look down so pityingly on me from your height. I am reconciled to my fate. Let the rest of our family be ever so tall—and—conscious of their personal advantages, I don't mean to be brow-beaten and put down by any one of them."

"Decidedly, we are neither of us changed," said Steenie. "I have not been three minutes in the house, and you have begun to bully me already. You get me into a corner, and won't even let me sit down."

"Decidedly, we are both of us a little changed," said Cecil, pushing an arm-chair towards the window, as she spoke. "Some years ago such a speech as that would have been followed by your ordering me to help you to pull off your boots; now you will be satisfied by my setting your lordship's chair, I suppose."

"I don't believe I was ever quite such a brute as to let you wait on me to that extent, even in my worst Oldbury days," said Steenie, sinking slowly into the chair she had pushed towards him, but turning his head so as to look up at her all the time. Then half springing up again—"But I am almost as bad now. Where are you going to sit?"

"Nowhere just now," answered Cecil. "Look at the clock!—Papa's letters! No, sit down again, you can't help me. Only be quiet, and let me forget you are here for the next ten minutes."

She ran back to the desk, seized her pen, and began hastily to direct letters, and make up and seal packages. Her delicately-marked brows were knit into a small frown, as she fluttered the leaves of a distractingly full blotting-book backwards and forwards, and her quick fingers got into unwonted puzzles over her tying and sealing.

"No, I can't stand seeing you burn your fingers with the sealing-wax like that," cried Steenie, jumping up and standing over her. "Come, give up the letters to me, and just tell me where they are going."

For the next ten minutes they worked together as if they had shared the same task every day of their lives; Cecil giving directions in a quick, decided tone, and Stephen glancing up from his writing and folding every now and then to smile at her business-like airs. When the letters were ready, he retired to the arm-chair again, and watched her as she flitted about the room: first to the door to give the letter-bag to the servant who was waiting for it; then back to the desk, stooping now to pick up a stray paper, then

stretching upon tip-toe to restore a book to the shelf over her head.

Stephen had never been able to make up his mind whether he considered his cousin Cecil pretty or plain, and he was as far as ever from arriving at any conclusion on the subject as his eyes followed her rapid movements that day. Pretty or plain, she was Cecil Russel, with something about her so different from anybody else, that even if one were not lazy or tired the temptation to sit still and watch her was not to be resisted.

Quick, restless, glancing ways were hers, and among them never an ungraceful movement, nor a look on the rapidly-changing countenance that betrayed a thought about herself.

Her dress was as characteristic as her motions. The soft, black hair was still strained back from the face and tied with ribbons—sober back velvet bands now, but there were fluttering ends falling over her neck in the old fashion; a bright-coloured ribbon round her small brown throat; heavy falling bracelets on her wrists, that seemed as if they must get in the way of any hands less nimble than those they surrounded:—the whole effect a perfection of dexterous daintiness that somehow or other looked as if it would have been disorder on any other figure than hers.

“I believe you are changed after all,” said Steenie as she jumped down from a footstool on which she had mounted to arrange the book-case; “you have grown about a hundred years younger than you were when I went away; you have lost your fairy god-



mother look. Is it coming out that has done it, or what?"

"I shall leave it to your philosophic mind to determine cause and effect," said Cecil. "Don't expect me to pull myself to pieces for your edification; but here I am, ready to sit still and answer any other question."

"You have been modernising the room as well as yourself," observed Steenie, looking round discontentedly; "the old Indian cabinet and all the Japanese dragons are gone to make room for that sofa. I don't like it."

"Do you mean to say you don't know the reason? You must have missed a great many of our letters. Have you really not heard of the new dynasty that came into power when I began to go out? Dear old Miss Palmer, whom you will never have the satisfaction of plaguing again, sent away, and Grandmamma installed in command."

"Living in this house?" cried Stephen in a comical tone of dismay. "Well, I thought you had grown very thin; but how in the world does my uncle——"

"Steenie," interrupted Cecil, "do you know I don't think I ever quite knew *how* good Papa is till lately. It seemed to him a right thing to do to ask Grandmamma to live with us; and now she is here nothing ever puts him out of temper, or alters his consideration and respect. He listens——"

"What! to all the histories about the Russels being so small and brown? I am glad I came home: I shall at least prove a diversion, and perhaps save you both from dying of superhuman exertions to be respectful. You will have to acknowledge that you have

never quite known how good I am when you see the heroism with which I shall throw myself into the breach."

"No, no, I shall not trust you, and I don't want to have old nonsense revived; I am really trying to behave well. But how is it that you have come home? The last thing we heard was that you had decided on spending the spring in Syria, and meant to see something of Russia before you came back. Papa approved of the plan, both for you and your pupil, Walter Neale. He will think you very foolish for shortening your holiday."

"He will be satisfied when he hears our reasons."

"I hope it is not because you and poor young Neale have grown tired of each other," said Cecil anxiously. "Your kindness to that poor fellow is the one thing I like about you, Steenie, and I sha'n't approve of it if you have tired of him and thrown him off."

"What an extraordinary way of speaking of the connexion between tutor and pupil! for that is how he and I have stood to each other lately. I like him as well as ever I did, and it strikes me that you are quite unnecessarily compassionate. Poor fellow indeed! that's not the tone in which he would like to hear you speak of him, I can assure you."

"He is a poor fellow," said Cecil—"one can't say anything else about him; and I pity him, because Papa says there are peculiarly sad circumstances in his family history that partly excuse his painful nervousness. It certainly must be the force of contrast that makes him attach himself so vehemently to you. Was he very much cut up at your leaving him?"

"He did not say so," answered Steenie, laughing. "There was no grief in our parting that need distress your imagination. Besides, he had received a summons home himself. The great event to which his uncle, Gilbert Neale, has been looking forward for years, has taken place at last. Colonel Lloyd is dead; and Connington, the property that formerly belonged to Mrs. Neale, is in the market again. Old Gilbert will purchase it at any price. He is rich enough now, they say; and I believe he means to keep his nephew's twenty-first birthday in great state there. If they do get down to Connington this summer, I shall see more than enough of them. It is within ten miles of Oldbury, you know."

"You intend to spend the summer at Oldbury then? Oldbury instead of a tent in a rose garden at Damascus, or a convent on Mount Lebanon. And you don't know yet how you are going to be rewarded for making the exchange."

"Rewarded! You are speaking riddles," said Steenie rather hurriedly.

"Yes, I think you deserve some reward for giving up the rest of your tour for the sake of spending the summer with your father, who is just now very much out of spirits and troubled about these Oldbury quarrels; and I expect you will be overpowered with gratitude when you know what recompense is in store for filial duty. We are going there, Grandmamma and I, to Oldbury for the whole summer. My father expects to be sent to Vienna on public business, and while he is away we are to stay at the Rectory. What do you think of that?"

There was a moment's pause. Cecil sprang from

her chair, and stood straight before her cousin, looking down with playful defiance into his face.

“Now, Steenie, take care. It is too late. All the pretty speeches in the world won't do any good now. Keep back the one you are preparing, for I have read your real feelings in your face. You are *not* particularly pleased. It does not fall in with your projects that we should be at the Rectory this year; or else you are thinking that, since we shall be there to keep your father company, you might as well have stayed away and enjoyed yourself.”

“No, no; I mean to enjoy myself at Oldbury. I am immensely glad you are going there, of course. If I did not look so, it was merely that I was taken aback by your accrediting me with such elaborately virtuous motives for coming home. They exist only in your imagination, and we are talking at cross purposes.”

“I don't believe it. The very same purpose draws us both to Oldbury, but you won't confess it even to yourself. You don't choose to see that Mrs. Lutridge is at the bottom of your being obliged to come home sooner than you had intended.”

“That I will swear she is not.”

“Yes, she is. She has stretched out her hand into Asia after you, and brought you back against your will. You have been compelled to shorten your tour, and I to give up part of my first London season, because the four Miss Lutridges have taken to attend daily service in the new church, and Mrs. Lutridge, having sagely concluded that all Oldbury is going over to the Church of Rome in consequence, is trying to drag your father into controversies with the new in-

cumbent, and has made him thoroughly miserable by the party spirit she has roused."

"But what do you suppose I could do in that galley? Do you think I am conceited enough to imagine I can quell a storm in an Oldbury tea-cup, or that my father would care to have me with him if he were ever so miserable?"

"Then what in the world do you come home for?"

"Is it absolutely necessary to have a well-digested reason for coming home when one has been wandering about the world for eight months?" said Stephen evasively.

"But I am perfectly certain there is something."

"And I am perfectly certain that there is nothing, but that I was seized with an irresistible desire to get back."

"To Oldbury!" said Cecil, with a note of exclamation in her face.

"Yes, to Oldbury. There, make what you like of it; but don't be too imaginative, I warn you. Anyhow, here I am, and whether I deserve it or not, I appreciate my wonderful luck in having you at the Rectory this year. We shall have a glorious summer, a right down glorious summer, Cecil, in spite of Mrs. Lutridge and all the witch storms she may be brewing. How many years is it since you stayed at the old house?"

Much eager talk followed. Cecil was satisfied of her companion's real pleasure in the prospect before them; but as they continued their conversation, a new anxiety seized her. What would her father think of Steenie's unexpected return? Would it please him, or

would it make him regret the consent to her visit to Oldbury she had coaxed him into giving?

As soon as she heard Sir Cecil's knock at the door, she flew down stairs and informed him of her cousin's arrival, and of his projects for the summer, all in a breath.

She noticed, or fancied she noticed, a slight shade of something that was not satisfaction flit across her father's face; but it was so slight, and passed away so quickly, that she did not venture to remark upon it.

By the time Sir Cecil had followed his daughter to the drawing-room the cloud had departed, and Stephen received as warm a welcome from his uncle as he could possibly desire.

It was a brilliantly happy evening to Cecil after that. She enjoyed sitting opposite her father at dinner and watching how the lines of worry passed from his face, and how his eyes woke up and brightened as he cross-questioned Stephen about his travels, and was skilfully led on by his nephew's answers to bring out recollections of his own days of wandering.

It was pleasant to interpose a word now and then, and to exchange a congratulatory, amused side glance with her cousin when their combined skill had fairly launched her father on one of his favourite topics.

Steenie was the one person in the world with whom Cecil was intimate enough to share her thoughts about her father. It was a decided pleasure to have his sympathy within reach again. They understood each other's full admiration and reverence for Sir Cecil, and could venture to exchange the sort of playful affectionate amusement over his peculiarities and cha-

racteristic ways, which is often the strongest evidence of a perfectly sound affection.

Mr. Pierrepont came up to London to meet his son, and consented to remain in Eaton Square till the time fixed for Sir Cecil's departure from England.

Cecil professed a determination to crowd into the last few days as many as possible of the gaieties she was giving. She hunted her uncle and cousin about to fêtes and evening parties, rejoicing mischievously when she had entrapped Mr. Pierrepont into being present at some entertainment about which she and Steenie could exchange glances, and exclaim, "If only dearest Mrs. Lutridge could see him just now!"

On the last evening before their departure for Oldbury, Cecil returned from an evening party quite triumphant, because she had kept her uncle so happily engaged in conversation in an ante-room, that he never became aware of the dancing that was going on in the drawing-room beyond.

While Mr. Pierrepont gave Sir Cecil his account of the evening's amusements, Cecil turned to Stephen, who had not relished being left by her to his own resources, and began to rally him on the morose silence he had maintained during the drive home. Sir Cecil, who was turning over a great bundle of letters that the late post had brought in, managed to send some quick observing glances towards the two young people, as they stood together near the door, and caught a good deal of what they were saying to each other, through the even flow of Mr. Pierrepont's discourse.

"No, it was base conduct on your part," Steenie began; "I shall not laugh. To draw us both to that

place on false pretences! You knew perfectly well I should never have gone if you had not led me to believe that you would dance with me yourself half the evening."

"I!—the idea of my doing such a thing. Besides, you did not want me in the least; you had plenty of better partners. I watched you, and observed how happy you were talking to Selina Deane whenever you thought I was not looking at you."

"She was talking to me; I was nearly drowned in the avalanche of smooth unmeaning words."

"But you admired her. Everyone said she looked lovely to-night."

"Such a thorough Deane, so remarkably tall and fair," Steenie laughed; "it is pleasant to see that there are some of the younger generation who have not degenerated in any respect."

"I will forgive your laughter, for I know that at the bottom of your heart you like her immensely. I foresaw you would. She has grown up into just the sort of girl you are sure to be charmed with; one of those stupid beautiful negative women that clever men always adore."

"I don't belong to the class of her adorers, then, I beg to state. Why do you insist on my being charmed? Can't you let me decide that for myself?"

"No, because I understand your real tastes much better than you do yourself at present. I know precisely the manner of woman you will eventually fall in love with. It may not be our dear cousin Selina Deane, but it will be some one of her stamp. I was consulting your inmost inclinations when I left you to



the company of the Deanes to-night, and you enjoyed yourself immensely, though you will not own it."

"I hope you don't mean to be as perverse when we get down to Oldbury, and consult my inmost inclinations by leaving me to enjoy Mrs. Lutridge's society."

"I shall not favour your shirking a fair share of it, I can assure you," said Cecil demurely. "It is in order to keep you up to your duty in this and other respects that I am going down to the Rectory.—Now, Uncle, confess, should you not have been terribly afraid of having Stephen at home with you all this long summer if I were not going too, to smooth out all the tangles he will make among your good Oldbury neighbours? Don't you foresee the misunderstandings, and the clatter and the dust he will raise round him, and the hard work you and I shall have to keep the peace and manage everyone?"

"What an odious creature you are making yourself out to be!" cried Steenie. "One would think you aspired to become a second Mrs. Lutridge. Of all things in the world, the most hateful is a managing woman."

"That is your opinion, of course," said Cecil; "I have just been telling you so. You don't like a woman to be clever enough to manage; she must be a meek nonentity to please you, I know that well enough."

She came up to her uncle and slipped her hand through his arm, sending back a triumphant, saucy glance at Stephen's face as she finished speaking; then turned round to her father, and grew sober all at once on perceiving that he had overheard their talk, and

that his face wore a slight look of disapprobation very unusually seen there while listening to her.

"Papa, was I talking very great nonsense—worse than usual?" she said, coming and standing before Sir Cecil's chair when the other two had left the room.

"Not worse than usual that I perceived," Sir Cecil answered, smiling.

"What was it, then? Tell me, dear; you *must* tell me this last night what thought you had about me that brought such a grave look into your eyes."

"Shall I?" said Sir Cecil, musing aloud, and looking up consideringly at her. "Would it be wise and good for you to hear it?"

"Yes, yes, all your thoughts are wise, and good for me to hear."

"Well, you are not the kind of girl to fall in love with anyone, simply because you have been warned against it."

"I should hope not. But this is the oddest thing for you to say; and, Papa, I don't think I need any warning."

"I may be making a mistake: I am but a clumsy monitor for you; your mother would have known exactly what it was best to say and leave unsaid. Yet I can't let you go from me, to spend a long idle summer almost exclusively in one person's company, without giving you a word of caution."

"Papa!" exclaimed Cecil, suddenly crimsoning up to her forehead. "You don't mean Steenie? Oh, I wish you had not said it or thought it. We have been so happy and at ease together, like brother and

sister, and now to have such a thing put into words. It will spoil all my comfort."

"It is because I think you have sense enough not to let it spoil your comfort that I have ventured to speak."

"Yes, but that you should have had even a passing thought of the kind about us—I can't get over it."

"Then I had best tell you exactly what I do think, that you may not be tempted to exaggerate. I know better than you do, that young people, when they are thrown very much together, do talk and laugh and joke themselves into a kind of intimacy and dependence on each other which they often mistake for love. It is just this mistake I am warning you against. I should be sorry if you and Steenie became really attached, for I don't approve of cousins marrying. But it is not an attachment between you I fear; I speak because I know if you get any fancy of the kind into your heads it will not be the real thing. It will be a mere sham liking, founded on banter and nonsense and companionship in idleness, the worst sympathies to found a life-long connexion upon. It may be a romantic notion of mine, but I don't think I could bear to give you up to anyone who did not feel for you as I felt for your mother. Till some one comes who can claim you on such good grounds as that, I should like to keep you myself."

"Papa, don't you know," cried Cecil, "that I will never go to anyone while you want me? How could I? Who could be as much to me as you? If you will only always want me."

"No, no, I forbid your making rash resolutions; I don't mean to be selfish. I only wish you to under-

stand what there is for you at home. I could not bear you to be one of those restless, pining women, who are ready to snatch at any poor pretence of an attachment just because they have no faith in the home love. You must not be like that, my little one, my darling, my one child."

"Papa, how could I?" cried Cecil, throwing her arms round her father's neck. "I am not sorry you spoke now; I will take it as just another proof of how good you are to me; I will be very wise, and careful."

"But not too wise. I don't want to destroy your freedom and lightness of heart. I trust to your good sense not to exaggerate my warning. Be cautious too how you meddle with Oldbury politics. You are not going down as consul-general to settle the affairs of the whole town. You had better not mix yourself up in the good townspeople's little jealousies and squabbles, and, above all, don't encourage Steenie to laugh at them too much. Young people are naturally insolent, and never perceive while they are laughing at others what embarrassments they may be weaving for themselves. Remember that the silliest of the Oldbury people who has lived fifty years in the world is probably wiser on many points than you and Steenie put together, geniuses as you consider yourselves."

Sir Cecil was stroking back Cecil's soft hair, and looking down at her as she sat on his knee, with a playful, tender smile softening all the thoughtful lines of his face.

"Oh, Papa! what will it be—to be away from you, and have no more scoldings the whole summer!" exclaimed Cecil by way of answer.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## A long Summer's Day in Oldbury.

A BRISK sunshiny June day, after a night of thunder-rain, with just enough wind to keep the wet leaves of the trees in all the little gardens behind the Oldbury houses dancing and glancing in the sunshine, and with floating white clouds overhead to dot the distant hill-sides with moving shadows, and chequer the bright white street in pleasant alternations of light and shade.

Cecil had been nearly a week in Oldbury, but she had not yet learnt to distrust the seeming quiet of the place, or to understand that there were more eyes watching her unconventional proceedings in the High Street than would have been turned upon her in the most crowded thoroughfare in London, whatever she might have been doing.

On this breezy morning after the rain she was, to Miss Berry's secret dismay, more restless and more forgetful of appearances than usual, just as if the rollicking wind, or the dazzle of the sunshine, had got into her brain and made her beside herself with high spirits. It was quite impossible to help watching her, as she flitted in and out from the garden behind the Rectory, through the hall, out upon the front doorstep, leaving all the doors open behind her, as if for the express purpose of affording passers-by a full view of young Stephen Pierrepont stretched lazily on a

garden seat with a short pipe in his mouth, and of Mr. Pierrepont walking up and down the lime-walk as tranquilly as if he had forgotten all about Mrs. Lutridge's anti-tobacco society, and did not heed in the least what his son was doing.

She was actually standing in the open doorway, looking out into the street, when Mr. Lutridge passed on his way to the bank; and not at all abashed by his ceremonious greeting, she dashed down the wet steps almost before his eyes, trailing her dainty dress in the gutter, for nothing in the world but to pick up a cauliflower that an old woman had let fall from her basket; and then she stood still, in the very middle of the road, for several minutes, staring after the scarlet-cloaked market-women, as they passed through sunlight and shadow along the upward sloping street.

She would hardly have remained so tranquil if she had known, as well as Miss Berry did, that the four clerks in Mr. Lutridge's bank, and the surgeon's assistant, and the young men in the mercer's shop, and the Misses Tomkinsons' twenty young ladies, were all pressing their faces against their window-panes, or peering furtively from their doorways, to see what she was about; and that the whole of the rest of the morning would have for each one of them a certain flavour of interest and unusualness from a lively perception of the oddity of her conduct.

Stephen might have been expected to know better what was due to Oldbury etiquette; but he did not mend matters much by coming to meet his cousin, as she leisurely approached the house, and keeping her standing talking to him for another five minutes in the doorway.

The six Misses Lutridge, with their six ivory-crossed prayer-books in their hands, on their way from one of the numerous services of the new church, passed in this interval; but Cecil was too much occupied with the inanimate objects round her to be aware of their proximity. She did not notice when Stephen raised his wide-awake hat, in greeting to them, and missed the flash of amusement that came into his eyes when he caught the scandalized glances they directed towards her. She was looking through the house into the garden behind.

"It is the contrast I enjoy so much," she exclaimed. "Oh! Steenie, do look at that delicious bit of old garden wall now the sun is shining full upon it. The bitter-sweet and the mother-of-millions growing on the top, and the stone-crop sprouting out between the currant leaves, and then those long bunches of red and white currants, solid and perfect, like the jewel fruit Aladdin brought from the lamp-garden. How sleepy and dreamy it all looks."

"There is a good deal of brisk life going on there, if my eyes serve me right. Can you see that fat thrush standing on tip-toe and shelling peas with his beak? Decidedly the most wide-awake individual in Oldbury this morning."

"Yes. What a garden it is for birds! What a crowd of them round that white-heart cherry-tree, and how their wings glance and shimmer in the sunshine! It is almost a shame to let them have it all to themselves. I shall suggest to Miss Berry to turn in some school children to dispute possession of the currants and cherries with the blackbirds."

"It would be a cruel kindness. Imagine the super-

human industry and fluency in Watts' catechism that would be expected to result from eating the Rector's cherries. The blackbirds have the best of it; they can regale themselves from my father's trees without being required to set their feathers to Mrs. Lutridge's orders, and offer an example of smugness to their tribe for ever afterwards."

"How odd it is to turn from the still garden to the town street, and hear the rumble of carts going up the hill, and the sound of voices. The man crying cherries down there, and the chatter from the group of women round the market-cross. That little bit of life takes me further away from London bustle than the garden stillness. How is it, Steenie? When I go away from home, I am generally disappointed to find that I have brought my own sky with me; yet here I actually do feel as if I had slipped down into the middle of another person's life. It is strange the much and the little that outside things go to make up one's inside feeling. I wish I could make it out."

"You had better come into the house, then," said Stephen, laughing; "I am not capable of talking Plato in a doorway, with all Oldbury looking on, if you are. I don't think, however, you need trouble yourself about your identity; I can testify that your propensity to plunge into metaphysics at inconvenient times did not come with Oldbury air. It has been a troublesome peculiarity of your inside ever since I have known you."

Stephen started from his recumbent position by the door-post as he finished speaking, and passed into the house rather hastily; but Cecil did not follow him.



When she entered the morning-room at last, there was a bright flush on her cheek, and a sparkle of excitement in her eyes, quite different from the thoughtful look they had a few minutes before.

"Oh, Steenie!" she said, "what a pity you went away just then! I wonder you did, for you must have seen them coming down the road. They passed just now, she and her aunt, on this side of the street, and she turned quite round and smiled at me—such a smile! coming from under that prim poke-bonnet. I declare it was worth travelling all the way from London to see the wonderful illumination it was. I shall speak to her the very next time we meet. I really can't help it any longer. I am certain she remembers me, and I won't be bound by Oldbury rules. I shall claim them as old acquaintances, though they have not chosen to call, like everybody else, since I came here."

"You are admirably perspicuous in your use of pronouns this morning," said Stephen.

He had seated himself at Cecil's easel while she was speaking, and, with an ostentatious display of unconcern, was dabbling her brushes in the water, and preparing to administer a wash to a water-colour sketch that stood upon the easel.

Cecil ran up and peeped over his shoulder to see what he was doing.

"You think I have put too much yellow ochre in my sunset reflections in the water?"

"The reflections are deeper coloured than the sky."

"But so they were."

"Impossible."

“Not in Oldbury, not in that particular reach of the river by the three oaks. Let us go down there again to-night, and if there is a fine sunset you will see what I meant. You may alter my trees if you like. I know they don’t stand out properly.”

“To go back to what you were saying,” remarked Steenie, as he worked diligently; “if you really do wish to begin a speaking acquaintance with her, I advise you to watch for an opportunity when she has gone into Miss Berry’s house. I think I have observed that she——”

“Who is admirably perspicuous as to pronouns now?” interrupted Cecil.

“Nonsense, my meaning is quite clear.”

“And so was mine, for I knew perfectly well that you had been watching her through the window. I shall just despise you if you pretend that you are not curious and interested about her. She turns the whole town into a fairy tale just by walking about it. I could believe I had dreamed her, till I got that smile of recognition just now; and it was——Oh, Steenie, what are you doing to my sky? you have got your brush full of sap green; you can’t be attending to what you are about.”

“Well, put it right for yourself; I am regularly wasting my morning; I am going into the library now to read law.”

“Yes, I daresay; I will take care not to interrupt your studies as I did the other day, when I found you standing on the library steps finishing the last number of ‘Vanity Fair,’ with all the others scattered about you.”

“I had been looking to see if they were still in

my old hiding-place for them, behind the 'Church Missionary Magazines.' I suppose you know about Mrs. Lutridge's having ordered 'Vanity Fair' into the book-club under an idea that it was a continuation of 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and how long it was before she would give up trying to see a religious allegory in it. She wrote to the author to complain of want of clearness and to suggest improvements."

"What a lucky mistake for the book-club members! How Miss Berry must have revelled in the story!"

"She was ordered to stop at the fifth chapter when Mrs. Lutridge discovered that her letter had not received the attention she expected. After that the numbers never got further than the Rectory, and when I was not reading them they hid behind the 'Church Missionary Magazines.' I had a scheme for shooting them from my bed-room window into Elderberry's back yard, but her tyrannical conscience would not permit her to profit by my cunning, and I am afraid she is secretly uneasy about how Amelia Sedley's marriage turned out to this day."

"Well, Mrs. Lutridge's days of dictatorship are over now. I was really almost sorry for her last night, when her six daughters were putting her down with such a high hand for objecting to the Saints'-day services in the new church. One does so dislike to hear right things advocated in such a wrong temper. I was glad you did not join in the discussion."

"Squabble," corrected Steenie. "There was about as much understanding of what they were talking about on one side as on the other. It was extremely amusing to hear them at it, and I was not the least

sorry for Mrs. Lutridge. She deserves to have all her six daughters turn Mormonites or Spirit-Rappers. It is too good luck for her that they have fallen into such good hands, and are doing nothing worse than setting themselves dead against all her pet prejudices. Now I really am going; but if you do think of calling on Miss Berry this morning, don't be afraid of interrupting me. I sha'n't object to go with you."

"Nor I to go alone," said Cecil, laughing. "Ah, you have lingered a minute too long; here are three of the Lutridges coming up the steps. You will meet them in the hall."

Steenie disappeared through the window before Cecil finished her sentence, and she had to hurry forward to meet her incoming visitors to cover his retreat. She need not have distressed herself. It never would have occurred to the Misses Lutridge that anyone could possibly wish to avoid them, or that there were more agreeable ways of spending long summer mornings than in their company.

In vain Cecil glanced at her easel, and sent longing looks through the window into the garden, where the strong summer sunshine was gradually chasing away the morning shadows, and flooding every nook and corner with a full tide of glory. They would not take any hint to go, but kept their places, though Cecil's first attempts to find congenial topics of conversation were not very successful. They never read anything, they informed her, in answer to her questions. Oh dear, no! they had no time for reading. Miss Russel might look down upon Oldbury as a very quiet place, but they could assure her there was too much going on for that. They never sketched, they

never took long walks, they did not care for scenery except when they were abroad—at home they played at croquet.

“It was such a mercy,” the eldest sister remarked, “that it had never come into Mamma’s head to object to croquet. She objected to almost everything else, even to going to church on week-days; and if it ever occurred to her to object to croquet, they did not know what would become of them.”

They all three hoped, with a fervour that brought tears into their eyes, that dear Miss Russel liked croquet. They were sure she was not one of those old-fashioned people like Mamma, who think all amusements worldly, for they had observed she generally attended early service at the new church, and that she had “Hymns Ancient and Modern” among her music.

Cecil was not allowed to protest against church-going being taken as a test of love of amusement, the conversation flowed on so fast, and she grew so bewildered between anxiety to avoid a gossiping, irreverent discussion on church principles, and dislike to being drawn in to join the young ladies’ criticisms of their mother. The prevailing anxiety with each sister seemed to be to impress on her how entirely they all differed from poor Mamma, and how contemptuously they looked down upon the opinions in which she had endeavoured to train them. Cecil soon discovered that they were reckoning on her co-operation to enable them to give a character of greater gaiety to their garden parties and riding excursions this summer than they had ever brought their mother to consent to hitherto.

“You see,” they explained, “Mamma is that kind of person, though she does say so much about not being worldly, who does not like to do things in a different style from what is considered right in good society. So if you would only second us, we really think a great deal might be done; and we might get up some parties this year that would be worth going to, not, perhaps, anything so decided or so very delightful as a dance in our drawing-room after it got too dark for playing croquet. It would take a long time to bring poor Mamma round to actually giving a dance; but she would let us have a large party, and keep it up as late, and everybody might be quite as much dressed as if we were going to dance, so it would be very nearly the same thing.”

A sudden thought here came into Cecil's mind, which all at once made the prospect of croquet parties at Laurel House not only tolerable, but interesting.

“Are not the Blakes near neighbours of yours?” she asked. “Elsie Blake would be one of the croquet players, would she not?”

“Well, we ask her to spend an afternoon with us sometimes. Oh yes, we are very fond of her; she is a dear little thing; but we don't think it kind to invite her unless we are quite alone. The Blakes seem to be very poor—or something. They never by any chance ask anyone to their house, not even to the quietest tea-party; and when Elsie goes out for the evening, she is, oh! so plainly dressed. Not plain merely in the way Mamma dresses, for though she won't have fashionable or becoming things, she takes care of course that all her clothes shall be very ex-

pensive; but Elsie is quite shabby. We asked her to a large party in the spring, when we had some friends staying in the house—Mamma would do it, we advised her not; and Elsie came just in her Sunday dress—a little lilac muslin, not new even, no ornaments, nothing but a bit of black velvet round her throat, and all that yellow hair she has twisted round and round her head in the most old-fashioned style. Of course everybody took her for a nursery governess, or something of that sort. We felt it was the truest kindness to leave her quite alone, and not draw anyone's attention to her; but when the gentlemen came upstairs from the dining-room, Richard—that's our brother, Miss Russel; you will have observed him at church on Sunday with curly auburn hair and a white hat—took it into his head to go and sit near her in a corner of the room, and stay by her side a great part of the evening. We fancy his notice made her more conscious than she had been before how different she looked from our other guests, for she grew uneasy at last, and jumped up from her seat, and walked across the room, and stood by the window alone with her back to everyone; and when Mamma made her sing a little while after, her voice shook as if it was just all she could do to keep from crying. What we saw that evening has convinced us that it really is not kind to put her in a position where she must feel the contrast between herself and us, for instance, so keenly——”

“I should think she must be so accustomed to the contrast she can't mind it much,” said Cecil, smiling. “I would secure her for your croquet parties if I were you. It is so convenient to have the regular players

close at hand for the sake of practising together; you know. We must make a point of Elsie Blake's joining us, I think." The emphasis on the *we* and the *us* made the faces of the Misses Lutridge glow with delight.

"Oh, if *you* think so!" they all exclaimed in chorus.

That preliminary settled, Cecil listened to a long discussion of plans without impatience. The prospect of singling out Elsie Blake in her poor little lilac muslin dress before all Mrs. Lutridge's guests, and of snubbing Mr. Richard Lutridge in her behoof, imparted a flavour of interest to the croquet parties she had not anticipated for any Oldbury amusement hitherto.

Elsie Blake's timid glance of half recognition that morning had taken Cecil's heart by storm. There is such a thing as falling into friendship at first sight as well as falling into love, and this surprise of the heart has sometimes almost as much excitement and romance about it as the other. It had for Cecil. From that morning, chance encounters in the street with Elsie Blake, or incidental allusions to her in conversation, began to be looked forward to as the great events of a day; and when she merrily recounted them to her cousin, she was not at all surprised to find herself listened to with very eager interest.

The new unexplained sympathy brought a fresh element into their old brother and sister intimacy, and they had never been such close friends, or enjoyed each other's society so thoroughly, as during the early weeks of Cecil's visit to Oldbury that year.



## CHAPTER XIV.

## Moonlight in Oldbury.

CECIL was in high spirits and good humour with everything in and about Oldbury when she set off in the evening to finish her sketch by the river, and she would not acknowledge to her cousin that she had found her morning with the Misses Lutridge tiresome.

"No, even Oldbury gossip is not such a bad thing," she maintained. "One learns a great deal of human nature from it, and for what else does one study history? I have often wondered at myself for caring so much about people who lived a hundred years ago, while I am quite indifferent to the doings of my next-door neighbours. Oldbury curiosity is far more human and respectable; I like the people for it."

"I wonder whether you would like them, if you could hear what they are saying about you and me in the houses we are passing," said Stephen slyly. "Did you not perceive that Mrs. Adams crossed the road to satisfy herself that it is *your* portfolio I am carrying under my arm? and is she not pretending to fasten her boot-lace now, that she may ascertain to her satisfaction whether we turn to the river, or walk across the bridge when we reach the bottom of the street? Ah! just glance back at her; she has found

another object of interest. Here is a little bit of Oldbury life for you."

Cecil turned and could not help laughing, as she watched the stout old lady rush suddenly into the middle of the road, and drag back with her a dirty little boy, who had been happily walking up and down in a gutter.

"To think of its being you, Johnny Simpson," they heard her say, as she administered a vigorous shaking to the object of her care, "and there's your poor widowed mother at home working her fingers to the bone this minute to pay for the shoes you are spoiling."

"Well, Steenie, I like it," Cecil said, looking up gravely in his face, as they walked on. "It's all very well to laugh, but it's just that I do like about Oldbury. Each person here knows something about the rest, and cares a little. Does not that make it a society instead of a mass of people thrown together? I don't think it is such a delightful thing to be able to do just as one likes because nobody cares for one."

"I've had too much experience of everybody caring for one to think that a delightful thing," said Steenie, laughing. "I feel for Oldbury boys who can't enjoy a gutter without having an avalanche of fat old women down upon them. Ah! my friend Johnny Simpson has gone back to his mire. I shall make a note of him, and give him a halfpenny next time we meet."

"You are as much of an Oldburyite as any one here," said Cecil. "I believe you are on speaking terms with every man, woman, child, and dog in the place. You would understand how pleasantly this

sociability strikes me if you had ever lived through a whole winter in London. Now I will tell you something that happened to me last year. I was coming home from church one Wednesday during that long dreadful frost, and I noticed a man sitting shivering on a door-step. I passed him, and then I came back again, there was something in his attitude that struck me so. He lifted up his head when I spoke to him, and oh! Steenie, I shall never forget the expression his face had. There was hunger in his eyes, like an eager live thing looking out, and sullen dumb despair everywhere else. He told me he had come out of prison three days before, and that he had been wandering about the streets ever since. His story might not have been true, but his pain was all the same, and the hard angry despair; I felt so helpless before it. Of course I gave him some money; I have no doubt you will say it was a foolish thing to do, but I could think of nothing better at the time; and then he got up, and staggered down the steps, and melted into the crowd passing along the street. I went back to my bright, easy, safe life, and felt what a gulf of separation there was between me and a great many of my fellow-creatures. It was almost as if I had looked down into hell through that man's eyes, and found I could not even carry down the cup of cold water. Now people don't live so terribly far apart in Oldbury but that they can know something of each other's sorrows, and hold out a helping hand. There is no unknown dismal nether world surging up, for one to get surprised glimpses into now and then."

"Not such abysses of dismal physical misery perhaps, but I am afraid you must not conclude that

Oldbury decorum has nothing to hide, or that its easy-going, gossipy compassion has any help to bring to the deeper sorts of sorrow. If there are any real tragedies being acted out in Oldbury just now, you may depend upon it they are unsuspected ones, or that all the good people are busy heaping last straws on the fainting camel's burdens."

They had walked quickly as they talked, and now Cecil paused to take breath on the stone bridge spanning the Idle, which connected the High Street with one of the roads leading from the town.

The bridge was a sort of border land between as much of busy life as there ever was in Oldbury, and the solitude of the wide still fields, and the distant chalk hills, over which the sunset was spreading its hazy golden gleams and deep purple shadows. It was such a tempting place that Cecil could not forbear lingering, and looking down over the parapet. The water rippled slowly out of the black shadow of the bridge into curves of molten gold, that whirled and glittered past the tall sedges, over the stones, crimsoning, purpling, darkening through the shaded fields, till they were lost in the distance. Little children ran down the bank, and dabbled their feet in the golden water; a flock of geese suddenly appeared on the river's edge, and hissing and screaming flopped into the stream, and floated down with puffed out wings gleaming like snow; market girls and labourers on their way from the fields rested their baskets or their tools on the parapet, and talked and laughed low to each other. Mrs. Lutridge and Mrs. Adams might be ever so much scandalized at her conduct in lingering on the bridge with the market girls, but there was so

much to see that Cecil could not tear herself away. All at once the sweet bells of the old church began to ring out the curfew, and Cecil and Stephen turned to each other with a simultaneous cry of delight.

When they moved on again, Steenie made Cecil observe the sympathetic glances which a young man and girl, who were standing together in the quietest corner of the bridge, turned on them as they passed.

"The bridge at sunset is the orthodox place for love-making in Oldbury. I hope you understand what we have been doing," he said.

Cecil walked a little more quickly after this, and was not sorry when they turned into the field path; but with all the haste she could make, it was too late for sketching when they reached the wide curve of the river, shaded by the tall oaks she wanted to draw.

They strolled slowly through the fields homewards while the summer twilight deepened, and, crossing the river higher up by a foot-bridge, took a quiet path that led through the churchyard into the town.

"I want to show you something, and it is dark enough and quiet enough now," Stephen said in a grave voice, as he handed Cecil over a stile that led into the enclosure. They passed one or two untidily kept graves, till they came to a quiet corner of the place, where, enclosed within high iron rails, was a square brick erection, surmounted by a stone figure clasping an urn.

"Is it here?" said Cecil, under her breath.

"Yes, here. It's horribly heathenish, is it not?—the monument—horrible Oldbury taste; but I wanted you to know where it was."

Cecil stooped down and pulled away some strag-

gling weeds that had insinuated themselves between the brickwork and the railings. "It might at least be made tidy," she said. "We could plant a flower border here, and I daresay my uncle would let this tottering stone figure come down, and have a plain cross put in its place."

"No, no," said Stephen quickly; "let it alone. A cross indeed! The whole town would chatter and quarrel over it. She had enough of that while she was alive. The weeds don't do her any harm, and she is at least let alone here."

"Steenie, she was very happy in Oldbury. I can never understand the bitter feeling you have about her life here."

"Because you don't know how I used to hear her spoken of when I was a child by the people about me. The solemn shakes of the head some of the good ladies used to exchange when her name was mentioned; the doubtful hopes about her state of mind and present condition they did not scruple to discuss before me, with conscious stretch of charity when they gave her a favourable verdict. For a long time I really believed that Mrs. Lutridge had made away with my mother, and had her shut up somewhere to prevent her over-indulging me; and how savage the supposition made me! I declare now I don't think I was far wrong. It was the place that killed her. She could not have gone on living here: the chatter and the gossip, the prying of all those censorious eyes, and the heavy choking atmosphere, just crushed the bright tender soul out of her. I expect she was tired out, and very glad to escape away here, even after a year of it."

"How can you talk so? It is very unjust to your

father. Don't you think he could defend her against the Oldbury ladies even if they had been as censoriously disposed towards her as you make out?"

Steenie shook his head. "I don't know. Is he able to defend himself?"

"The truth is," Cecil struck in, "you are crazy on the subject of Oldbury interference. You will never rest till you and Mrs. Lutridge have had a regular quarrel and struggle for power on some subject or other."

"No, indeed; the days are past for that. I have nothing to do with her. She would hardly take upon herself to interfere in my affairs now, I suppose; and if she did——"

"Hush! you are speaking too loud," said Cecil. "I hear some one moving close behind us, near the yew-tree. We have been overheard all this time."

"Even here," said Steenie; "how annoying! I will find out who it is."

He turned quickly round, and stood in the narrow path to intercept the listener as he or she moved away.

A tall, slender female figure emerged slowly from the shadow of the yew-tree, and stood full before him, with the moonlight falling distinctly on her face. Cecil uttered an exclamation of surprise, and came forward, holding out her hand. "Oh, Elsie—Miss Blake—is it you who have been near us all this time? I am afraid we have frightened you. I am so sorry."

"Oh no; it is I who am sorry to have been here and disturbed you," answered Elsie timidly. "My aunt has gone into a cottage by the churchyard gate,

and she told me to wait for her here. I tried to pass you once, but I could not, indeed."

"It is of no consequence; we ought to apologize for keeping you prisoner," Cecil said, and then a fit of dumbness seized her. She had been planning all day what she would say to Elsie, if she had a chance of speaking to her, and now that the opportunity had come she could think of nothing worth saying. The three stood staring at each other helplessly—their faces looking pale and large-eyed and agitated in the moonlight.

Elsie moved first. "My aunt is coming out of the cottage. May I not pass, please?"

The last sentence was addressed to Stephen, who had stupidly maintained his position in the pathway, hedging Elsie in between the wall and the great tombstone. He stood aside when she spoke to him, and, once clear of obstacles, Elsie's feet seemed to have wings. She flew down the steep pathway, over the stile, out of sight before the other two thought of doing anything but gaze after her.

Cecil broke the silence. "Look, she has left something down on the grass there, where she must have been sitting. An open book, is it not?" she asked, as Steenie dived down under the tree, and possessed himself of the relic. "No, you stupid fellow, don't dash off after her with it now. You can't possibly catch her up, and it will be an excuse for us to call to-morrow to take it back to her."

Steenie pocketed the book, and they left the tomb and struck into the broader pathway which led past the church, and opened on the High Street.

"How strange that *she* should be there!" Steenie



said in rather an awe-struck voice after a long silence, just as they were leaving the moonlit churchyard for the town street.

"Yes, was it not strange?" Cecil answered more briskly.

They walked quickly along the street, and after an interval Steenie burst out again: "What a fool one makes of oneself when one is taken by surprise, to stand staring in that idiotic fashion! Why could not we think of something to say? It was disgusting."

"It does not signify," said Cecil coolly. "You have the book safe, and I can call with it, and see her any day I like."

"You—yes—you! It's all very well for you," said Stephen bitterly. "You have not been making yourself obnoxious by staring like an idiot. Your calling and seeing her won't do me any good."

"Well, we shall see. And at all events you need not scold me for your want of manners. Here we are at the Rectory."

"Come through the garden-gate. Don't let us go indoors just yet," said Steenie. "I feel as if the house would stifle me."

Cecil complied, and they paced up and down the chequered light and shade of the lime walk once or twice.

"It is an extraordinary thing our having met her there, a wonderful thing," Steenie reiterated at intervals.

"Well, I don't know," said Cecil, who began to be surprised at finding herself so much the least excited of the two; "anybody may go into the churchyard who

likes. There was nothing really wonderful in it. Steenie, I can't turn again; Grandmamma will be angry with me as it is for staying out so late with you."

"Ah, well, go in then," said Stephen carelessly; "I sha'n't. I feel as if I could never bear the house again. I shall set off on a long stretching walk somewhere. Don't let any one wait up for me. There's something in the look of things to-night that makes one feel as if one could walk on, and on, and on, indefinitely through the moonlight, till one reached—one does not know what exactly."

"Some sort of dream-land," said Cecil. "Yes, I know the feeling; but I should not have thought you were the sort of person to have it."

## CHAPTER XV.

## Flower Aspect.

ELSIE did not mention her encounter in the churchyard to her aunt, and Margaret was too much pre-occupied with the scene she had left to notice a little perturbation there was in Elsie's manner when she rejoined her.

"You need not have run so very fast; I could have waited a minute or two," she said, and then they walked on in silence.

Elsie was as indisposed to talk that evening as Margaret. She was busy settling with her conscience whether she might recall the conversation she had accidentally overheard, or whether she ought to try to forget it. It had interested her very much. She was glad to have a satisfactory explanation of the apparent indifference to Oldbury, for which she had so often blamed her old playmate. She found it was pleasant to be relieved from the spirit of antagonism she had been cherishing against him. Yes, she would recall and often think over what he and Miss Russel had said to each other. It was better to do that than be unjust. She walked with a springing step up the hill; but Margaret paused, and turned, before they reached the top.

"What an exquisitely still night!" she said. "I am glad we had energy to come out after tea, for I found I was wanted at the Bowmans' cottage."

"How is poor Jane Bowman to-night?" Elsie asked, with sudden compunction for not having made the inquiry sooner.

"Dying," said Margaret shortly. She stood looking over the sloping hill-side to the moonlit fields beyond, for a minute or two, before she spoke again. "Yes," she said, in a gravely satisfied voice, that jarred terribly on Elsie's shocked feelings, "I don't think she can possibly have to live till morning. It is a beautiful night for a person to die in."

"Or to live and be happy in," cried Elsie vehemently. "Miss Berry thinks Jane Bowman may recover yet. Why will you never hope, Aunt Margaret?"

"I do not encourage false hopes," Margaret answered. "But in Jane Bowman's case any reasonable person's hopes ought to be the other way. Prolonged life would be anything but a boon to her."

They turned into the lamplit streets now, and Elsie was glad. Margaret's sorrowful words had spoiled all the beauty of the evening for her. She was glad that the end of their walk was near.

When they reached the house, Margaret went to her room, and sat for a long time at the open window, realizing the solemn scene that was now passing in the cottage she had left. The hour afforded her one of her brief seasons of perfect peace that was almost joy. A solemn kind of triumph came over her, as she thought of the weary, repentant, pardoned soul breaking from the prison-house of the body, where it had struggled and suffered long, into light and peace at last. There was escape for other prisoners that way. Men might decree definite periods of punishment, but

the merciful heavenly Father, who looked into the soul, and knew when its stains were purged, had a warrant of release in His own keeping. There might be mournful results of sin still to be worked out on earth by the survivors when the guilty soul was pardoned and freed. Let it be so. The innocent were stronger to endure than the guilty.

Margaret bowed her head on her hands, and prayed—"Only give them strength, O merciful Father, to bear themselves bravely and patiently under the strokes. Enable them to make the offering of their lives ungrudgingly—sharing so the office of the Great Atoner. Let it be the joy and brightness of their lives that is withered up, but keep their hearts tender and pure—unembittered, uncantered by the chill influence of the shadows through which they have to move."

Elsie did not follow Margaret upstairs; she threw off her hat in the hall, and ran into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Blake was impatiently awaiting her return. The sitting-room, unlighted and uncurtained, with the two old people seated in their arm-chairs on opposite sides of the fireless grate, looked somewhat dreary, but then it nearly always looked so when Elsie was not in it.

"You have been out a long time, darling," Mrs. Blake said, not querulously, but with an accent of surprise in her voice that showed how seldom she had anything approaching to neglect on Elsie's part to complain of.

"I could not help it, Grannie," Elsie answered, hastening up to Mrs. Blake's chair, and stooping over her to caress her soft withered cheeks and forehead. "I was afraid you would want me, but I could not get

home sooner. Aunt Margaret told me to wait for her, and I sat for more than an hour under the yew-tree close to Mrs. Pierrepont's grave. I wish——"

"Well, sweet one?" Mrs. Blake asked, as Elsie came to a sudden pause.

"I was going to say I wished I had not gone out this evening, but I think I am glad I went. It was very pleasant in the churchyard while I was waiting for Aunt Margaret. I watched the rooks coming home from the fields to the tall trees in the Rectory garden, cawing and making such a noise as they settled for the night; and then a jackdaw came hopping over the graves and looked at me. It was bright moonlight before the glow of the sunset was over; and just as I was beginning to weary for Aunt Margaret to call me, who do you think came over the stile from the river fields——But, Grandmamma, had I not better draw the curtains and light the lamp? Grandpapa looks very dull sitting there without his book."

Mrs. Blake was no longer able to wait on her husband as she had formerly done. In the autumn of the previous year she had had a stroke of paralysis, which disabled her from walking alone, and all the little household duties she had been used to perform now devolved on Elsie. Mr. Blake was, to outward appearance, very little changed. He still wrote in his study, and listened to Margaret reading aloud, with the same apparent interest; but his mind was really growing feebler every day, and he was subject to sudden fits of irritability, from which Margaret suffered more than anyone else in the house. Mrs. Blake's voice had always power to compose him, and Elsie had a bright

tact and ready sympathy that enabled her to avoid causes of offence.

Elsie took a long look out into the garden before she finally dropped the curtain.

“Moonlight is very beautiful, Grandmamma,” she said, settling herself on a stool at Mrs. Blake’s feet. “I don’t think you know how nice it made everything look to-night—people’s faces, and everything.”

“Did it, darling? Well, I am quite satisfied to see your face by lamplight. That makes it quite beautiful enough for Grandmamma.”

Elsie looked up quickly, as if she hoped some further question would follow her remark, but Grandmamma was not in an inquisitive mood that evening. Stroking Elsie’s head with her one capable hand, she sank into a silent reverie, and Elsie’s thoughts took wing, and, like Margaret’s, flew down the hill again; but they stopped at the brightly-lighted Rectory windows, and busied themselves in picturing the party assembled within, till Margaret came down from her room and rang the bell for evening prayers.

The next morning Elsie had about as great a disappointment as, in her uneventful life, could have come upon her. On returning from her morning’s walk with Margaret, she found a little parcel lying on the hall table, and learned from Crawford that a young lady and the young gentleman from the Rectory had called and asked very particularly to see her, and left that when they heard she was out.

Such an event as some one calling and asking to see her had never occurred in Elsie’s whole life before. She tore open the parcel, and found the book she had been reading in the churchyard, of which she had not

once thought since she left it behind her. As she pushed it away impatiently, her eyes fell on some words pencilled on a card her visitors had left. She was devouring them when Margaret came up, and, looking over her shoulder, read with her—

“We are so sorry not to find you. Why don't you come and see me? Have you forgotten your old playmate, Cecil Russel?”

Beneath, in an almost illegible scrawl, came a post-script:

“My cousin forces me to add that we are ashamed we did not ask leave to walk home with you and your aunt last night, as it was so late.”

Margaret turned the card round contemptuously when she had finished reading. “How absurd of those children to talk of walking home with us, as if we could possibly want their company! Well, it is fortunate we were out—a lucky escape. Of course we need not return this call, and they will not trouble us again.”

“Oh, Aunt Margaret, may not I?” cried Elsie imploringly; “it would be such a pleasure to me. Please let me call on Miss Russel at the Rectory.”

“My dear, I cannot,” Margaret answered decidedly; “and you must not encourage these young people to come here again. Your grandfather does not like to see strangers about the house.”

“Oh, Aunt Margaret, I do think you are cruel!” Elsie exclaimed. “You put it on Grandpapa, but it is in reality you who keep everyone away from us. You don't care to have any friends yourself, and you won't understand that Grandmamma and I are not as cold-hearted as you are.”

The words rushed almost involuntarily from Elsie's



lips on the provocation of her extreme disappointment; but she repented them the next minute, when she heard Mrs. Blake's feeble voice calling anxiously from the drawing-room to know what they were talking about.

When Margaret's and Elsie's explanations were made, old Mrs. Blake seemed even more agitated by the question they were discussing than Elsie had been.

She read the words on Cecil's card over and over again, and sent wistful inquiring glances into Margaret's resolute face to see whether there would be any use in endeavouring to change her decision. Then with a sigh she fell to stroking Elsie's flushed cheek, as if she were trying to smooth the vexation out of it.

"Never mind, Granny," Elsie said cheerfully when Margaret had left the room, "I won't say another word. Nothing signifies so much as your being worried. Aunt Margaret can't take you away from me, or make us love each other less, though I sometimes think she would if she could, I have seen such a strange expression come on her face when we have been making much of each other."

"My darling, you are unjust to Aunt Margaret; you don't understand what her looks mean. If you only knew! Don't call her cold-hearted again. She has had great sorrows in her life—terrible sorrows."

"But so have you. She has not suffered more than you."

"I don't know. Some people take their troubles more hardly than others. I am not so wise as Margaret. I don't see all the consequences of things as she does."

"If Aunt Margaret had only acknowledged that it

was a disappointment, I should have borne it better," Elsie pleaded. "Everyone in Oldbury is talking about Miss Russel; and it does seem hard that I am to keep out of her way, when she comes to seek me."

"Well, darling, it is very hard. Perhaps Margaret did not quite mean that. I can't think there would be any harm in your seeing a little of Miss Russel, or even of young Mr. Pierrepont, now and then. Miss Berry tells me that they are engaged to be married, and she thinks they will very likely be a great deal at the Rectory now. They might prove good friends to you some day, when you may want friends. You had perhaps better not say anything more to Margaret about calling at the Rectory, but we will wait and do the best we can, you and I."

There was not much to build on in the promise, but Elsie went away perfectly satisfied. She considered that she had Grandmamma's permission to take advantage of any chance opportunity that might arise of renewing her intimacy with her old playmates, and somehow or other she felt considerable certainty that the opportunities she wanted would not fail to come. Just for once in her life she had a happy conviction that the thing she herself wished was desired at least as eagerly by people more capable of attaining their wishes, and in that knowledge she rested.

The experience of the next few days did not disappoint her. She did not depart in the least particular from her usual habits, and yet she seldom went out now without something happening to give an interest to her walk. Very little things, to be sure. Cecil Russel tripped across the road to shake hands

with her in Aunt Margaret's very presence, or Stephen Pierrepont came up to her, in the Lending Library, while she was struggling to lift down some old *Quarterly Reviews* her grandfather wanted from the topmost shelf, and insisted on helping her, and on keeping her a few breathless minutes in conversation, while Aunt Margaret stood stiffly waiting behind. Small incidents certainly; but then it was a new thing for Elsie's walks to afford any incidents whatever; and about these there was a curious subtle flavour of finding herself made much of, and treated as a person of some consequence in the world, which to Elsie was the newest experience of all. She could not help perceiving that Stephen Pierrepont was quite eager and nervous about helping her with the books; his hands trembled as he lifted them from the shelf almost as much as did her own; and when Aunt Margaret interposed decidedly to cut short his entreaties that he might be allowed to carry them up the hill for her, he looked as disappointed and crestfallen as if it were he who was in want of companions, and could not speak to whom he liked.

Aunt Margaret went into the Lending Library alone the next time they walked to the town, and sent Elsie to make some purchases in an uninteresting china shop close by; and on that occasion, by some strange freak of circumstance, it was into the china shop that Stephen Pierrepont dropped accidentally,—to inquire after one of the shop-woman's children who was ill, he said. Cecil Russel followed a few moments after, and the three fell into conversation about old times, and made such rapid advances in intimacy, that Elsie found herself discussing confidentially with them the

probability of her being allowed to attend the croquet parties at Laurel House, about which everybody in Oldbury was talking just now. They were all so eager laying plans to bring about this desirable result, that they did not see Aunt Margaret when she came into the shop to discover what was detaining Elsie so long. Elsie felt very angry with herself for colouring violently when her aunt spoke to her, and Margaret's quiet way of looking over Cecil and Stephen as if they were pieces of furniture, and giving the orders Elsie had neglected in a few quick words, made her more uncomfortable than ever. Stephen showed a determination not to be ignored, that completed her embarrassment. He would not see that Aunt Margaret did not acknowledge his bow, and he actually followed them beyond the door of the shop with a last suggestion about the croquet party, though Elsie was too much awed by Aunt Margaret's surprised, upraised eyebrows to make any answer.

Margaret broke the uncomfortable silence between them when they had made a few paces up the street.

"I suppose there can be no doubt that young Pierrepoint is engaged to his cousin?" she said, in a more complacent tone of voice than Elsie expected to hear just then; "they would not be so much together if it were not so."

Elsie did not know whether an answer was expected from her or not. It was a new thing for Margaret to ask a question that savoured of commonplace curiosity about her neighbours' concerns; and the question itself required thinking about. She had heard the suggestion before, and had nothing to say against it; but just now it seemed to put her two

friends before her in an unexpected light. Engaged to be married! She could not help casting a furtive glance back to look at them again and realize the idea. Cecil was stooping down talking to one of the shopwoman's children, and Stephen, with his back to her, was looking after them up the street. Elsie caught his eye, and resolved that she would never be so ill-mannered again as to turn back to look at people; but though she kept her eyes steadily fixed on the ground, she knew when Cecil and Steenie crossed the road, and was aware that they were talking eagerly to each other as they walked up the street, and while they stood on the upper doorstep of the Rectory waiting to be let in.

Cecil's face, all bright and sparkling, as she looked up at her cousin while making some last remark before she entered the house, was a picture Elsie recalled a great many times.

She glanced down at her own dim Quakerlike costume, and contrasted it with Cecil's dainty-pretty-nesses. What could the two cousins have thought of her? She was quite sure that they had looked at her, and said something to each other about her, when they passed her on the opposite side of the street. She could not help wondering what it was, and worrying herself with conjectures till she reached home, when she had to brighten up to give a pleasant account of the incidents of the morning to her grandmother, old Mrs. Blake.

She would, perhaps, have been as much puzzled as enlightened if she had overheard the conversation that did pass between the two cousins.

"What was it we were reading the other day?" Stephen began, after he had taken that last glance across the road at Elsie's down-drooping face, which she had felt more than seen; "something about an old Welsh magician and his witch-wife, who made a maiden out of flowers. Let me see. They took flower of the broom, and flower of the meadow-sweet, and flower of the rye——"

"And when they had made the maiden, they baptized her and called her Flower Aspect." Cecil went on, "A prettier and more appropriate name than Elsie Blake, is it not?"

"Nay, I don't know," said Steenie; "for my part, one might come to mean as much as the other, I think."

"So that came into your head just now," said Cecil. "Dear me, how poetical a prosaic person gets to be when he is in——. Well, I beg your pardon, Steenie; I won't finish my sentence. When he is brought in contact with a lovely, griffin-guarded, mysterious lady, we will say, with whom he cannot play unlimited croquet. Do you know, I think we are making a mistake in trying to draw Elsie Blake in among the Lutridge rabble? She will not look as like 'Flower Aspect' with a mallet in her hand."

"Why not? A person who won't do for ordinary occasions is worth very little, I should say."

"Now you are prosaic again. I am the truest lover, for I have the reverential feeling that will not bear to see the divinity descend from its pedestal."

"Nonsense, I thought you were in earnest about wishing to see more of her."

"Things are come to a pretty pass when *you* take *me* to task for not being in earnest. Here we are at home. You must not turn round and stare again, for you have behaved very badly already, but *I* shall take one look more before the door is opened. Certainly that is a remarkable pair to be walking down Oldbury. I suppose the good commonplace Oldbury people have grown so used to them that they don't perceive how out of the ordinary course of events they are. Griffiness must have been very beautiful once herself. I wonder what it is in her face that impresses one so? There is a sort of fire in it though it is so cold. It looks as if some sudden blow had dashed the spirit out of it, and turned it into stone. Some one says that every face should be a prophecy or a history. There go the two together, if one had but skill to read them."

"I will excuse you the history," Steenie said; "the prophecy will be the most interesting, if you will only read what I want in it."

They had entered the house by this time, but, as was often the case with them, they were too much interested in the conversation they were carrying on to be ready for the interruption of fresh company. They stood one on each side of the library door, Cecil with her hand on the lock hurrying to get out what she had to say before it was necessary to open the door.

"I don't mean anything like fortune-telling, of course, only I think I can read in her face that there is a great deal more than just the flower aspect. She is not altogether made up of meadow-sweet and the bloom of the rye. She looks now as if she had walked

straight out of imagination land and scarcely saw anything in Oldbury; but that is only because she has been forced to lead such a still, solitary life. She wants waking up—but mind I am not saying that you are the Prince to do it. I won't take upon myself to say that."

"No, indeed! Why don't you open the library door, and give one a chance of sitting down somewhere?"

"Now I think of what I am doing, I am going upstairs," said Cecil.

She ran lightly up the steps laughing to herself. "At all events, Papa's warning was thrown away," she soliloquised. "I must say I cherish a little grudge against him for fancying that Steenie and I could not spend three months together in a country house without growing silly. There will be some fun in seeing Steenie vindicate his power of falling in love desperately, which Papa evidently doubted. I can't help being rather amused at it all. Steenie's transparent little devices to make me talk about her all day long, and his determination to cheat himself into thinking that the interest is all on my side, and that he is doing it all to please me, are so absurd. What an odd sort of transformation this falling in love is! One wonders what it can be that gets into people and makes them up fresh. I have never seen such a look in Steenie's face all the years I have known him, as there was while he was talking of nothing to that girl, whom, after all, he does not know much about. Well, it's odd, and rather frightening, when one comes to think of it. I wonder whether she sees it as plainly as I do? Perhaps not, because she does not know



his usual face so well. I hope I am not playing with edge tools. I hope I shall not be led into doing anything that Papa would call meddling. If only he were here to look on and keep me in order!"

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## CHAPTER XVI.

## A Dreary Day.

ALL Oldbury was talking about Mrs. Lutridge's pleasant garden parties, and Elsie Blake could not help feeling some girlish mortification at the small chance there seemed of her having any share in the general gaiety.

The note of invitation which Cecil had undertaken to procure for her arrived in due course, and was quietly torn up and made into spills by Margaret, without its calling forth a word of remark from any one. Elsie had meditated an appeal to her grandmother, but Mrs. Blake happened to be unusually unwell during the fortnight when the croquet excitement was at its height, and Elsie could not find it in her heart to trouble her about such a trifle.

Just at that period, too, the elders of the household had rather more than usual of the air of pre-occupation and mystery that often made Elsie feel as if she were shut out from them and banished to a world of her own. When she came suddenly into the drawing-room, she frequently found Margaret reading letters aloud to her grandmother, which were hastily put aside when she came near, and often, after being thus occupied for an hour or so with Margaret, Mrs. Blake would shut herself up in her room, and forbid any one to go near her. Elsie was less depressed by this state of things than a new-comer into the family

would have been. She generally did well enough in her dream world, but every now and then a longing for sympathy and companionship came over her, and she felt cold among her shadowy companions, almost as if she were a dream herself, or a changeling from fairyland, who could not persuade the denizens of the upper world to recognise her.

The day of Mrs. Lutridge's gayest and last garden party happened to be one of peculiar gloom in the Blakes' house. Mrs. Blake burst into a distressing fit of tears during dinner, and had to be led upstairs by Margaret, and Elsie had to sit out the rest of the dinner hour with her grandfather, making vain efforts to persuade him to sit still and eat, and being at last obliged to content herself with watching him as he wandered up and down between the dining-room and the foot of the staircase, moaning and wringing his hands. There was some relief when Margaret came down-stairs again and reported that Mrs. Blake was better, and had composed herself to sleep. She persuaded her father to retire into the study with her, and very soon Elsie heard the sound of her voice reading aloud, and the scratching of Mr. Blake's pen. They had settled to their afternoon's occupations just in their ordinary way, and Elsie was left to her own resources for recovering her equanimity after the agitation of the day. She went out and paced up and down Margaret's favourite avenue at the end of the garden. It was generally too gloomy for her taste, but to-day she was glad to avoid a view of the road, along which a stream of carriages was wending to Mrs. Lutridge's white house at the top of the hill. She could hear the constant sound of wheels, and

even the click of the mallets and balls, and now and then a shrill tone of voice or burst of laughter from some of the players in the next garden. How merry and light-hearted most people seemed to be! Elsie wondered how it would feel to get into some one else, into Cecil Russel for example, just for one afternoon, and breathe an air that had no mystery in it.

It was nearly dark before she could make up her mind to return to the house, and when she entered she found Crawford watching in the hall to waylay her.

"Just run upstairs to your grandmamma, Elsie dear," the old servant whispered, "without letting Miss Margaret know. She is wearying to see you."

Mrs. Blake was propped up in bed, looking very much flushed and agitated, when Elsie came to her.

"If I had only known you wanted me," Elsie began remorsefully.

"I did not want you till now, darling. Margaret advised me to be quiet and not to think, and, oh, I have been trying to do as she bids me. She means it for the best, but she does not know how short my time is, or she would not oppose my making this one effort, this one last effort;—I cannot rest till it is made."

"Dearest Granny!" Elsie cried, throwing her arms round her, and feeling, as she clasped the trembling form, strength to defy all the world in her behalf, "tell me what you wish to do; let me help you. I will manage so that you shall have your own way, whatever Aunt Margaret says against it."

"Nay, darling, we must not talk of going against Aunt Margaret. I don't wish to deceive her. It is only

because I have not strength to argue the question with her any more to-night that I ask you, instead of her, to do this little thing for me. I want you to run down to the gate and watch till Miss Berry passes, and bring her up here to speak to me. Be quick, or she may have gone, and I shall not rest till I have seen her."

"Is that all? Lie still then, dear Granny, and I will manage it beautifully," Elsie said, a good deal surprised, and a little disappointed that some more difficult service was not required of her.

Elsie's impatience and curiosity had time to grow very strong during her watch at the gate, before the welcome sound of wheels told her that Mrs. Lutridge's guests were beginning to take their departure. Lady Selina's carriage, with Cecil in it, rolled past; then came Stephen Pierrepont, escorting two laughing, rosy-cheeked grand-daughters of Mrs. Adams, who were spending the summer in Oldbury. The sound of their voices in gay, bantering talk reached Elsie's ears before she caught sight of them.

It began to be rather embarrassing to stand at the gate, a spectacle for all Mrs. Lutridge's visitors to stare at. Presently, however, Miss Berry, arm-in-arm with the Rector himself, appeared, and Elsie hastily opened the gate and went into the road to meet them. Miss Berry looked a little blank when she heard her request. The walk down the hill with the Rector had seemed such a crowning point to the attentions which, thanks to Cecil's and Steenie's manœuvres, had been showered upon her all the evening, [that it cost her something to give it up. She did not hesitate, but her acquiescence was rather incoherently worded.

“My dear! your good grandmamma! The loss of the pleasure I have been promising myself in my walk home shall not be thought of. Mr. Pierrepont, in his great kindness, will excuse——”

“Certainly,” Mr. Pierrepont put in quickly. “If I can be of any service, pray let me know. I wish to be at the call of every one of my parishioners in cases of illness or trouble; meanwhile, don’t let me detain you. Good evening.”

Elsie did not feel herself included even in the parting salutation. Mr. Pierrepont’s manner had never been cordial towards her, and during the last few weeks there had been something in his way of looking or not looking at her when they met, that gave her an uneasy suspicion that she must unwittingly have done something to incur his displeasure. She was not disposed to echo the admiring exclamations in which Miss Berry indulged as they were walking up to the house.

“At the call of every one!” such a truly noble sentiment; “and, my dear, at any cost to his own feelings, I am convinced he would act up to it. You may smile at the notion of middle-aged people having regrets of the kind,—but what am I thinking of? It is of your grandmamma’s illness we are speaking; and if I can be of any use—yes, I see, the back stairs, a most sensible precaution, though you may depend on me to be quite silent when we get near the sick-room.”

Elsie’s caution was not needed, for Margaret met them on the stairs; and a single glance at her quiet, sad, disapproving face, told Elsie that she had heard of her errand, and had yielded the subject of dispute, whatever it was, between herself and her mother. She

thanked Miss Berry for her kindness in coming. "You must not let my mother trespass on your good-nature," she said; "I trust you will refuse the request she is about to make if it will inconvenience you to grant it."

Miss Berry began to be quite excited by the mystery she had come into the midst of. She had never felt so important in her life as when Elsie took her up to Mrs. Blake's bedside and left her to her secret interview. It did not last many minutes. Before Elsie expected to see her, Miss Berry reappeared. The seriousness had left her face; it was all smiles and nods and beaming satisfaction. She seized Elsie's hands and kissed her before she spoke.

"My dear! such a trifle to make all this fuss about. One would think we were the worst neighbours in the world in Oldbury. To be sure, it is years and years since that little bed in my spare room has been occupied; but I have kept all in tolerable repair, and you will put up with deficiencies, won't you? Next week your good grandmamma is so obliging as to say she will trust you to me, and I must hurry home at once, or Caroline will complain that I have not given her time to prepare. A visitor to our house—such an event! I shall come for you myself that you may not feel the parting. I don't think I ever was more gratified in my life."

Miss Berry shot out these broken sentences during her progress down stairs, and Elsie was too much bewildered by the extraordinary prospect they seemed to hold out to say much in reply. As soon as Miss Berry had left the house, she hurried back to her grandmother's room.

"Grandmamma, what does it all mean?" she said,

coming close to her, and kneeling by the bed. "It can't be true. You can't have been plotting to send me away from you."

"But, darling, you have so often said you should like to go," Mrs. Blake answered coaxingly; "and I have planned this little visit for you, because I can't bear to leave you quite alone here. Won't you like it?"

"But why, do tell me why you are sending me away? What made you think of it? If you are only going the usual half-yearly journey, why cannot I stay here with Crawford?"

"Because we shall be away longer than usual this year, and I am so helpless now I must take Crawford with me. Margaret thought I had better stay at home, but I could not endure the thought. I must go while I have strength left. You won't make difficulties, dearest? You will go to Miss Berry's to please me."

"Anything for you, Granny; but—" There was a pause, and Elsie's eyes grew eager. "But oh, Granny, could not you take me where you are going? You know how I have wondered and longed all my life to see the friends you visit every year, and love so much, and never talk to me about. Could not I go? Am I not old enough to be trusted yet?"

It was the old vexed question, which Elsie felt impelled to repeat every now and then, though she knew by experience that nothing but pain ever came of her bringing it forward. She was always sorry the instant the words had passed her lips; and to-night a keener repentance than ordinary seized her, for Mrs. Blake's face twitched nervously, and a bewildered look came into her eyes.

"Don't, dear," she said piteously, "it hurts me so.



I cannot bear it to-night. You must not ask me any questions, for I don't know what I may say. You will be happy while we are away, won't you, Elsie, and show Margaret that no harm has come of our trusting you from us just this once?"

"Why should Aunt Margaret be afraid of my being trusted?" Elsie asked indignantly; but she did not press the question. She saw that Mrs. Blake was growing more agitated every moment, and she endeavoured to calm her by talking cheerfully about the proposed visit, and by dwelling on the speed with which the time of separation would certainly pass.

After the first shock of surprise was over, Elsie could seem pleased with her prospects without effort. The half-yearly absences of the elders of the family had now recurred so often that she had grown almost tired of speculating about them, and she quickly came to the conclusion that the next best thing to sharing the journey was to escape the lonely week at home. She had so longed for a change—for some event to occur in her life—and now a change had come.

As she went about the house helping Margaret with her preparations, she could not keep her feet from taking a dancing measure as she moved, or her voice from breaking into little snatches of song, even though she knew that Aunt Margaret's grave eyes were following her about disapprovingly.

On the last evening, when she was kneeling down arranging her possessions in the little old portmanteau, that had so often accompanied Margaret on her mysterious journeys, she looked up suddenly in her aunt's face, and ventured on a remonstrance her thoughts had been framing constantly during the last few days.

"Aunt Margaret, you won't allow me to go on this journey with you, you won't tell me what it is makes you all so anxious and unhappy, yet you don't like me to be pleased at the thought of staying behind with Miss Berry. Is it not rather hard? If you would let me share your cares, I would not have another thought but of them. I would give up everything to be of use to you—oh, so gladly! But you won't do that, and yet you are surprised if I forget myself for a moment and look happy."

"You mistake me, dear," Aunt Margaret answered gently; "I am not surprised, and I don't grudge you any pleasure you might safely enjoy. I am sorry about this visit, because I do not think it is safe for you. You will be exposed to the temptation of forming intimacies that must be broken hereafter, and which may lead to painful disappointments. I am afraid my warning you against making new friends while you are left at liberty to see whom you like will not do any good; yet I am not sorry to have this opportunity of giving you the warning."

Margaret finished her sentence by stooping down to kiss Elsie's forehead; but though her manner was kind, her words fell very coldly on Elsie's ear.

To be kept out of the confidence of the relatives to whose affection she had a natural right, and yet to be warned against making friends of her own choice, seemed too cruel a lot to be quietly acquiesced in. In her inmost heart Elsie resolved not to be frightened by Margaret's foreboding words, or held back by any cold fear of consequences, from responding to the affectionate warmth with which she knew she should be welcomed where she was going.

Miss Berry's beaming face pervading the house on the morning of the day fixed for the journey was an astounding innovation on the old routine, which Elsie could hardly realize, even when it was before her eyes. Her cordial presence kept up Mrs. Blake's courage at the last, and made the parting between her and Elsie less solemn than it would otherwise have been.

Then, when the travellers had taken their departure, came to Elsie the new experience of turning her back on the deserted house, now given up unreservedly to be dealt with by Crawford's usual coadjutors in the house-cleaning, and walking down the hill to take up her abode in Miss Berry's cheerful little home.

The rest of the day passed in a bewildering excitement of pleasure. All Oldbury seemed to have conspired to make a festival of Elsie's visit. Miss Berry's house had been beautified, and the room where Elsie was to sleep refurnished with a taste and magnificence that it quite took away her breath to see. And though Miss Berry was always hinting at some mysterious agency by which the changes had been brought about, and disclaiming Elsie's gratitude on her own account, she invariably checked herself in time to prevent Elsie's curiosity from being finally set at rest.

Cecil Russel flashed in and out of the house a dozen times in the course of the afternoon, to see if anything was wanted. Mrs. Adams brought a basket of the first apricots that had ripened in her garden to stand on the tea-table. Even Mrs. Lutridge sent her servant round with her compliments, and a packet of clothing-club cards, which she thought Miss Elsie Blake might like to employ her spare moments in adding up.

Later in the evening, Stephen Pierrepoint looked in to advise Miss Berry not to tire herself by too much conversation with her guest this first evening, and instead of going away again in five minutes, as he said he should, he somehow or other stayed, and took Elsie's entertainment on himself so effectually that Miss Berry was able to nod comfortably over her knitting much in her usual way till bed-time.

It was altogether a wonderful afternoon and evening to Elsie. But strangest and sweetest of all was the waking in her pretty room next morning, to see Miss Berry's kind face bending over her, and hear her plead in excuse for being there, that she had just slipped in the first thing to look at her asleep, and satisfy herself that the happiness of having her safe under her roof was not a dream.

It was the first time in her conscious life that Elsie had opened her eyes on new objects. How sunny and heart-warming the brightly furnished room looked, filled as it was with bewildering tokens of the care with which it had been prepared for her coming! For some moments she could scarcely understand what had happened. Where was she? How had it all come to pass? Was she still in the old familiar careworn world, or had she wakened up that morning into some region quite new?

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## CHAPTER XVII.

## An Evening of Misunderstandings.

THE fact that Elsie Blake was coming to spend a fortnight in the little house opposite, had been made known to all the inmates of the Rectory about half an hour after Miss Berry's interview with Mrs. Blake.

That same evening Cecil Russel was called from the drawing-room, where she was amusing herself by watching Steenie drawing caricatures of the croquet players on a sheet of sermon paper, abstracted from the desk at which Mr. Pierrepont sat writing, to hold a private interview with some one. She came back with a very radiant face, and danced up to Stephen's chair.

"Such wonderful news as I have just heard! You must guess it, Steenie. I will give it you in ten, I will give it you in a hundred, I will give it you in a thousand, as Madame de Sevigné says."

"What a thorough Oldburyite you have become in six weeks!" said Stephen, yawning. "News indeed! Somebody's High Church cat has got into somebody's Low Church cellar and stolen all the cream, and Mrs. Lutridge considers it a sign of the times."

"It is something you will really care to hear."

"It must be something startling then just now. Let us see. The highest of the curates has offered to Miss Ursula Lutridge since we left, and Mrs. Lutridge has thrown a croquet ball at his head."

"Now I can make him grave in an instant," Cecil thought to herself; and she stood silent, not liking to part too soon with the conversational missile she expected to hurl with so much effect.

"That's not a caricature you have been drawing since I left you?" she observed at last, peering over his shoulder. "I declare it's a very pretty picture of *her*. How did you come to see her standing like that at her garden gate? Now then for my news. She—Flower Aspect herself—is coming to stay for a week or two at the house opposite. Griffiness and the rest of the family are leaving Oldbury, and she is coming here. Now, is not that news?"

Cecil had thrown her stone, and could not help a little laugh of triumph as she observed the disturbance it effected. Stephen had one of those unmanageably expressive countenances that leave their owners completely at the mercy of experimenters like Cecil.

His voice was more under control. "Well, yes" he answered deliberately, "a tolerably ingenious invention for Oldbury to amuse itself with. It is not true, of course?"

"But it is. Miss Berry has been here begging me to go across to her house to-morrow morning to look at the room where Flower Aspect is to sleep, and advise how it can be made comfortable for her. I shall go, but I shall be puzzled. To what sort of rooms do fairy princesses resort when their brazen towers are thrown down? Ought there to be spindles in them, or magic mirrors? Do you think you could ride off anywhere to get a bottle of that wine Christabel's mother made from spring flowers, for her to drink?"

'A wine it is of wondrous powers,  
My mother made it of spring flowers.'

Just the beverage for Flower Aspect."

"I wish you would not talk such nonsense," said Stephen. "Why don't you explain what you really mean? You cannot mean that Mr. and Mrs. Blake are leaving Oldbury for good, and that their grand-daughter is to be left behind?"

"I shall call it for good if they give her up to us for a week even. It will be giving her up *to us* if she goes to the house opposite, for we three shall always be together. We shall grow quite intimate. What a much pleasanter way of seeing her than meeting at Mrs. Lutridge's! Steenie, how grave you look about it. Are not you immensely glad?"

"I! Why should I be? I don't know. What is it to me?" said Stephen quickly.

He could not bear Cecil's laughing, questioning eyes on him any longer. He got up, took a turn or two in the room, and finally wandered through the open window into the garden, leaving Cecil to answer the questions of the two elder occupants of the room, whose attention had by this time been drawn to what was going on.

"Dear me!" Lady Selina began, "how I wish it was not the custom in this house for people to go in and out continually all the evening. It is one constant opening and shutting of the door, and it puts an end to anything like rational conversation. I began to tell you, some time ago, what I said to Mrs. Lutridge about the fire at Compton Deane the year after I was married, and I have not been able to finish my sen-

tence yet, for the constant rushing in and out of the room there has been."

"You fell asleep, Grandmamma," said Cecil; "that was why you never finished your story. I have only been out of the room once, and Steenie has been drawing."

"The door has been opened and shut continually," persisted Lady Selina. "I never do sleep in an evening—I only wish I could. I heard every word you said to Stephen. You told him that Miss Flowers, of Ashton, was coming to stay in Oldbury. I did not know she had any friends in the neighbourhood. I wonder she did not write and tell me."

"No, no, Grandmamma; I said Elsie Blake was coming to the house opposite, that was all."

"One would think I had grown quite deaf or stupid from the way you contradict me, Cecil," Lady Selina grumbled. "Yet my hearing is very acute, and I am certain you did say something about Miss Flowers. If you and Stephen choose to make mysteries, I suppose you must; but I beg you will not try to persuade me that I am in my dotage yet."

"I assure you, Grandmamma, there is not any mystery. I called Elsie Blake 'Flower Aspect,' a name Stephen and I have invented for her; that really was all."

The bell rang for evening prayers, and the servants came flocking into the room before Lady Selina could take in this astounding explanation. Mr. Pierrepont glanced gloomily towards the open window, through which Stephen did not appear in answer to the summons, and then began to read in a tone that plainly betokened dissatisfaction.



Cecil felt herself in disgrace in that quarter too. She was convinced that her uncle laid the offence of Steenie's absence at her door, and as soon as the service was over, she tripped up to his desk, and by way of making amends, busied herself in helping him to put away his books and papers. His brow relaxed as her dexterous fingers reduced the melancholy looking heap of letters and sermon notes to order.

"This is what I always do for Papa," she observed; "he says I am worth a second secretary to him."

"He is a lucky man to have you," Mr. Pierrepont answered. "I should envy him, if I did not remember that he cannot hope to keep you always; that is the worst of having a daughter. Now my condition may improve. When Steenie marries and settles down here with his wife, as I trust he will do eventually, my time for being waited upon will perhaps begin."

Cecil dived down under the table to pick up an errant paper as her uncle spoke; but she knew quite well what sort of look was on his face, and what was the vision he was conjuring up before him as he finished his sentence. She had read his thoughts on that point once or twice before since she came to Oldbury, and she did not know whether to be most provoked or amused at his blindness. To-night amusement predominated, and she emerged from under the table with quite a broad smile on her lips.

"You are a perfect sunbeam in a house," Mr. Pierrepont said admiringly. "But, my dear, there is just one remark I wish to make. Considering how every word spoken here is liable to be repeated and commented on in the town, do you think it quite

prudent to give young ladies by-names in your talk about them with Steenie? I should be sorry if any of the Blake family had reasonable cause to complain of disrespect from us."

Cecil's cheeks crimsoned. "Dear Uncle, how could you think Stephen would speak disrespectfully of any young lady, of Elsie Blake least of all. It would be quite impossible, too. The name is only because we admire her so very much."

Mr. Pierrepont's countenance seemed to say that did not mend the matter.

"The Blakes are a very respectable family, but there has never been any intimacy. Why should you speak of them at all? and what made Stephen rush out of the room in such an impetuous way just as the servants were coming up to prayers? I wish you would give him a hint not to leave the room at prayer-time before all the servants. It has happened once or twice before, and I am vexed to think what might be said about it in the town. Do give him a hint that I do not like him to be so inconsiderate."

"I should have thought, sir, there was no occasion for you to give hints about your wishes in this house," said Steenie's voice, as he came suddenly upon them from the shadow of the window, by which he had just re-entered the room. "I am quite ready to come to prayers as often as you like; but if it is for the townspeople's sake you wish me to say them, don't you think it would be a good plan for us all to buy little bits of carpet and kneel out in the streets, as they do at Cairo: then all Oldbury will have the benefit of knowing we perform our devotions regularly."

Mr. Pierrepoint looked a good deal annoyed. "I was speaking to your cousin," he said shortly; then, without further remark, he turned his back upon them both, locked his desk, and left the room.

Stephen's sarcastic speeches generally had the effect of shutting him up in this way. He neither rebuked nor openly resented them; but their constant recurrence was gradually building up a wall of reserve between the father and son, which all Cecil's vigorous efforts to bring about a better understanding between them could not remove. Yet they were all the time very much attached to each other, and did not fail to suffer each in his own way from the little jars that thrust them apart.

Cecil turned upon Stephen with the books she had collected piled up in her arms, her eager face and indignant eyes flashing upon him over the barrier.

"Now, Steenie, it was a shame of you to say that to him. It was like accusing him of hypocrisy, and you know perfectly well you don't mean that."

"I suppose I don't; but I could not help what I said. It disgusts me beyond anything to hear him confess such paltry motives for caring what I do or leave undone. I can't help asking myself, 'Is it really all humbug, then?—Is it a show we are keeping up for the Oldbury people's edification, and winking in each other's faces all the time, like Cicero's two augurs?'"

"No, no. You know a great deal better than that. If his fear of your causing scandal among these prying people is a weakness, you have no business to judge it. Do you know, I think it is right down cruel and cowardly to make sarcastic speeches to a sensi-

tive, anxious-minded person like your father. Your words hurt him a great deal more than you can understand. It is as bad as striking a woman."

"Women can strike hard enough themselves, I perceive," said Stephen; "and I suppose one must not venture to complain of their blows being cruel."

"You deserve it; and besides, you don't really care for anything I say to you," Cecil answered, relaxing a little in her wrath.

"I don't know about not caring, but I will confess I deserve it if you like. We used to say 'a kiss for a blow' when we were children;" and Stephen stooped down and touched her forehead with his lips.

Cecil could not be angry. His face had just the same self-convicted expression on it she had seen often enough in old times at the end of a quarrel. She was only rather vexed with herself for having let the conversation take a more earnest tone than had been common between them since she came to Oldbury.

"After all, I am not the person you have got to make it up with," she said. "You are wasting your penitence on me. I had better have left you to your own reflections, and contented myself by putting my uncle's books away for him. There must be some perverse spirit abroad to-night that drives me into contention with every one. I little thought when I ran in with Miss Berry's good news that it would have the effect of setting us all by the ears."

"Give me the books; I will take them to the library. My father is there, and I want to speak to him. But stay, just a minute—tell me what you call

your good news again; I don't think I ever heard it rightly."

"Oh yes, you did," said Cecil; "I told you all there was to tell, and it only made you cross."

"But there must be something more. Come, I am not cross now. Miss Berry was talking to you for ten minutes at least. She must have said something else, something about her. Do be merciful, and try to recollect."

"I am sleepy, and want to go to bed," remonstrated Cecil. "I should have to rack my brains till morning to disentangle Miss Berry's sentences. The exclamations of delight, and the entreaties that I would glance round the little room, and just be so obliging as to point out—and that I was not to scruple about expense; it was so easy to make up by a little extra economy by and by. You can imagine all that."

"That I can. Dear old Elderberry, don't I know the flutter and triumph she will be in at the prospect of lavishing luxuries on her guest, which will have to be made up for by months and months of painful pinching when she is alone again."

"Do you mean that Miss Berry's circumstances are so straitened that it will really inconvenience her to have a visitor for a few weeks? I had no idea of such a thing. She never says a word in all her incoherent talk that would lead one to suspect she had any cares of the kind, and she does so delight in being hospitable."

"Yes, and the thought of the future self-denial her hospitality involves is the very core of her delight. She is calculating now how many dinners and how many fires she can do without by and by, that she

may feel justified, as she would say, in using no stint while her friend is with her. I know her if nobody else in Oldbury does, for we have had some confidences together in old times. The good, foolish, generous, noble, old soul!"

Cecil's eyes glistened as Steenie went on. She liked him a great deal better praising Miss Berry than quarrelling with his father, or even rhapsodising about Elsie, and was not sorry to have waited to hear this.

"Well," she said, "if you do know so much, I don't think you ought ever to make sarcastic speeches again, or sneer about augurs winking at each other. You must see how real *it* is with her. And she would tell you *it* all came from your father's teaching."

"I never doubted its being real," said Steenie; "only——"

"No, no, don't argue yourself into cold blood again. Go down and speak to your father while the glow of admiration for Miss Berry's goodness is on you, and let me go to bed."

But Cecil turned back again before she reached the staircase.

"O Steenie, such a delicious thought has come into my head! I will go to-morrow and really see what is wanted to make the little room comfortable; it has not been occupied for thirty years, and is, I expect, in a very forlorn state. I will persuade Miss Berry to let me get what is necessary. We will choose things that will really be useful to her afterwards, and write a pretty note, and ask her to accept them from us. She will not refuse, for the sake of making the house comfortable for Elsie."

“Admirable!” said Steenie; “but you must be content with helping to choose—you will leave all the rest to me. I am the oldest friend, and have the best right. Come, you must acknowledge that.”

Cecil could not help laughing at the eagerness on his face.

“You covetous, greedy creature,” she said, “you want to monopolize all the thanks and gratitude to yourself. It is very base, when the thought was mine. However, we will quarrel about that to-morrow.”

“You had better let me manage it; it would be a pity to risk hurting her feelings or spoiling her pleasure in this visit. It is a piece of promotion and glory such as she will perhaps never have in her life again.”

“Promotion and glory! having Elsie Blake to stay a few weeks in her house?” cried Cecil with a note of interrogation in her voice. “Good-night. You are growing too absurd to talk to.”

“Well, I hope I am not doing wrong?” Cecil soliloquised as she brushed her hair. “Poor Uncle! I wish he would not look at Steenie and me, whenever we are talking more eagerly than usual together, with that terribly satisfied look on his face. I can’t help reading the thought that is in his heart at the moment, and it does provoke me that he should be so utterly blind, and misunderstand us so. I am afraid it makes me a little more inclined—but no, I will not say that I am encouraging anything, for really I am acting just as I should if Steenie were still abroad. If people will betray their secrets to me, I can’t help it, or help pondering over what I discover. Certainly this falling

in love is a strange contradictory sort of thing. Tennyson may say what he likes about the 'chord of self passing in music out of sight;' but as far as I can make it out, it is after all rather a selfish kind of unselfishness. Here is Steenie really thinking it a privilege for Miss Berry to be allowed to sacrifice her comfort for a year or so to entertain Elsie Blake. He has scruples about depriving her of such glory, and by and by he will quarrel with me for the right to manage every little thing with which she has to do, and think himself magnanimous when he throws me a scrap of trouble. I have seen that sort of thing before, men harnessing their mothers and their sisters to the chariots of their lady-loves or their wives, and driving them—to death almost. They don't mean to be selfish; they really think it is quite enough for some people, unattractive sisters and so on, to bask in the reflected rays of their happiness, and that they have no business at all to want a sun of their own. Yes, and there are women who live all their lives long in the cold white moonlight of other people's reflected joy. It is not a bad kind of light to live in after all. It may leave some dark, ghostly corners in the heart unwarmed; but, like the other moonlight, it lets a great deal be seen overhead that sunshine hides."



## CHAPTER XVIII.

## First Days.

"HEAVEN is made up of first days; hell perhaps also." Elsie slowly translated the words from the "Flegel Jahre," which she and Cecil were studying together seated in the window recess of Miss Berry's little sitting-room, and then she paused reflectively.

"What odd things he does say, this gigantic Jean Paul," remarked Cecil; "but go on, I can't make out the next sentence, and you know more German than I do."

"Odd!" cried Elsie, and instead of reading on she let the book slide from her fingers, clasped her hands round her knees curled up on the window seat, and looked out of the window with far off dreamy eyes that saw nothing in the little street. She was thinking of her own experience of a first day, in the light of which the opening clause of Jean Paul's sentence was quite intelligible to her.

That first evening at Miss Berry's had indeed been a happy time. It had been like coming out of a dark cellar into a warm sunlighted room, and knowing first how dismal the darkness had been. Could she ever go back into the dark, or had the happy days of this last week made a gulf in her life never to be crossed again? Elsie confidently told herself that they had. She should be a different person when she returned home. She should carry a sunshine with her, that the

other inmates of the house could not fail to be gladdened by. She should never feel lonely again. She had found such friends as she had been longing for and dreaming of all her life. The thought of them would make every place bright, and all her life would now be made up of heavenly first days.

"Now you have put on your most unmistakable 'Flower Aspect' look," said Cecil; "you have escaped back to the bloom regions from which your magician father and your witch mother brought you when they distilled you into a maiden, and I shall not be able to get at you for a long time. Yet I should like to see what you are looking at, if you could show it me."

"I am only thinking about myself," said Elsie. "I began with Jean Paul's sentence, but it took me straight off to recollections of my own, and I had forgotten all about the book when you spoke."

"That's not like your usual way of musing over what you read," said Cecil. "Stephen and I had a discussion last night when we went home, after that thorough talk about favourite books we had with you, and we made out that your enjoyment of poetry and novels is quite different from ours. We admire and discuss and realize by a sort of effort, but you seem to have lived all the stories you have read, as if you had got inside the heroes and heroines by turns, and made them real."

"So they are," said Elsie; "a great deal more real than any live people have been to me till now. I wonder whether I could explain to you how it is. The people I have lived among have never shown me anything but their outsides. I have always felt all my life that they were thinking of and caring chiefly for some-

thing quite apart from the everyday affairs of which they talk to me. The book people who explain their thoughts, and take me into their confidence about their loves and their troubles, are much more alive. I have lived with them really ever since I could read; it has only been my body that has filled up a space in our house along with the other automatons that move about there."

Cecil shook her head. "It was not a good way of living, and it must have been very unsatisfactory," she said.

"Dreadful sometimes when I woke up," said Elsie; "it was just as if I had been walking about in those golden and purple spaces one sees between the clouds at sunset, finding them at first as substantial as they look, and then they had broken away suddenly, and let me down into nothing."

"You should have brisked up, and set yourself to some sort of work," said Cecil.

"I did try. I had fits of studying hard, and often I got Crawford to let me help in the housework; but whether it was because no one ever seemed to care what I did, or only from my own laziness, I always found that in a little time the study or the work grew even more chopped-strawy than the fancies. Then the dream world made itself up solid again, and took me into it."

"And that's how you come by your flower aspect?" said Cecil meditatively.

A little colour rose to Elsie's cheeks, and her voice had an earnest tone in it as she went on.

"I hope I should have struggled harder if I had seen any way of being of real use to any one. Once

Miss Berry put it into my head to ask Aunt Margaret if I might teach a class in the Sunday-school. It seemed such an opening to get out of my unreality; I did so long to be allowed; but when I spoke to Aunt Margaret——”

“Well,” cried Cecil; “she could not be angry with you for having such a wish as that.”

“No; but she looked surprised, almost frightened at my having had the presumption to think I could teach anybody anything. I can't tell you all her face expressed. She was not angry, though Margaret can be angry; she looked grieved and shocked, as if I had proposed a preposterous thing. Her way of taking that request of mine was a worse downfall to me than any of my descents from cloudland. I don't think I have quite got over it yet. It brought back an old nightmare of my childhood—a fear that there is something in me different from other people. Don't laugh at me, Cecil; you would not, if you knew how dreadful that thought is to me.”

“A dreadful thought that you are not like the six Miss Lutridges and the two Miss Adams! My dear Flower Aspect, you really must not expect me to sympathise with you if that is your trouble. No, no, you will have to make up your mind to it. People will always turn their heads to look after you when you come into a room or walk down a street, and I am afraid they will be apt to bring against you the terrible accusation that they have never seen anything like you before. When they begin to talk to you, they will be still more disposed to make an exception of you, though perhaps by and by, when you have left Oldbury and seen more of the world, you

will cure yourself of that way you have of asking questions with an eager look in your eyes, as if you really cared for what the answer was to be. You will grow commonplace, and learn to talk languidly about nothings like the rest of the world, and so perhaps get rid of some of the pretty dimples and glows and smiles that now make it worth people's while to go on looking after the first surprise of you is over."

"You put it in a very flattering way, but I see even you think me an oddity," said Elsie.

"It is a sort of oddity one easily learns to put up with."

"Ah, you are kind; but I am afraid the Miss Lutridges don't find it easy. You laugh at my quoting them, but you don't know what they have been to me. How, ever since I can remember anything, I have longed and longed for them to make friends with me, and felt that I should think so much better of myself if they would acknowledge me for a young girl like themselves. When we were all children together, I used to be invited now and then to spend a day at Laurel House. Grandmamma and I always had a struggle with Aunt Margaret before we could persuade her to let the invitation be accepted. When leave was given, how I longed for the day to come! and when it came, how forlorn and wretched I used to feel in that school-room of theirs while they talked over their school companions and amusements, with just a condescending word of explanation to me now and then, that somehow made me feel more left out than entire neglect would have done. Even while I was longing for their notice I felt they were right, and that I should be quite out of place in the bustling wide-awake school world they described."

"Such conduct was natural enough in vulgar school-girls, but surely they behave better now."

"Since we have been grown up I have only gone to Laurel House once or twice when they have had evening parties, and I can't say I have found it any pleasanter. I don't think the girls mean to be unkind, but they take it for granted that I am ashamed of my plain dress, and wish to keep in the background; and when any compassionate person seeks me out in my corner and begins a conversation, they look astounded, as if some wonderful thing had happened, or I had been misbehaving somehow. You can't imagine how uncomfortable and puzzling it is."

"Not the least in the world puzzling. The compassionate persons are gentlemen of course. I can quite imagine how the twelve green eyes shoot evil fire at you for not hanging your flower head low enough to escape notice. They will be more surprised still some day."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind; I want to ask you a question. You said your Aunt Margaret could be very angry. Do you mean that she has ever been angry with you?"

"Yes, sometimes, when I used to give way to fits of passion as a child; and once not very long ago, when I came home in great wrath from Laurel House, and was silly enough to console myself for the treatment I had received there, by repeating something our old servant Crawford had once said about the Lutridges being upstarts, and ourselves come of a real good old family. I don't know why the stupid boast annoyed Aunt Margaret so much, but if you could have seen her face when I repeated it. You must not

suppose that very angry with Aunt Margaret means violent. She did not say much, but the few words she spoke gave me the impression that her very soul was shaken by the agony of anxiety she felt to tear away from me at once and for ever the shred of pride I was trying to deck myself with. Her look that day gave my self-opinion another dash down to the ground. I expect I must naturally be very vain, or I should not remember my falls so vividly, and feel so bruised and sore after them."

"Poor little flower head," said Cecil; "I don't think it ought ever to have had anything but the softest wind and the gentlest rain to bend it. I don't understand your Aunt Margaret; but she has such a grand face I can't help believing she has good reasons for all she does. Perhaps she has seen some very great misfortune brought about by pride, and thinks it her duty to take extra care to keep you humble. My father thinks too much suppression as injurious as too much praise. We will conclude that you have had enough snubbing now to last for your life, and that the time has come for you to emerge from the shade and unfold all your delicate petals in the sunshine."

"It is you who have brought the sunshine then," said Elsie; "and it looks wonderfully bright. That was what I was thinking about when you spoke just now."

"I! well, yes, I believe I have something to do with it for the present," said Cecil, smiling.

"You and Miss Berry and every one who has been kind about my coming here," Elsie continued, with a conscious effort to speak the whole truth.

"I know how thoughtful you were for me before I came."

"Other people had thoughts as well as I," said Cecil. "That sliding bookcase filled with German books, from which you took the 'Flegel Jahre' for example, I should not have had the face to send it and its contents as a present to Miss Berry—who does not understand a word of German, and has a secret horror of German literature as something dangerous and explosive—if my cousin Stephen had not insisted vehemently that it was the fittest ornament for her drawing-room he could select. How far his judgment was warped by his having discovered that you read German I can't undertake to say. You know it was a volume of Tieck you left under the yew-tree that night. He seems to have managed to pick out all your favourites."

"It is wonderful that any one should take so much trouble for me," said Elsie, turning to the window again.

Cecil watched the glow deepening on her face as she looked away, and said to herself:

"There now, am I not disinterested? I am sawing away at the plank of my own importance as hard as I can. When it is quite cut through, how far shall I fall? They both like me disinterestedly on my own account; I know that. But all the grand halo I wear now is not mine. By and by I shall not be needed. I shall shrink to my proper dimensions in people's estimation, and find out what my exact place is. Ah, she is really looking out into the street now. Stephen said something about coming in here before tea; it is



time to expect him. She sees that I am observing her, and wakes up out of her dream."

"Do you know, I think we have been idling in the window-seat long enough," Elsie said. "Miss Berry's servant and tyrant Caroline has gone to bed with a severe temper-ache, and I have undertaken to bring in the tea-tray and make the toast. It is time I went to the kitchen to look after the fire."

"Let me go with you," cried Cecil. "The highest ambition I have in the world is to do something in a kitchen; and when I attempt to effect an entrance into ours at home, the cook charges me with arms akimbo, and puts me to ignominious flight up the stairs again."

"It is the most picturesque place in the whole house," Cecil pronounced, after tripping round the kitchen, as she perched herself on a corner of the spotless white dresser, and divided her attention between watching Elsie's proceedings with the tea-tray, and examining the various utensils that depended from the shelves above her head.

"Spices! how deliciously they smell! What a complicated machine a spice-box is, to be sure; I shall never get the divisions screwed right again. Oh, the flour dredger! I must use it a little. What nice soft white flakes come out all over the board! I wish you could think of something for me to do with the flour. It is very ignominious to come into a kitchen merely to put out cups and cut bread. Flower Aspect, could not you put on an apron, and make a pudding as Ruth Pinch did? I forgot to mention it before when we were talking of heroines, but I do think that the one I most like to contemplate is Ruth Pinch, just as

she is flouring the basin for her pudding. I envy her that glorious picturesque pudding; don't you?"

"I envy her for having a brother to make a pudding for, perhaps," said Elsie.

"Yes, and a lover coming in just at the right moment; you must allow there is something in that."

"But I don't think it was at the right moment. I have had too much experience in pudding-making to believe in its picturesqueness. Her hands would have been sticky, and her hair floury. I can't understand John Westlock's falling in love with her just then."

"Oh, but I can; and what is more, I understand the man in the 'Bothie of Tober na Buolich,' who could not feel any admiration for the ball-room young ladies, and was conquered at once by a girl turning up potatoes with a pitchfork; and Werter, too, with his Charlotte cutting bread and butter. That is the style of falling in love I do understand. Don't you remember that man in the 'Bothie,' and what he says about conventionalities being such a barrier against love, and about the pleasure of labouring together. Stephen was reading it aloud to us the other day."

"Yes, but I don't think I agreed with him," said Elsie hesitatingly.

"I must descend from my elevation and come nearer to you. This is a difference of opinion we must talk out thoroughly. Give me another slice of bread and a toasting-fork, and let me kneel by you. We have discussed all manner of subjects since you came, and this one, which girls are generally supposed to think of so much, has never come into our talk yet. Now will be a good time for it; for if our cheeks do

get red, there is the fire and the toasting to lay the blame on."

"My cheeks will not get red," said Elsie; "I have really nothing to say, except that I don't like quite such literal ugly things to be mixed up with the beginning of it. I have never seen, or even heard any one tell an actual life love-story; but in books I confess I like a little romance to be thrown round it still. If it is a real solemn thing, that is to last for ever, and be so much in one's life, it ought to have a beautiful beginning. Would not one rather be remembered by one's husband all his life, like the 'Gardener's daughter,' than like Ruth Pinch with her pudding basin?"

"No," said Cecil, "not for me. The picture is ever so much prettier, but I don't think the reality would be so good. One can't be always standing among roses, with the light and shade falling exactly in the right places, and I think I had rather not owe so much to adventitious circumstances even at the very first. The thing is for a person to like one in one's commonplace, everyday ways; to like the ways just because they are yours, having sense enough all the time to acknowledge that other people's may be better. I should not care for misunderstanding love; the sort of love that casts a halo, and does not see the true object at all. What good would it do me for a man to fall in love with his own fancy and say I was it? If any one will ever undertake to know me almost as well as I know myself, and say, 'There now, you are what I want, I know all the ins and outs and quirks and turns of you, and I like you inside and out;' then—well, I should call that something. I don't

want to be worshipped, I only want to be really known and made the best of."

"I suppose you consider yourself humble and reasonable for saying that!" exclaimed Elsie. "To me it seems—don't be angry with me—such immense self-confidence. It is very natural in you perhaps, but I could never say what you have said. I wish every one I come near to throw some sort of halo round me, and to let me hide myself in it. If any one I cared for should ever imagine anything very good about me, I think I might in time grow into becoming what my lover thought me. I should feel myself worth all that to him, and to believe it would, I fancy, almost make me over again. Now that is my idea of love and what it ought to do for one, and that is why I like the halo kind the best."

"Ah, there is something in what you say. I see that side of it now," said Cecil. "I suppose I am self-confident and you are humble. There's the root of our difference of opinion."

"Oh no, no, it is not conceited in you to have confidence in yourself; you really are not such a goose as I am; and besides——"

"Well, what besides?"

"Were not you speaking from experience? You must not think me impertinent, but the sort of perfect understanding you described, is it not exactly like you and your cousin?"

"Flower Aspect! Flower Aspect! I will not contradict you for calling yourself a goose, or a mole, or a bat, or all the blindest things in the world together, if you really think what you are saying. No, there is not the least likeness between Steenie's friendship for me and

what we are talking about. I mayn't want to be made a heroine of, but I am not quite reasonable enough to be satisfied with the cool critical estimation I get in that quarter. I shall expect to be first with my lover, if I ever have one, at all events. Come, tell me who put that notion into your head."

"Miss Berry said something about your being engaged soon after you came to Oldbury, and Grand-mamma and Aunt Margaret both repeated it to me before I came here."

"And you have believed it since you have been here?"

"Why should not I? I did not feel quite sure," said Elsie, finding just then either the fire or Cecil's eyes very trying to her complexion.

The two girls were silent for some time after this, and sat with faces averted from each other, diligently toasting their slices of bread before the fire. Cecil was glad she had had an opportunity of explaining away Elsie's strange misconception; but she felt somewhat disturbed by the unexpected turn the conversation had taken. In describing her ideal of what love should be to her, had she really given such a true picture of the dear old pleasant bright relationship between herself and Stephen, that Elsie could not help recognising it? She had certainly never mistaken their friendship for anything but just what it was. Yet, after all, could any fresh feeling that might come to her in the future ever be as much to her as that friendship had long been? "Well," she said to herself, "there is no use in puzzling oneself about what is to come." She drew her hand across her forehead to

push disagreeable thoughts away, and woke up from her reverie.

"I will tell you something, Flower Aspect," she exclaimed. "We have both burned our pieces of bread to cinders. Miss Berry has small chance of finding anything eatable on the tea-table, and we shall neither of us win hearts on the score of our useful qualities at this rate. What an opportunity we have lost! Just glance out of the window; here are Mr. Stephen Pierrepont and Mr. Richard Lutridge wending their way to this house from opposite quarters of the town. I suppose Caroline won't condescend to come downstairs to open the door for them; shall we let them knock till they are tired, or give up our toasting forks and edify all Oldbury by-acting housemaids together?"

"I think we will let them knock at the door till they are tired," said Elsie, putting up her scorched hands to her glowing cheeks. "I should not like to go to the door just now, and we really ought to get Miss Berry's tea ready."

"Well, they will tire all the sooner for there being two of them. Each will be consoled for his own disappointment by witnessing the discomfiture of the other. They have actually given it up already. Faint hearts! It is all very well for you to take up your loaf and begin composedly cutting fresh slices of bread—you won't suffer for it; but think what a cross face I shall have opposite me at the Rectory dinner-table all this evening."

## CHAPTER XIX.

## Miss Berry's Diplomacy.

MISS BERRY was not in quite her usual spirits when she returned home. She was very silent during tea-time, and sat with her head turned towards the window, keeping a nervous watch on the door-step, as if she were in momentary dread of some enemy effecting an entrance into the house. When the tea-tray was removed, and Elsie had wheeled her chair into the window-recess, and furnished her with her knitting, she recovered her equanimity sufficiently to be able to open out the subject of her uneasiness to her young companion—reaching it, however, through a more than usually zigzag path of preliminary talk.

“My dear,” she began, “I am sure I hope I am not beginning to have what dear Mrs. Lutridge calls latitudinarian views. Mr. Pierrepont said the other day that latitudinarianism was one of the crying sins of the day, and Mrs. Lutridge has no doubt about its being a frog—one of the frogs that are to come out of the mouth of the beast. Latitudinarianism—I am not sure that I pronounce the word rightly, but I know it means ‘making excuses,’ and I am afraid sometimes that I am a good deal too apt to fall into that snare myself. You will be shocked to hear it, but just now I have been thinking that there is more excuse than one would at first suppose for Roman Catholics and very High Church people going to con-

fession and wishing to place themselves, as Miss Ursula Lutridge says she has done, under spiritual direction. If such a thing is possible, it must be a great comfort. Dear! dear! dear! if only one could find some one who would tell one exactly what one ought to do, and who would stick to the same advice consistently, without turning round upon one when things go wrong and saying exactly the contrary to what was said before, what a much more comfortable thing life would be than it is now!"

"Do you think so?" said Elsie. "But perhaps it would not be fair to throw all the trouble of one's life on anybody else, unless," she added, hesitatingly—"unless it were some one who loved one well enough to want to take it."

"My dear, I know well enough that it might not be right. The misery of having to decide for oneself is no doubt part of one's earthly discipline; and if only one is mercifully kept from injuring other people by one's mistakes, the misconstructions and harsh judgments that come upon one must be borne patiently."

"Who has been speaking harshly of you, dear Miss Berry? I saw something had grieved you directly you came in," Elsie said soothingly.

"Oh, my dear, I really did not mean to complain. I said to myself while I was taking my tea, 'There—I will not mention a word; I will be dumb on the subject to every one. I am acting for the best, and if anything should arise among all these young people, it is not my place to interfere.' I resolved to forget all that had passed between myself and Mrs. Lutridge this afternoon; but, my dear, there are some words



that, applied to oneself, do give a pain one can't get over all at once; and then, too, while we were talking, something happened that almost seemed to warrant—Mrs. Lutridge had walked all the way from my district with me, and we were turning into the High Street when she made use of the expression that so weighs on my mind—'Match-maker!' I exclaimed—I could not help repeating her word; and at that very moment we came in sight of this house, and whom should we see there but Mr. Richard Lutridge himself, in, I am sure, his very best clothes, and white hat, and cane and all, coming down the steps from my door. My dear, I really thought I should have dropped on the pavement. The look Mrs. Lutridge gave me! and Mr. Richard, when he caught sight of her, hurried across the road and passed us on the other side of the street, swinging his cane about, and putting on a defiant, sullen kind of look that must, I am afraid, have hurt his mother's feelings very severely, especially as he had declined to accompany her to a missionary meeting this evening on the plea that he had business that would detain him at the bank to a late hour."

"But still," said Elsie, "I don't see——"

"No, my dear, and very thankful I was, when I came in, to find you had not seen him. It was extremely prudent and self-denying on your part, and I hope it will come to Mrs. Lutridge's ears, and soften her heart towards us both. Still, it does make me nervous to think that young man may still be prowling about. I may as well confess it to you at once, my dear; I have made a sort of promise to his mother not to encourage—though really how I am to set about dis-

couraging—in fact, it was just that set me wishing for a director, whose advice I might follow without fear of being reproached with it afterwards. I make allowances for Mrs. Lutridge—an only son—and such high expectations as she has naturally formed for him; but I do think she might remember that, when Stephen Pierrepont first came back to Oldbury, before we heard of his engagement to his cousin, she did speak strongly to me about the duty of hospitality, and seemed to imply that I should be doing a good work in promoting intercourse between her young people and the party at the Rectory.”

“Then it is because I am with you that she dislikes her son to come here now,” said Elsie; “but what harm does she think I can possibly do him?”

Even Miss Berry smiled with a sense of amusement as she glanced at Elsie’s beautiful face turned towards her with a deprecating, anxious expression on it.

“As to harm, my dear, you have lived so much alone you don’t know the sort of gossip; however, in moderation, I don’t suppose even Mrs. Lutridge would object; but you see you have only been here about ten days, and Caroline complained to me this morning, that since you came she had had to leave her work to open the door for Mr. Lutridge fifteen times, and he never used to call here, not once in a year.”

“I am sure his visits are not worth Caroline’s trouble in opening the door,” said Elsie, laughing; “he sits sucking the knob of his cane, and staring at us for ten minutes at a time, and then gets up to go away. I have often wondered why he came; I thought

perhaps he had always had a habit of inflicting himself on you two or three times a day. If it is he who is weighing on Caroline's temper, I wish we could devise some measure for keeping him out of the house."

"My dear, you take a great weight off my mind if you are quite sincere in what you say," cried Miss Berry, sitting upright in her chair and looking herself again. "I have been very anxious, not selfishly, I trust, but I feel that a double responsibility is laid upon me. I am responsible to your good aunt and grandmother for your safe keeping; and if anything had arisen between you and Mr. Richard, I should have felt bound to let them know that since the day when he stole a dish of apples from my sideboard, and tried to lay the blame on Steenie Pierrepoint, I have never been able to think quite as well of his disposition as I could wish."

"You need not be afraid of my thinking too well of his disposition," said Elsie; "I have still such a vivid recollection of the frights he used to give me when I was a child, by setting his dog at me whenever I was alone in our garden, that I can hardly help running away and hiding whenever I see him coming now."

"But, my dear, don't let us be uncharitable," said Miss Berry, relapsing into her usual optimism now her fears were allayed. "I dare say he is very much improved. I don't suppose there ever was a young man who had more good advice showered upon him, in season and out of season, for dear Mrs. Lutridge is instant if ever any one was. No doubt her labours have been blessed. We will not judge him by what he

was as a boy; it really seems natural to boys to be cruel."

"Do you think so?" asked Elsie doubtfully.

"Well, perhaps there are exceptions. I believe you and I are thinking of the same person at this moment, my dear. To be sure, Stephen Pierrepoint was a very different kind of boy. He had a great many faults—it was terrible how disrespectful he used to be to dear Mrs. Lutridge; he was far oftener in disgrace than Richard, and kept me, I am sure I may say, in continual hot water, wondering what extraordinary trick he would take it into his head to play next. Yet he always was a favourite of mine; and now, in spite of that way he has of making out that he never does anything except for his own amusement, you would be surprised if you knew how many people there are in this town besides myself who could tell of thoughtful kindnesses they owe to him. I see by the colour in your face, my dear, that you are pleased, and I am not surprised, it is so very gratifying to hear anything good of a person one has known all one's life."

"Yes, very," said Elsie, and she stole her hand gently into Miss Berry's as she spoke, and began to smooth the bony wrinkled fingers, a good deal roughened with various kinds of work, with her soft velvety touch.

"My dear, there is a knock at the door!" exclaimed Miss Berry nervously. "What shall we do? Should you object to putting your head close to the window and just finding out whether it is Mr. Richard Lutridge or not, before we commit ourselves by opening the door?"

"It is not Mr. Lutridge's knock," said Elsie. "It is—some one from the Rectory."

"It must be Steenie Pierrepont then. Dear me, he is going on knocking; he will bring the door down. Mrs. Bolton will say I have parties every night of the week. I must run at once; and if it turns out that Richard Lutridge is lurking about, and should manage to get in before I can stop him, would you mind just running upstairs to your room and staying there till he has gone? Mrs. Lutridge could not call that conduct encouraging on your part, and it would be such a relief to my mind."

"I thought Miss Blake must have pricked her hand with a spindle in an upstairs room, and that you had all fallen asleep," Elsie heard Steenie say to Miss Berry in the hall; but as they entered together her shrill tones predominated.

"My dear, it is only Mr. Stephen Pierrepont, no one else, you need not run away. I looked out at the door, and the coast was quite clear. I think we may venture to draw down the blinds and light the lamp now without any danger of being surprised."

The lamp was one of the new luxuries that Stephen and Cecil had manœuvred into the house, and Stephen had taken unfair advantage of Miss Berry's regard for it, to establish a custom of coming in every evening to light it himself.

"I think I do understand how to manage the glass and everything now, my dear," Miss Berry said after each lesson.

For the last two or three nights Steenie had pre-faced his demure answer, about its being as well to

be quite perfect before one left off learning, with a quick, playful, understanding glance towards Elsie.

It had been very strange to her the first time that one of those sudden, amused flashes from Steenie's eyes had taken her into partnership in his enjoyment of some oddity of Miss Berry's, or some characteristic speech of Cecil's. She was getting accustomed to his constant silent reference of everything to her, and had given up fighting against the conviction, which would grow stronger every time she was in his company, that, let him be talking or listening to whom he would, it was her opinion of what was said that was in his thoughts all the time.

The process of lighting the lamp had a tendency to lengthen out in Stephen's hands each time it was repeated. Miss Berry had once or twice had time for a comfortable nap, while the final adjustments of wick and glasses were in progress, and Elsie and Stephen stood opposite each other at the table talking in low tones over their work.

"My dears," she would generally exclaim as she started wide awake from a neck-dislocating nod, "you need not whisper, I am not asleep; and if you will only speak loud enough for me to hear, I am sure I shall be interested in what you are saying to each other, unless indeed it is German, which is a language I never profess to understand, and indeed do not exactly approve of."

Apparently it usually was German, for though Stephen always rushed into a loud-voiced conversation at once, he never referred to anything that had been said before, and the subject he introduced always seemed quite as fresh to Elsie, when she joined in the

talk after awhile, as to Miss Berry. To-night Miss Berry was too much disturbed in her mind to indulge in her usual forty winks. She made a great show of giving undivided attention to the lamp-lighting business, and would not allow herself to be puzzled by any of Steenie's mystifications.

"My dear," she said decidedly, "I mayn't understand about a vacuum, but I do see exactly how that handle is turned round; and the thought of your dear father being deprived of your company every evening for so many hours, weighs on my conscience to that degree——"

"That you actually meditate forbidding me to come to your house of an evening, Elderberry. Has it come to that between us?"

"My dear Steenie, you really have such an uncomfortable way of putting things. You know very well that if I only considered myself I would not say a word, though Caroline does object to the constant tramping in the hall, and has had one of her worst rigid fits in consequence, as Elsie Blake can tell you, for we had almost to carry her to bed between us. Yet, indeed, I would not have spoken——"

"No, no, I understand," interrupted Stephen; "you would not have thrown me over for Caroline. It is your stronger tyrant that demands the sacrifice; I marked the colloquy; I saw the terrific Gorgon brows lowering; I observed that you weakly quailed beneath her threats. Oh, Elderberry, Elderberry! I did not think you were so base! So often as I have stood by you! Did I not cook your clothing-club accounts, when you had weakly let yourself be persuaded into giving sixpenny bonuses where Mrs. Lutridge had de-

creed threepenny pieces? At the school feast did I not stand over the children to whom you had slyly given a second allowance of cake, and force them to swallow their portions to the last crumb while Mrs. Lutridge's back was turned, lest your iniquity should come to light; and are you to give me up at the first word? Now listen, I refuse to allow you to burden your conscience with such remorse as you will feel if you give me up to our mutual enemy just now. You may order me out of the house as often as you please; I shall regard your future peace of mind, and come in every evening all the same."

"Do you mean that you really would?" said Elsie, laughing.

"Yes, really," said Steenie, crossing his arms on the back of the prie-dieu chair from which he had just risen, and letting his laughing eyes rest on her face till the playfulness in them died out in a look of earnest admiration, under which Elsie's eyes fell.

"My dear," said Miss Berry, collecting her bewildered faculties just as the other two were unaccountably and silently drifting into forgetfulness of what had been last said, "you are a great deal too ready to fancy that Mrs. Lutridge is always thinking about you. She and I certainly did talk together for some time at the corner of the street, and you may have seen that I was agitated, but it had nothing to do with you. No one would think any harm of your coming in here for an hour or so of an evening if your example did not encourage others to do the same. One makes allowance for a mother's anxiety; — and really, Steenie, I think you might feel a little for the perplexity I am in, and not lean on that chair laughing,



as if you did not care in the least whether you broke it to pieces or not. It is one of the old ones, and very cranky."

"I think you ought to be obliged to me for not crying, after the severe snub you have given to my self-importance," said Steenie, whose laugh had had a sound of relief in it that rather surprised Elsie. "So that is what you are at! But you don't suppose I shall submit to be banished to keep Dick Lutridge in countenance. No, no; fight your own battles with him, Elderberry. You won't get any such help from me, I can tell you."

"My dear, I am quite aware that I am not a person of good judgment, and if it were not that so much is being said in the town just now about the ladies of the district church going to confession, and troubling their clergyman about every little thing, I should just slip on my bonnet and go back to the Rectory with you, and ask your father (I see he is alone in his study to-night) to give me some plain rules for guiding my household, now that so many young people are making it a place for meeting together."

"Dear Miss Berry, I see how inconsiderate we have all been!" exclaimed Elsie with crimsoning cheeks. "You have been intruded upon, and your comfort spoiled—it must not go on!"

"What are you aiming at, Elderberry? Is this the subtlety of the serpent instead of the harmlessness of the dove?" cried Steenie, colouring too, and laughing a little nervously.

The two remarks came together, and Miss Berry did not give either a direct answer.

"My dear Elsie, would you be so good as to run upstairs to my room, and search in my work-drawer for another skein of crimson wool? You see, I have just come to the end of my ball."

Elsie fled gladly; and, as the door closed behind her, Miss Berry came nearer Stephen and placed her hand on his arm. A pretty pink flush rose to her soft wrinkled cheeks as she spoke. "My dear, I hope I am not taking too much on myself in what I am going to ask you, it is very embarrassing, and I am sure I don't wish to think any evil. But do you think, engaged as you are to Miss Russel, that it is quite right of you to come here every evening and stay so long, and talk all this German with Elsie Blake? I am sure you would not willingly mislead any one, or trifle with any one's feelings, so I only just put it to you—is it quite right?"

"As wrong as possible; very rascally conduct indeed," said Steenie quietly, "if I were engaged to Miss Russel; but then, you see, I am not. Does not that somewhat alter the case?"

Miss Berry reseated herself in her arm-chair. "My dear, but this is a very startling assertion," she said. "Are you sure that you are not mistaken? Mrs. Lutridge told me her own self, and repeated it again to-day, that she has not a doubt about your being engaged, or as good as engaged, to Cecil Russel."

"Just on this one point, don't you think I may be better informed than Mrs. Lutridge? I am not engaged to Cecil Russel."

"But you are very fond of her, and you have known her all your life."

"Certainly. And I am very fond of you, and I have known you all my life."

"But everybody in Oldbury expects it. And it would so exactly have suited your father."

"It would not have exactly suited me; and neither Cecil nor I are people to marry because Oldbury expects it of us. My dear Elderberry, it won't do. Thrust that notion out of your head without further parley with it. See now, I am driven into making a confidant of you. I did not know I was profiting by a false impression, but now it is removed: you must not treat me as you have planned in your own mind to treat Richard Lutridge. I don't ask any partisanship from you, only that you will not manœuvre me out of your house while she is here. I shall get savage, and be driven to underhand ways if you do. I give you fair warning."

"But your father?"

"Leave me to manage my father myself. It will be all right, if officious friends don't interfere between us. Why should it not be right? He has too much affection for me to thwart me without reason in a matter that concerns the happiness of my life. You think well enough of him to believe that, don't you?"

"The happiness of your life? But, my dear Steenie, that is saying a great deal. You have known very little of Elsie Blake till within the last ten days. You can't have got to care so very much for her in such a short time."

"Well, I suppose I shall not succeed in making you believe anything else, but that is not precisely my own view of the case. If I were to talk till midnight, I could not make you understand what it is to me,

or how long it has been nearly all I cared for. Do you remember my sending you that list of college honours? Well, I sent it for the chance, just for the chance, of her seeing it. I had worked for that. I thought more of that one possibility than of all the other congratulations I received. Come, Elderberry, you are romantic at the bottom, as all good women are; you mean to stand my friend so far as keeping my secret goes, and letting me have a chance of teaching her to care for me while she is here. You know I can't get even that when she has gone back to her own home."

"My dear Steenie, I wish you would not go on talking so fast, you keep my head in a whirl. It is all very embarrassing. I certainly do wish it was Miss Russel you were attached to."

"But then you see it is not, and I am afraid I cannot change even to accommodate you. There is no use going back to that idea. Elderberry, I am making a mistake in letting you fancy you have so much in your power. You can forbid my coming to your house, and of course I shall obey you, but you are not a very vigilant guardian. I shall find other opportunities of meeting her. You had better not make it a war of wits between us."

"Only I have a conviction, my dear, that when you come to think it all over calmly, and consider what a difficult position I am in, you will not choose to act against my wishes. Your good feeling will not allow you to do so. It might, to be sure, have an awkward appearance if you suddenly left off coming to this house; but you know your dear good father was urging you only the other day to pay a visit to

some friends of yours who have lately come to live at Connington. I heard him speak about it my own self. It seems a way of escape from our difficulties mercifully provided; and you must not be angry with me for begging you to go away for a few days, just till Elsie Blake's friends return to Oldbury. It is not as if I were a superior person, like dear Mrs. Lutridge, who could trust her own judgment on all occasions. I am so foolish, and so unfit for responsibility, that I am really obliged to ask you not to make my charge too heavy for me to bear."

There was a few minutes' silence.

"I begin to think you have the most subtle Machiavellian intellect of anybody in Oldbury!" Stephen exclaimed at last, in an aggravated tone. "It's the most horrible tyranny in the world you are exercising over me; putting your weakness forward as a shield that you know I can't knock over. It's a great deal too bad. I have been vowing all day that nothing should induce me to go to Connington while Elsie Blake was in your house. Come, we will make a bargain. If I go to Connington for a week to satisfy your scruples, you must give me one chance, just one, of seeing her while I am there. It shall not be in your house, and the whole town may know of it; and you may consult Mr. and Mrs. Blake if you like. You have heard us talk of the fête that is to be given at Connington when my pupil Walter Neale comes of age. I have leave to invite all Oldbury to it if I like. You must promise to come to Connington that day and bring her. Among so many people even your conscience cannot imagine an objection to our meeting. Promise this. It is a bargain, is it not?" Stephen

stretched out his hand. "Come, you must allow it is very good of me to consent to go away. If you could but understand how I hate the idea—what a sacrifice it is. There, don't you hear her coming down-stairs? I do. You have not time to get up another scruple. Promise to bring her to Connington."

"I am sure I hope I shall not be doing very wrong," Miss Berry said, and Elsie opened the door and entered just as their hands were clasped to seal the bargain. She wondered what they could have been shaking hands about, and felt somewhat disconcerted and a little hurt at the notion that they had manœuvred her out of the room in order that they might have a private conversation perhaps about her.

The rest of the evening passed very uncomfortably. Stephen stayed another hour, though Miss Berry kept giving him little hints to go, and showed distinctly enough that she was in no mood to enjoy his company. She let her knitting drop from her fingers, and every now and then interrupted herself in the middle of a sentence to turn round and stare with a bewildered air at Elsie, as if some extraordinary change had passed over her while she was out of the room, or as if her own eyes had been opened to see something in her they had never perceived before. Embarrassed by her scrutiny Elsie sat demurely winding worsted at the work-table behind the door, and resisted all Stephen's attempts to draw her into conversation.

By and by a chance remark revealed to Elsie that Stephen was thinking of leaving Oldbury for a whole week, the last week of her visit, every day of which she had been reckoning on and trying to lengthen out in her thoughts, as an indefinite period

beyond which she need not look. He was going to throw away the whole week as if it were nothing. Well, of course, it was nothing to him. He had plenty of pleasant weeks to do as he liked with, and was going to spend this, no doubt, with friends he preferred very much to any one in Oldbury.

Elsie was glad that the skein of red worsted proved very full of complicated knots. Her difficulties with it accounted for her silence, and for her having to stoop her head close over her work, and wink away some moisture that staring at the tangles so persistently brought into her eyes.

At last, when Miss Berry's patience was nearly worn out, and there had been a dead silence in the room for at least ten minutes, Stephen jumped up suddenly, walked across the room, and wished Elsie good-night. He said something about hoping to see her at Connington in a day or two, but Elsie did not choose to ask any questions; if he really cared to see her, he would stay in Oldbury. She held out her hand with the worsted ball in it for him to shake, and the next minute he was gone, and she wondered how it had all passed so quickly.

Miss Berry was provokingly alert and talkative when she returned from shutting the hall-door.

"My dear, I thought he never would go," she said; "I was so relieved when he got up at last, for I really hardly could keep my eyes open. I suppose he liked sitting there watching you wind that skein of red worsted. Dear, dear, how extraordinary young people are, when we might all have been in our beds an hour ago! It is a comfort to know that we shall not have the same kind of thing another evening."





## CHAPTER XX.

## Summer Rain.

STEPHEN PIERREPOINT took his departure early next morning, and Miss Berry allowed herself to stand at the window to watch him drive off from the Rectory door.

"It is the basket pony-chaise they have brought round," she informed Elsie. "The servant is putting his luggage in the back seat. He is going to drive himself to Connington. The relatives of a college friend of his have quite lately bought the place, and gone to live at the old Hall there, which has been empty so long. Neale is the name. There was a Miss Connington, an heiress, who married a Mr. Neale a long time ago. I remember hearing of the marriage, though the Conningtons were thoroughly county people, and had nothing to do with Oldbury. Ah, there's the Rector himself come out on the door-step to see his son drive off! He looks extremely well, and in good spirits this morning. He is rubbing his hands just as any of us might do if we were particularly pleased about anything. As for Steenie, so far as one can judge by his face——; but if young people will sit up unreasonably late over night, one can't wonder at their looking a little pale and out of sorts in the morning. He is glancing up at our house, my dear; if you would like to stand quite behind me, and take a peep at the carriage, I don't think there would be

any harm. The boy who sits behind is Caroline's second cousin. I got him the place myself; and I have no doubt it would gratify you to see how well he looks in his new livery."

Elsie resisted the temptation of looking at Caroline's second cousin, and went on diligently copying a water-colour sketch Cecil had lent her, though Miss Berry could not compliment her on the progress she had made, when she came and looked over her shoulder an hour afterwards.

It began to rain before twelve o'clock, and went on raining all the rest of the day. Miss Berry spent a good deal of time at the window, calculating how thoroughly wet a person must get in driving from Oldbury to Connington in such weather. Caroline celebrated her triumph over intruders, by putting on a pair of high pattens, and walking in them up and down stairs, and in and out of the wet yard continually all through the afternoon, filling the house with gusts of wet wind as she came and went, and making the click-clack of her restless feet audible everywhere.

"I did venture to say a word about her staying in bed all yesterday," Miss Berry acknowledged penitently; "and so she has just put on her pattens, and I suppose she will walk about in them till bed-time. My dear, we must bear it. Every one has his faults; and though you would not think it from her behaviour, Caroline is truly attached to me, and would not leave me when Mrs. Lutridge herself offered her better wages than I can afford, to go and live with her on the hill."

In the afternoon there came a knock at the door;

but it was only Mrs. Lutridge's servant bringing a letter and parcel. Miss Berry's face flushed a little uncomfortably as she read.

"My dear, this is one of Mrs. Lutridge's kind, or rather, I should say, faithful letters. 'I have always dealt faithfully with you,' she writes; and certainly I must do her the justice to say that she never does fail to tell me anything disagreeable that she thinks it better for me to know. She has sent us some profitable reading to occupy our afternoons, that we may have no excuse in future for encouraging the visits of idle young men. This thick volume is, I see, a memoir of Mrs. Hawkes, the wife of an excellent Baptist minister. It has a preface by her husband, dedicated to his second wife. My dear, as you don't seem to be getting on with your drawing, would you mind reading a little of it aloud to me at once? I daresay we both want it. We have, perhaps, been a little too happy lately, and have let ourselves be carried away by all the pleasant society we have had. This seems just the kind of work to bring one down to what dear Mrs. Lutridge would call a properly serious frame."

Elsie took the book and read industriously for an hour or so. The words flowed in right order from her lips; but she would have fared badly if Mrs. Lutridge had come in and cross-questioned her on Mrs. Hawkes' history. When Miss Berry was fairly sent to sleep at last, she climbed on to the window-seat, rubbed the dew from the panes, and looked across the road into the Rectory sitting-room, where a low burning fire shone like a beacon across the wet dimness of the street. She fancied she was really very sad as she watched the rain-drops chasing each other down the

window-panes, and caught glimpses of Cecil's shadow on the wall of the opposite house. She made a sort of play-tragedy of contrasting this evening with previous ones, putting it to herself as if she really believed that the sunshine would never come back to her again, nor the smiles on the faces of friends she chose to think had turned away from her. And all the time there dwelt at the bottom of her heart a strange, sweet, fearful certainty of a swift, coming joy, too dazzling to be looked at, which she thought it best to thrust out of sight, and keep at bay with shadows of imaginary sorrow. In after times she often looked back with a sort of envy of herself, as the recollection rose of that dim, dreary, pleasant, nonsensically sad afternoon.

In spite of foreboding, sunshine came back the next day, and very little progress was made in Mrs. Hawkes' Memoirs during the remaining days of Elsie's visit. Cecil set herself decidedly against the reading, and made a point of rushing in with a letter from Connington, or some exciting news about the festivities in preparation there, just as Elsie got out the book to begin.

Even Mrs. Lutridge recovered her good-humour, and condescended to show a certain grim approbation of Elsie when she met her on Sunday morning in the Rectory garden, where it was an Oldbury custom for some of the most favoured of the congregation to repair between services, to pace up and down the gravel walks, and enjoy the privilege of complimenting the Rector on his morning's sermon.

Elsie had never made one of the privileged procession before; and she was a good deal surprised

when Mrs. Lutridge claimed her as her companion, and made her walk in state under the lime-trees among the magnates of the town, while the humbler people scattered themselves in groups about the garden. Cecil did the honours of the great mulberry-tree in the middle of the grass plot, and offered leaves full of purple fruit to sulky Richard Lutridge, who stood swinging his cane in the sunshine, and savagely eyeing Elsie's grey dress as it flitted up and down beside Mrs. Lutridge's purple satin under the trees; and Mrs. Adams and the Miss Tomkinsons relieved their minds after the solemnity of the service by counting the overripe apricots and golden-drop plums on the kitchen garden wall, and animadverting on the wastefulness of the Rectory servants who had neglected to gather them before the rain.

Even with Mrs. Lutridge's voice buzzing in her ears, Elsie had time to think what a sunny spot the Rectory garden was, and to congratulate herself very fervently on being there, she herself actually released at last from the sentence of banishment which had seemed to come upon her one well-remembered day of her childhood, and permitted to feast her eyes on objects which some people saw every day.

Cecil Russel came up to her, and drew her aside when the other visitors were leaving the garden.

"I want to show you something," she said, leading the way to a glass door which opened on to the grass plot behind the house. "Come in."

"To the house?" said Elsie, drawing back; "but I have never been inside the Rectory in my life."

"It is time to begin then;" and as Elsie still hesitated, Cecil went in first, and drew her across the threshold,

giving her, as she entered, a quick, strange, smiling look, which somehow made Elsie's heart beat very fast.

"There, you are in. Look round and remember some day that I brought you here first. It is a dismal room enough, and wants something pretty to come in and brighten it at last."

"It looks very bright from the outside," said Elsie. "Ask Miss Berry how often she looks towards that window."

"Well, come a little this way, to the right; that is what I want to show you!"

It was a picture, before which a curtain of green silk hung. Cecil raised the curtain, and Elsie saw a full-length portrait, in a white bridal dress, with a bright, winning face, whose full blue eyes seemed to her fancy to rest considerably on her.

"You know who it is, of course," said Cecil.

"Yes," said Elsie softly; "I almost wonder you dare let me see it."

"I was told to show it you; or rather I think it was to let it—her—see you. Bring Elsie Blake into the library after church, some one said, and take her up to my mother's picture."

Cecil dropped the curtain, and the two girls stood silent for a moment, with a sort of reverent hush upon them. The sound of a bell ringing roused Elsie.

"Let me go now," she said; "though you are so kind, I feel that I ought not to be here."

"I am keeping a promise," said Cecil; "and as you are here I should like to show you another of our household gods,—this folding screen; my cousin and I made it years ago, when I spent a summer in Oldbury. We did all the drawings ourselves, and

most of them are meant for portraits of Oldbury people. That little girl with long curls and a straight nose is always you. You fill up half the screen. I used to get cross at your coming into everything. I can remember arguing vehemently that my snub-nosed face might sometimes be allowed to figure on the persons of our fairy princesses and heroines; but no, Steenie always found excellent reasons for putting you in the place of honour, and leaving me, as I am there, an insignificant little servant, in the corner. He was quite right. An artist putting us two into a picture would assign the same places to us now."

"How can you say so!" cried Elsie; "to me it seems just the contrary. You are always bright and dainty, with everything about you complete like a picture, and I look grey and dowdy—a shadow beside you."

"Your dress beside my dress, not you beside me," said Cecil, laughing. "I will tell you how it is. You are that beautifully-illuminated missal on the book-shelf in an old vellum binding, and I am this common little prayer-book,—all daubed over with crimson and gold. No one in their senses would doubt which was best worth looking at."

"I won't stay to hear you disparage yourself," cried Elsie, moving on. "Besides," she added, pausing and looking up into Cecil's face as they were crossing the garden again, "after all, our bodies are not you and me. They are only binding, too, and it is what is inside that makes the real difference."

"Perhaps," said Cecil; "but still I think it must be very pleasant to be such a well-bound soul as you are. It makes all the book such pleasant reading for every one. Good-bye,—I am coming in to-morrow to have

some more talk over the Connington fête, and settle what you are to wear on that occasion."

Miss Berry's curiosity was evidently greatly excited by Cecil's private conference with Elsie. In the long bright afternoon, when she had drawn down the window blinds to shut out intrusive sights, and settled herself with a great show of determination to study Mrs. Hawkes' memoir, her wonder came so strong upon her that she could not refrain from interrupting the reading continually with remarks that had no connexion with that worthy lady's sentiments. It was clearly her own biography and Elsie's, and not that of good Mrs. Hawkes, on which her thoughts were running.

"I don't think I ever was taken into the Rectory through the window in such a familiar way myself," she observed; "but I quite well remember one Sunday long ago when Mrs. Lutridge and her sister went in so. I think they had asked to borrow Cruden's Concordance, and Mr. Pierrepont took them into the library to look for the work—to be sure! what conclusions we all drew! and they thought a good deal of the circumstance themselves. I can see Mrs. Lutridge's face, as if it were yesterday, just as she came back into the garden, glancing round as if she were making up her mind what alterations she would advise her sister to set on foot by and by. How strange it is to look back and think of all the plans and the changes, and how one thing follows another! Children one has played with grow up, and things begin to happen to them—dear! dear! and one's own life has been going on in the same quiet way all the time."

"I should not like to think my life would always



go on very quietly," said Elsie; "I think I should like to have a very busy life, full of events and changes. I hope it will be so with me."

"Perhaps it may, my dear. That was what I was saying. Children grow up, and their independent lives begin, and sometimes one feels—I am not grumbling, for I have had a very happy life myself—but now and then one feels a little left out. I used to expect changes to come to me. Other people had them. They married, or took long journeys, or had fortunes left them, or something; and when I heard about it, I had my little hopes and plans too. I was as foolish as any other young girl once. One year my father took us all to the sea. That was a great event. My sister Louisa met the gentleman she married afterwards while we were away; and the very next spring I had a valentine on Valentine's Day. It's a foolish thing to remember, but I do remember it. I spent a great deal of time puzzling to find out who could have sent it. 'Now it is all going to begin with me as it does with other people,' I said; but, my dear, it did not begin, it stopped. I found out that it was only Letitia Lutridge who had written the verses to make fun of me. She could make fun in those days. We were never able to afford another journey. My sister married, and my father died, and I have gone on living alone in this little house in Oldbury ever since."

"It sounds very dreary," said Elsie.

"But, my love, it has not been dreary," Miss Berry answered in a brisk voice. "Why, I have had the map, and such excellent friends and neighbours—dearest Mrs. Lutridge taking, I am sure, the most dis-

interested trouble about all my concerns; and then such a privileged place as Oldbury to live in! I should be a discontented person indeed if I did not consider my lot a singularly favoured one. As for journeys and changes I shall have my share of them too in the end. There's one journey and one change that I certainly shall not be left out of; and it's enough to make one's life interesting to be sure of that. Can it be five o'clock striking already, and we have hardly advanced a page? I am afraid my tongue is, as dearest Mrs. Lutridge always says, a terrible snare to me. How I could forget the sacredness of the day so far as to refer to a valentine, and speak of hopes and thoughts which are after all so merely worldly. Let us go back to those excellent reflections of Mrs. Hawkes you were beginning to read, my love, and try to profit by them. It strikes me she must have been just such another uncompromising person as Mrs. Lutridge, and one hopes that *her* friends and neighbours did not fail to value her as she deserved."

Elsie read, and Miss Berry sat bolt upright, with a painstaking resolve to be edified written on her face, and a golden river of sunshine flowed into the room through the crevices of the blind, glanced over Elsie's bent head, and lit up the grotesque figures on the wall. Sweet scents of late mignonette and full-blown magnolia blossoms stole over the Rectory garden wall and crept round Elsie, whispering words in her ear that a good deal disturbed her understanding of Mrs. Hawkes' maxims; till at last the church bells began their summons to the Oldbury people to come to evening service;—seven sweet chimes, falling, rising, low down, up, up, to the sky, with a joyous palpitat-

ing motion, like the beating of a lark's wings, carrying Elsie's thoughts with them, up to dizzy, dazzling heights of joy and hope, and rapturous consciousness of love given and returned; and down, down, softly, harmoniously falling, plucked back by maiden humility and shyness, and a wonder whether "such thoughts," as Miss Berry had mysteriously phrased it, *were* merely worldly matters, unfit for a sacred day, or true, God-sent awakenings of the soul into fuller life, as the sunshine and the flower-scents and the music seemed to be saying to her.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

## The Neales.

THE fête at Connington, to which Miss Berry had received an invitation, was to take place on the very day before that fixed for Mr. and Mrs. Blake's return home. A few months before Elsie would have been greatly agitated at the mere thought of entering a house owned by any one of the name of Neale. Now the once absorbing thought had fallen into the background; and instead of being anxious to discover a connexion between her own unknown relations and Cecil's and Steenie's friends, she avoided asking questions or listening to talk about them, in dread of hearing something that would make it seem right for her to give up the expedition. Margaret's letters since they parted had been short and hurried, with the least possible information in them, and Elsie had felt considerable restraint in composing her answers. She had never been used to letter writing, and there was hardly anything she could say about her present mode of life that might not annoy Margaret. She had kept Cecil's and Stephen's names out of her letters hitherto; and now, though she had many misgivings about paying this visit to Connington without first asking Margaret's consent, she let the days slip by till it was too late, before she could make up her mind to enter into explanations that would be difficult to her.

Cecil had several secret conferences with Miss

Berry on the day before the fête; and when Elsie returned to her room after their evening walk, her eyes fell on some articles of dress spread out on her bed that looked very unlike any of her own belongings,—a light silk dress, of a pretty rosebud pattern, a white lace mantle, and a shady hat trimmed with rosebuds. Cecil gradually emerged from behind an arm-chair, where she had hidden herself, before Elsie had done staring in surprise at them. There was an apologetic look on her face as she came forward.

“It is only the very outsidest binding you see,” she said. “You won’t mind putting on a silk cover instead of a brown holland one just for once to please me. I made it nearly all myself——”

“For me! How kind you are, and how clever!”

“Louise helped, of course, and you must not praise my work till you have tried it on. Be good, and let me dress you now just to see how I have succeeded.”

“Now turn round and look at yourself,” Cecil said when she had completed her operations. It was as much the pleasurable excitement lending a new colour to her cheeks, and light to her eyes, as the alteration in the dress that made the radiant reflection in the depths of the glass seem so unfamiliar to Elsie.

“It is not Elsie Blake, it is ‘Alice Pamela Neale,’” she said to herself; and with the thought a little shadow came flickering down, and put out the light in the face, and she knew herself again, and turned away from the glass rather quickly.

“Well, what is it?” cried Cecil. “Why are you so soon tired of seeing how beautiful you are? If the glass would only look back at me like that, should I

ever be tired of standing before it? Have you discovered, with dearest Mrs. Lutridge, that pink is a worldly colour?"

"Oh no; only I can't get out of myself so far all at once. People would not know me."

"That is the treat you are going to give me," said Cecil. "It was not to please you I worked this hole in my forefinger; it was for the gratification of seeing dearest Mrs. Lutridge wrinkle up her brows, and all the six dear Miss Lutridges turn pale with envy—to say nothing of a certain grateful glance I shall get from a friend's eyes, and the sudden blaze of pleasure that, I know, will come over his face when he catches the first glimpse of us."

"But I sha'n't like all that," said Elsie.

"Oh yes, you will. You will find you are quite suitably dressed when you get to Connington, and you won't think any more about it. The Oldbury people will be in the minority there. You and Miss Berry belong to our party, and we shall keep you with us all day. The Neales are old friends of ours. Steenie has told you all about them, of course?"

"No," said Elsie, hesitatingly. "I have heard him speaking of them to Miss Berry sometimes, but I do not know much."

"Steenie's account would have been more *couleur de rose* than mine. I can't say I feel much interest in any of the family, though the story of their coming back to Connington is rather a pretty one. Our acquaintance began by Steenie's bringing the nephew—this Walter Neale, whose coming of age we are to celebrate to-morrow—to spend his Easter holidays with us in London. He was a miserably shy, unlucky

kind of boy then, and I used to admire Steenie's humanity in putting up with him, till he confessed to me lately that he took a sort of liking to him first because there was something in his face that put him in mind of you—of you at church looking frightened of Mrs. Lutridge."

"But is there a likeness?" said Elsie.

"Well, yes; I am afraid I must confess that I have been struck with it once or twice myself lately."

"My mother's name was Neale," said Elsie in a low voice.

"Don't try to make out a relationship. I had rather you did not. I don't choose that Walter Neale should have you for a cousin."

"You dislike him then," said Elsie almost resentfully.

"Do I? No, I think not quite. There is really nothing to dislike about him. He is only horribly shy, and morbid, and full of fancies, which my father says is the result of the fuss that his mother has made over him, and the unnatural gloom of his home. She is a widow, and has the most miserable face I ever saw."

"I think he must be like me," said Elsie; "I wish you did not dislike him."

"Come, I will confess. There is a mean kind of pride at the bottom of my enmity. Ever since the old Eton holiday times, when I taught him to tie his neckerchiefs properly, and insisted on his walking into a room straight instead of sideways, he has had a provoking spaniel-like affection for me, and I am ashamed of it. I look into his meek face as he sidles up, dying to be able to say something to ingratiate

himself with me, and I say to myself, 'There now, just because you are such a sharp, talkative, critical personage, and fancy yourself somewhat intellectual, that's the only sort of man who will ever take to you.' Don't look so shocked, Elsie. It is myself I despise, not poor, unlucky Walter Neale."

"I don't in the least understand why you should despise either."

"The mother and uncle are worse than he is to me," Cecil went on, "for it is not so easy to snub them. They have quite made up their minds that I am precisely the energetic, pushing little personage who is best fitted to fight dear, sensitive Walter's battles, and drag him with some credit through the world. That is the *rôle* in life they have assigned to me; and so they give this grand fête at Connington tomorrow, and permit me to bid all Oldbury to it in order to dazzle me with their new splendour, and show me what grand things are in store for me if I choose to take them."

"So this is your fête," said Elsie; "and you have been thinking of nothing but of dressing me up for it."

"No, it is yours. I had declined to have anything to do with it, till Steenie thought of having some of the Oldbury people invited for the sake of including Miss Berry and you. Then I gave way. I hope I shall not have cause to repent. My business tomorrow will be to keep a strict watch over Grand-mamma; for if I am not at hand to contradict every word that comes out of her mouth, she will talk poor Mrs. Neale into dreadful misconception of my state of mind."

"What is Mrs. Neale like?"



"She is a white frightened mouse of a woman. She was left a widow many years ago, and I believe her husband met with his death in some shocking way. I never heard the rights of the story. She has a scared look in her eyes still, as if she had never got over the fright of it. I dread her. 'She looks in my face,' as the song says, 'till my heart is like to break.' It passes her comprehension that any one can have the heart to deny her fatherless boy anything. It strikes me as strange that the uncle, who is a very different sort of person, should have just the same anxious, pitiful tenderness over him."

"Tell me about the uncle."

"One admires him. He has been everything to the meek little widow and her son. They were poor after the husband's death, and he has worked for them for years, and now at last bought back this property at Connington, which originally belonged to Mrs. Neale, and which I suppose her husband squandered or let himself be cheated out of. The other two are afraid of him. He is a sort of person one feels one never comes within a mile of mentally, yet one is interested in him. Do you know, I believe he has really suffered more than even the frightened little widow; there is a look on his face sometimes that makes me suspect he has gone through a far more terrible struggle. If it had been he who cared for me now; but I expect it is about a century since he took the trouble of knowing one woman from another."

"Shall I see him to-morrow?" asked Elsie eagerly.

"Of course you shall if you please; I will take care of that. But I wish I had not told you this melancholy history. You have got your frightened

‘Walter Neale’ look on; and you will be pitying the Neales all to-morrow instead of enjoying yourself. Come, forget it. Look what a splendid glow there is in the west! We shall have perfect weather for the fête, and you will shine out upon us in the white dress, won’t you?”

Elsie took the rosebud hat from her head and began to twist it round and round on her hand mechanically. Could she wear it? If Cecil’s Mr. Neale were the friend who sent the books to “little Alice,” would it be best to come before him looking as she had seen herself in the glass half an hour before, or clad in the sombre guise Margaret had imposed so long? As she pondered her eyes fixed themselves on a rosebud in the hat she was holding, and all at once a picture rose up before her mind of Margaret sitting with a hat something like this in her hand snipping out the rosebuds, and of the expression on her face afterwards when she had knelt down beside her bed. The sorrow on it—the deep humility on it—it came before her with an understanding of Margaret’s feelings she had not had at the time. She put the hat down, and began slowly to undo the fastenings of the dainty silk dress. Such things were not for her—she was certain of it; and though she knew nothing of Margaret’s reasons in putting them away from her, she resolved to remain faithful to her old habits.

“You have let the last gleam of sunlight go while you have been meditating,” said Cecil. “I had no idea you could look so solemn. What have you been reading in that horrid Hawkes’ book to make you think it wicked to put on a silk dress?”

“It is not that. Don’t be angry with me, Cecil.

I can't explain it to you; I don't even quite understand my own feelings; but I must go in my own dress if I go to Connington at all. I will stay away if you think I shall be out of place there; and indeed I am afraid that would be best."

"I should like to see myself going without you!" cried Cecil. "If you put it in that way, of course there is no more to be said."

"You are angry with me. I am so sorry," said Elsie.

There was a short silence, and then Cecil took Elsie's face between her two hands, and turned it to the window.

"Tears, Flower Aspect! nay, that will never do. I won't have my rosebuds watered with such dew as that. There, take off that thing and give it me. I will fold it away, and my moment's vexation with it, and never think of either again. By to-morrow evening I shall no doubt be able to allow that you are right, and that the precious illuminated missal ought always to keep to its own quaint vellum binding."

## CHAPTER XXII.

Mrs. Lutridge at Fault.

So many of the Oldbury people had (through Cecil's intervention) received invitations to the archery fête at Connington, that the little town wore quite a gay appearance on the morning of the appointed day, with carriages setting out on the Connington road, and groups of pedestrians who did not own any conveyance wending their way to the station at the bottom of the town.

Miss Berry and Elsie were to go by rail; and when they were quite ready to start, to Elsie's dismay Miss Berry fell into a painful state of indecision respecting which train Cecil had advised them to take.

"Ought we to try for the 11.15 train?" she said in a very bewildered tone as she turned over the leaves of her "Bradshaw." "But, my dear, there is not an 11.15 train; it is 11.5. And Caroline has chosen to pop out to the baker's, and will not be back in time. Shall we say 1.30. But stay, that does not stop at Connington at all; it would carry us straight through to Bristol. How providential that I made the discovery! My dear, I am getting puzzled, for all the other trains end in dots, and don't seem to me ever to get anywhere."

"I wish I could help you," said Elsie; "but I have never made a railway journey in my life."

"And it is a much safer thing to stay at home," said Miss Berry rather eagerly. "My dear, do you know

I think we shall have to give it up? The Adams's passed the window some time ago. Perhaps it is an intimation that you and I shall be best at home to-day. I have, I confess, all along had my scruples; and then the risk of being taken on by the train unawares to Bristol, or any of those large towns, is so very appalling! You will not mind taking off your walking things, and spending the day quietly with me, my dear, will you?"

Elsie turned away towards the window to hide her eyes as she slowly untied her bonnet strings. It was a disappointment. Oh, it was a disappointment! And Miss Berry took up her feather brush and began whisking the china ornaments on the mantel-shelf with as much composure as if no more exciting than ordinary way of passing the morning had ever been contemplated. Elsie went on looking out of the window, just not to see her do it. The streets were almost as empty as usual now; there was nothing to be seen but a few urchins playing truant from school, and some groups of servants standing out on the door-steps—Oldbury fashion—to exchange comments on their departing masters and mistresses.

Presently the scene enlarged; a carriage drove rapidly up the street and stopped at Miss Berry's door. The children huzzaed, the servants disappeared down the areas. Elsie started away from the window, and the next moment Miss Berry let her handsomest Chinese mandarin fall to the ground in the nervous tremor that came over her when Stephen Pierrepont walked into the room.

The colour rushed back into Elsie's cheeks, and a gleam of sunshine came to her dewy eyes, and she had no need of the rosebud dress just then to heighten her

radiant beauty. Stephen went up to her first, while Miss Berry was picking up the mandarin; and as they shook hands, and their eyes met, they both discovered (what people sometimes do discover who have been thinking a great deal of each other during an absence) that their intimacy had made a great start forwards in the interval, and that they met in quite a different stage of acquaintanceship from that in which they had parted. They had all the right which reluctant parting and eager meeting again confer, to be very close friends, and rejoice in each other's presence.

Miss Berry's exclamations of astonishment were not as much heeded as they might have been for a minute or so; and when Stephen proceeded to explain that he had driven in from Connington for the express purpose of taking her and Miss Blake back with him, she gave up all hope of escape, though she continued to urge objections to the expedition, while Steenie was half dragging her to the door.

"My dear!—my old brown silk—I am not prepared for such a conspicuous position. Am I really to get in here? Such a handsome, comfortable carriage—it seems almost a sin; and there is good Mr. Adams still a little stiff with rheumatism, and Mrs. Adams so inconveniently stout and large,—don't you think you could overtake them before they reach the station, and offer to drive them to Connington instead of us? The satisfaction to your feelings of doing a kindness to such worthy people would repay you for any little disappointment you might feel about leaving us behind."

"Yes, I daresay," said Steenie demurely; "but there are the ponies' feelings to be considered as well as mine, and I have promised them that they shall not

take anything back to Connington stouter or larger than yourself and Miss Blake. - You should mix a little justice with your charity, Elderberry."

"Dear me!" Miss Berry exclaimed, when they were fairly started and bowling easily along the road; "but this is a luxurious way of travelling. If we could but (without cruelty to the ponies) share the convenience with all our friends, and if I were sure we should not dash past the dear Lutridges on the road, there would be nothing left to wish for."

Once clear of the town, Steenie, to Miss Berry's relief, showed no further disposition to dash along. The ponies subsided into a gentle trot, and Steenie let the reins hang on their necks, while he turned a radiant face round, and leant back to converse comfortably with the occupants of the back seat.

"There is no hurry," he said. "I am not sure that I shall take you to Connington at all. We will drive about bye-lanes all day, and make a picnic of our own. It would be such a nice adventure for Oldbury to talk about, and I have you both quite in my power, you see."

"My dear, you surely would not think of such a thing!" cried Miss Berry, in alarm.

"I don't know. You deserve to be punished for the treachery you were meditating against me, Elderberry. I saw it in your face the instant I entered your room. You intended to break your promise, and shirk coming to Connington to-day. Now, was it not so?"

"You see," Miss Berry answered, rather falteringly, "I had been feeling doubtful; and when Caroline chose to pop out to the baker's just as we ought to have been starting, it seemed so like a leading that we were not to go, that I thought I was justified——"

“In breaking your word. You thought you had got a hint direct from heaven to do that, did you? Well, it only shows to what bewilderment a long course of Hawkes’ memoirs, and subservience to Mrs. Lutridge, can bring even your honest conscience.”

“My dear Stephen,” said Miss Berry with a little air of dignity, “if only you would be so kind as just to put it down to my own weakness and incapacity when you see me doing anything wrong, and not charge it on Mrs. Lutridge, or on any good person’s teaching, I should be very much obliged to you, and you would not have so much idle, inconsiderate speech on your conscience as I sadly fear you have now.”

“Well, we will not quarrel to-day. Forgive me, Elderberry. I will take any view of your character you please, and find Mrs. Lutridge an angel if she will only keep out of our way.”

“My dear, I never said she was anything but an imperfect creature like the rest of us; and you know nothing about angels.”

“Ah, but I do. I have seen several in my life—several angels, and one saint. She is an acquaintance of yours, Elderberry, and you have behaved very badly to her ever since I can remember. Sticking fronts on the top of her head, maligning her before all her neighbours, forcing her to bow down to monstrous idols; but you can’t quite hide her auriole—at least not from some people’s eyes.”

“I suppose it amuses you to puzzle me to-day; but don’t you think you had better turn round and attend to where we are going? The road is a little broken here, and the ponies are getting uncomfortably near the ditch, and seem to know that no one is thinking of them.”



They had turned away from the chalk hills now towards the richer, better wooded lowlands, through which the river dawdled and curved, and gathered strength for its onward journey. It was the perfection of a September day; there was no wind, but the air seemed to throb gently with the fulness of the sunshine. The motionless trees, and golden shocks of corn leaning against each other in the fields, and the quiet groups of cattle on the distant hill-sides, stood out with a clear-cut distinctness of outline against the deep cloudless blue, such as can be seen only on a few perfect autumn days.

Sometimes they bowled swiftly along in a charmed silence, pleasanter than speech, with only just time for Elsie to catch entrancing glimpses of shining reaches of the river between the trees, or of the low hanging treasures of the hedgerows they passed between, or of a row of harvesters putting in the first sickles in a field of standing corn; sometimes, when they came to a shady upward-sloping bit of road, the ponies were allowed to choose their own pace, and Stephen turned round and the talk began again.

"This is Connington village," said Stephen at last; "and under this quaint old archway is the entrance into the grounds. Have you ever, either of you, been here before? The last owner was very unsociable, and would not let the place be shown."

"No," said Miss Berry; "but I was here long ago—in Mr. Connington's time. I remember his death; he left a little daughter. The place was let during her minority, and sold long afterwards when people were beginning to hope she would come back here to live."

"Mrs. Neale is the daughter. She was defrauded of her property by an unjust guardian, and now all these years afterwards, when the story of her wrongs has died out of people's minds, her Quixotic brother-in-law buys back the place and hands it over to her son. Just look round, that you may appreciate the action properly. That's the old manor-house covered with trellised roses and magnolia to its gabled roof. Rather a magnificent birthday present to be given away to-day, is it not?"

"It will be a very happy day to the giver, I should think," said Elsie.

"A proud day, I believe, unless something goes wrong and spoils it. I never saw any of the Neales happy, and don't believe it's in them. I think it's all a mistake myself, and that my friend would be better without such a weight of obligation laid upon him. But now what will you do? shall I drive you quite up to the house, or will you get down here? The archery is going on under the trees, and most of the guests are assembled there by this time."

As Miss Berry's only anxiety was to slip in among the other visitors in the least conspicuous manner, she chose to alight at once; and they were soon all three strolling through the beautiful gardens towards the spot where the targets stood.

"That is Walter Neale just preparing to shoot," said Stephen; "I will bring him up to you by and by."

"Does he—did Mr. and Mrs. Neale hear that I was coming to-day?" asked Elsie anxiously. "I mean, did you ever mention my name to them?"

Stenie looked a little embarrassed.

"One is not in a hurry to mention the name one

has oftenest in one's thoughts," he said in a low voice that escaped Miss Berry's ears.

"I asked," Elsie went on hurriedly, "because I believe my grandfather knows a Mr. Neale, and if this should be the same it might be awkward—he might be surprised."

"You will perhaps never come across him all day. Ah! Mrs. Lutridge has spied us out, and my father—there is no help for it. They are beckoning, and Miss Berry sees it. Our fate is sealed."

While Mrs. Lutridge was cross-examining Miss Berry on the mode of their conveyance from Oldbury, Elsie's quick ears caught a sentence or two which passed between Mr. Pierrepont and his son.

"What a long time you have been away," Mr. Pierrepont began. "There were many inquiries for you. You were wanted for the shooting."

"Oh no, sir, there are plenty of people to shoot. I told them I should not be here for the first hour or so."

"At all events you have been missed. Here are all our friends from Oldbury who were invited at your and Cecil's instigation, and no one to show them any attention."

"Is not Cecil somewhere about? Besides, I have been looking after two of our friends all the morning—the only two for whose entertainment I hold myself responsible; the rest are Cecil's charge."

Mr. Pierrepont glanced round, and Elsie felt that his eye dwelt on her.

"Miss Berry and Miss Blake!"

There was great irritation in the tone of his voice as he pronounced the two names, and something

rather like defiance in Steenie's as he repeated them after him.

"Yes, Miss Berry and Miss Blake; I have brought them over from Oldbury in Mrs. Neale's carriage. I thought they would prefer it to coming in the train."

"Well," Mr. Pierrepont continued after a moment's pause, during which he seemed to have recovered himself. "I have no older friend than good Miss Berry—she deserves every consideration; and since you think you have already discharged all duties to our neighbours for the day, suppose you come into the house with me. Colonel Seymour and Lady Mary have been asking about you. I want you to see them; they were your mother's friends."

"Time enough for them. They will come out on to the lawn soon, I daresay, and I shall see them," said Steenie coolly.

And then, as Miss Berry began to move again, he followed, stationing himself at Elsie's side. Elsie's face was burning crimson with vexation.

"Do go away, please," she said.

"Why should I?"

"Because your father wants you."

"No, he does not. It's all nonsense. I can see those people just as well any other time."

"Then he does not like you to be with us."

"Pray don't get that notion into your head; it's worse nonsense still. I shall find you seats where you can see everything that is going on before I leave you, at all events."

When the seats were found, Steenie still lingered, pointing out to Elsie their hosts, and the guests that were not Oldbury people.

"That tall man with his hands behind him standing there alone is old Neale—Gilbert Neale. He always stands like that, seemingly in the deepest of brown studies, as if he did not care for anything that was going on round him. Yet I expect he will know, at the end of the day, the exact amount of attention each of the county grandees has paid his nephew, and how many of her old friends have recognised Mrs. Neale."

"It is only for their sakes he cares, not for his own then?" said Elsie. "He is a very noble-looking man, like what I fancied him. I am glad you pointed him out to me."

"I see you are determined to make a hero of him. Well, he is something of the strong-willed, silent, compressed-lip type of personage that you ladies admire. I have studied the character in some of Cecil's new novels, in the hope of forming myself on it to please you, but the last hero I met with has reduced me to despair. I find it recorded of him that on one occasion he ate his dinner in silence, save when he sternly motioned away a cruet-stand that had not been burnished to the proper pitch of brightness. I could not do that. I don't *think* I could hurl a maniac out of a railway carriage window, as this gentleman does in the last chapter; but I am *certain* I shall never arrive at the dignity of sternly motioning away anything."

"Or of eating your dinner or doing anything else in silence," said Elsie, smiling.

He moved away at last, and Elsie's eyes followed him till he had joined the group of archers under the trees. She noticed how eagerly Walter Neale came

forward to meet him, and the increased animation his coming seemed to bring. Miss Berry pointed it out to her too, as if she were not already feeling it in her heart. Elsie had been used to fancy herself a sort of alien from happy people; and now for one so bright and popular to seek her out, to care so much for her company, it seemed too much, she could hardly believe it. It was a wonder that would bear any amount of pondering over, and so she drooped her eyes—afraid of where they would stray to—and sat musing in contented silence, till Miss Berry, who had nothing very particular to think about, grew restless in her conspicuous place, and insisted on making a move.

“Don’t you think we have kept this comfortable seat too long,” she said. “There are others still standing; and though Stephen Pierrepoint is so kind, I can’t feel that you and I are in our right places stuck up here under an awning among all the county people, while Mrs. Lutridge, I see, and the other Oldbury ladies, have only found a garden seat quite at the bottom of the lawn. If you don’t object, my dear, it would make me happier to go and join them.”

Miss Berry’s voluntary abdication of her honours did not save her from some reproaches when she got among her friends.

“We thought we were not to see anything of you to-day, my dear,” said the eldest Miss Tomkinson as she and Elsie approached the Oldbury group. “‘Rather her than I,’ I said to my sister when I saw you stuck up on the raised seats—your old brown silk between Lady Fox’s velvet and Mrs. Wentworth’s blue brocade. ‘Some people like to be in grand company,’ I said, ‘and to be stared at; but for me, I prefer to walk

about at my ease and smell the flowers.' That's what we Oldbury ladies have been invited out here to do to-day as far as I can make out, and very pleasant I am sure we find it, though we mayn't feel any obligation to those who take so little thought of our entertainment."

"My dear Miss Tomkinson, hush!" said Mrs. Lutridge with awful solemnity; "I blame myself. Yes," she continued, looking round with a full consciousness of the tremendous character of the admission she was making, "I consider *myself* to blame. I did not make sufficient inquiries into the nature of the entertainment before I consented to sanction it with my presence; and it being what it is, can I wonder that I feel out of place? On the contrary, I pity those to whom such society is congenial. 'The friendship of the world,' my dear Miss Berry; but I have too often pointed out its consequences, and I fear with too little result, to need to dwell upon them now."

Mrs. Lutridge paused to take breath. She was undoubtedly a good deal excited; but it must in justice be allowed that she had weightier causes of discontent than the being left to find a garden seat for herself, while her humbler neighbours were made to sit in high places. Five of her daughters, for the sake of whose advancement she had possibly yielded a scruple or two, were standing exactly where they had taken up their position two hours before, carrying on a little languid flirtation, all five of them, with Mrs. Adams' fat hobbledohy grandson, the only chevalier that their five new Balmoral hats and pink parasols had attracted into their neighbourhood; while pretty Miss Ursula, on whose chance of captivating the hero of the day her

mother had perhaps speculated a little, had turned her back on the rest of the company, and for the last half-hour had been looking devoutly up into the face of the poorest and most ritualistic of the District Church curates, who was describing to her a vestment he had lately purchased to wear under his surplice till the Oldbury people were prepared for its open display.

"It will be an immense comfort to some of us to know that you have the right thing on, even if we may not see it," cried Miss Ursula enthusiastically, just as Mrs. Lutridge's sudden silence made her words audible.

Mrs. Lutridge would have liked to have jumped up and boxed their ears. As she could not do this, she re-opened her attack on Miss Berry.

"I blame myself, but I don't excuse those whose misrepresentations have drawn me into the snare. There are people whom a very little attention and flattery will delude, but I am thankful to say I am not one of them. Stephen Pierrepoint and Miss Russel are wise in not wasting their assiduities on me. They don't venture to introduce me to their gay companions; they know I shall not be deterred from openly expressing to Mr. Pierrepoint my disapproval of their engagement, which I regret to see is evidently drawing his son into a vortex of dissipation."

"Well, but do you know as to that," began Miss Berry timidly, "I think we have all been making a little mistake, and perhaps we had better not talk so loud about it here. Lady Fox and Mrs. Wentworth spoke very confidently to me just now, and it seems, from what they say, that it is not Stephen Pierrepoint at all that Miss Russel is going to marry, but that pale young



man who has been standing behind her all the morning holding her arrows—Mr. Walter Neale, whose birthday we are keeping to-day.”

“Then I have been grossly deceived!” exclaimed Mrs. Lutridge, rising from her seat in awful anger; “and a most precious opportunity of bringing the young man under good influences has been thrown away. I cannot but believe there has been design in this; a design aimed at me and my family. Miss Berry, you have much to answer for. What may be the ultimate result of your deplorable imprudence I dare not think, but you may rest assured that no advantage will ensue to those” (with a withering glance at Elsie) “whom you have designed to advance by your machinations. I shall take the matter into my own hands; I shall act——”

Mrs. Lutridge’s voice had risen during her harangue into something like a scream, which penetrated beyond the circle of her own immediate auditors. The five Misses Lutridge, not knowing on whom the storm was about to burst, flew apart in various directions like croqueted balls; young Adams took off his hat and wiped a cold perspiration from his forehead; the little curate hid behind Miss Ursula’s ample crinoline; and Cecil, gaining a dim perception that something was amiss, threw down her arrows and ran across the lawn to the scene of action, followed by Walter Neale and one or two others who had been standing near her.

She descended on the disturbed elements like oil on troubled waters.

“Ah, I have found you all at last!” she exclaimed, smiling and holding out her hand to one and another. “Mrs. Lutridge, Mrs. Adams, Miss Tomkinson, what a

delightfully shady spot you have chosen! If I had known you were all established here so comfortably, I certainly should not have stayed so long up there in the glare of the sun. Mrs. Lutridge, this is Stephen Pierrepont's friend and travelling companion, Mr. Walter Neale. He has heard a great deal about you. Now have you not, Mr. Neale? And he is most anxious for an introduction. He was saying just now that he was certain he could single you out from the crowd, my cousin has so often described you to him."

Elsie looked up curiously at the sound of Walter Neale's name. A pale, regular-featured, fair-haired young man stepped forward, raised his hat, made a sort of desperate gasp in the air instead of speech when Cecil appealed to him, and then stood in a nervous agony of silence, while Mrs. Lutridge, somewhat mollified, but swelling with suppressed rage, addressed some remarks to him. To cover his distress Cecil chattered on. "You do not condescend to interest yourself in the archery, but we have had a very good match. Miss Fox, the pretty Miss Fox, the member's daughter, has won the ladies' prize—such an exquisite bracelet! it is to be presented after luncheon. And see, everybody is crowding to the tent already. You had better all come with me that I may find you comfortable places. Miss Berry, Elsie, you ought not to be here. Stephen has gone to the upper end of the lawn to look for you; but as you are here, you had better follow me."

END OF VOL. I.

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