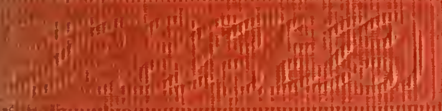
A POINT OF CONSCIENCE

MRS. HUNGERFORD



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A

POINT OF CONSCIENCE

BY

MRS. HUNGERFORD

AUTHOR OF

'THE PROFESSOR'S EXPERIMENT,' 'LADY VERNER'S FLIGHT, ETC.

A NEW EDITION

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A POINT OF CONSCIENCE

CHAPTER I.

'Affection lights a brighter flame
Than ever blazed by art.'

'I REALLY think we may congratulate ourselves about *this* governess,' says Lady Maria, leaning back in her chair, and letting her lovely old hands, with their knitting, drop into her lap. 'She seems a most excellent creature.'

With Lady Maria most people inferior to herself are 'creatures.' A 'nice' creature, or a 'good' creature, if it happens to be the doctor's or the curate's wife, and she approves of her; an 'excellent' creature, if it be the butler or the governess; whilst a 'worthy' creature does for the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker.

'She's very pretty,' returns Mrs. Verschoyle, a tall, handsome, fashionable-looking woman of about forty, with a touch of humour in her clear gray eyes. It is perhaps this touch of humour that has endeared her so strongly to her mother-in-law, with whom she has lived ever since the death of her husband, Lady Maria's eldest son—a death that took place five years ago, and was so much to these two women of the world that they found it impossible to forget it.

'Oh, pretty!' says Lady Maria, with a shrug. 'What has prettiness to do with it? Beauty is not necessary in one's governess. In fact, I always think that sort of person should be born plain. To be distinctly plain, without being actually repulsive, would be so *wise* of them!'

'It is so hard for them to arrange it beforehand,' says Mrs.

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Verschoyle. 'But you haven't looked sufficiently at Miss Royce. *She* has not been wise. She is not plain.'

'That black little thing!'

'Very dark, I allow you; but wonderful colouring. The name is English enough; but her face, with those black eyes and that olive skin, is almost French.'

'French! Good gracious, Jane! why didn't you say all this before? She has been here for a month now, and——'

'Why should I? She seems an admirable governess; she suits Jinnie (who, as you know, is not very easily suited), and what more do I want?'

'I can see you have taken a dislike to her.'

'Indeed I have not. Efficiency in a governess is all that one requires, as I have just been saying.'

'For all that,' says Lady Maria, 'you are a mass of prejudices.'

'Am I?' Mrs. Verschoyle looks amused. 'Let me tell you, though, that not one out of the mass would lead me astray in my judgment.'

'What an absurd speech! As if prejudices were not made for that special purpose—to lead one astray. I hope you will not set your face against Miss Royce, Jane. *Don't*, my dear. She sings so well, and is such a quiet creature. Quite a treasure, *I* call her. One'—raising herself in her chair to give emphasis to her clinching argument—'one never sees her!'

Mrs. Verschoyle smiles.

'You score there,' says she. 'She certainly is seldom to be seen—a splendid thing in governesses. Miss Royce is wise in her manners, if not in her face.'

'To drag up one's last words is not good manners, Jane,' says Lady Maria, putting down her knitting again—a long, seemingly interminable row of red and black wool, meant for the comforting of some deep-sea fisherman. 'For the rest, let me forget Miss Royce for a while. By-the-by'—inconsequently—'what a curious Christian name she has!'

'Yes—Maden. It suggests the missing *i*. I am sure it must be an abbreviation of something. But she is very reticent; she will not speak of herself or let one be friends with her.'

'Just as well,' says Lady Maria indifferently.

'Oh, I don't know! Poor little thing! I am almost sure she has known rough passages in her life.'

'Well, she ought to find it all the smoother here,' says Lady Maria comfortably. 'Don't I see somebody coming down the hill? Is it Sidney? By the way, what a rolling stone he is!'

Mrs. Verschoyle raises her head and glances across the sunny landscape outside, over the flowering beds and the budding rose-trees, over the tennis-courts below (already being shaven and rolled in anticipation of the coming summer), to the gentle hill beyond.

'Anthony, I *think*,' says she, peering uncertainly, 'and, beyond doubt, that is Jinnie'—her daughter's small form being unmistakable—'and Miss Royce. And yes, it is Sidney, too.'

'Talk of the——,' begins Lady Maria, with a shrug.

She laughs gaily, checking herself at the naughty word. Her laugh is infectious and wonderfully young, considering that she is a grandmother, and not even a young one at that. Grief and disappointment had failed to check the indomitable spirit that had been born with her (as, indeed, with most of the Amyots), and she had had much of both.

The marriage of her elder and favourite son with Jane Brandreth, the daughter and heiress of an old house slightly connected with her own, had been a cause of keen pleasure to her, and had helped to dull the sense of loneliness that had shadowed her after her husband's death. But sorrow follows hard upon the heels of joy, and when the tiny grandchild (a girl, too!) was barely a twelvemonth old, George Verschoyle had gone over to the majority. It was a blow that stunned, and it left its indelible mark on the mother who loved, the wife who adored him.

The child, too, was only a girl! Poor George left no heir. And thus Anthony Verschoyle stepped into his inheritance. At first, when real and honest grief for the brother he loved was full upon him, Anthony cared little for the pomp and glory of it, though to be head of all the Verschoyles, and master of The Towers, were as good things as a man *could* come into in these dull days; but later on, as was only natural, he grew to feel and know the meaning of possession, though of all men he would probably be the slowest to give in thus to Nature's cruelties. Perhaps he never quite felt or knew that he cared for the change in his fortune until Cecil Fairfax came back to live in her own home, Fairtown, a charming

place situated about four miles from The Towers—a fatherless, motherless girl, but rich enough, and of sufficient strength to elect to live *alone*, without duenna, or companion, or governess, or whatever one chooses to call the overseer on these occasions.

It was then that Anthony awoke to a belief in his possessions, and a delight in them. And truly The Towers was worthy of much thought. It stood up there, and stands there now, for the matter of that—on the top of that high hill, surrounded and encompassed by woods and wooded places, and by all the blasts of heaven as well, if the truth be told, at certain seasons of the year.

Down below in the valley the river ran, mild as a babe in summer, raging and tumbling in the winter, and roaring its wild song, that is always so full of melody. Down in the valley, too, sitting in its leafy pleasaunces under the shadow of The Towers, lay the Dower-house, tranquil, calm, imprisoned in its dainty gardens. Lady Maria, who was never impassioned in her manner, had nevertheless taken a vehement dislike to The Towers on the death of her elder born, the poor George I have spoken of, and had gone down to the valley and the calm house there, that was always waiting for her, as she said, since her husband left her. The Towers felt cold to her. Her husband had died there, and there, too, had died her dearest possession. She always knew in her soul that George had been dearer to her than his father, a fact that added poignancy in the way of remorse to her grief at his death. Had Heaven meant it as a reprisal?

Any way, at George's death the old place grew too much for her, and she cast it off, as it were, and went down to the Dower-house, that was, as I have said, a dream of beauty. It seemed to call to her, to remind her of the young lover, whose son had become dearer even than himself, ousting him out of the principal place in her heart. There she had lived after her marriage for many years with the elder George, until his father and mother in the big house above had made room for them—they no longer having room left them there, or anywhere on earth, save the small six feet of it that the poorest of us may claim.

Well, the old people were gone, and now *she* was the 'old people,' compressed into one frail, pretty old lady, and she went back to the house from which she came, and which held

the sweetest memories for her. There she had lived with 'George the first,' as in her lightest hours she had called him, and there 'George the second' was born.

Anthony, her other son, had been cut to the heart by her going, but she had been very determined, and George's widow had gone with her.

'You will *both* desert me,' said Anthony, standing, a little pale, and facing them both.

'Yes, darling,' said his mother, 'and there is nothing to forgive, Tony. I am going now, because'—playfully—'I should hate to be turned out later on, when you take to yourself a wife.'

'You were not afraid that George would turn you out,' said he, breathing a little quickly.

'Ah! but I knew George's wife,' said his mother.

'Do you think mine will be less easy to know?' said he, and his heart contracted a little, and then throbbed madly, as he thought of Cecil Fairfax, over there beyond the river in her lonely home.

'I'm not a seer, Tony. Who can read the future? And my going! It is such a little going! Just a step or two down there, where I can always see you, and where you can come to me at a moment's notice should I be ill or dying.'

'God forbid the last,' said he, but he felt cold at heart as he said it. She was forsaking him, no matter what arguments she might use, or in what pretty words she clothed the desertion.

Any way, she had gone, taking George's widow with her. She had hardly dared at first, in spite of her indomitable pluck, to suggest the change to Jane Verschoyle, who had ever been a fashionable woman, and used to the keener niceties of life. How would she care to come and live in the depths of the country in a house, lovely indeed, but smaller—much smaller than The Towers? But she had from the very first loved Jane, who had, indeed, more of Lady Maria in her nature than Lady Maria's begotten children—and she risked the question.

'Of course, Jane, the world is wide, and you are a young woman, and handsome—and to bury yourself here . . . A house in town would suit you——' she broke off, compelling a little cough to her assistance—a kind little cough that hid, or as she thought hid, a most sorry and undignified choking in her throat.

'So it might,' Jane had responded gently, 'if'—she looked up out of her weeds, into the face of her mother-in-law; the weeds were intensely fashionable, but quite as intense was the undying regret on the face of George's widow—'if there were not another house in the country, that *drags* me to it. . . . Mother!'—with a sudden touch of rare passion—'Jinnie and I are *yours!* Do not refuse to have us.'

So it was arranged, and when Lady Maria went to the Dower-house, Jane went too, with her daughter, and that daughter's governess. Of the succession of these governesses there seemed to be no end; they had reached an eighth edition, indeed, before the child came to its age of to-day—seven years. Then Lady Maria had advertised once more, and Miss Royce had dropped into the quiet life at the Dower-house.

The latter, as I have said, lies at the foot of the valley, and between it and The Towers a pleasant river runs, spanned by a bridge that catches the eye from the Dower dining-room, whilst from the drawing-room a clear glimpse of the taller of the two towers can be seen standing out grand and massive from the forest of trees that surrounds it. From this tower a red flag waves always, to tell Lady Maria that all is well with her son up there; but on occasions a green flag is hoisted, and that is to tell Lady Maria that Anthony is coming down to see her, and so on: quite a little code of loving signals have been now set up between mother and son. For Verschoyle has at last learnt to tolerate his mother's going, and to read between the lines the real meaning of it.

Besides, very often, in quite a serious spirit, and as though there were no element of the comic sort in it, Lady Maria packs up her bag and baggage, including Mrs. Verschoyle, Jinnie, and governess, to say nothing of maids, and goes up to the top of the hill to stay with her son for a week or so. She always chooses the long way round by the road to get there, taking out her carriage and coachman and footman, paying thus a tribute to her determination to think of The Towers as being quite a long way off, though, as a fact, she might have crossed the rustic bridge in her little pony-carriage and got there in less than a quarter of the time. And there her old rooms are always ready for her; Anthony never allows any guests to inhabit them; and there she falls for the moment into the old groove again, with God alone knows what sad

and happy memories, and with the old grace to take her place at the head of her son's table—and is all that her son would have her to be, and perhaps more than most women of her own age could be.

* * * * *

'That's unkind!' says Mrs. Verschoyle. She has turned from her glance at the hill that leads with a rush over the pretty toy bridge into the valley below and the Dower grounds. 'And it belies your former judgment. You quite *praised* Miss Royce only a moment ago.'

'Miss Royce! The romantic Maden?' Lady Maria pretends to throw up her hands. 'I was not thinking of *her* when I spoke, but of Sidney Fenton.'

'Your pauses are eloquent,' says Jane, who does not love Sidney Fenton.

'Oh, I mean nothing; you know he is a sort of nephew of mine, on my husband's side. What I object to is his long stay here. I can see that Anthony does not care for him.'

'And is too good-hearted to give him his *congé*?'

'Quite that. Sidney and Anthony could never be really friends; they are miles apart in every way. And yet'—knitting a little faster—'he *has* his points.'

'He is very handsome,' says Jane Verschoyle.

'Pah!' says Lady Maria. It is the fashion nowadays to say that metaphorically you have made someone 'sit up.' Mrs. Verschoyle has gone one better. Under her speech Lady Maria literally does it. 'What do you mean, Jane? You enrage me! Have you only one set of sentences? Miss Royce is "pretty." Sidney is "handsome." Are there no other virtues? Really, if so, I'd rather have vices! Have you no opinion? Are you a mere nothing?'

'I wish I were,' says Mrs. Verschoyle. 'It would save so much trouble; besides, negatives have weight; you never know what's beyond them. But, as a fact, I used a positive. I stated distinctly my views on the personal charms of Miss Royce and Sidney.'

'I wish he would go away,' says Lady Maria irrelevantly.

'*There* we come together, at all events: if'—affectionately—'we are ever really apart. I dislike Sidney in spite of his *beaux yeux* and his general air of good-nature, and yet'—reluctantly—'I don't know why. There must be some good in him, I'm sure.'

'Not to know is the most fatal argument of all,' says Lady Maria thoughtfully. 'To honestly dislike a person without knowing why *proves* a reason. That old rhyme, "I do not love thee, Dr. Fell," contained very clever germs.'

'He has two months' leave,' says Jane. 'And only three weeks of that expired.'

'Three——' Lady Maria puts down her knitting. 'I have sometimes thought,' begins she, in a troubled tone.

'Oh, so have I,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, interrupting her. 'But you mustn't dwell on it.'

'You think, then——'

'That Cecil——' Mrs. Verschoyle pauses. 'I don't think she is in love with *Anthony*,' says she, in a low tone.

'I had so set my heart on it,' says Lady Maria, alluding to something unspoken.

'Don't.' Jane, rising with one of her swift, beautiful movements, brings herself on her knees beside her mother-in-law. 'Don't set your heart on that: I—I am afraid *she* has set her heart on Sidney.'

'Well, well!' says Lady Maria.

A silence follows. She presses Jane's cheek to her own and kisses her lingeringly, and with love. The old, time-worn theory of hatred between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is cast to the winds in their case.

'Still,' says Lady Maria, as Jane gets to her feet again, 'you may be mistaken, dearest.'

'I may——' doubtfully.

'And he—Sidney—may not be in love with her.'

'True: I'—hastily, with a view to comfort—'don't think he is either. But—she has money, and—— Let us forget all this, however. Why trouble about bare possibilities? And, besides, no harm has been done. Perhaps Anthony is not in love with her, either.'

'Ah! if one could be sure,' says Anthony's mother.

She herself, however, is quite sure. No wife, no child, can understand or pierce to the heart of things as can a man's mother.

'There is Mr. Popkin coming down the hill now with Carry Desmond,' says Mrs. Verschoyle suddenly, glad of a point of diversion. It has been given to her as a relief to watch the arrivals from the hockey ground, who, as a rule, drop in to tea at the Dower-house. 'I'm certain he has a penchant for Carry.'

'Poor Carry!' says Lady Maria, who has not yet come back to her usual kindly indifferent air.

'What a criticism!' said Mrs. Verschoyle; 'but I can't help crying yea and amen to it. Carry is too good for curates. Still, it makes two distinct love affairs in our dull neighbourhood, and that means something.'

'Two?'

'I'm afraid Aurora Langley—or else her dreadful mother—has fallen in love with poor dear Richie.'

Lady Maria leans back in her lounge. Her fingers knit faster than ever. Her brows knit too.

'What a gossip you are, Jane!' says she.

CHAPTER II.

> 'So well she's masked under this fair pretence,
> An infidel would swear she's made of perfect innocence.'

Mrs. Verschoyle, as if tickled by some inward thought, laughs softly.

'That is why you love me,' says she, a little audaciously.

'For *that* reason!'

'Like cleaves to like, you know.'

'Tut, Jane! Poor—very poor! I'll quote you as good as that, and better. "Extremes meet." How's that, now?'

'When they meet they are one,' says Mrs. Verschoyle triumphantly.

'Your wits were never made for the good of your soul,' says Lady Maria contemptuously. 'Let us try your fingers. Give me a cup of tea.'

Mrs. Verschoyle rises, pours out the tea, and gives it to her, with one of the tiny hot cakes in which her soul delights. Passing back again to her seat, her eyes glance through the far window that overlooks the drive.

'Here come Mrs. Langley-Binks,' says she, 'and her fair Aurora, rosier than the rosiest morn.'

'A boisterous morn would describe her better. Is she driving?'

'Yes. *The* brand-new carriage, and *the* brand-new horses. They are all frightfully new. Richie has just come up with them, and now Mr. Popkin and Carry. How boyish that girl is!'

'Hoydenish is the word.'

'Oh no; the *last* word. A boy spoiled, that is all.'

'Or a spoiled boy.'

'I never know whether Carry is pretty or not, but I always know I love to look at her.'

'That's fascination—a far better thing than mere beauty. Yes, I too like that child. She is youth itself, and there is something so strong and sweet about her.'

'Ah! that sounds intoxicating indeed,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, whereat both the women laugh.

'Now, what *can* Mrs. Langley-Binks mean by coming here again to-day,' says Lady Maria, the wheels of the coming chariot now sounding louder on the gravel. 'She was here only last Thursday.'

'I told you a moment ago that she and Aurora are anxious to annex our "poor Richard." He *is* dreadfully poor, dear fellow! but he is your cousin, and his uncle'—laughing—'is a real live lord, and when one has been boiling soap for half a lifetime——'

Mrs. Verschoyle shrugs her shoulders with meaning.

'One should be clean,' supplements Lady Maria dryly. 'And soap is an excellent thing' (she nearly says 'creature'). 'But these people—they are very pushing; their methods, I fear, are not as clean as their soap.'

'No? Oh, I think they are honest enough. People hanging on the outskirts of Society will always sacrifice a good deal to get into the inner circle, and I really think Mrs. Langley-Binks is quite open in her desire to give Aurora and her fortune for Richie and his connections.'

'I begin to pity myself even more than Richie,' says Lady Maria; 'I am one of the connections. Still, really, Jane, I hardly see how the poor boy can do better. I pity him, but the old place must go soon if no fresh grist is brought to the mill. And yet—Dick Amyot's son and that *dreadful* girl! And the Amyots were always so fastidious. . . . If there wasn't so much of Aurora, one might . . . or, if her mother could be translated, or cremated, or something. Still, I can see plainly that Richie must either take this chance or let himself go altogether.'

'Where?' asks Mrs. Verschoyle, with a frivolity she is far from feeling; and then, as if ashamed of herself, 'Oh, poor old Richie!'

'It will mean ruin to him. He is getting into debt as fast as he can in a vain effort to make the place pay. I can see nothing before him but Australia, or——' She pauses significantly.

'Ah, no'—hastily—'Richie is not made like that. He is quite good, and so honest, and healthy, and handsome. I suppose'—regretfully—'you are right, and it will have to be Miss Langley-Binks.'

'Her mother is even more objectionable than she is; she is perfectly terrible, and such a size, my dear Jane. As broad as she is long, and——' Here the door is thrown open. 'Oh, how d'ye do, Mrs. Langley-Binks? Very cold, is it not? Come nearer to the fire.'

She motions daintily with her slender, patrician, heavily-ringed hand, that time has failed to deprive of its original charm, to the large woman who has just entered, and pushes a lounging chair a little forward. Mrs. Langley-Binks, after a slight hesitation that might reasonably be laid down to an uncertainty on her part as to whether the seat in question is capable of upholding her, drops into it with an elephantine grace, and an assumption of ease that is plainly far from her. She is followed by her daughter, a generous replica of herself, a girl of about twenty-three, with a truly Wellingtonian nose and a voice like a Gatling gun.

'You are earlier than usual this evening, Richie,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, standing between a tall fair young man, with handsome, clear-cut features, blue eyes, and an athletic figure, and two girls. One is Miss Langley-Binks, already described, the other Carry Desmond—a girl of nineteen, a child at heart, and as sweet a creature (as Lady Maria would have said) as one might care to look for. She is very slender, very beautifully made, with the figure of an Atalanta, whom, indeed, she might have run close in many ways, and with a small, shapely head, covered with closely-cropped curls. Very far from beauty, Carry Desmond has still that charm that creates its own beauty, and lives long after the more classical types lie dead. She has, for one thing, vitality in her looks and every action, that essence of perpetual youth that carries one through and above and beyond all things, and is the most precious gift of all. Hardly the girl to be thrown away on Mr. Popkin, thinks Jane Verschoyle, looking at the curate, who has just come in; and yet, so poor is she—living with

her old aunt in that broken-down old place that her improvident Irish father had taken with a view to making a third fortune out of it (he was always going to make a fresh fortune) —that perhaps even to marry Mr. Popkin might be better than to live as she now is living—better certainly than to have to go out into the world and earn her bread.

Mr. Popkin has gone over to the fireplace, where the blaze runs merrily up the chimney, in spite of the fact that we are well into the heart of May—cold-hearted May, as a rule—and Mrs. Verschoyle, with Richie and the two girls, are left for the moment alone.

'Half an hour or so, not more,' says Amyot. 'The other side had it all its own way, which, of course, shortened it. They got two goals to our one.'

'How dreadful!' says Mrs. Verschoyle, laughing. 'And *you*, Richie, to be so defeated, and with Carry on your side, too.'

'Oh, it wasn't *his* fault! He played beautifully!' declares Miss Langley-Binks in her high scream.

'He didn't play a screw,' says Carry Desmond, with the quick decision that belongs to her. 'I must say, Richie, I shan't care to be on your side again if you can't do better than you did to-day. You lost us that last goal, beyond doubt.'

'You can put it on me if you like,' says Mr. Amyot. 'But if it hadn't been for that ass Popkin, I might have saved it. All on earth he is good for is to get in everybody's way, and kill the game.'

'Yes. Yes, really—that is *quite* so. I saw it,' says Miss Langley-Binks, her red cheeks growing rosier.

'For all that, Richie,' persists Miss Desmond, with a calm condemnation in her eyes, 'I think if you had not made that sudden last rush *quite* so soon, we might have pushed the ball a little more forward, gradually, as it were (you know Mr. Stokes is of no use at all), and—any way, it's fatal to make a rush too soon.'

'Quite a sermon!' says Miss Langley-Binks, with a hysterical laugh. 'Ought to be addressed to Mr. Popkin, you know. He'—with a deliberate glance at Carry—'would be delighted to hear it from you. Ha! ha! Better sermons than *he* can deliver as a rule, poor little man!'

Miss Desmond stares at her for a moment only, then goes on:

'If you had held back when Jim Drew made that first charge and caught the ball, then things would have been very different. But, instead of that, you ran your stick actually between Sidney's legs, and upset him.'

'Oh, you are full of theories,' said Richie grievously. 'This New Woman movement has got on your nerves. I wonder all you girls don't get up a hockey club of your own, and leave us dull fellows out in the cold.'

'Oh, if you're going to be cross!' says Carry, lifting her charming brows.

'I am sure Mr. Amyot could never be cross,' says Miss Langley-Binks, breaking into the discussion, with the heavy air inherited from her mother, and a little amorous air, too, that belongs to herself alone, and sits most sadly on her. 'And really, dear Miss Desmond, if you *do* think Mr. Amyot a little out of temper, surely'—with a fatuous look at Amyot, who, for his part, is looking the other way—'it is *you* who have led him to it.'

Here Mrs. Verschoyle makes a movement.

'Richie is never cross,' says she gaily. 'Are you, Richie? Come and help me to pour out tea. By-the-bye'—as Amyot accompanies her across the room—'I thought I saw Miss Royce and Jinnie coming down the hill just now with Sidney and Anthony.'

'I dare say. They started before we did.'

'They are very late, then.'

Mrs. Verschoyle is conscious of a faint feeling of annoyance. Surely Miss Royce might have hurried herself a little to help Lady Maria with her guests—to superintend the other little tea-tables over there, where Carry is now busy with the dainty cups and saucers and beautiful old Queen Anne teapot. She had never *quite* liked Miss Royce, without exactly knowing why, and this is, perhaps, the reason why she is so specially kind to her.

'Oh, I don't know.' Amyot is a little absent in manner. 'Anthony said something about having to go to see Horrocks at one of the up-farms. He's sick, you know, and perhaps they went round with him. Oh, here they are, any way.'

He glances towards the veranda. One can hear quick steps running up the stone stairs outside, and now a small long-legged child of about seven springs into the room by the open window and flings herself into Mrs. Verschoyle's arms.

'Jinnie! What a way to come in!' says her mother, in a tone that is meant to be reproving, but falls very short of the mark.

'She *would* come in this way,' says a voice behind Jinnie. 'She said it was the shortest way. I—I hope I am not very late, but——'

The speaker stops short, and Mrs. Verschoyle, having disengaged Jinnie's very vigorous arms from around her neck, looks at her.

Miss Royce's face is well worth looking at—small, dark, vivid, with eyes as nearly black as human eyes can be, and hair to match. The skin is a pure ivory, and the mouth a little large. But the lips are thin, and intensely scarlet. Jinnie's new governess is a tiny creature barely five feet, exquisitely proportioned, and any age at all from seventeen to twenty-two. The dark, fathomless, Oriental eyes are inscrutable, but the mouth, with its wonderful colouring, is suggestive of extraordinary strength and determination—and passion.

'A *little* late,' says Mrs. Verschoyle kindly, with the rather exaggerated kindness of the person who is determined not to be disagreeable at any cost. Had she liked the girl better, she would probably have given her a good scolding. She looks over her head.

'I thought Anthony was with you,' says she to a man of about thirty-four, who has come in with Miss Royce and Jinnie—a very handsome man, dark, and with an agreeable smile.

'So he was, up to the bridge,' says Captain Fenton. 'But he got one of his evil fits on him then, and went off at a tangent to see some old, indescribable tenant or other. You know how his conscience works him at times.'

'I know. Richie told me he had gone to see old Horrocks; his rheumatism is very bad, poor old man! You didn't go with him, then?' She pauses. Richie's assumption of Miss Royce and Jinnie's having accompanied Anthony in his philanthropic mission was evidently an incorrect one. But how, then, was it that Jinnie and her governess—and Sidney—had been so late?

'No,' Miss Royce's plaintive voice breaks in on her somewhat troubled thoughts. 'We came straight back here, but at the southern point of the river, where the little bay is, and where the lilies grow, Jinnie said we must stop and let her

gather some of them. And so we spent more time there than we should, I'm afraid'—with pretty remorse. 'But we had to wait for her to gather them; she wanted them so badly. Didn't you, Jinnie?'

The soft voice travels now to where the child is sitting, perched upon her grandmother's knees, her thin but terribly lively legs dangling and swinging against poor Lady Maria's, very much to the detriment of the latter.

'Yes. But they were faded old things, the ones I could reach—and you wouldn't help me to get the others—and I flung them at Sidney on my way home,' says Jinnie, surnamed the Imp by her uncle Anthony.

A little frown runs across Mrs. Verschoyle's forehead, a strange place for so unkind a thing. Twice since her return has Jinnie's governess brought Jinnie into her explanations. It seems a sort of making use of the child that is distinctly distasteful to Mrs. Verschoyle. Jinnie is one of the class rightly termed *enfants terribles,* but one so genuinely honest and truthful that it would be impossible to distrust her lightest statement. So that her mother at once knows she *did* desire those lilies. But was there no one to suggest to her the desire for them? And Miss Royce's own words: '*We* spent more time than we should, waiting for her to get them.' Waiting! Why should the child's governess not have helped her to get them? Why, Jinnie might have fallen into the water for one thing. And then that *we*. The whole thing jars on Mrs. Verschoyle. Sidney Fenton, as *she* sees him (her lip curls involuntarily), is quite capable of developing a stupid, silly flirtation with even his little cousin's governess.

Disgust, largely mingled with contempt, is in her air as she turns aside. All this naturally must find a vent somewhere, and as her eyes light on her daughter, still dangling her thin legs against her grannie's long-suffering shins, she opens her mouth.

'Jinnie, get down,' says she, addressing the astonished Jinnie, who is not accustomed to rebukes (though she ought to be), with extreme severity. 'Get down at once from grannie's knee. You know you are tiring her.'

Thus do the innocent often suffer for the guilty. The innocent in this case, however, refuses to suffer.

'Grannie likes me here,' says Jinnie, her legs swinging higher than ever.

'Yes, indeed,' stoutly says Lady Maria, who is about as tired as she can be, but cannot bear to put away from her voluntarily the little form within her arms—the little, slender thing that is all that remains to her of the dear dead son.

'Grannie loves me to be here,' repeats Jinnie, now triumphantly, on the head of this encouragement.

'But I don't!' says somebody just behind her.

CHAPTER III.

'Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in Venice.'

ANTHONY VERSCHOYLE has come into the room and up to his mother's chair without Lady Maria or the lively Jinnie being aware of it. He is a well-built young man of about eight-and-twenty, who, in spite of the fact that his eyes are large and clear and his expression remarkably pleasant, can hardly come under the term 'handsome'; even 'good-looking,' that nineteenth-century compromise, could hardly describe him. But his face, if almost plain, is one to be trusted, and it is a pity that his mouth, the one really beautiful feature he possesses, should be hidden by his short brown moustache. He is quite as well proportioned as his cousin, Richard Amyot—which is saying a good deal for his limbs—and quite an inch taller. He brings a young man in his train—a short, somewhat stout and somewhat nondescript person, who rejoices in exuberant spirits and a pug nose.

'*You*, Dicky!' says Lady Maria to this last importation. Her tone is full of surprise; but the surprise is conquered by delight. Lady Maria is one of those old ladies who like to have men about them—*young* men; the younger the better, and the more frivolous the better, too. Mr. Browne suits her on all points. To guess at his age has given pleasant pastime to many of his friends, pleasanter in that it lasts for ever. Dicky's age is known to himself alone. His father—he has one somewhere—has long forgotten it. He forgets Dicky, too, as a rule, for the best part of the year.

'No use even reminding him of my existence on a Christmas or a New Year's Eve,' Mr. Browne is accustomed to tell his intimates (they are many) occasionally. 'Nothing would make the governor part. Bad old papa, I call him.'

'Put that saucy minx down, mother,' says Anthony Verschoyle. 'She is far too much for you.'

He stoops, and, lifting Jinnie from his mother's knee, plants her beside him on the ground, keeping her within the enclosure of his arm, however, where, indeed, she stays contentedly enough. Next to her mammy and her grannie, Miss Verschoyle betrays a warm preference for 'Tony' above all the rest of the world. Sundry measures had been used to make her call Verschoyle Uncle Anthony, but the fight over that has been won by her many a day ago.

'How d'ye do, Popkin?' says Verschoyle, finding the curate at his elbow. 'How's the bazaar getting on?'

'Better, thank you,' returns Mr. Popkin, as if responding to an inquiry about his health. 'Ever since Lady Maria has consented to take a stall, things have been almost flourishin'; still, the workin' up of it is very fatiguin'.'

Mr. Popkin disdains his *g*'s. Some unkind person, during his last holiday at Ramsgate, had told him that the aristocracy had not now time to pronounce all their letters, and that they found words ending in *g* much more mellifluous when that vulgar letter was left out. Mr. Popkin, who had a cousin a Mayor—and one who had been knighted, too—fell naturally into the spirit of the upper ten, and, being hopelessly enamoured of poor Carry Desmond, saw at once how much sweeter 'lovin'' sounded than 'loving.' He came home a new man, and Mrs. Banfield, a rather pretty woman, and the terror of Hillesden, said his Ramsgate friend ought to be prosecuted.

'Killin', I should think,' says Captain Fenton gravely.

Lady Maria casts a reproving glance at him, but no harm is done, as Mr. Popkin, started on the all-engrossing theme, does not hear him.

'What I'm afraid of is that the concert part of it won't be all we would wish. So few people here in the singin' line, you know.'

'True,' says Anthony kindly. 'We must only try and draft in a few from outside. By-the-by, Mr. Browne is rather famous with his banjo songs. You should enlist him at once. No, don't mind now. I'll do it for you. He's going to stay with me for a month or so. And there is Miss Fairfax; she is a host in herself—such a lovely voice.'

'Charmin'! charmin'!' says the curate.

'I think you might say a word for me,' says Fenton re-

proachfully. 'In costume, you know, I'm very effective. I gave them a few little things at Chester last week, and, I hear, Chevalier, who happened to be there, was green with envy. I do hope, Mr. Popkin'—adjusting his glass in his eye—'you are not'—with a quick change of tone to one that almost exactly resembles Popkin's—'goin' to put me out of the actin'. I'd call that disgustin'.'

'Sidney, give Miss Langley-Binks some tea,' interposes Lady Maria severely.

'Shall I, Miss Langley-Binks?' says Sidney, who is determined not to stir. He is standing by the tea-table, where the governess is busying her small brown hands with the cups and saucers, and, as he speaks, he gives her a slight glance, as much as to say he would be inhospitable, or even rude, to Miss Langley-Binks, rather than leave her. It is only 'pretty Fanny's way.' He couldn't have helped it to save his life. To show to every pretty woman he meets a tender deference —to make light, and sometimes eager, love to her—is as the breath of his nostrils.

Miss Royce, lifting her black eyes slowly to his, looks at him strangely, lingeringly. There is a gleam in the fathomless eyes that half amuses, half puzzles him. Then the eyes drop again, and the brown fingers grow busier than ever.

'Oh no—no, thanks!' cries Miss Langley-Binks, in a voice that shakes the room.

'Good old girl!' says Sidney, with a sigh of relief, in a low tone to Miss Royce. 'Walls aren't crumbling, are they? I say, you sing, too, don't you? Oh yes, you do. I'—tenderly —'remember that delicious little French thing you sang last Thursday.' He turns abruptly to Popkin. 'You are bound to make this a success, eh? *Must*, you know, with the Bishop and all his robes coming. And what are you talking about, Anthony, when you speak of bringing in outsiders? Why, with Cecil and Miss Royce we shall do a roaring trade.'

'Miss Royce—oh yes!' says Verschoyle quickly. 'Miss Royce has a most sweet and singularly expressive little voice; but it *is* little, and the Assembly Room is large.'

'I couldn't,' says the governess quickly. 'No'—nervously —'*no*.'

'You're afraid,' says Sidney. 'Now, I—man as I am—am *not*. Tell you what, Popkin: Miss Royce and I will sing a duet together. That will make a change in the bill, and——'

'Oh, it'll be lovely!' says Jinnie, casting herself into Captain Fenton's arms. 'Sidney, you're a *duck!*'

Everyone laughs a little, and the whole thing seems arranged.

'It is delightful to see so much energy,' says the curate, bleating very loudly, 'for the good cause. Even amongst—he, he, he'—the bleats are now immense—'amongst those who are considered wolves in the flock.' He gives a wreathèd smile to Sidney, who gives him back another, that sends Jinnie into fits of joy, and makes her mother very angry. But Mr. Popkin is above all such clown's play.

'I believe in transmigration,' says Sidney. 'Don't you? I know I'm going to be a lamb shortly.'

Mr. Popkin shakes a funny finger at him. All at once he tells himself he likes Captain Fenton. Indeed, most people do. It is only the very few who don't; but they are people of discretion.

'You are amusin'—very amusin',' says Mr. Popkin gaily. 'But we must be serious now, really. This bazaar means a great deal to our parish music. The organ is really too horrifyin'—isn't it, Mr. Verschoyle? It *squeaks*—it quite squeaks, I assure you.'

Mr. Popkin looks at Anthony, and puts his little head to one side. Thus posed, he looks exactly like a superannuated robin.

'With raffles and—er—other things we shall pull through,' says Anthony.

'Ah! that's just it,' says Carry Desmond, who, with Richard Amyot, has come up. 'But I hear the new Bishop won't hear of raffles—says they're vulgar or something.'

'Not vulgar, dear Miss Desmond,' says the curate, clasping his hands tightly, and mowing at her over the top of them; 'but immoral.'

'Oh! it's all the same,' says Miss Desmond, with beautiful breadth of feeling, and perhaps not so much ignorance as one might imagine.

'If *you* would only do something for us, our fortune would be assured,' says the curate, still leaning over his folded hands, and looking, if possible, a greater ass than even Nature intended him to be.

'Well, I can't,' says Carry, throwing up her curly head. 'I'm A1 at raffles; get more tickets than most—don't I,

Tony?'—to Verschoyle. 'But if this silly old fossil is going to cut them off, good-bye to my help.'

'I think—I really think, don't you?' says Mr. Popkin, addressing people generally, and evidently ready to change even his opinions for Carry's sake, 'that his lordship is goin' a little too far. I was thinkin' that if he were to allow even a few raffles for sacred things—let us say like the altar-cloth that Lady Maria is givin'—it wouldn't be runnin' in the face of his principles, and we should make considerably more than if we sold things outright.'

'Quite so,' says Sidney. 'Do you know, Popkin, I don't quite believe in that Bishop of yours? Anything of the swindler about him, do you think?'

'Oh, my dear sir!'

'Looks a little as if—you know.'

'I don't, indeed,' says Popkin.

'Well, he objects to raffles, you say—mind, *you* say—and then you tell us that the tablecloths——'

'*Altar*-cloths.'

'Can be bought cheaper *without* raffling, at the bazaar. Take my word for it, Popkin, your good old Bishop is going to make a deal on his own account at this fancy fair. You'll see how Mrs. Bishop will be dressed next season. Cloth of gold won't be in it. And, besides——'

'My dear Captain Fenton! No, no! *Nothin'* of the sort. The Bishop is above suspicion.'

'Like Cæsar's wife,' says Sidney, who is enjoying himself.

'Heavens!'

Poor Mr. Popkin, feeling his brow bathed in unnatural heat (that's how he puts it: he studies to be refined), wonders if anyone has heard these terribly scandalous remarks about the Lord Bishop. Evidently no one has, and his righteous soul feels relief.

'If—if his lordship would allow even a raffle here and there,' says he—as though 'a raffle here and there' were nothing, and hadn't even a word to say to the big principle of it all—'we might make quite a good sum for the organ; but he told me himself he distinctly disapproved of gamblin' of all sorts. Conscientious, no doubt, but to us who want to get a new organ it is bafflin'—very bafflin'.'

Mr. Popkin is always so delighted with his new language that he repeats it whenever repetition is possible.

'What is baffling?' asks Carry, who has not quite heard.

'My dear Carry, you ought to attend,' says Sidney. 'To a bazaar what can be more bafflin' than to have no rafflin'?'

At this even Carry looks severe, and turns away to meet Amyot face to face.

'I'm going to fish that stream of Verschoyle's to-morrow,' says he, 'the Droon—up at the Den, you know. Will you come? Of course if it's as bright as to-day I shouldn't go, but if not——'

'Oh, I'll go,' says the girl carelessly. 'Auntie likes a trout now and then, and if I can't land one, *you* can.' She smiles, opening her wide and kindly mouth with a touch of *camaraderie* in the smile that makes it almost beautiful. 'About eleven, then—and *I'll* bring some sandwiches this time. Yours'—with a grimace—'were awful.'

'I haven't an aunt, you see,' returns he, in perfect good-humour, 'or'—he pauses—'anyone else, for the matter of that.'

'Oh, but you soon will,' returns she.

She makes a little grimace, and accompanies it with a shrug of her shoulders. As she does so, she glances lightly at Miss Langley-Binks, who is standing in the window over there—Miss Langley-Binks, who is looking back at *her* with a somewhat strained expression on her large face.

'Oh, I know what you mean,' says Richie, colouring. 'But that's all nonsense. And even'—heavily sighing—'if——' He pauses, and then, seeing much in Carry's eye, goes on defiantly: 'After all, she isn't a bit worse than Popkin.' He looks across the room at Popkin. 'Oh, hang it! Popkin's even *worse*.'

Miss Desmond gives way to laughter, subdued, but gay.

'Worse, nonsense! They are both—*worst*,' says she.

CHAPTER IV.

'A choking gall.'

'I WONDER Cecil hasn't come in this afternoon,' Lady Maria is saying, when the door is thrown open and Miss Fairfax is announced.

'At last!' says Anthony quickly, irrepressibly. Had he

been waiting, listening? His cousin, Captain Fenton, has gone to meet her.

'Talk of an angel,' says the latter, in a low tone; not so low, however, but that Maden Royce can hear it, as, indeed, she can hear anything he says, at almost impossible distances, so acute has her ear grown to the sound of his utterances. She pales a little amongst her teacups, and lets the sugar-tongs fall with a clatter against the silver tray. Miss Fairfax smiles at him, colouring softly. She would have spoken, perhaps, but that now Mr. Verschoyle has reached her, and is holding her hand.

'My mother has been expecting you.'

'Only your mother!' says Cecil, with a little laugh, and a sudden glance that makes his heart beat. Yet there is nothing in either glance or laugh. Not half so much, indeed, in both united, as there was in that one blush she had given to Sidney—to Sidney who cares so little for it.

She draws her hand from Anthony's, always with the prettiest air, and goes on to where his mother sits.

'So late,' says the latter.

'Yes, I know. I have come only to go, really. But Maudie Prior made me promise to go and see her this afternoon. She is still very ill, you know; and, besides, I wanted to see the baby. It's lovely—all eyes——'

'And nose,' says Mr. Browne, who, unhappily, happens to be near. 'That's a strong point in a baby. Too *much* nose sometimes, they say. But there are always cavillers in every turn of life.'

'Why, Dicky, it's you,' says Miss Fairfax, too much amazed at the suddenness of his presence, thus sprung upon her without a word of warning, to find fault with his abominable sarcasm, his jibe at the adorable babies.

'It is,' says Mr. Browne regretfully. 'I have often wished it might be someone else. But it hasn't come off. And it is you, too, my dear Cecil—as I knew you a year ago, but a little "glorified," if I may say so.'

'Oh, you—you can say anything!' says Miss Fairfax, with a shrug; she accompanies the shrug, however, with a charming smile. She likes Dicky Browne.

Not only her smile, but she herself, is entirely charming. Miss Fairfax is tall—not too tall, not taller than a tall man's heart, for example—and she is straight and supple as a sapling

elm. Her beautiful face is full of life and thought, the gray eyes soft and earnest. Her mouth is replete with tenderness, but with a strength too that is its chief charm. A dear and gentle face, the dearer for its nobility—a nobility that sees no evil in those around her.

Her father had come into his property when quite a young man, to find it hopelessly encumbered—impoverished to the last degree, and, indeed, almost at the vanishing-point.

It was a hard struggle for the man, but he conquered, and came out all right at the other end. He married first an heiress—her name was Keren-happuch, and Mrs. Banfield—always a little disagreeable—said it killed her. Undoubtedly she was Jewish, although her nose was wonderfully modern, and Mr. Fairfax redeemed a great deal of the mortgaged property with her fortune. She was of immense use to him in many ways, though it cannot be said he was of much use to her, beyond changing her name from Cohen to Fairfax.

He was always devoutly grateful that she had given him no children, and no doubt it was this gratitude that enabled him to make a very decent show of grief at her funeral. Later on he married again, a mere Gentile, a very lovely girl, nearly as lovely as her daughter is now, and, like the Jewess, well dowered. Like the Jewess, too, she died, and Mr. Fairfax made no decent signs of grief at her funeral. He appeared cold and emotionless—scandalously unconcerned said some—but he died of nothing in particular a few weeks later, unless it was sheer inability to live without her.

A miser at heart, if not too openly in action, he had amassed to himself riches and redeemed his property. If not born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he certainly died with one in it, but it came too late to be of any use to him. Luck at the eleventh hour is of little good to us poor mortals.

Cecil at seventeen—two years ago now—came in for a very handsome inheritance. She was not only an heiress, but a very lovely girl—one of the rarest combinations on earth.

'Glorified! What a slander!' says Fenton. 'As if there was room for anything of that sort!'

He has taken her muff from her, in a proprietary sort of way—a way that he has with all women—and is pushing a low chair towards her. Miss Fairfax, with a soft little flush, accepts both services.

'Tea?' says a voice at her elbow. The tone is low, but

trembling, abrupt. Cecil, looking up, finds Miss Royce beside her, a cup of tea in her hand.

'Oh, how d'ye do, Miss Royce? Thank you; but I don't think I'll take any more tea. I have just had some at Mrs. Prior's. And, besides, really——'

'I can't stay' was to have been the finish of her sentence, but something in the eyes bent on hers checks her speech. The great dark eyes are literally blazing; the face is quite white. But whatever emotion is troubling Jinnie's governess, her manner remains calm to the verge of coldness. And for a moment only do those strange eyes burn into Cecil's; then they are lifted to Sidney Fenton's, also for a bare moment—and then the cup is carried back to the table from which it came.

Fenton follows the small childish figure, as it moves away, with an air of secret amusement. He has found himself extremely popular with women ever since he came to years of indiscretion, and that this silly, if out-of-the-common pretty, little girl should have fallen in love with him seems quite in the nature of things. Of late, in the tender growing evenings, when

> 'May, with her world in flower,
> Seemed still to murmur and smile,'

he has met her now and again by the river that divides The Towers from the Dower-house. He liked smoking a cigar in the ash grove there (*ash*, so very appropriate, as he used to tell himself in his airy way), and it was the simplest thing to stroll down there in the evening for that purpose. It was, no doubt, the simplest thing, too, for the 'little Maden'—another airy flight on his part—to meet him there. A girl was bound to fall in love sooner or later, and it might as well be with him as with anyone else, and she was distinctly worth cultivating. She passed an hour or two, and gave a touch of life to the monotony of the country. Besides, she was pretty—even more, fascinating; and, of course, it was a calf-love on her part—there would be no difficulty about it afterwards. Perhaps, astute as he believed himself, he hardly understood the 'little Maden.'

No principles to speak of, no heart, a deeply sympathetic manner, and an immense amount of belief in himself, would make up Sidney Fenton's character. But, to give the devil

his due, he possesses, *au fond*, a sort of reckless good-nature that, added to his handsome face and figure, has given him more friends than many a better man can boast. There is, too, something happy and sociable about him that has made him popular in his regiment. As 'a good fellow all round' he is generally regarded: one who never groans over his misfortunes—otherwise debts—or crows over his successes. He is, indeed, as good-natured, and as thoroughly worthless, as anyone can be.

This selfish good-nature now prompts him to follow Miss Royce and say something to her.

'Headache again?' whispers he, under pretence of having some tea. 'You ought to get some air; nothing like air for a bad head.'

'Especially by the river,' returns she bitterly.

'Do you know, I *was* going to suggest that,' says he, with a delightful air of surprise. 'A breeze off the river is always so cool.'

To this she makes no reply, and he, watching her, half earnestly, half with an increasing sense of amusement, tells himself afresh how attractive the small face is, with its dark, glowing eyes and crimson lips.

> 'Graceful she was, as some slim marsh-flower shaken
> Among the sallows, in the breezy spring.'

'You will come this evening?' says he, taking up the sugar-bowl.

'No!'

Sharp and angry, though subdued, rings the word.

'What have I done?' asks Fenton, with that subtle touch of reproach he knows so well how to assume.

Miss Royce at this lifts her head, and casts an expressive glance at Cecil Fairfax, where, at the end of the room, she is standing, very tall and lovely in her silks and laces, talking now to Verschoyle.

'Oh, that!' says Fenton. 'Come, now, isn't that a little stupid of you?'

'Is she stupid, *too*, then?'

'My dear child, what do you mean?'

'Oh, I know! I *know*'—passionately. Her little flower-like face grows deadly pale, her lips quiver. 'She, *too*——'

Her voice dies away, but her meaning remains clear. It

startles Fenton. Cecil Fairfax, the unapproachable, as he has always believed her, the heiress. *No*—a thousand times no! This child's silly jealousy has led her to this mad belief. There is no more than that in it. Yet the suggested knowledge comes to life in his mind later on, and thrives and bears fruit.

'Baby!' says he tenderly. He touches her hand under the pretext of taking up the cream-ewer. 'You *will* come this evening? You won't let me wait for you for ever?'

A faint smile disturbs the sadness of her lips.

'If I could believe.'

'In what? In me?'

'Ah, yes! And that she——' She pauses. 'She'—with agitation—'is beautiful. How could she be compared with me?'

The extreme vehemence of the small creature again touches him to hidden mirth. He leans towards her.

'As moonlight unto sunlight—as water unto wine.'

Her face brightens, her eyes soften. It is the truth, she tells herself. And, in a way, Fenton had been sincere. Cecil Fairfax, with her refined and delicate beauty, and her calm, reserved manner, is almost distasteful to him, whilst this little fervid, unthinking creature, as he deems Maden Royce, is changeable enough in her moods to amuse, and sometimes even to touch him.

'This tea is cold,' says Fenton, putting down the cup—'nearly as cold as you are. I don't care for it now.' He half turns away.

'Let me give you another,' says she quickly. 'And——'

'You will come?'

'Yes.'

Everyone is now on the point of going. There is a little stir in the room.

'I hope,' Mrs. Langley-Binks is saying in a general tone, 'that you will all remember Thursday is my tea-day at the tennis-club. I *do* hope it will be fine, don't you?'

'I do indeed!' says Carry Desmond heartily. She is an ardent tennis-player. The remark, however, had not been meant for her.

'Oh, *you*, of *course*,' says Mrs. Langley-Binks, with a smile that would frighten you. Carry had won the prize at the last local tournament from Aurora, who plays very well, too, considering her size. 'When people'—with a melancholy attempt

at playfulness—'are almost *professionals,* they are doubtless very keen over their game.'

Carry drops back.

'Well, she *is* a rude old thing!' says she, with all her native honesty, addressing the nearest person to her, who happens to be Mr. Popkin.

'She is—she is indeed!' says the curate. 'Anything to oblige,' describes his air. 'She—but you know, dear Miss Desmond, that all the annoyance might be averted if you would only——'

'Oh, bother!' says Carry, who really, in little ways, is dreadful; and Mr. Popkin, crushed again, recedes into the background.

'You, dear Lady Maria, will, I *hope,* come?' Mrs. Langley-Binks is saying in her loud voice, before which Lady Maria seems to give way a little.

'If it is fine, I shall be so glad,' says she. And then, as Mrs. Langley-Binks moves away, she turns plaintively to her son, who happens to be near: 'Are *you* going, Anthony?'

'Yes, of course,' says he, with an amused air; 'and Sidney and Browne will go with me—quite a handsome contingent. I don't honestly think there is any immediate danger.'

'I give myself into your hands,' says his mother demurely.

CHAPTER V.

> 'Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
> Her infinite variety.'

> 'And a bird overhead sang "Follow,"
> And a bird to the right sang "Here";
> And the arch of the leaves was hollow,
> And the meaning of May was clear.'

A LOVELY young wind, filled full with all the scents of May, is rushing up through the valley, little shimmering gusts from it making the river run riot. On its bosom it brings the breath of honeysuckle and of wild-roses, whose delicate faces peep out from all the hedgerows round.

The evening is falling gently, tenderly; but as yet the night is not quite here, though the shadows in the spaces of the ash grove are already large and fanciful. Up above in the trees the soft and delicate cooing of wood-pigeons creates in

one a desire for sleep, for rest, for forgetfulness of all things; so still, so altogether fraught with silence, is the coming night, that almost the opening of the buds, the opening of the young leaves, can be heard.

Something else can be heard, too—the quick, light step of a young girl.

Quickly, impatiently, she crosses the bridge, where the river calls to her so sadly from below, and enters the thick grove to her right. It is an easy thing for her to come out, and down here for an hour or so. When first she came to the Dower-house she suffered intensely from headaches, and Mrs. Verschoyle had recommended the cool, sweet air of evening to her as a cure. At first the evening had meant four o'clock, or five; but now the days have lengthened.

In this easy household, however, where neither Lady Maria nor Mrs. Verschoyle dreams of unpleasant possibilities, Miss Royce, once Jinnie is disposed of for the night, is considered off duty, and not dreamt of again until the morning. A careless treatment if unmeant selfishness towards the girl, for which Mrs. Verschoyle afterwards bitterly reproached herself.

'At last,' says Sidney Fenton, coming out of the shadow of the wood to meet her.

'I am late,' says she. Her breath is coming quickly. Evidently she has run a great part of the way.

'I thought you were never coming,' returns he, with the lover-like ardour he finds it so easy to assume. As a fact, however, he had been feeling a little uncertain as to her coming at all, for the past five minutes, and, to his own surprise, a little impatient. As has been said, she amuses him, and has dropped into his short stay in this dull country life as a relief to the monotony of it. And she is really very pretty and very young, and—he will soon be going away.

'To love and to ride away' is no new thing with him, and, of course, this child——

He doesn't believe in broken hearts himself, and—well, lightly come, lightly go, is doubtless her creed as well as his, or *will* be, later on.

He means no harm to her; he can swear that; and she, dear little thing . . . Her eyes were so loving when calm, so much lovelier when enraged. He likes to enrage her, if only to see the quick lights and shades in them—the fierce anger, fading to the wonderful softness of forgiveness. To

mark these effects delights him, and gives a zest to his meetings with her.

Once he is gone, however, she will, of course, forget him, as many another has had to do. Perhaps he miscalculates a little *this* time—not allowing for the touch of fire in Maden's blood caught from her French mother.

'Well, I couldn't help it,' says she. Then suddenly she pulls the little crimson woollen cap she is wearing from her dark head and flings it to the ground. The gesture is graceful, passionate, suggestive of unrestrained delight.

'Oh, the joy—the freedom!' cries she, as if in ecstasy. 'I feel like one escaped. And the run here, all through the scented air, and with the mad rush of the river in my ears! Ah, I felt as if I could rush *with* it—anywhere—anywhere.'

'That's rather unkind, isn't it?' says Captain Fenton, gazing at her with unfeigned admiration. Standing there, beneath the branching trees, with her small hands clasped against her dusky head, and her eyes alight, she looks like some sylvan sprite—all fire and life. Like a red spot of blood her little cap lies on the greensward a foot or so away from her. 'If you had gone with the river, what should I have done?'

'Ah, I shouldn't have gone,' says she. She laughs; her white teeth gleam.

'And your headache?'

'Headache? *Had* I a headache? *Ever?* I haven't one now, any way, or,' laughing gaily, almost wildly, 'a head either, I think.'

'Maden!' He catches her hands suddenly, and draws her to him; but she slips lightly away, and stands back, laughing always, and with a wonderful coquetry in her air.

'Do you know how pretty you are?' says Fenton quickly, eagerly.

'Pretty! I hate the word,' says she, pouting. 'Ah, to be tall, and fair—and beautiful!'

'Like Cecil Fairfax'—mimicking her tone lightly. 'Well, you can't be tall and fair, you know; Nature's forbidden that.'

'Yes, I know'—gloomily. All her charming gaiety of a moment ago is now overclouded. She stands now—so quickly changed are her moods—a little image of despair.

'But——' says he, and pauses as if to tantalize her.

'Yes'—eagerly,

'You *can* be beautiful—you *are*.'

'But not like her. I have not her charm, her grace.'

'A thousandfold more!' cries he, with sudden vehemence that astonishes even himself.

'Ah!' Her voice rises triumphantly. And now she gives him her hands, and comes to him with all the late joyousness intensified in every feature of her vivid face, in every action of her small lissome body.

Some emotion, stronger than he has known for a long time, transitory, no doubt, but real while it lasts, possesses Fenton now. He would have drawn her to his heart, but after a brief moment, that looked like yielding, she again frees herself lightly from his grasp, and with a little charming gesture forbids him to come nearer.

'Sit down here and let us talk,' says she, indicating the fallen trunk of a tree near her. 'This bazaar seems to be absorbing everybody's thoughts.'

'Not mine,' says he, with a downward glance at her, a glance she catches and returns with a smile that is warm as sunshine.

'It ought, however.'

'How? Oh, I see. You are to take part in it. You will help at Lady Maria's stall?'

'Yes. And we are all to be in fancy costume.'

She looks so very fanciful at the present moment, sitting here in the dusky twilight on the old tree, that it occurs to Fenton that she hardly wants accessories for the part she is going to take at the bazaar.

'What are you going as?—a fairy?'

'No, no! nothing so frivolous.'

'A pixie, then?'

'Wrong again. Fancy Lady Maria's face if you asked her that question!'

'Ah, you ought to be a pixie,' says he. 'It would suit you.'

'Why?'

She moves a little nearer to him, blinking her pretty lids, with their long, dark eyelashes, rapidly, so curious has she grown.

'Don't you know?'

'No, indeed.'

'Well, come closer, and I'll tell you. It isn't safe to speak out loud about pixies in wooded places now'—he has secured

her hand, and is holding it in both his, whilst she with widened eyes is looking into his face—'because from all time pixies have drawn from men their very hearts—and souls.'

'No, no!' she says; she drags her hand out of his, as if affrighted, and then quite as suddenly pushes it back again. 'Oh, nonsense! And whose soul, whose heart? Oh, no, no, no!'

There is something childish in the expostulation. Is she to be an evil influence in his destiny? That he loves her she hopes, she fears. Her eyes are full of tears as she looks at him.

'I shall not be a pixie at the bazaar, or at any other time,' says she; 'and yet——'

She hesitates, and with a little gesture turns his face to hers.

'And yet I would I could be one,' says she, 'to turn your soul to mine.'

Softly, softly blows the tender night wind through the trees; softly, too, runs the river down below. Above, in the branches, the birds are nesting, little tiny cheeps from unseen recesses making the air sweet with a music magical. Down there the river is rushing, pale gray in its hue; whilst above the sky is gray, too, sky and water thus making one exquisite blend.

> 'Behind the western bars
>   The shrouded Day retreats,
> And unperceived the stars
>   Steal to their sovran seats.'

'Maden,' says he, in a low tone, 'do you ever think?'

'Ah, too much and too often. But we will not think now. It'—frowning—'troubles me. Well, I am not going to be a pixie, you see.'

'I'm not sure.'

She laughs, and rubs her cheek against his shoulder.

'Oh no. Only a French peasant. Odd, Lady Maria's choosing that costume for her stall, eh?'

'Why? It would suit you better than anything else, if you can't be my pixie. And you could wear that little red cap.' He points to where it is lying in the light of the young May moon, that now has arisen in all its glory, and is flooding even this tree-haunted place with light. '*That* suits you, any way.'

'You think I would look well as a French peasant, then?'

A frown has settled on her brow.

'It is an effective costume, and——'

'Appropriate?'

She is frowning still.

'Why, what's the matter now?' asks Fenton.

'Oh, nothing, only I *hate* to look like a Frenchwoman.'

'Well, you don't,' says he, laughing.

'Still'—she lifts her eyes with evident reluctance to his—'my mother was French.'

'And your father?'

'English.'

'The happiest combination of all,' says Fenton, laughing. 'That's what makes you——'

'Yes?'

She turns to him; again the glowing light of happy expectancy is in her eyes.

'What you are.'

'Oh, but that—but that!' cries she. She rises impulsively, and with her hands separated, but clenched, looks at him. '*Tell* me!'

'The sweetest—the *dearest* thing on earth,' says Fenton, forgetting all things—prudence, to-morrow even—with those dark eyes on his.

'Ah!' She runs to him. 'If *I* might think that *you* thought that.'

'You may,' says he, in a low, impassioned tone, and for the moment he believes in his own mood. His arms are round her, he stoops over her; but even at this instant, with one small but firm hand upon his breast, she pushes him from her.

'No, you mustn't kiss me,' says she, her eyes on his, her breath coming quickly. '*No.*' And then all suddenly, as if angry with herself for her cold-heartedness, she relents a little—a very little.

'Well, only just my eyes, my hair—*not* my lips. Now, remember!'

It is strange, even amusing, but he can see that she really means it. She is always amusing. But what is still more strange is the fact that Fenton respects her meaning, and it is only on her hair and her eyes his kisses rest. Upon her lips, not one.

CHAPTER VI.

'We'll prove it just, with treacherous bait,
To make the preying trout our prey.'

To-day, as Mr. Amyot acknowledges with disgust as he springs out of bed, is a 'scorcher.' Above, indeed, Sol is running amuck, and the solemn earth beneath is suffering.

'Awful rot, thinking of fishing on a day like this!' he tells himself further on. Yet, having arranged with Carry Desmond to meet her at the Droon at a certain hour, he most unwillingly dons his armour—fishing boots, basket, rod, and book with the sacred flies—and starts for the rendezvous.

*   *   *   *   *

Up here amongst the hills, where the river leaps gaily from rock to rock, the shadows are lying and the air is almost cool. The tall trees on either edge of it, with their hanging branches, resist the sun, and here and there in the darkened pools some fishing may be hoped for. The day is exquisite, and full of fresh young breathings. It is, indeed, hardly possible to move without taking the life of some small perfect thing. The wood-anemones and the cuckoo-flower are making carpets everywhere, while on the banks 'my lady's bedstraw' is climbing over everything its dainty feet can touch, and here, in corners, the gaudy celandine calls loud for praise.

And the ferns! The ferns are everywhere, gloriously cool, and filled with so many different greens as to suffice the eye. Spring is still with us, as it seems, though summer is very near at hand, its message coming with the May:

'May, that mother is of monthës glade,
When all the freshë flowers, green and red,
Be quick again, that Winter deadë made,
And full of balm is floating every meade.'

'Oh! there you are,' says Carry Desmond, glancing at him over her shoulder as he comes springing over the rocks on her left—a short-cut to the Droon. With rod in hand she is whipping the stream diligently. 'I suppose you thought the day too bad for anything, but you were wrong. You generally are. I've got two already'—with a swift gesture towards her basket, that is lying on the bank above her.

She vouchsafes him no further, no more ordinary greeting.

She and he are indeed comrades too well tried to care for the bare conventionalities of their day. Besides which, Carry, it must be confessed, is somewhat of 'a boy spoiled,' as Mrs. Verschoyle always says.

She had come amongst the Hillesden people seventeen years ago. The old place she lives in was once what the land agents call 'a handsome residence,' but many years of Carry's father's residence in it (this last remark alone will show her Irish origin) had sufficed to bring it to the verge of dissolution. As a fact, Tudor Hall, for so it was named when Mr. Desmond took it, is now in the last stages of decay. The walls are falling in, the roof is distinctly unsound, not a boarding in any part of the house that a stout step might not crack in two. There has been a hint of late that someone walking without wariness across the drawing-room floor might find himself unawares in the kitchen.

In the country one's world is very limited, yet Cecil Fairfax had found she was Carry's cousin—a far-off cousin, truly, but still, if distantly connected, of her very blood. Carry's mother had been English, and the second Mrs. Fairfax's first cousin.

There arose a strong affection between the two girls: one so well off, the other so distinctly poor. Cecil would gladly have loaded Carry and her aunt with benefits, but was refused—more distinctly even by the girl than by her aunt. No, no! They could live alone, she and auntie. They could manage perfectly.

* * * * *

'Well, you *are* lucky!' says Richie, pulling out the contents of the basket. 'Half a pound, or three-quarters, if anything.' He hardly looks at her, so intent is he on the trout she has caught. But, then, he knows her looks. 'But it was a beastly day in the beginning, wasn't it?'

'Not half bad, *I* thought.'

No more is said. Amyot now grows busy with his tackle, and presently, springing from stone to stone over a rough crossing-place, he reaches the other side of the river, and marching upwards, though scarcely out of sight or call of his companion, finds a favourite pool, and casting a green drake lightly on the water, possesses, as all fishermen must do, his soul in patience.

Slowly, silently, the minutes go by, growing into quarters and half-hours. Carry has made her two trout four, and has

learned to her satisfaction that Richie's basket is the better for only one. Both are fishing down the stream, he very much above her, and now at a turn of the river he is out of sight.

The river is swollen almost to its banks, because of the late rains, and is tumbling heavily on its way to the great sea far down there many a mile away. Pale-green it gleams in the shallower parts, and now tea-green in the deeper, and black as night in the big pools where the fish lie hungry ; and sometimes there comes a fall, where the spray dashes up in foamy clouds, half drowning the delicate ferns that deck out with charming coquetry the old river's broken sides—kind ferns that always seek to hide, like the ivy, old age, and poverty,, and sad decay. A tender wind has risen, moving the gentle ripples of the water here and there on its downward course, but all around is silence. No sound breaks the delicate stillness of the noon, save the song of the stream and the sighing and rustling of ferns and grasses. Sometimes the river's music is broken by the trilling of a bird overhead, but not often. The languorous heat of the May day oppresses the birds as well as the plants and bushes.

Suddenly through this quiet a voice rings :

'Carry, come here, come quickly ! Carry, I say——'

Miss Desmond draws in her line as quickly as possible, sees that her fly is safe, and then rushes up the hill to Richie. It is no easy journey, springing thus over boulders and fallen stumps of trees, and she is, therefore, hardly prepared to be accosted thus by Mr. Amyot :

'Hang it all ! you *might* hurry yourself !'

He is red with excitement, and is playing his rod with evident difficulty. The line, indeed, seems strung to the last degree, and his eyes are fixed on a bit of the river over there where some stir amongst the weeds tells its own tale.

'Hang it all yourself !' says Carry indignantly. 'I ran all I could. You didn't expect me to fling my rod into the stream, did you ?'

'Never mind me ; I'm sorry. But catch hold, and sit tight,' says Amyot.

With this he thrusts his rod into her hands, and, springing on a branch of an old alder that lies across the river, drags himself as far as he can, then drops into mid-stream. From that a stroke or two takes him to the other side, where his line lies fouled amongst a lot of weeds.

'Got caught!' he roars to Carry across the water; 'but there's a fish on, and a whopper, if I know anything. Dig the rod into the bank.'

Carry, whose ill-temper is always a transitory evil, and hardly likely to be even remembered when a big catch is on, does as she is directed; and, indeed, there is little time for thought of any kind as the rod begins to grow almost too much for her, so great is the rushing and trembling and returning at the end of it. Now Richie is beside her again, and has taken the rod from her, and is tearing down-stream with it, and now up again; and now the supreme moment has come, and the handsome, speckled, gasping trout is lying at their feet.

'Two pounds, if an ounce!' says Richie, running his sleeve across his forehead.

'Oh, what a beauty!' says Carry. 'It—it seems a shame to kill him. He's a king amongst trout.'

'When the terrible deed has been done, you shall have him,' says Amyot.

'Oh no; I have enough of my own.'

'You shall, though. If *you* hadn't been there to help me, I should never have been able to extricate the line from that stuff over there.'

'You had far better take him to Miss Langley-Binks as a love-offering,' says Carry with a little irrepressible burst of teasing.

'Oh, Carry, confound it! let's forget things for *once*,' says Amyot with a groan of disgust.

'I don't see how you can forget your clothes,' says she. 'Oh, Richie, really, you know, you are awfully wet.'

'Wet or not wet, I feel as jolly as a sandboy,' says Mr. Amyot. 'It's the biggest fish I've caught this year, or the last, for the matter of that.'

'I didn't think it was in it,' says Carry, with almost solemn feeling, indicating the river by a movement of her head.

'I say, I'm starving,' says Richie suddenly. 'What have you brought?'

'There wasn't much of anything,' confesses Carry, without, however, the slightest sign of confusion or *mauvaise honte*. 'Only some cold mutton, and I had to leave enough for auntie's luncheon; though if she knew, old darling! she'd have made me take it all. So I'm afraid the sandwiches are rather more bread-and-butter than anything else.'

'I shouldn't care if they were only bread,' declares Richie, 'as long as there was enough of them; I'm as hungry as a hawk.'

'So am I,' says Carry; and together the two young, happy, healthy creatures seat themselves on a knoll, and munch hungrily at their somewhat unappetizing, if good and wholesome, luncheon. But, then, who wants an appetite when one is young and vigorous, and has gone out fishing since eleven o'clock, and when one has the balmy breath of spring-time in one's heart, and a constitution that would baffle even a specialist to find a flaw in it!

'Carry,' says Mr. Amyot, when he has come to the last crumb, 'what do you think I ought to do about that confounded girl?'

CHAPTER VII.

'I needed rest and comfort,
And came to seek them with you.'

'I REALLY, *honestly* think you ought to marry her,' says Miss Desmond, facing this momentous question with all the solemnity it undoubtedly requires. 'She's got thousands, and you've got only pence, and the old place *must* be kept up.'

'That's what the Dowager says,' acquiesces Amyot, with a sigh.

Richie always speaks of Lady Maria as the Dowager; she, of him, as 'my young relative' or 'that handsome creature Richie.' She always pronounces her favourite term as 'creechaw,' which somehow makes it seem like a new name for a cockatoo.

'She'd know,' says Carry. 'She knows everything. She's ever so clever; and you really ought to listen to her, Richie. She's a cousin of yours, you know. But about Miss Langley-Binks——'

'Oh, that's all right,' says Richie, in a doleful tone. 'It appears her mother threw out hints to the Dowager. What an old beast, eh?'

'M—m!' says Carry, conveying in this extraordinary syllable the very sweetest sympathy.

'It seems she has set her heart on my old place, and thinks she could make up a new Amyot family with the help of my

name and her daughter's money. No family of her own, you know.'

'No *family*. Why, there's Aurora.'

'Oh, nonsense! Who's thinking of that sort of family? Rank in the county, you know, is what she's going for. Grandfathers, and that. And so she's told the Dowager she would be willing to countenance—*countenance*, mind you—an alliance between her daughter's fortune'—bitterly—'and my name! When the Dowager mentioned alliance to me, I felt sick. The Binkses and that class of persons, and Royalties, always speak of alliances. We don't!'

'You forget Lady Maria.'

'No, I don't. They are all in the same boat, not a pin's point to choose between her and the Langleys.'

'Oh, poor Lady Maria! Surely she can't be put in a category with Mrs. Langley.'

'Couldn't she, by Jove! I tell you what, Carry: she only wants to patch up me and my affairs because my old place belongs in a way to her and her family. To keep up the Name, as she calls it—she always puts a big N on, if you notice—she would sell me to the devil, or—that sack!'

'I think you needn't be vulgar, Richie.'

'It's not half so vulgar, any way, as trying to keep up a name by false means—trying to make one by a graft,' says Richie; 'and that's what the Dowager and your precious Aurora are trying to do.'

'Not my Aurora, thank you. But still, Richie——'

'Yes, I know'—gloomily—'lots of fellows have done it. They've taken the plunge for the sake of the family, or the name or title. And if I don't, the old place will be in the market in no time.'

'That would break your heart,' says she, shaking her head dismally.

'Well, it's a choice of evils. Aurora would break it, too.'

'No, no! She isn't so bad as that,' says Carry, plainly bent on encouraging him, though with deep commiseration. 'She's a kind sort of girl, I think, though she is fat: and after all, Richie, she's very fond of you, I think.'

'Ah, that's it,' says Mr. Amyot, whose voice seems now to come out of his boots; 'she *does* like me. You'—with a last lingering ray of hope—'you don't think she'd refuse me, do you?'

'She'll accept you, to a moral,' says Carry; 'you needn't have two thoughts about it.' She pauses. 'And it's better to be fat than a bag of bones, any way.'

The wind sweeps up the stream and down again, but brings no comfort with it.

'Carry,' says Mr. Amyot, 'let us talk of something else.'

In this he shows himself a true philosopher.

Carry laughs.

'With all my heart,' says she; 'but of what? It's fatal to ask a person to talk; it ties one's tongue. Oh, by-the-by, have you heard that our new Bishop—he must be a silly old thing—has a prejudice against raffles? That will destroy half our chances at the bazaar. You know raffles run up a thing so; they are of immense use.'

'Have them on the quiet,' suggests Mr. Amyot, with a disgraceful lack of principle.

'I thought of that, too. I expect it will come to it in the end. Oh, Richie, I wonder how I'll look as a Norwegian peasant.'

'First-class,' says Amyot carelessly; 'though, if they had the pluck to get up a rational costume stall, that'—with a view to teasing her—'would have suited you down to the ground.'

Miss Desmond casts a brief but curious glance at him, and then, for *no* reason, apparently, becomes all at once a brilliant pink.

'Why, you're blushing!' cries Richie, delighted at the success of his venture. 'Yes, you are; you're as red as fire.'

'I suppose I can blush if I like,' says Carry valiantly. Whatever little fear—or fancy—brought the unusual blush, it has now been conquered. 'A Norwegian I am going to be, any way—that's settled. Auntie's cousin, one of the Meath Desmonds, has a Norwegian dress, and she is going to lend it to me. Lucky, isn't it? I couldn't have taken part in Cecil's stall if it hadn't been for that. Oh yes; of course, Cecil wanted to give me the dress, but—well, I couldn't, you know.'

'Yes, I know.'

'And auntie couldn't have done anything. She's awfully down just now, Richie.'

'Nothing fresh?'—anxiously.

'Well, no; not exactly. The old loan, you know. But

we're rather short this year for many reasons, and she doesn't know *how* to make up the next quarter's money. It's only twenty pounds, really, but——'

'I wish to Heaven I could help you,' says Amyot; 'but, as it is, it will be cut and run with me presently, I'm afraid, and the old place in the market. Still, Carry, perhaps I could do something, and you would not mind my helping you.'

'Not a bit,' says Carry, which, indeed, is the truth. 'But you can't, you know; and besides, Richie, I have a small idea of my own. Auntie, it seems, can make out ten pounds, and for the other ten—well, I *have* an idea, I say.'

'Popkin?'—shortly.

'Oh no! not *yet*. Though'—with a sigh—'I expect in the end I shall find myself Mrs. Popkin. What a wretch of a name!'

'And the little brute himself! Don't do it, Carry, and take *my* advice.'

'Lady Maria says he's a very good young man,' says Carry.

'Oh, Lor'! That puts the finishing stroke,' says Amyot, with wild disgust; 'though, after all, I shouldn't talk. We're in the same boat.'

'Yes. Aurora's got money.'

'And Popkin expectations.'

'If I'm one of them,' says Miss Desmond, breaking into most unseemly mirth, 'he'll come to a bad, and, I'm afraid, a speedy end. Oh, I say, Richie, I wonder what Aurora is going to be at the bazaar.'

'A houri, I shouldn't wonder,' says Amyot bitterly, after which they both roar with laughter.

'I fancy,' says Carry presently, 'that when you marry her you won't be allowed to go fishing with me again. She keeps her eye on me. I really think'—giving way to fresh uncontrollable mirth—'she thinks you are in love with me.'

'Well, I like you better than anybody,' says Amyot, regarding her dispassionately.

'Oh, and I you, too, dear old thing!' says Carry, with the most open affection. 'If I had had a brother, I should have liked him to be the very image of you.'

'I've often had that sort of thought about you,' says Amyot. 'If you were a boy instead of a girl, you're just the sort of chum I'd have chosen.'

Again the thought that dyed Miss Desmond's cheeks awhile ago makes them a pale pink now. Why would he not have chosen her as a *sister?* Is she really so like a boy, then, as Mrs. Verschoyle says? Well, if so, so much the better for her scheme. She is still thinking deeply, when Richie's conversation—he has been talking fluently—breaks in upon her dreams.

'It's all rot, of course, about Aurora,' says he. 'If the worst comes to the worst, there is always America. I shouldn't make half a bad sort of cowboy.'

'Horrid!' says she. 'And, besides, to abandon the dear old place! Oh no; I think you ought to make a sacrifice for its sake.'

'A big sacrifice,' says Richie gloomily. 'Well'—with returning cheerfulness—'there is no hurry, any way; that's one comfort. Come on; I think we may as well go home; the sun is blinding. And I think I'll go your way, and give my one great catch to Miss Desmond.'

'Yes, do; she will be pleased,' says Carry, scrambling to her feet. 'You shall lay your offering before her, if not before the great Aurora; and indeed, Richie, I only hope you won't catch your death of cold, sitting here so long in those wet clothes.'

Ten minutes' walk brings them to the torn-down entrance to an avenue, once gravelled, but now thickly sown with weeds. On either side two lines of elm-trees, now bursting into leaf, stand tall and stately, whilst amongst them, straggling and uncared for, laurel bushes are running unheeded into wood. On the right-hand the grass slopes downwards and away into a wooded hollow, now warm with scented bluebells. Across the avenue, and here and there amongst the trees, rabbits are scuttling to and fro, their soft white tails making little flashes of light amongst the green.

The air of utter desolation, the suggestion of poverty that lies on all around, is evidently unheeded by the two who now go up the walk, chatting cheerfully of many things. A turn brings them in view of an old, ivy-covered house, and a little plot of ground at the southern side of it, prettily laid out in flower-beds of the usual ancient designs. The horseshoe here, near the doorsteps, the star next to it, the diamond beyond that again, and so on. This flower-garden is the apple of the elder Miss Desmond's eye, and it is therefore, on hearing

certain 'cushings' and 'shooings,' that Richie and Carry smarten their footsteps as they draw near it.

In the middle of the sacred plot an old lady, dainty, fragile (she looks as if a respectable puff of wind would blow her away), with a snowy kerchief over her head, is making frantic passes in the air at two impertinent hens, that with many insolent glances, and a considerable amount of the very worst language, are slowly retreating to the yard whence they had come on predatory thoughts intent.

'Oh, auntie darling, have they been here again? What beasts they are!'

'Yes, my dear. Yes, indeed: though, perhaps, that is hardly a nice word.' The old lady looks flushed and tremulous from her late exertions. Her pretty cap, with its pale blue ribbons, has been blown a little to one side; her skirt, caught by the merry May wind, lets two of the smallest feet in Europe be seen, clad in their velvet slippers. The Desmonds for generations have been able to boast of the beauty of their feet and hands. 'Is that you, Richie dear?' She raises her face, fair still, in spite of the white soft hair that surmounts it, as Amyot stoops to kiss her affectionately. It is quite a usual proceeding. He has kissed her ever since he first saw her; he was then a little fellow in his first knickers. 'How well you look! But aren't these hens most troublesome?—even worse than the rabbits, though they are getting intolerable—a perfect nuisance! I wish someone would shoot them.'

Here Carry's face again grows conscious—a little pink, a little pleased, however.

'But the hens are worse,' old Miss Desmond goes on in her plaintive voice. 'Just now nothing would suit them but my young stocks, that I only yesterday spent an hour putting out. And they were also attacking my early bed of mignonette, when'—warming to the subject—'I most providentially saw them from the drawing-room window. They trouble me very much.'

'They shan't trouble you much longer,' says Amyot, who is already, indeed, in search of pebbles from the trodden-in old gravel of the avenue; with these, and a stirring whoop, the hens are finally driven out of sight, the speckled one narrowly escaping having her off-leg broken by one of the pebbles.

'I should like to have the garden wired in,' says Miss Desmond, whilst Carry adjusts her dainty cap; 'but wiring

costs so much. And so you have been fishing, you two—any sport?'

'A leviathan,' says Carry, laughing. 'And he has brought it to lay at your feet.'

Richie had opened his basket.

'My goodness, Richie!' says old Miss Desmond. 'Well, really, my dear, I never saw such a handsome creature! Though my poor dead brother, Carry's father, you know, used to tell us of trout he caught. And for *me*, Richie?'

'Where could I find a better shrine?' asks Amyot, patting her pretty old hand softly.

'I suggested that he should give it to Miss Aurora Langley-Binks—goodness, what a mouthful it is!' says Carry—'as a love-offering. But no! you won the day. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, auntie, cutting out all the young people like this.'

Miss Desmond laughs, and colours as delicately as a girl of eighteen. Then all at once she grows grave.

'Love-offering—to Miss Langley—I don't like that,' says she. 'A Binks and an Amyot. No, Richie, no! No good could come of such an alliance as that. I hope, my dear, the gossip I have heard about you and that young woman means nothing.'

'Don't say that, auntie,' says Carry quickly. 'You know how it will be with his old home if he can't get help somewhere. I—I have been advising him to marry her.'

'Carry, you are wrong,' says Miss Desmond, with something in her tone that in anyone else might be called anger.

'I'm not. The old place always calls to one, and he promised his father to keep it up if he could. Didn't you, Richie?'

Amyot nods. Once again that dying scene with his father rises before him: the man dying, holding the lad's hand, and imploring him to keep together the old place, where so many Amyots had lived and died.

'And you know, auntie darling, how you love *this* place. Would you let it go without a pang? Could Richie see his go?'

'Well, well,' says the old maid sadly. She looks round her, at the dilapidated greenhouse that once had been her pride, at the grass growing thickly in the avenue, that used to be so clean. 'It is queer,' says she at last. 'How one shrinks

from death! But I suppose there is something in the sunshine. Come in and have some tea, Richie.'

'No, no! He must go home and change his clothes.'

'Wet, are you, dear? In the river catching that fish for me! Had you whisky, Richie? My brother always said whisky was a splendid thing out fishing. Well, good-bye, dear.' She holds his hand, looking at him sadly. 'Must you do it, Richie—must you? Well, perhaps.' She sighs. 'Poverty is a hard master, God knows!' says she.

CHAPTER VIII.

'A soul exasperated in ills falls out with everything—its friend, itself.'

Mrs. Langley-Binks' 'day' for giving tea to the members of the Hillesden Tennis Club has dawned, as the poet says, 'in perfect beauty,' and already, though it is barely three o'clock, the green-painted and backless forms are lined with the timid ones, who fear to come when all may be assembled, and with the inquisitive ones, who would not miss an arrival for anything. Over there in the tent Mrs. Langley-Binks' servants are preparing the table and laying it out on quite a grand scale. Most of the members are content to give their teas on a modest one—dainty little tea-cakes, delicately-cut bread-and-butter, slices of the generous plum-cake, and the innoxious sponge, and so on. But Mrs. Langley-Binks o'ertops all this—her flowers, her fruit ('some of our own early strawberries, dear Lady Maria'), her bon-bons, and other fal-lals, tend to make her 'tea' a very elaborate affair. And if, as Mr. Browne says, it uplifts her soul, who shall say a word against it? And as for 'you and me, Jinnie—we're nuts on sweeties, eh?'

Jinnie has arrived now, seemingly all legs and arms, with her mother, and Miss Royce in attendance. And Lady Maria has come with them, to Mrs. Langley-Binks' intense relief and delight; she had been trembling, indeed, lest she should not come. That hateful Mrs. Berkeley will be here to a certainty, though she and her hostess of to-day are barely on speaking terms, and would be sure to say her very nastiest things about Lady Maria's staying away. Mrs. Berkeley had given the tea only last week, and Lady Maria had come to it; but, then,

Mrs. Berkeley, if odd, and very vulgar, and painted out of all knowledge, is still first cousin of the Marquis of Waterdale, the Lord-Lieutenant of the county, and in a small way somebody. There are little tales, here and there, about her. For one thing, she had divorced her first husband—a fatal thing for a woman to do, however in the right she may be—and Mrs. Berkeley had certainly been in *her* right when she did it. But this militates, however, against her in some ways, and has tended, perhaps, poor soul ! to heighten the venom of her nature ; but, for all that, she *is* somebody, whilst Mrs. Langley-Binks (and in her own bosom, and sometimes in the watches of the night, she acknowledges the dreadful truth) is, in spite of her money, nobody. However, here is Lady Maria, and the enemy cannot crow to-day, and the poor old snob's soul is at rest.

Mrs. Verschoyle, looking charming in a costume of pale green serge and fur (the weather is still cold), and a little touch of pink in her bonnet, is coming slowly up the path that borders the tennis-courts, when her brother-in-law Anthony, with Captain Fenton and Dicky Browne, check her progress. Carry is with them.

'You look so lovely to-day,' says the latter affectionately and impulsively, as is her wont.

'We have been admiring you as you came up the path,' says Anthony, affectionately too.

'What a dear, dear bonnet !' says Dicky Browne.

'And how you become it !' says Sidney.

Mrs. Verschoyle laughs, and blushes most delicately.

'Oh no ! you really mustn't,' says she tragically. 'I won't have any compliments paid me at this time of day. I'm getting too old for them. There was a time—I don't mind admitting that now'—she is *now* one of the youngest-looking women on the ground—'when I used to receive compliments galore. That's a good sound Irish word—isn't it, Carry ? But when one has reached the season of the sere and yellow leaf——'

'Only one hasn't,' says Mr. Browne gaily. 'This, unless my intellect has played me false, is just the close of the merry spring-time. You will have to wait a long, long time for your yellow leaf.'

'Courtier !' says she with a charming smile.

The afternoon is growing in beauty. Down by the lazy

reaches of the river that runs by one side of the courts some of the people are wandering, whilst here, in the cool shade of branching beeches, little groups are sitting on the uncomfortable seats, or standing about gossiping gaily of all things in earth—but certainly not in heaven.

'By Jove! here's Mrs. Berkeley,' suddenly says Amyot, who is leaning over Lady Maria's chair.

The latter always holds, wherever she goes, a little court of her own, to which, as a rule, the young only are admitted. Lady Maria likes youth. A little flutter runs through the crowd around her now as Richie speaks.

'My dear, I hope not,' says Lady Maria, very half-heartedly, however. In her way she likes this queer Mrs. Berkeley; besides, there is a cousinship between them somewhere, and she is great on 'clans.' 'There is sure to be some little unpleasantness between her and Mrs. Langley.'

'Not to-day, perhaps,' says Mrs. Verschoyle. 'Even if *she* isn't, Mrs. Langley is sure to be on her best behaviour.'

'And so we shall escape fireworks,' says Sidney Fenton.

'Hard to escape them with Mrs. Berkeley,' says Dicky Browne meditatively. 'Her hair is perfectly suggestive of them. Talk of casting coals of fire on your enemy's head! If Mrs. Langley-Binks were to cast some on Mrs. Berkeley's, it would be perfectly iniquitous; 'twould cause a conflagration—burn down the whole town, most likely.'

'It is strange,' says Anthony; 'but really, red hair is growing scarce. There seems to be nobody with red hair nowadays.'

'It's *dyeing* out,' says Dicky sadly.

Lady Maria makes a little pass at him with her long glasses. 'Ah, naughty boy!' says she.

'I believe it is very unfashionable nowadays to have red hair,' says Mrs. Verschoyle.

'Such a pity!' says Fenton. 'Such a glorious colour, and sets off the complexion so.'

'So does paint,' says Lady Maria. 'Very vulgar, all that kind of thing.'

'Still, Titian—he admired red hair: was he vulgar?' asks Sidney, with a suppressed amusement that annoys Anthony.

'Intensely so,' says Lady Maria. 'On his canvases, at all events. But we were not talking of Titian, were we?—of Mrs. Berkeley, rather. She is, I am afraid, a little—er—well,

a very little—*you* know, dearest'—to Mrs. Verschoyle, who has an anxious eye on Mrs. Berkeley's approach; she is now only about a hundred yards off. 'But certainly very amusing. And in a place like this, my dear Dicky, where there is no one, as a rule, but the curate and the fossils, one can forgive a good deal. However, I am going to say a word or two to her about that silly little Infantry boy she is taking about with her of late. If he had been in the Horse Guards, or even in the Artillery, I'd say nothing; one could understand; but she—so well connected, and a widow, and no family—she might surely do better. And——'

She backs water smartly. The subject of her discourse is now almost on her.

'Oh, how d'ye do?' says a high-pitched voice at her ear. 'I've had such an amusing day. Tell you about it later on. You do look dull. Any tea to-day? Seems unlikely.'

Mrs. Berkeley is a tall, thin woman, with a high, aristocratic nose and a mouth that, literally, speaks volumes. She is forty-five if a day, but poses as thirty. This need not be laid down to her charge. Very many good women have been known to do likewise.

Perhaps, however, those good women would have been indignant at Mrs. Berkeley's complexion. There might, indeed, have been a question about its arising from extreme good health. Any way, her cheeks are always blooming, and her lashes singularly black. Mrs. Langley-Binks is in the habit of asking her intimates how much Mrs. Berkeley pays her maid; but, then, Mrs. Langley-Binks is so vulgar!

Mrs. Berkeley gets through her life in spite of all this. She is tall, as I have said, and her face is long—it runs down, indeed, like a curtain—and she has her own qualities. For example, she can tell a lie of her neighbour so reasonably, so concisely, so entirely without alteration, in spite of the fact that she has told it twenty times before, that after a bit she learns to believe in it herself. In this way she saves her conscience a good deal. She has come to-day without the Infantry man, which all feel to be a relief.

'I think we shall have it very soon,' says Lady Maria. She draws her skirts aside politely. 'Will you sit here?'

The only garden-seat with a back to it has been allotted to the Dowager.

'No, tha*a*nks; hate sitting down. Have only run in for a

moment, really. So Mrs. Binks'—putting a glass in her eye and staring at the florid tea-table in the tent beyond—'is going to have the usual banquet? Too much for her, evidently. Five now'—consulting her watch—'and not even the modest cup of tea ready——'

She ends, rather out of breath.

'I really think you had better sit down,' says Lady Maria, mildly sarcastic.

'To see it out?' Mrs. Berkeley shrugs her meagre shoulders. 'I dare say it might prove interesting. "All the delicacies of the season," isn't that how she puts it? Is that Mr. Popkin down there? I hope she's got brandy pawnee for him. Curates require something special. I'll ask her presently. She'll think it's a new sort of gown—something Oriental. He's looking our way.'

'Oh yes, he's comin', he's comin'!' says Dicky Browne with a glance at Carry—who returns it furiously—and an exact imitation of the curate's voice and peculiar phraseology.

Mrs. Berkeley laughs, as well as her stays will allow her.

'You haven't told us about your amusing day,' says Lady Maria, who really ought to have known better.

'No? Well, I went to lunch with Mrs. Harcount (General's wife), and the Colonel's little daughter was lunching too. Nice little garl, but rightdown awful when one looked into her! My word! she beats most. Just in the middle of it she fixed her eyes on Captain Graile—you know, Adjutant; man with brick-red hair—and said out loud for everyone to hear: "Saw you kissin' Miss Jones"—General's daughter, ye know—"last night." "Sh—sh—sh!" says everybody. "Yes, I did, and not once, but *twenty* times!" Wasn't it awful? Could have heard a shudder run through the room. Thought I'd have gone into my shoes. Captain Graile was purple; Miss Jones on point of fainting. And as for the General! Such a row all round as it was. But awful funny little garl, don't you think?'

'Hopeful little "garl," at all events,' says Mr. Browne.

'Little beast!' says Carry in a low tone; she feels sorry for poor Miss Jones.

'I think she ought to be locked up out of harm's way, and given a sound whipping,' says Lady Maria.

Mrs. Berkeley seems immensely amused at these criticisms.

'She is only tw*a*lve, you know,' says she. 'Whipping too

severe, eh? Par child couldn't be expected to know, you know.'

'I don't think I believe in the *ingénue* of twelve,' says Mrs. Verschoyle. 'Just fancy Jinnie ever saying anything like that!'

'My dear, you *couldn't* fancy it,' says Lady Maria, with a frown.

'Your Jinnie is seven, I think,' says Mrs. Berkeley promptly. 'Wonderful clever little garl for that! I shouldn't really wonder, if, when she is twelve——'

She moves gracefully forward to greet someone else, having left her little story behind her.

'Odious woman!' says Mrs. Verschoyle, who, usually so placid, is now stirred to her depths. 'After all, I'm sure she is rouged.'

'Aspinalled,' says Captain Fenton with severe correction. 'Warranted to wear. Soap and water invited.'

'I say,' says Amyot, coming up to them at this moment, 'there's a court over there empty. Let's secure it while we can.'

'By all means,' says Fenton.

Maden Royce is standing quite close to him, and in a little flash her eyes meet his: Will he—will he?

Cecil Fairfax is a little beyond her.

'Have a game, Cecil?' says Sidney.

Cecil nods.

Maden stands motionless, her strange face livid.

'Miss Royce and I will play you,' says Amyot. 'Will you, Miss Royce?'

'Yes.'

It is with difficulty she forces herself to speak the husky word. To *kill*—to kill Cecil is her one desire at this moment, and yet Cecil, of all the people in Hillesden, has been the kindest to the poor little waif.

Here, providentially, Mrs. Langley-Binks says:

'Dear Lady Maria, tea is ready. Will you come to the tent, or shall some of my people bring it here to you?'

'Thank you, I should prefer to go to the tent,' says Lady Maria, rising.

'Come on, Sidney, and we'll give you a licking,' says Amyot gaily, turning towards the tennis-court.

Sidney, finishing, rustles up—Cecil is talking to Mrs. Langley-Binks; he would have said something to Miss Royce, but with a passionate gesture she repulses him and follows Amyot.

CHAPTER IX.

'I see the devil's hook, and yet cannot help nibbling at his bait.'

'By Jove! that's a good set,' says Dicky Browne.

He is in the pleasantest temper. The tea had been excellent, the iced champagne considerably better, and the cakes beyond reproach; he has left the sweetmeats, the sandwiches, and the fruit for later on. Jinnie has been his heroic aider and abettor all through. Nobody on earth knows why children like Dicky. He spends hours of his life preparing unpleasant surprises and artful teasings for them, yet one and all they adore him. Perhaps they like teasings and surprises.

'It looks very equal,' says Anthony Verschoyle, with an attempt at indifference a little overdone.

He moves away as he speaks, and Mr. Browne looks after him meditatively: he is fond of Anthony.

It is indeed an excellently matched game—Miss Royce and Amyot against Cecil and Captain Fenton. Cecil is a very pretty player, if scarcely strong; but, then, Fenton is good enough for most people. He can generally, in the smaller tournaments, take the cup wherever he goes.

As for Amyot, he is playing his best, certainly, but that would not bring him within talking distance of Fenton. But Miss Royce! Miss Royce, whose playing up to this has been of the usual kind, not too good and not too bad, seems to be possessed with a very demon of skill to-day. The lookers-on, indeed, grow curious, and those who have been hanging round the other courts by degrees desert their friends, and congregate at the foot of this one.

Strangely enough, it seems to them as if the little girl they have known as Jinnie's governess has grown. She certainly seems taller, and her usually impenetrable face is now pale as the dead, the large dark eyes alone alive in it. Like a creature possessed, she flies here, there, everywhere, smashing her balls into unexpected corners; never forgetting, however, to give to Miss Fairfax—who is weak in her returns—all the difficult balls.

Five games all!

Fenton, surprised, rouses himself and prepares to win the next easily; but something in the passionate despair of the

little, dark, brilliant face behind the net over there touches him with a kind of amused compassion. Well, *she* shall win. And so the game comes to an end—game and set to Miss Royce—and everyone applauds loudly, and says it was Miss Royce's charming play that carried all before it.

Maden, colourless, breathless, is going towards the tent with Amyot, when Cecil and Sidney come up with her. She would not have seen them if possible, but Cecil stops her, laying her hand, with a sweet little gesture, on her arm. In some way Cecil has always liked this small, strange, wayward girl.

'How beautifully you played!' says she. 'It was almost'—laughing—'a pleasure to be beaten by you. Come and have some tea with us; you must be very tired. She does look pale, Sidney, doesn't she?'

The gentle appeal to Fenton, seeming to Maden like an understanding between the two, rouses her worst passions.

'I am not tired,' says she shortly. 'Pray do not trouble yourself about me. You'—panting—'believe me—are the very last person—I——'

Fenton breaks in quietly but calmly.

'Oh, you are overdone,' says he. 'My dear Cecil, if you will go on with Amyot, I will take Miss Royce to that seat over there. She is almost faint, and no wonder.'

He gives a cold warning glance to Maden, that brings her suddenly to herself. Cecil nods kindly, and goes on with Amyot.

'We'll send some tea,' says she kindly, as she goes.

'Or some cup,' suggests, with an unmoved countenance, Mr. Browne, who happens to be standing near. He grows a little thoughtful, however, as they separate. He, with perhaps a few others, had been suspicious of Fenton's play in that last game. He had certainly let Miss Royce win it. 'Mashed on the governess,' says Dicky to himself, 'or the governess mashed on him? Which? The latter, I think. I wish Cecil well out of it.' He grows even more thoughtful. As has been said, he is fond of Verschoyle. 'Poor old Anthony!' says he; and then, with a little click: 'What a beastly idiot a really nice girl can be!'

He is roused from these extraordinary meditations by the voice of Miss Verschoyle, who, in the shortest petticoats and the longest and thinnest legs, has again sought his side.

'Who *did* win, Dicky?' asks she excitedly. 'Go on. Tell me!'—in the irrepressible way of all children. 'Tommy Bagot was pulling my hair, and I had to kick him, so I didn't see.'

'This comes of promiscuous flirtations,' says Mr. Browne severely. 'If, as my *fiancée*, Jane, you had conducted yourself with even common decency, you might have learned the information you seek for yourself.'

'Oh, bother!' says Jinnie. 'Ah, Dicky, do tell me. I hope it was my Miss Royce.'

'Do you?' Mr. Browne stares at her meditatively. That governess, then, whom he distinctly distrusts, can't be all bad. Jinnie is a person of discrimination, and she evidently likes her. 'Well, how can I say? You know you stood right before me as the game was going on, and you've grown so frightfully tall of late that I couldn't see over your head.'

'That's a story,' says Jinnie, who has no scruples. 'You're ever so much bigger than me. You must have twenty feet, and the carpenter was up yesterday, and he says I've got only nearly four feet.'

'Like a donkey,' returns Mr. Browne cheerfully.

There is an awful silence, and then Jinnie goes for him tooth and nail.

'I'm not! I'm not!' shrieks she.

'Not what?'—defending himself as he best may.

'I'm *not* like a donkey.'

'My poor dear child, you must be. A donkey has four feet; so have you, according to the carpenter.'

'You're a beast!' says Jinnie violently.

'So is a donkey,' says Mr. Browne, with admirable presence of mind—her attacks are getting severe. 'So we are both wild animals. And I don't see why you should fall upon *me*, any way. I'm not the carpenter. Why don't you go for him? Go home and make his life a misery to him if you will. He richly deserves it. It's not fair to punish me for his fault. It wasn't I, it was he, who said you were a—— Oh, by-the-by'—with a tragic change of tone—'good heavens! it has just come back to me that all donkeys are, as a rule, called Jinnie! Oh, my poor Jin—— *No!*'—recollecting himself nobly—'never that again. My poor child, I, even I, in my long-lost home, in the days of my gentle girlhood, had a moke called Jinnie!'

'I'll tell my mammy about you; I will indeed!' says Miss Verschoyle, now quite furious, and with tears in her eyes. 'She'll hate you, she will.'

'Oh, don't tell her, then—*don't!*' entreats Mr. Browne wildly, apparently now reduced to the last stage of abject fright. 'I'll do anything you like, Jinnie, if you won't tell on me this once. And, besides, look here'—changing his tone with alarming rapidity, and catching her little claw of a hand and clutching it under his arm in the most confidential manner—'there's splendid tuck over there still, in Mrs. Binks' pavilion. I hope you have not sunk so low as to call it a tent—a mere tent; let's go on a maraud.'

Now, a 'maraud' would exactly have come within Miss Verschoyle's view of things fascinating; but perhaps she does not understand the word.

'I won't go! I won't go anywhere with you ever again!' cries she, struggling angrily with him now, and growing very red in the face.

Her long thin legs in their black silk stockings grow lively. She kicks out vigorously, and Mr. Browne knows that now or never must his invention come into play.

'Oh, poor Tommy Bagot!' says he feelingly. Then, quickly: 'You won't maraud, then, just because there's danger?'

The kicks seem softer.

'It's highway robbery, of course!' Miss Verschoyle's silken legs grow absolutely calm. 'But, tush!'—in a thrilling whisper—'we may escape. The odds are against us, of course, but—— You see that big man over there'—pointing to Mrs. Langley-Binks' 'pavilion'—'in the uncomfortably tight stockings, with the lumps on the back of his legs? Well, he'—mysteriously—'is the dragon that guards our prey. When he turns we'll make a grab. I know how to do it. I'm an old hand. And even if we are caught, Jinnie, I don't think the Beak (your uncle Anthony, by the way) can give us more than a month *hard*. But if you are afraid——'

'No, no,' says Jinnie, who is not proof against the gentle art of stealing; she is, indeed, quite fired by this awful suggestion.

'Come on, then,' says Mr. Browne valiantly. 'Let's go on a foraging expedition; let's be brigands for once!'

He takes a long step forward, with a stealthy look here and

there, behind and before him, hauling Miss Verschoyle with him.

'Oh no!' cries she, in the subdued tone of the practised villain. 'Let's be Pawnee Indians!'

Jinnie's reading has been deep and varied.

'So be it,' acquiesces Mr. Browne sepulchrally; 'but your blood be on your own head!'

Nothing daunted, even by this ghastly warning, the maiden follows him, and together, prowling behind the green bushes that surround the pavilion, they watch the unconscious 'Chawles,' until Mr. Browne, having caught his eye, gives him a wink to withdraw, whereon 'Chawles,' laughing, devotes wonderful energy to the glasses in the far corner, and Mr. Browne and Jinnie, stealing—*stealing* always, as if expecting a knife between their ribs at any moment—fall bodily upon a little Crown Derby dish of marrons glacés, and carrying it away undiscovered, retire behind one of the escallonias outside, and have a most excellent time.

Thus peace, so far as Jinnie and Mr. Browne are concerned, is restored with the most flagrant dishonour.

CHAPTER X.

'As he thinketh in his heart, so is he.'

AMYOT, finding Carry alone, has sunk down upon the grass beside her. He is so despondent that Carry at once knows what is the matter with him.

'What has she been doing now?' asks she.

'Been offering me one of her last photos—a big thing, half-size length by Mendelssohn,' says Richie gloomily; then, waxing wroth: 'What the deuce is a fellow to say on an occasion like that?'

'Accept it, of course. But I must say I think she——'

Carry stops abruptly. Of course it is to his eternal advantage if he marries this rich girl, and is she, his friend, to put a spoke in that wheel? Certainly not!

'It's downright disgusting,' says Richie moodily.

'Oh, Richie! you mustn't think of her like that.'

'I'll think of her'—with increasing gloom—'just as I like. What do I want with her beastly picture?'

'But it's a compliment, don't you see. And such a big picture, too!'

'The bigger the beastlier,' says Mr. Amyot, who has now reached the last stage of misery.

'Richie! I really don't think you ought to talk of her like that—not even to me. Poor girl! what has she done but show a wish to love you?'

'Love me!' Richie's voice breaks into a perfect growl.

'Well, that's no sin, is it? She prefers you to everybody else. She would rather marry you than——'

Mr. Amyot dispenses with the rest of this sentence; he flings it aside, indeed, airily.

'Woman proposes, God disposes,' says he. 'In the meantime, let's talk of something else. How wonderfully Miss Royce played that set against Fenton and Cecil!'

'Against Cecil,' says Carry dryly.

'Against—— What do you mean now?'

'Oh, I don't know. But I feel sure that Miss Royce can't bear Cecil. Dear, dear Cecil! who is always so good to her. Defending her against everyone—against right; and, you know, she is not liked here, Richie. For myself, I can't bear her.'

'She seems to me an awfully nice little girl,' says Richie, 'and very jolly too.'

'I dare say,' says Miss Desmond; 'but she isn't an awfully good little girl, any way.'

'Oh, come now, Carry! that isn't like you.'

Carry bestows upon him a frank and open smile.

'I can't help it,' says she. 'She's a regular snake, in my opinion, and you can think her jolly if you like; but she's horrid all the same. Richie'—leaning towards him and speaking low—'I'll tell you something: she's in love with Sidney.'

'Oh, rot!' says Mr. Amyot.

'All right—think your own thoughts: I'm sure of it,' says Carry. 'And—and I'm sure of something else too'—falteringly. 'It is really only to you I would say it, Richie: I think Cecil is in love with him.'

'Ah! I have thought that,' says Richie; 'but I—I——'

He has turned his eyes away from her for a moment, and now something he sees approaching freezes the remainder of his speech upon his lips. Carry hardly notices that he has

not finished his sentence, because she too has looked afield—in a different direction from his, however—and a desire to rise and flee is in her mind.

Alas! Richie's mind as well is bent on flight. He gets up.

'Richie!' gasps Carry. 'Don't desert me now. Richie, if you love me, stay!'

'I can't!' declares Richie tragically. 'Nothing under heaven would keep me here a moment longer. Let me go, Carry'—as Miss Desmond, with a last touch of desperation, makes a grab at his coat. 'It would be no use my staying here.'

'Oh, it would—it would!' says Carry. 'It would stave off things.'

'Not for a second. D'ye think I don't know?'

'You deliberately desert me, then?' says Carry, tears in her eyes.

'Desert you? What on earth is it to you?' says Mr. Amyot, with open-eyed astonishment.

'To me?' with even greater surprise. 'What is it to *you*? you mean.'

'You're a heartless girl,' says Richie, turning abruptly round and making as big a run for it, in the way of a smart walk—people are looking on, and he daren't betray himself—across the tennis-ground, and away from Carry, as society will permit, without inquiry.

'Richie,' cries Carry once again, and then vindictively, seeing him hopelessly disappear, 'what a beast you are!'

She turns to find Miss Langley-Binks with a girl friend scudding hastily past her, evidently bent on pursuit. Oh, poor old Richie! *now* she understands. Really, that girl would do anything! If Richie had not been driven to flight, he would certainly not have refused to stand by her when Mr. Popkin came up.

Mr. Popkin, who has just arrived breathless, and has fallen gracefully into the seat beside her that Richie has just vacated, entertains his own view of Mr. Amyot's abrupt departure.

'Sent him away, dear girl! to enjoy a "teet-a-teet" with me,' says he, in his own beautiful French.

He cuddles up quite close to Carry now, and looks unutterable things. This is his usual look when with poor Carry.

'If,' says Mrs. Berkeley, when conversing with her familiars, 'they *were* unutterable things, they might have some chance of being interesting.'

'So good of you to secure me this vacant seat,' says the curate fondly.

'But I didn't,' says Carry, who, always horribly downright, is now nervous.

'Ah—is that so? It is Mr. Amyot, then, I have to thank. He'—tenderly—'it seems, understood——'

'Oh, you are all wrong, you are really,' says Carry.

'I hope not,' says Popkin, with extraordinary solemnity. 'I feel assured that Amyot, whom I have every reason to believe is a most estimable young man, has pierced the secret of my heart.'

Here he lays his hand upon that necessary adjunct.

'I don't think he has. I'm sure no one has—and——' She looks round desperately, but the only eye she catches belongs to Dicky Browne, and she regrets she caught it. That young man, I am sorry to record, seems convulsed with some inward trouble. 'And, besides, it's so stupid to have secrets.'

'Ah! you think that,' says Mr. Popkin eagerly. 'Then it shall be a secret no longer. You alone, up to this, knew it'—infatuated man!—'but as you give me leave, I shall declare my noble devotion to you at every corner.'

'Oh, don't!' says Carry feebly. Then a wild desire for laughter overcomes her. 'You'd catch cold,' says she. 'Corners mean draughts.'

'How beautiful is your mirth!' says Mr. Popkin, hanging his head to one side. 'How it invigorates me after a week's toil! How I pine to hear it in the rooms of my small home!—not to be small for ever, I beg you to understand; but if my rooms were palatial, as perhaps in years to come they may be'—he is now evidently alluding to his chance of a bishopric in the dark ages to come—'I should still be quite as charmed to hear its thrilling music in them.'

'You are very kind—too, too kind,' says Carry, who is too frightened to be indignant. 'But——'

'"But me no buts,"' quotes the curate in his most playful style. Mrs. Berkeley always says it makes her cry. 'No doubt you have qualms as to responsibilities and all that; but I'll take them off your shoulders. If you marry me——'

Carry makes a violent gesture.

'I don't want to marry anyone,' says she.

'Ah! that is so sweet, so girlish. I love the girlish things,' says Mr. Popkin, his head a little more at an angle than before. 'Still'—stolidly—'if you would marry me I could give you——'

'I don't want'—now desperately—'*anyone* to give me anything!'

'What I always thought you—quite devoid of mercenary feelings,' says the curate with rapt admiration. 'For all that, if you did marry me, you should have whatever you wanted, and your own way in everything.'

'That's just what no woman would like,' says Carry angrily.

Poor girl! she knows little of the wonderful opening of the ways for the great New Woman of the future.

'Ah, how truly sweet!' coos Mr. Popkin. 'No, no, I was not mistaken in you. You are all that I thought you, and more: you'—tenderly—'will marry me?'

'No!' says Carry in a truly awful tone. 'Mr. Popkin, I have told you so before; why—why do you persist——'

But even now Carry's courage is deserting her. Oh, she has gone too far at last, and what will they all say? Even auntie, who has said many favourable words of Mr. Popkin of late. The latter immovable gentleman, studying her, sees the instant nervousness in her eyes.

'So coy, so coy!' says he to himself, with a beautiful twinkle.

'One question, dear Miss Carry,' persists he. 'You forbid me to hope, but I am not so poor a lover, believe me, as to abandon that great blessing because of one word from your sweet lips. Now'—playfully—'tell me this—is there another?'

'Another!' says Carry; 'another what?'

'Another—like me,' says Mr. Popkin softly.

'Not one,' says Carry promptly, and with something in her tone that might be termed devoutly grateful.

'Ah! then I shall still wait, and dwell upon a happy time, when you will have discovered your own heart, and—the place I pray I may find in it.'

He puts out his hand to lay it upon hers, but Carry deftly, angrily, draws it from beneath his fingers. This unexpected act ruffles him temporarily, especially as Miss Desmond's eyes are a little ablaze and her whole air warlike.

It is, on the whole, a rather providential thing that at this moment Dicky Browne comes up to them.

'How awfully jolly you two are looking!' says he, with a quite envious air. 'Easy to see that you are taking life easily. It seems quite a shame to disturb you; but I say, Carry, Lady Maria is on the war-path. She brought you, didn't she? and she's fussing very considerably about your spending so much time with—nothing wrong, you know, Popkin—but an unmarried man, you know . . . and people *do* talk.'

Carry, in spite of her joy at the sudden break in on her extremely uncomfortable *tête-à-tête*, now casts an annihilating glance at him.

'With regard to Miss Desmond and me there need be no talk,' says the curate stiffly. 'I am nothing if not honourable.'

'I felt that, I knew that,' says Browne, with the utmost gravity; yet a second later, as he walks away with Carry beside him, the latter feels that he is shaking.

'I don't think you need have said that!' says she indignantly.

'Said what?'

'You know'—angrily—'very well. It was distinct encouragement, telling him Lady Maria was noticing his attentions to me. His'—bitterly—'odious attentions!'

'Well, I had to say something, you know,' says Mr. Browne. 'I was bound to let him down easy. Would you rather I had kept away altogether?'

'Oh no!'—quickly. 'After all, Dicky, anything you could say would be better than being left alone with him any longer.'

'Why?' asks Mr. Browne, now all open and innocent wonder. 'Good gracious, how terrible! How little one knows anyone! Was he really so bad as all that? And before the assembled crowd, too! My dearest girl! if you had only given me an inkling of it I should have ground him to powder. Even now——' He stops deliberately, and looks back to where the curate is still sitting, somewhat isolated, on the wooden bench. 'Confide in me, my dear girl. *What* did he do?'

'Well, I must say I can't bear a fool!' says Miss Desmond, marching on to where Mrs. Verschoyle, Lady Maria, and others are still sitting, under the shade of a big beech-tree.

Anthony has just come up, and is talking to his mother.

'Well, when are you going to spend another long and happy day with me?' says he.

'Better get the bazaar over first, dearest.'

'On the contrary, I've been thinking that your drive to the bazaar will be very much shorter from The Towers than from your place. Come up on Tuesday next, every one of you. Jane'—turning to his sister-in-law—'that will suit, won't it?'

'Excellently, I think.'

'Perhaps, after all—yes, the drive will be shorter,' says Lady Maria; 'and, having a stall, one must of course be there. Well, to-morrow, then, Tony darling.'

'That's all right; and now I'll go and get some people to meet and amuse you. You know, Baring is to be down next week; you admire his pictures, don't you? He wants rest, he says—and to take studies of a child.'

'Does he call that rest?'

'Oh, those artists, painters, sculptors, and so on, never really rest. But he is charming, as you will find.'

CHAPTER XI.

'The shades of fears far off are soonest seen.'

To-day, being the first day of the bazaar, is—it seems quite unnecessary to say it—wet. Bazaar-days always are wet. So are Sundays, as a rule, and Bank Holidays. No one knows why. To-day, at all events, the gay and merry Summer, tired of ingratitude, has gone on the war-path. She has rebelled against the world, the world that has received her sweets for quite four weeks—weeks of unbroken sunshine—quite as a matter of course, without so much as a vote of thanks to her; and now she is going to 'show them,' as the children say. But why on a bazaar-day?

It began at six, and the rain is now steadily pouring at eleven. Lady Maria, emerging from her brougham—she always takes and keeps her own carriage and coachman with her wherever she goes—has walked daintily from the flagged pavement under the triumphal arch—which now indeed is funereal—into the Assembly Rooms, an umbrella over her head, held by Sidney Fenton. He, of all people, had been

told off—indeed, he had volunteered—to see Lady Maria safely installed behind her charming arrangement of bric-à-brac.

Perhaps, wise man! he knew that, having done his duty so far, he would not be asked to do it again for the rest of the day.

The Assembly Hall of Hillesden is very gay with festoons of Indian muslin, and Chinese fans, and the daintily-clad figures that stand, some outside, and some inside the stalls, at the receipt of custom. All the girls are looking their very best in their fancy costumes; even Miss Langley-Binks, red and blowzy as ever, does not disgrace hers. She has most providentially elected to be a Turkish woman, and this dress, the veil especially, is eminently becoming to her style of beauty.

Poor old Carry, it must be confessed, is hardly of the wildly attractive order, though the man who cannot read, beneath her round and boyish face, the strong, sweet nature that belongs to her, must be pitied. Yet even Carry in her borrowed plumes, lent by the Meath cousin, is looking uncommonly well—so well, indeed, that old Miss Desmond's heart, as she looks at her, quite swells with pride.

Cecil Fairfax is quite beautiful in an Old English costume. But Miss Royce, in her French peasant dress, is the principal feature of the bazaar. And, as if knowing that for once she can brave all scrutiny, a sort of mad daring has taken possession of her. In her eyes a fire is lit that makes those dark, inscrutable orbs a very blaze of beauty; and on her scarlet lips is a smile that no one in Hillesden had ever seen there before. When dressed and presented to her, Lady Maria was electrified, and, being somewhat of a slave to beauty, had almost forgotten that she was only Jinnie's governess—a woman of no importance—and been very nearly friendly with her. But Mrs. Verschoyle was a little silent. In the storm of admiration that greeted her from every side, this went unnoticed by all but Maden herself, who remembered and resented it bitterly, in spite of the adulation of the others. Mr. Browne had been heard to say that he'd back Lady Maria's stall to do the most roaring trade of the day, and, indeed, went so far as to rashly promise to buy anything Miss Royce offered him, and to take unlimited tickets for her raffles. Ah! but raffling was not allowed by the new Bishop, Miss Royce reminded him. There were to be no raffles, except—on the sly.

Fenton had not been able to take his eyes off the exquisite little figure, as it danced here and there through the assembling crowds, the rain having kept back very few. He had hardly known, he told himself, how charming, how distinctly beautiful, she was; all at once it seems to him that if he were a rich man—Anthony, for example—he would marry her. But the gods have not been kind to him, and even now he knows he has come very nearly to the end of his tether.

To marry Cecil Fairfax—that thought is in his mind always, but only when he must does he let it come into prominence. Some instinct has told him that Cecil likes him above his fellows. In her gentle, proud way of going, it seems almost impossible that this discovery should have reached him; yet it has. Not that he is quite sure, but, still, it is a dream with him that, when all things fail, Cecil will accept him.

He is deep in debt now; he will be up to his neck in it presently; and, of course, in the long-run something will have to be done. To do him justice, he has always sworn against a moneyed marriage—partly through selfishness, no doubt, as to drag through life with a woman uncongenial, distasteful perhaps, would be such a grinding bore. Still——

He looks across at Cecil now, serenely beautiful in her severe costume, and wonders if he could endure life with her. Maden, beyond doubt, appeals to him; but Cecil . . . Still, she is very distinguished-looking, and a woman so cold, so self-contained, would hardly interfere much with one's life.

He is gazing at her, lost a little in thought, when Anthony lays a hand, a somewhat emphatic hand, upon his shoulder.

'Dreaming?' says Verschoyle.

His voice is hardly his own. There is a sharper ring in it. The day, indeed, has been a disappointment to him. Baring, to whose visit he had looked forward as a means of rendering his mother's visit more agreeable, is ill with influenza. And . . . there are other things . . . He would not have acknowledged it, but a feeling of absolute anguish is tearing at his heart.

'Dreaming!—in this wide-awake day? No; I was thinking of——'

'Of what?'

'Of Cecil. That dress becomes her. She'—with careless scrutiny—'has improved, I think, since last I saw her.'

A dull red darkens Verschoyle's forehead. Improved!

Could she improve? And to be discussed in this cold, brutal way—she, his highest ideal, the one woman on earth who seems to him worth winning! Improvement!—was there even room for it? He looks across to where Cecil is standing, gracious, kindly, a happy smile upon her perfect lips. Could he only know why the smile was so happy! Sidney, with his careful look-out for the future, has been specially attentive to Cecil all day, doing her little services hardly to be noticed by those who come and go, but enough to make her heart beat with a certainty of the fulfilment of her hopes in the future; the vaguest, slightest little acts, unseen by anyone—except Maden Royce.

Anthony's silence strikes him, only to lead him into another wrong path.

'Oh, I know what you mean. She doesn't suit me, either. Too statuesque for my part, and it's such confounded trouble bringing down the statue from its pedestal. Not good enough for most fellows.'

'The man who dreamt of bringing down Miss Fairfax,' begins Verschoyle, 'would be——'

He stops, choking.

'I know, dear boy—a fool for his pains. I quite agree with you. Still, she has improved. She can unbend a little now and then. I suppose'—irrelevantly—'the property is very tightly tied up.'

'So I have heard,' says Anthony stiffly.

'Hah, that will prove a spoke in her wheel, I shouldn't wonder! To marry her, then, would be to be entirely dependent on—— Her father was a regular old screw, I always heard.'

'He was an excellent father, as it seems to me.'

'He was an old curmudgeon,' says Captain Fenton. 'One of the type who, having made their money hard, are determined to keep it for ever, dead or alive.'

'He was determined on keeping it for his daughter. A very fatherly deed, in my opinion. At all events, in a way it saves her from that modern shark, the heiress-hunter.'

He looks straight before him, not caring to meet his cousin's eyes. Will he understand? Will the shaft go home? It does—to give Fenton a sense of mirth. He laughs.

'That's one for me,' says he. 'But it falls short. I am not yet past grace, and she would probably not have me, even if I

asked her. She is like her father, I think—like that painting of him in her hall.'

'There is perhaps something—about the mouth. He was a clever man in many ways.'

'Too clever for some people. He'—cynically—'was nobody's friend but his own.' He laughs again, amused at his new rendering of the old sad phrase. 'The only way to get on, after all,' says he.

'I always thought him much to be pitied,' says Anthony, who has difficulty in keeping himself from being insolent to a guest in his own house.

'Bad as he was,' says Fenton, with a shrug, 'I expect he was livelier company than his daughter.'

As he says this he moves away, providentially for the character of the bazaar. Verschoyle, his face very white, takes a step after him, then stops abruptly. After all, what has he said? Not more than any man might say of any woman that he did not care for. It is his own love for her that has made the words offensive. Yet that the man who could speak of her like that should be the one to whom she has given the priceless treasure of her heart—her first, fresh young love! There is a stifled cry of rage in Anthony's heart, as the injustice of this thing comes home to him.

Meantime the bazaar is going on gaily. Already the 'takings' at the different stalls are even greater than had been hoped for.

'And to-morrow may be fine,' says the Rector's wife, with splendid faith.

The shooting-gallery is very popular, Carry, however, carrying off most of the prizes, to the chagrin of the younger officers from the barracks at Middleham, and to the delight of her chum Richie. The concert-hall has not, perhaps, been quite such a success. Lady Maria had struggled valiantly, and so had all the others, but in the end it was found impossible to exclude the local talent.

'They would be so offended,' said the Rector, who feared a dropping-off from his choir. And of course no harm would have come of it, either, if the home people could only have been induced to choose simple ballads. Some of them, indeed, have quite nice little voices—not unpleasant, by any means—but, alas! they are all bent on soaring to the highest flights, thinking lightly of singing, after two days' notice, a song that

many a celebrated artiste would practise diligently for weeks before singing it in public.

To-day the undertaker's son has elected to sing first—Gounod's 'Serenade,' of all things in the world. His voice and his French are equally awful, but he is a friend of the townspeople—one of their own people—a songster they have heard, and applauded, and loved, and taken pride in for ten long years, so that wild and vociferous are the cheerings and the demand for an encore at the end of the truly wretched thing. A very renowned singer, Sir John Illworth, had been received almost coldly the turn before.

Now, as Mr. Browne, heralding a bevy of fair dames and gallant gentlemen—who feel it their duty to pay their shilling at the door—enter the concert-hall, the undertaker's son is 'consenting to oblige' once more, in answer to the vociferous encores from his intimates. 'Love is a little boy,' he has chosen this time—a delicate bit of music, all feeling. Naturally an undertaker's son should be brought up to 'feeling,' but, alas! this young man, whatever feelings his heart may be endowed with, has nothing of them in his voice.

'Love is a little boy,' sings he stonily, and just a little, a very little, out of tune, but enough to make Cecil blink her lids.

The room had been darkened purposely, and, under cover of the twilight thus obtained, Fenton, who is sitting between Cecil and Maden, slips his hand under the light cloak the latter has flung over her by Cecil's gentle advice. He is hardly prepared for the quick, almost painful, grip he receives in turn. The girl's very heart seems to be in it.

'Whose little boy, I wonder?' asks Mr. Browne anxiously.

He looks at Mrs. Berkeley, who has her Infantry baby beside her, but that lady gives him little encouragement.

'How you mock that poor creature!' says she modestly. 'I suppose you will be directing the shafts of your wit at me next; you know I sing after this.'

'I didn't know,' says Mr. Brown; 'but now that I *do*, I feel a glory added to my life!'

'Oh, I like that!' says Mrs. Berkeley contemptuously.

She casts this over her shoulder at him, and then gives herself back to her Infantry boy.

Love's 'little boy' has died out 'of sheer exhaustion,' as Mrs. Berkeley says, and now she has been escorted to the

platform by Dicky himself, of all people, and 'Oh, had I Jubal's lyre' rings through the room.

'What's that? what's that?' eagerly questions Jinnie, who by a most unlucky oversight has been brought in. 'Liar—liar is it, Dicky?'

She is, as usual, hanging round Mr. Browne.

'Yes, lyre! For goodness' sake be quiet, Jinnie.'

'Liar,' repeats Jinnie, who is not as well up in her classical music as she might be. 'Mammy says she is one herself. Is she singing about herself? Do people sing about themselves? Miss Royce says they should not. She says to sing your own praises is bad. But Mrs. Berkeley isn't singing her own praises, only her own nasties. Is she good?'

'Is anyone going to take this child away?' asks Dicky desperately, in a low whisper.

But now, happily, the song comes to an end, and Mrs. Berkeley, who has really sung it very creditably, has come down to receive the congratulations of her friends, who are—outwardly—many, for the delightfully simple reason that her tongue is like a barbed wire.

'Popkin is going to sing now,' says somebody.

'Let's clear out, then,' says Fenton. 'I hear that even at the village club, when he begins, they take off their boots and shy them at him.'

'He roars!' says Carry. 'It is quite dreadful to hear him.'

'Unkind girl!' whispers Mr. Browne *sotto voce*.

'It is astonishing,' says Fenton, 'what a row one is allowed to make for a shilling. If you made half that, without paying for it, you'd be run in.'

'There he is!' suddenly says Carry, who has treated Mr. Browne's remark with the contempt it deserved.

'In all his glory,' responds he. 'But'—he stops, listening—'whence these sounds?'

And, indeed, from the lower end of the hall the most remarkable cries are arising. Poor Mr. Popkin's efforts are being badly received amongst the lower classes in Hillesden. Fenton, who has a twist in his mind that makes him find a certain joy in others' misfortunes, laughs quietly. He glances at Dicky.

'Groans from the pit,' says he.

'Of my stomach,' rejoins that worthy in a melancholy tone. 'I'm starving. For goodness' sake, Fenton, let's get out of this and go in search of something to eat.'

CHAPTER XII.

> 'For wisdom is most riches; fooles therefore
> They are which fortunes doe by vowes devize,
> Sith each unto himself his life may fortunize.'

OUTSIDE they meet Anthony.

'I've been looking for you all everywhere,' says he. 'All' seems to mean Cecil alone, for his eyes go straight to her, and rest there. 'Luncheon is ready. You must be famished. I've secured a table, so come on.' He goes to Cecil. 'You must be tired out,' says he.

'Oh no!'—gaily; 'the day is only just beginning. But I don't mind telling *you*, Tony, that I am very, *very* hungry.'

The 'you' delights him; it sounds sweet, familiar, almost loving; perhaps, after all——

He might have been tempted to say something tender to her, but just at this moment she sees that Miss Royce has severed herself from their little party, and is going away in the direction of Lady Maria's stall.

'Oh, poor little girl!' says she quickly. 'Anthony, call her back; she must be hungry, too; she has been doing wonders all the morning. I hear she has sold more than anyone in the place; she is all fire and life, and so pretty. Don't you think so? Do go and make her join us.'

Her solicitude for the friendless governess strikes Anthony as a fresh instance of the beauty, the kindliness of her disposition. Long afterwards he remembers it again, and the ingratitude of the other.

'Miss Royce,' says he, coming up with the little French peasant, 'I hope you will come and lunch with us.'

'How kind!' says Maden, giving him a warm and grateful glance.

'Miss Fairfax sent me to bring you back. She begs you will come. You must be tired, she says, having been working so energetically all the morning.'

When she gave him that lovely smile of a moment ago, he had told himself that Cecil was right (when is she not right with him?), and that this girl is pretty. But now in a flash the smile has died, and the face has darkened to a sullen, almost repellent, expression.

'Miss Fairfax is too good,' says she. Her ivory complexion

is almost ghastly. 'But I am not tired, and I think Lady Maria has brought some sandwiches with her.'

She gives him the faintest, the most graceful little inclination, and then deliberately continues on her way—to dulness and Lady Maria. Anthony knows at once that nothing could move her, that she is bent on going back—but why? Well, after all, Lady Maria has evidently brought sandwiches, so this puzzling little girl won't be hungry. He can assure Cecil about that. And, indeed, there is no fear of hunger for the governess. Lady Maria, who would not brave the wilds of the pavilion (and, as the sequel proves, very wisely too), where an uncommonly bad luncheon is served at five shillings a head, has provided herself with a handsome supply of the daintiest sandwiches and a bottle of moselle. Jinnie had refused to leave her uncle Anthony, and so Miss Royce and Lady Maria share this repast between them. Lady Maria is very generous with it, even with the moselle, and is so good as to carry on a lively conversation with Jinnie's governess—all about Jinnie!

In a glow of satisfaction at having been so kind, you know, to the insignificant girl, the Dowager goes back to her stall again oblivious of the fact that the 'insignificant girl' would not only have given up the dainty sandwiches and the moselle, but even Lady Maria's own excellent company, to have been fed on bread and water in any place where Sidney Fenton might be.

'A much better luncheon, I assure you, Miss Royce, poor as it is,' Lady Maria had said, 'than what is provided over there. I know these bazaar feeds—they are unspeakable.'

But when the heart is young, and love is the guiding star, who cares for well-baked meats—or ill-baked, for the matter of that?

* * * * *

At the luncheon in the pavilion, merriment is reigning. Fenton, whose motto is ever, 'When far from the lips that we love, make love to the lips that are near,' has seated himself beside Cecil, whose pale, beautiful face has flushed a little at his nearness, and into whose eyes a glad light has sprung.

'Has anyone seen the new Bishop?' asks Mrs. Verschoyle presently, in between her efforts to dissect a chicken that must have seen at all events threescore months and ten.

'*I* have,' says Carry Desmond. 'He is a great, large man, with a big——'

'Caroline!' says Mr. Browne, in an awful tone.

'Face!' says Carry indignantly. 'What on earth did you think I was going to say?' This calls for smothered mirth on the part of some of the more frivolous members. The good Bishop, if a Friar of Orders Grey, would take a considerable girdle. But Carry, innocently unconscious, goes on. 'I've not seen his wife, though,' says she; 'but Cecil—it was you, Cecil, wasn't it?—said she was buying things right and left all day.'

'She is elderly, but very kind-looking,' says Miss Fairfax. 'I expect we shall like them immensely.'

'Oh, this chicken is uneatable!' says Anthony suddenly. 'My dear Jane, have something else.'

'It isn't half bad,' says Mrs. Verschoyle; 'and, besides, we must all suffer for our—bazaar. The ham, at all events, is excellent.'

'Don't abuse the poor old rooster,' says Mr. Browne tenderly; 'it has done all it could. If it had been allowed to live longer it might, perhaps, have done more.'

'Longer! Browne, collect yourself,' says Sidney, who, however, is not eating chicken.

'Well, it's gone to its rest now, at all events,' says Dicky, with a deep sigh, 'and we should all speak kindly of the dead. Peace to its ashes, say I.'

'A good rabbit would be better than it,' declares Anthony wrathfully.

'Talking of rabbits,' says Amyot, 'did you hear that Bilbery is making twelve pounds a week by his?'

Colonel Bilbery is a neighbour, who does not, however, come into this story.

'I shouldn't wonder,' says Anthony. 'Very good warrens there, and rabbits seem to be the most saleable of all things nowadays amongst the lower classes. There's quite a boom on them.'

'I don't like them,' says Mrs. Verschoyle. 'They always taste to me like white paint.'

'You astonish me!' says Mr. Browne. 'Fancy eating white paint! When do *you* do it—breakfast or afternoon tea?'

The conversation for a long time turns on rabbits, their culture, their worth in the market, their price. And to it all Carry has been listening attentively. Indeed, as the discussion continues, she seems to lean more forward, more

eagerly, until at last her attitude might be described as breathless.

Twelve pounds a week! That is the one remark that seems to have hammered itself into her brain. Oh, if she could only make three pounds a week by the rabbits that are running wild about her place—doing nothing except destroying auntie's gardens—she could lift a weight from that darling auntie's shoulders! Such frail little shoulders, too!

An idea, long forming in her mind, now takes distinct shape; and at this same moment, all at once as it were, she remembers (though what on earth can it have to do with money, and rabbits, and auntie?) that a local manufacturer had sent in a big roll of tweed to be—well, balloted for. Raffling, open raffling, is forbidden. Her hand slips into her pocket. No, nothing! She remembers now she had spent her last shilling on a toy for Jinnie, and a shilling is exactly the sum that will make you a 'shareholder' in the big roll of tweed. Blank disappointment clouds her face for a moment. Auntie has gone home, and won't be back until four, and the tickets for the tweed are almost sold. 'Hope,' however, 'springs eternal' in Miss Desmond's breast, and now, as her eyes happen to fall on Richie, she is all life and joy again. He will lend her the fateful shilling that shall secure her the desired tweed.

Here Verschoyle, seeing Mrs. Berkeley in the distance, studying with a little critical air the names of the different items on the *menu* as though hardly knowing how to decide (she has decided on a cup of coffee and a sandwich), rises, and goes towards her. He has no great love for the sharp-tongued lady, though she is always extremely silver-tongued to him, but he knows she can ill-afford to pay five shillings for her luncheon, and the 'Infantry boy' is carefully conspicuous by his absence. Infantry boys' incomes don't run to bazaar luncheons as a rule, and, as Verschoyle tells himself, it is uncommonly good of her to have come here at all to-day with her very limited means.

'Oh, Mrs. Berkeley,' says he, 'you really mustn't go and lunch over there all by yourself. I want another guest badly at our table. Won't you join us?'

'Very glad—very glad indeed,' says Mrs. Berkeley, with a touch of condescension that tickles Verschoyle immensely, and presently she is sitting at their table in quite an amiable

temper for her. It is ever so much better to be here than taking a solitary cup of coffee over there; and, besides, it has even occurred to her that perhaps—who knows?—Mr. Verschoyle may have a secret admiration for her. Any way, it will be something to tell the faithless Infantry boy.

'How's Popkin been getting on all day?' asks Amyot presently. 'He seemed great at the Girls' Friendly stall a while ago.'

'Oh, he's strugglin', strugglin',' says Mr. Browne, with an exact imitation of Popkin's squeak.

'Mrs. Langley-Binks' stall is very handsome,' says Carry, with a view to changing the conversation.

'Yes, isn't it?' says Miss Fairfax, turning for a moment from her conversation with Fenton, which seems to be engrossing, and which, as it goes on, leaves Verschoyle more and more absent-minded, replying sometimes, indeed, at random to Mrs. Berkeley's liveliest sallies.

That lady, hearing her enemy's name, rushes to the front.

'Reg'lar bazaar in itself,' says she, with a sneer.

'She seems to have spared neither time nor care,' says Mrs. Verschoyle gently.

'*Nor* money. Quite Oriental! And her dear garl!' says Mrs. Berkeley, in her own extraordinary lingo. 'So entirely in keeping in those trousers.'

'Oh, hang it! she has something else on,' says Mr. Browne, frowning. He whispers this; but Dicky's whispers, unfortunately, are calculated to ring through a room. His father often said he was an actor, spoiled.

'*And* the veil,' says Fenton severely, addressing Mrs. Berkeley.

'Stroke of genius, that veil,' says she, at which, I regret to say, some of them laugh. 'In fact, the whole thing means business. The stall, an Eastern bazaar; the daughter, an Eastern garl. And the money spent! Ah, dear Captain Fenton, when one is hopelessly on the wrong side of Society's Rubicon, one willingly pays a good deal to be allowed to cross it.'

'Poor Mrs. Langley-Binks!' says Verschoyle, laughing. 'If not quite *in* the swim, still, she is very near it. A few more years——'

'If anyone is going to sing that hymn——' begins Mr. Browne, rising, but Carry pulls him down.

'A few more strokes,' puts in Fenton, laughing—'stick to

your metaphor, Anthony—and the rapids will be passed. I congratulate you,' he nods to Verschoyle—'you know your world;' then he turns to Amyot, 'And a rotten one it is,' says he, in a low tone.

'I don't think so,' says Richie. 'If a few years can turn some of the Langley-Binkses into clever, cultivated people, why should they not have a look-in as well as ourselves? Nobody can help the fact of their grandfather being a soap-boiler. Was it soap?'

At this moment Verschoyle's butler, who has been brought down and pressed into the service, as have most of the servants belonging to the county families round, hands Mrs. Berkeley a dish. It looks rather nondescript, and she turns to Verschoyle.

'What is it?'

'I should not care to answer for it,' says he, peering at it. 'Better be sure than sorry.'

'You advise me to let it alone?'

'Oh no; that would be to make you take it. Curiosity is a woman's bane, ever since the world began.'

'Do you know much of women?' asks she, with the little glance she had always found so effective—ten years ago.

Unhappily, Verschoyle at this moment has let his unruly eyes wander again to where Cecil and Fenton are now sitting very close together, and so he loses the thread of her argument. The butler is still waiting in an adamantine posture, and Mrs. Berkeley dismisses him impatiently.

'No, I shall not try it,' says she, addressing Verschoyle directly, and so compelling his attention to return to her. 'Better not, in spite of the curiosity you attribute to me; I have such a nervous digestion.'

'I shouldn't have thought you had a digestion at all,' says Verschoyle, with a sort of wild grab at the heart of her speech, the beginning of which he had either not heard or forgotten.

It might have been a risky speech, but Mrs. Berkeley accepts it as a compliment.

'Ah, that is how it always is,' says she; 'no one understands anyone. One looks at a person, and says she is in perfect health, as'—reproachfully—'you evidently think me. Or she is lovable, or hateful, or hideously dull, or a very star of intellect! Or else'—with a second reproachful glance—'that she has a splendid digestion. And, after all, one knows

nothing. I have spent all my life in studying character'—this with the air of a Balzac—'and now I tell myself I know nothing. I don't understand anyone. I'—with one of the old, rather worn-out glances at him—'don't even know you.'

Verschoyle laughs, and then, feeling bored, casts an imploring glance at his sister-in-law.

'No?' says he. 'And such an easy subject, too! It argues badly for you.'

Mrs. Verschoyle has risen in response to his speaking glance.

'To our work! to our work!' cries she gaily.

CHAPTER XIII.

'Oh! that 'twere possible.'

Carry lingers behind until she can reach Amyot.

'Richie,' says she, 'come here.' ('Here' is in a corner of the canvas pavilion.) 'Can you lend me a shilling?'

She is not in the least shamefaced. It would be as unlikely to look for shame in the face of a girl who is asking her brother for a little loan, as in the face of Carry. Has he not been as good as a brother to her all her life?

'A shilling!' says he, with contemptuous, good-natured laughter. 'What's the good of a shilling to you? Half my fortune, if you will, which'—a little ruefully—'amounts to about five pounds at the present moment.'

'No, no; nothing but a shilling.'

'Take five,' says he; 'you'—with a prophetic air—'will be sure to want it.'

'I shan't, indeed; and besides, auntie will be here in a moment. No; give me one, Richie.'

He tries to force three or four into her hand, but valiantly she refuses. Valiantly indeed! for in her blood is the love of spending, inherited from many Irish ancestors. But she *does* resist, and, going off with her one borrowed shilling, she buys forthwith a ticket for the desired roll of tweed. As it happens, it is the very last ticket: Amyot, who has followed her with the intention of buying her some more tickets, discovers this.

'Just in time,' says she, turning to him, with a little catch in her breath; 'it was the very last.'

'You're sure to win,' says he, with a faint grimace that she might have resented, but that time isn't given her.

'Carry,' says an anxious stall-holder, coming up to her, 'are you doing anything?'

'N—o,' says Carry, a little vaguely; her mind has now fled far beyond these decorated walls, and is busy cutting out the tweed into——

'Well, you might raffle this for me,' says Mrs. Ronaldson, a tall young woman of twenty-five or so. 'But very quietly, mind. I have nineteen tickets already sold, and only want twenty-five to make up the whole thing. Do, like a darling, go round to the most likely-looking people you can see, and induce them to give you the rest. Oh yes, I know you belong to Cecil for the day, but you might give me a tiny look-in. But for goodness' sake, Carry, whatever you do, avoid the Bishop's party. You know he is mad on raffles, and we haven't prepared our books for balloting. Isn't it awful humbug, that balloting? You understand, any way, about the Bishop?'—pressing a book of tickets into her hand.

'I know.' Carry nods her head sagaciously.

'You'—anxiously—'know the Bishop, too?'

'Not a bit,' says Carry. 'But I'm certain anyone would know a Bishop at sight, or a Bishop's wife, either. He wears breeches, doesn't he?'

'Yes. But his wife doesn't.'

'So much the better for the Bishop,' says Carry, with a smothered laugh.

'Oh no. I hear she is quite a nice woman—and particularly gentle. One of the womanly women who are so much despised of late, but who'—the speaker breaks off and goes on with a smile of conviction—'are always, I think, so much happier than—those others. Of course, I understand your allusion about wearing the——' She laughs; she is a gay-hearted person, and very sensible too. 'But no nice woman ever wants to wear them.'

Miss Desmond's face changes.

'No nice woman wants to wear——' She breaks off; her manner is cold. 'Well, where is the thing you want me to raffle?' says she, a little impatiently. 'I suppose you know, however, that the tickets won't be drawn until to-morrow?'

'Yes, I know. And that gives me hope that you will be able to get the other six. I'd have asked that wonderful

little person who is Jinnie's governess, but she seems up to her neck. Funny colouring, isn't it? . . . There go, Carry, and do your best for me.'

'Well, I'll do what I can to-day,' says Carry. 'And I'll finish it to-morrow.'

She certainly does finish it to-morrow!

That 'wonderful little person,' Miss Royce, is beginning to flag. Her extraordinary spirits of the morning have quite toned down now; she is looking, indeed, like a pale drooping flower, as Fenton, an hour after luncheon, approaches Lady Maria's stall. It is the first time she has seen him since she saw him pass with Cecil Fairfax to the pavilion, and by an odd coincidence she has not seen Cecil either. The latter has been tempted by Carry (who ought to have been selling those six tickets) to go to the shooting-gallery, where, of course, Miss Desmond herself carries off all the prizes. She is, indeed, a crack shot, as Amyot tells everyone, and who is very openly proud of his 'chum's' achievements—to the wrath of Miss Langley-Binks, who had insisted on trying her own skill. 'She could hit most things,' she said; and at all events she did hit something; she knocked the hat off an old gentleman who was standing two yards to one side of the target, and whose language afterwards is too bad for publication. He had, indeed, to be sh—sh—sh'd out of the room by Dicky Browne and Amyot, lest a breach of the peace should ensue.

In the meantime Maden has put together in her own mind Fenton's absence and Cecil's. And an awful agony of jealousy is destroying her. 'Oh, to be dead! to be dead!' is the cry from her heart—that, silent, yet seems to be calling aloud to all the world. The very silence of it suffocates her.

She is now leaning listlessly against the corner of the stall, when she sees Cecil come with Carry from the direction of the shooting-gallery, and go straight to Cecil's stall, which has been looked after in her absence by a kindly spinster; and almost immediately after that Fenton comes on the scene by a different doorway.

'Too clever!' thinks Maden to herself out of a heart filled with that deadly poison that is consuming her. 'She by one door, he by the other! And all to deceive me! Oh, it is too much!'

'What's the matter with you?' asks Fenton, going straight to her. 'You look awfully fagged.'

'Do I?'

'Have you not been out of this all day?'

'You forget, surely. I was in the concert-room.'

She casts an anguished and most bitter glance at him. Has he forgotten that dear moment when his hand sought hers? Is it so small a thing to him, the meeting of those hands—that to her seems so sweet, so filled with eager joy—the memory alone of which has almost kept her from going mad during these two past intolerable hours?

'I am not likely to forget that,' says Fenton tenderly. He is always fascinated by her changeful temper. The fact that she is angry now gives her a fresh charm, and adds to the pleasure of that remembered passionate hand-clasp. 'But'—lowering his voice—'is it possible, my darling, you have had no rest, no change?'

'Rest! I shall never know rest again.'

'Oh, don't speak like that, Maden. Something has disturbed you. What is it?'

'What is it always?' She has kept her face marvellously in repose up to this, fearing the eyes of lookers-on; but now a little convulsion of feeling passes over it, and, afraid, she draws back between the narrow division that separates Lady Maria's stall from the next. Fenton follows her. He is curious now, and for once in his life forgetful of himself. The anguish, the stormy passion, in the girl's eyes draw him.

'Well, what?' asks he in a low tone.

'You—you—you!' The voice is as low as his tone, but the words seem to flash out, and her eyes are now a little wild. 'All day—all day you have been with her.'

'My dearest child!'

'Oh, I know—I know what you would say! Two hours is not a whole day; but it has been many days to me—a hideous eternity!'

'But I haven't been with Miss Fairfax—is it Miss Fairfax you mean?—for the last two hours. Directly luncheon was over I left her. She was in the shooting-gallery, I hear, and I was shooting clay pigeons in the field outside. You can ask anyone you like—Verschoyle if you like—about that. Come, don't be a fool, Maden.'

'Swear it!' says she, with her eyes still blazing, but the faint return of colour to her cheeks.

'Of course I swear it. Now pull yourself together. It won't do for us—for *you*'—with hasty correction—'to be talked about. And here, by-the-by, is Miss Fairfax coming towards us. Do try and smile, Maden, for Heaven's sake!'

A born actress, as are most people with French blood in their veins, she manages a brilliant smile in time for Cecil's arrival; she has crossed from her own stall, which is just opposite. There is nothing in the smile, either, but a bare friendliness, as Fenton notices with relief. With another, the effort might have been overdone.

'Ah! you are looking better now,' says Miss Fairfax, with a kindly glance at the governess. 'But I assure you, Sidney'—turning to Fenton—'when I saw her a few minutes ago she was looking almost ill. She has been doing too much. I think she ought to go and have some tea—don't you?'

'I want nothing, thank you—nothing,' says Miss Royce hurriedly, her eyes on the ground. She seldom looks at Cecil when Cecil is looking at her.

'But indeed you must be tired.'

'I am not,' says Miss Royce coldly, repellently. 'Ah! she wants to get rid of me—to send me away from him, to keep him to herself,' is her secret, most ungenerous thought, and with it rises a perfect storm of vicious anger that almost shakes her slender body. 'I won't go! I *won't!*'

'Still, you look it,' says Cecil with gentle persistence; indeed, she is getting a little alarmed about the girl—she seems so strange, so unlike her usually reserved self. 'Sidney, won't you persuade Miss Royce to have a cup of tea, or anything else she fancies?' She lays her hand lightly on Maden's shoulder. 'You and Captain Fenton are very good friends, I think'—smiling sweetly. Poor Cecil! 'Go with him, then, and rest for a little while. Rest and tea often do wonders. Please see that she has both, Sidney. Half an hour can well be spared to so hard a worker.' She turns to Miss Royce, and again presses the governess's shoulder with a friendly hand. The shoulder seems to burn as she does it. 'And don't be uneasy; take plenty of time. I shall explain to Lady Maria.' She smiles her beautiful, calm smile, and with an almost affectionate gesture pushes the girl towards Fenton. 'Now, remember, I depend on you to be good to her, Sidney—to look well after her.'

She moves lightly away to where Lady Maria is sitting, and

the other two go—silent always—towards the open door on their left that leads to the tea-room.

In Maden's heart a very demon of passionate remorse is surging—remorse, not untouched by rage. She—*she* to be so magnanimous, so unsuspecting, so free from all degrading thoughts! Oh, how grand, how above all praise, she is! Should she—Maden—ever even strive to climb into a larger, purer life, and spend her whole life in the climbing, she knows she could never reach the height that Cecil Fairfax has attained.

She draws a sharp, heavy breath, as of one in mortal pain. Well, well, that is all over—that is acknowledged. She glances at her companion, walking stolidly beside her, but with no apparent thought of her, and the reaction sets in—a wild reaction that wrecks all her better thoughts of a moment since.

Ah! it is all because she does not fear the insignificant governess that she has been so good to her—not now only, but on so many different occasions. It has never occurred to the haughty, proud, beautiful heiress that a girl like her—a mere governess—would so much as dare to lift her eyes to the man whom she, the heiress, has chosen from all other men to be her husband. There was no open scorn of her in Miss Fairfax, no contempt, only a mere indifference—an indifference that repudiated the idea that she—a mere dependent—could come between her and Fenton.

The girl had penetrated Cecil's secret easily. To her, poor Cecil's carefully guarded secret of her love for Sidney Fenton is as clear as day—a secret that Cecil's extreme sensitiveness has kept concealed from most people, almost from herself. But Maden, with the omniscience of love, has divined it long ago, and the indifference of the girl so far above her in rank to her claim on love, galls and tears at her restless, unhappy heart.

Oh, to let her see, to let her know! To compel her to understand where the truth is—to make her learn where his love is really given! Jealous as she is of Cecil, she knows that Fenton prefers herself infinitely; but she knows, too, how unstable he is, and that he is in money difficulties, and that Cecil is mistress of a large fortune.

Yet to compel her to fling down her sure indifference and know the pangs of jealousy that she has known! Ah! that would be the sweetness of life indeed.

And yet, and yet, of all those in this place into which the stream of life has drifted her, Cecil has been the kindest person she has known, the only one who from the very first—and long before Sidney Fenton's arrival—had shown a disposition to be a friend to her.

She walks on, lost in a mist of maddening thoughts, that constitute fears, and griefs, and shuddering remorse.

As for Fenton, his thoughts are very different—briefer, and certainly more wanting in passion. A suppressed disgust that Cecil should so readily have given him up to the tender mercies of another woman angers him, and spoils a little the latent hope of gaining her that is always with him—of marrying her, should all things fail, as now, indeed, seems very likely. Her indifference augurs ill for the future.

And the future is looking black indeed. He is in about the tightest place he has ever been in in his life. His uncle, who had stood by him (if very begrudgingly) up to this, has by a late post coldly, and with—as Fenton thinks—most unnecessary rudeness, refused to advance him so much as another paltry fiver, even if the loss of it should send him to the workhouse.

He had made an end of that delightful effusion by applying to it the match that lit his cigar; but it is easier to burn a letter than to forget the contents of it. Still, Fenton, light-hearted—'light' in this sense really means no-hearted—tells himself he can still hang on for a while; and, after all, who knows what may turn up at any round of the wheel—in the next six months, for example? If nothing does—well, he must take the plunge; and the plunge for him had always found Cecil Fairfax at the bottom of it.

But this cold sending away of him with Maden—and Maden of all others, good Heaven!—seems to destroy his calculations. To plunge into unknown depths with a chance of being found and resuscitated is one thing; to plunge and sink, and sink, and disappear for ever—ah! that is another.

All at once a new reading of the situation comes to him, and restores him to his usual happy-go-lucky self. Why, this sending of him away with Maden only proves that Cecil has taken no note of his flirtation (a very careful one) with the little witch beside him, who now, by the way, looks rather down on her luck. He glances at Maden. Yes, she is pale—and how silent!

Well, thank Heaven! Cecil, as it seems, has seen nothing; and he must be careful that there is nothing for her to see; and he is going away in a few days, and . . . And, of course, if Cecil hasn't noticed anything, nobody else has. And, besides (with a frown), there is nothing to notice: a man may pay a few attentions to a pretty girl without all the world crying aloud and demanding the reason of it.

But why is she so quiet?

CHAPTER XIV.

'Our ways are on the waters wan and wild.'

'You are tired,' says he at last.

They are near the tea-room, but she turns away from it. There is a little rustic bower beyond; she moves towards it, and he follows her.

'I will bring you your tea here,' says he.

He is amazed at himself; a certain excitement, that might almost be termed joy, has entered into him. He will be alone with her for half an hour, at all events, in this little ridiculous nest of earwigs.

He brings her her tea presently, and the most respectable cakes he can find, with an air so loving that the cakes (though by an ordinary person, outside the pale of love's young dream, they might be calmly and truthfully regarded as three weeks old) grow young again.

'They are horrid, I am afraid,' says he, alluding to them.

'No, no; they are very nice. They'—with a softened glance at him—'are the very nicest cakes I ever ate!'

Fenton feels distinctly sorry for her.

'I tell you what——' says he.

But he disappears as he says it, and after five minutes spent in entreaties to the butler from The Towers, he succeeds in bringing back to her some sandwiches that are almost eatable.

'But the others——'

'Never mind the antiques,' says he; 'eat these.'

And Maden, who had made a pretence of eating Lady Maria's very superior sandwiches, feels now, being distinctly hungry, very eager for them, and eats them readily—and drinks, too, the glass of sherry he has brought with them.

But with returned strength comes, too, the return of the old torture.

'Tell me,' says she—'oh, Sidney, you were angry with me a moment ago. But, angry or not, I must speak now.'

'I am so often angry with you, or you with me,' says he, 'that one more turn scarcely matters. Well, what is it now?'

His tone is whimsical, half amused, half impatient.

'Tell me——' She breaks off. 'Oh, I don't know what I was going to say; but if you could tell me that you hate that tall, fair woman, I should be happy.'

'Oh, what nonsense!' says Sidney, with now only amusement in his glance. What a little fury she is! 'I am thankful to say I hate nobody—'tisn't good enough; and I love nobody either, except——'

He pauses, attracted by the brilliant eyes burning into his, as though demanding the right termination of his speech. He puts out his hand and takes the small white trembling one that rests upon her knee.

'You,' says he.

The flash of joy that irradiates her face wakes him to the moment.

'Come; we have been here long enough,' says he.

'Ah! true—true; and people talk.'

She gets up at once, as if eager to obey his least command. The beautiful depressed little face of a while ago is now radiant.

'But I needn't go back to Lady Maria just yet, need I?'

'No. Miss Fairfax, if you remember, said she would explain to Lady Maria, and that you might have half an hour's rest.'

Silence for a moment, and then the terribly twisted nature breaks out again:

'Miss Fairfax is very good, but she is not the judge of my strength. I shall go back now—yes, now at once.'

He had been unwilling to tempt the malice of his world a moment ago by remaining any longer alone with her, but now, at this voluntary giving up of his society on her part, his desire to be with her awakes afresh.

'You are a little ungenerous to Miss Fairfax, surely. You are bent on making her your *bête noire* without a vestige of reason for it. Let me take you for a little walk.'

'No; I shall go back.'

His defence of Cecil has enraged her again. She is walking steadfastly in the direction of the bazaar.

'Maden! a word,' says he. He is amazed at his own eagerness. 'When shall I see you again alone?'

'I don't know.'

'I don't see what I've done now to make you so uncivil to me. To-night, after dinner, in the garden?'

'To-night?' She pauses, and pales a little. 'But when?'

'Half-past ten or so; the men all go into the billiard-room then.'

'You want me to come?'

Her eyes are on his, with a strange, searching expression in them.

'Would I ask you if I didn't?' says he, though all at once it occurs to him that he is playing with fire. 'I shall dwell on the thought of meeting you until we meet.'

A little silence. She is now at the entrance-door of the bazaar. She looks back at him.

'Oh, if you don't mean it all!' says she.

Her eyes are full of hot tears. Is there a menace in her tone?

He has no time to decide; she has glided in beneath the heavy curtain, and is gone. When she reaches Lady Maria's side, her eyes are as dry, her pale face as inscrutable, as ever.

'Miss Royce has come back again,' says Carry, who is lounging idly at Miss Fairfax's stall.

The day is nearly over, and business is very slack.

'So soon? Poor little thing! she hardly gives herself even a chance of rest; and she was looking so tired a moment ago. I sent her away with Sidney to get a little air and a cup of tea.'

'I don't think she looks so very bad,' says Carry curtly. Grammar is not her strong point.

'Well, she looked wretched when I sent her away. What a pretty girl she is! I think there is something that amounts to fascination in her face.'

'Do you?'

'My dear Carry, what a tone! And you, who are always so tolerant! Why, what do you think of her?'

'I think she's a beast!' says Miss Desmond, whose language is always choice.

'Carry!'

'Yes, I do—a little pig! I can't tell you why, or anything else about it, because I don't know myself; but I do hate that girl!'

'You are growing frightfully interesting,' says Miss Fairfax, who is openly amused. 'Go on; tell me more.'

'I can't. I tell you, I don't know why I dislike her, but' —she hesitates, then says impulsively: 'unless it is that I think she doesn't like you.'

'Oh, nonsense! Why should she dislike me?' says Cecil. 'Put that out of your head, Carry, and—— Where are you going now?'

'Mr. Popkin's coming; I'm off!' says Carry, slipping from the edge of the stall on which she has been perched, and vanishing in the twinkling of an eye.

Customers are getting fewer and fewer, and already the stall-holders are shrouding their wares, to keep them safe for to-morrow's campaign.

'How are you getting on, dearest?' asks Mrs. Verschoyle, coming up to Lady Maria. 'Don't you think you had better be thinking of home? Not too tired, I hope?'

'Not so much tired as bored,' says Lady Maria; which, of course, means the same thing, but she would have died rather than say she was tired.

'Bored?'

'Yes, terribly. And the fatiguing part of it is that the more you're bored the less you must show it. You have to be what that absurd Sidney calls, "on the grin" all the time, especially at functions of this sort. Mrs. Langley-Binks has been especially trying—spent quite half an hour with me talking of nothing but poor dear Richie! Really, only for the boy's own sake—and undoubtedly Aurora has a great deal of money—I might have been tempted to be rude to her.'

'Oh no, you wouldn't,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, smiling.

'Why not, Jane? The bore *au naturel* deserves nothing less than extinction. By-the-by, I was reading yesterday an article in the *Monthly* called "Bores and Bored." It was very able.'

'Bores of a century ago: I read it.'

'Yes. They don't put in our bores of to-day because they wouldn't waste an article on them, for the simple reason that we all suffer them so gladly. No one seems to address to

them those witty, if extremely rude, remarks with which our ancestors used to repress them, or at all events made laudable attempts to do so, for the bore is difficult to tackle.'

'We are all too well bred nowadays to make a famous repartee,' says Mrs. Verschoyle. 'Let us go home instead.'

'After all,' says Lady Maria, laughing—she always recovers her temper under Mrs. Verschoyle's treatment, 'I dare say I am a bit of a bore myself. The only difference between bores and interesting people lies in this, Jane, that the bores wait only for you to say "Yes" and "No" to their small-talk, and the others wait to say "Yes" and "No" to yours.'

'You're getting cynical,' says Mrs. Verschoyle; 'you had better leave this and come back to The Towers.'

'Do you really think we can go away now with any show of decency?'

'It is half-past six,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, after a consultation with her watch. 'Even slave-drivers could not require more.'

'Well, well! where's Anthony?' asks Lady Maria, rising. She pauses, then looks back at Mrs. Verschoyle. 'What has annoyed me more than anything,' says she, 'is what I have just seen. That silly creature, Carry Desmond, has been almost openly unpleasant to Mr. Popkin. She was standing with Cecil over there a little while ago, and just as poor Mr. Popkin was going up to speak to her, she sprang to the ground—she was sitting on Cecil's stall in a most unladylike attitude—and ran away. It was the very rudest rebuff. I really shouldn't wonder if the poor man never spoke to her again.'

'Carry is very impulsive, but she is a good—a dear girl,' says Mrs. Verschoyle. 'And Mr. Popkin——'

'Well, what of Mr. Popkin?'

'He's not pretty,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, with a frivolity that one would not have expected from her. 'Honestly, dearest, I can't think how any girl (in her senses, of course) could elect to marry Mr. Popkin.'

'My dear Jane,' says Lady Maria wrathfully—she is evidently very tired, and so is her temper; the day has been too much for her—'of all things on earth a fool is the worst.'

'Well, that's my argument about Mr. Popkin.'

'I was alluding to you,' says Lady Maria severely. 'That girl hasn't a penny in the world, and I hear that her aunt is

very deeply in debt. Presently she won't have a roof over her head. Isn't it better for Carry to provide one for her? Mr. Popkin, I understand, has a small income of his own, irrespective of his profession, and will come in for something considerable on the death of a maiden aunt.'

'It was sure to be a maiden aunt,' says Mrs. Verschoyle.

'My good Jane,' says Lady Maria—who really is in a most unreasonable mood—'*don't* be a fool!'

'One has so little choice,' says Mrs. Verschoyle amiably. 'One is born a fool, or a musician, or a painter, or anything else you like.' She does not seem in the least ruffled, and she feels what she seems. 'I forget, however, you don't like a fool. Still, it is very hard to be anything else nowadays. It is the easiest profession of all.'

She leans over Lady Maria and kisses her softly on her cheek. It is a fact—a singular one, I think, but still a faet—that she loves Lady Maria, although she *is* her mother-in-law. And the older woman loves her with quite as deep, if not a deeper affection. Jane is, indeed, a necessity to her.

'Come home,' says Mrs. Verschoyle.

Lady Maria rises.

'I suppose I may as well,' says she. Then, with a touch of humour: 'Tell the boy to put up the shutters, Jane, and not to forget to take them down again in the morning.'

CHAPTER XV.

> 'We sail the sea of life: a calm one finds,
> And one a tempest.'

VERSCHOYLE was anxious that Miss Royce should be included in his dinner to-night; but Lady Maria put her veto on it. No, it was impossible. She would not hear of it.

Verschoyle went as far as 'But——'

And it was enough. Lady Maria launched into a generous and long-winded view of *her* ideas on the subject of governesses, dependents, and so forth. It was quite a mistake, that sort of thing, and would only lead to unpleasantness in the future. Once asked to come down to dinner she would certainly expect to be asked again, and that would raise fresh complications. Miss Royce had never dined even with Jane and her, therefore

she could not possibly be offended. And for one thing (there had already been several), she might not have a dinner-gown; and why break through a good rule?

Miss Fairfax, Verschoyle suggested, might, perhaps, lend her one—or Carry. After all, Carry wasn't well off, and yet she——

Anthony, with a man's extraordinary want of knowledge of women's gowns, has not seen that Carry's dinner get-up is, to say the least of it, extremely ancient.

'My *dearest* Tony!' Lady Maria's hands had made a gentle protest. One did not lend one's frocks to—er—people, even the most excellent creatures, and she was sure Miss Royce was one, unless—er—they were of one's class. And, indeed, to lend a frock at all—but on an emergency, and amongst one's own set! But to a girl like Miss Royce, practically unknown, though quite the nicest creature—no, no, it could not be heard of! And Tony was really kind-hearted—as he always was—but, then, he must give a thought to Jinnie, darling child! Lady Maria is a slave to her only granddaughter. Jinnie would be sure to be troublesome after this long, fatiguing day at the bazaar; and she had always been accustomed to take her tea with Miss Royce, and would, in all probability, make a scene if Miss Royce left her this evening. This evening especially, when the dear child must be a little overdone, and therefore inclined to be fractious, as even the best children would be. There seems a note of doubt as to whether Jinnie can be counted amongst the 'best' in this speech, yet her stanch grandmother would have been indignant if you had so much as hinted that to her.

Verschoyle, of course, did not press the point further, especially as Mrs Verschoyle, who was present, and who, as a rule, was kindness itself to everyone, did not put in one pleading word for her daughter's governess. Her silence struck Anthony as almost ominous, and, indeed, he would have liked to have asked her the reason of it, but there was no time. And even if he had, Mrs. Verschoyle would certainly have found herself at a loss for a clear answer. Yet the doubt—the doubt was there—lying hidden in her heart.

* * * * *

So, later on, in a charming room upstairs, a charming repast is sent up to Miss Royce and her pupil—a repast to which the pupil does full justice, but that Miss Royce never touches.

Jinnie, with so silent and so preoccupied a companion, tires presently, and the governess, having seen her safely off to bed in the hands of her maid, puts out the lamps in the charming if very solitary room, and, crouching in the cushioned recess in the window, bends her dark, angry face upon her upturned palms, and stares, with black, rebellious eyes, into the night.

Even now, at nine o'clock, it is not altogether dark. A delicate last memory of the gone twilight is lying over the gardens, giving them a delicious sense of mystery. Overhead in the heavens,

> 'The stars hang bright above,
> Silent as if they watched the sleeping earth.'

Maden sits watching them, fascination in her eyes. Oh, to be there, to be with them, to feel as they feel—nothing! From the sleeping flowers beneath an odorous breath is rising, and through the window she has flung open, as if gasping for air, as if craving for the passing night wind to come in and cool her burning forehead, this breath rushes in. It is sweet and heavy with dewy perfume. She welcomes it gladly, in the mad hope that, sweeping across her brow, it may perhaps ease the aching of her head, which, however, is not so bad as the aching of her heart.

A sense of injustice is thrilling her, of hatred of the world—the world so near to her—now sitting downstairs at the dinner-table, laughing and talking, in their gay dresses, whilst she——

Oh, God! to be dead and done with it all, or else to know a real life—to know love fulfilled—which *is* the real life! A life with Sidney! Her undisciplined, passionate heart has been beating all day with varied emotions. Mrs. Verschoyle's silent depreciation of her somewhat too vivid personality had been penetrated by her quick wit; and Lady Maria's half-insolent admiration of her had cut even deeper. *Ah!* now afresh she grinds under the memory of it.

'She spoke to me,' she breathes to herself violently, '*almost* as though I were within a few hundred miles of her world! And only because I happened to look pretty. I was a toy to her, a thing of delight for a moment. She gave no thought to me—myself: I was not a girl, to her, with heart and brain; I was only a doll dressed up for her delectation. To-morrow—even now—I am cast back into the blackness of darkness for ever—into the companionship of Jinnie.'

She leans back against the unrestful shutter, and closes her eyes in a misery of despair. She begins to hate Jinnie.

'So tired—so tired, my heart, and I——'

Presently a little sound from beneath breaks in upon her wandering thoughts. She starts. It can't be half-past ten yet. It was at that hour she had promised to meet him. She rises softly and leans out.

The windows below have been opened, and now the lights from the dining and larger drawing room are rushing out into the night, flooding the terraces with a vague, artificial light. She can hear Mr. Browne's voice, and now Amyot's, and now Mr. Verschoyle's—the latter, she knows with a sense of passionate relief, is with Miss Fairfax. Something in Verschoyle's voice—it comes up to her quite clearly—something that is tender and loving, yet fearing, makes Miss Royce understand that Verschoyle desires nothing greater than to be allowed to stay with Miss Fairfax for ever.

Relief first, and then a fresh burst of jealousy. Is she to have all, then? Are all to bend to her sway? Is she to have beauty and fortune, and then another fortune laid at her feet? . . . After this comes a reaction.

Oh, what does it matter, what does anything matter, if she will only marry Verschoyle and let Sidney go free? Not for a moment, even when with Fenton, has she lost sight of the fact (that surely some instinct only has told her) that Fenton has some vague, far-off thought of marrying Cecil Fairfax. Not now, perhaps, but some time. He may love *her*—Maden—but he will marry the heiress. Oh, if only Miss Fairfax might prove worldly-wise, and marry Mr. Verschoyle! But, alas! that is too much to hope for. The same instinct that has warned her of Fenton's mercenary views tells her that Cecil Fairfax has a soul that could never be dragged down to disgraceful depths.

She beats a sad little tattoo on the window-sill, and then leans out again cautiously. Where is *he?* Her room is very high up, and quite dark now that she has extinguished her lamp, so that there is really no fear of her being seen. Yet it is with a shrinking fear that she bends forward to look down on the terrace below—now bright with moving forms—to see if *he* is coming.

Carry, in her little plain, old-fashioned, black dinner-dress —her only one, and one that has done such good service that really it ought to be sent to some Chelsea Hospital now, and

given a pension—is discussing some subject with Mr. Amyot in a rather severe way. The words 'trout,' 'flies,' come up to Maden, and then 'rifle,' 'cartridges.'

'Good gracious, what a queer girl!' thinks Miss Royce. But she has no time to examine into the queerness. Her eyes are on Cecil Fairfax, who is still leaning over the terrace railings talking to Anthony Verschoyle.

Such an exquisite figure in its pale pink gown, and with a little diamond comb in the hair! She is talking gaily, her elbows on the railings—Verschoyle had slipped a small fur rug under them—and her pretty ringed fingers clasped. As she talks they clasp and unclasp, the jewels in the rings flashing in the lamplight that comes from the window behind her.

By intuition Maden, watching, knows that Verschoyle would have given *half* his fortune to kiss those pretty fingers—the *whole* of it to kiss the bare, naked arm so dangerously near him. By intuition, too, she knows that Miss Fairfax is entirely careless of his devotion. There is no woman born who cannot divine the fact of a man's being in love with her, and therefore Cecil, in a sort of side-glance as it were, has long ago allowed herself to know that Anthony admires her. But not by word, or act, or thought has she wilfully encouraged him.

All this Maden can read, with her eyes upon that lovely vision down below. She knows, too, that with only one word from Fenton, the fastidious, beautiful, and altogether unsuspicious Cecil Fairfax would link her fate with his.

All things seem clear to the little sphinx staring down from the darkness of her window into the lamplit terrace beneath.

The little sphinx is conscious of a sense of happiness. *He* —though no doubt that lovely vision in pink brocade is waiting for him—has not yet come out. No. He is waiting—waiting for her. A great exaltation takes her. Oh, how good life is, after all! Waiting for *her!* She must not keep him waiting. What was the hour—ten-thirty?

She draws her lithe body inwards silently, and as silently leaves her cushioned window-sill, and gropes her way to the mantelpiece. Then she lets her deft fingers wander over the marble slab until she comes to the match-box. Striking a light, she glances at the clock.

'Only ten! Oh, how horribly slow time goes sometimes! Only ten: she—*he*'—with quick correction, and joy in the

thought—'will have full thirty minutes more to wait before——'

Well, well! at least that time must perforce elapse before all these idle wanderers on the terrace go indoors. Then, and then only, will it be possible for her to slip out and join him in that scented, lovely garden.

She has blown out the candle, and has made her way back to the open window again. She may as well see when they do go in, and whether Miss Fairfax, with all her superiority (with a sneer), is not likely to succumb to the charms of The Towers—if not to the charms of its master.

It seems to her, as she reaches the window, that the voices have ceased in a degree—that fewer people are on the terrace. But one or two—*is* it two?—people are still talking.

Her breath is coming very fast now. Her face is livid. Further she leans out. Whose are the voices?

Too well she knows. The scene on the terrace is changed. Verschoyle is gone, so is Mr. Browne; so are all the rest, except Cecil Fairfax—and now with her is Fenton.

Breathlessly the girl above stares at them, listening—listening.

The voices do not come up to her so clearly now. The two heads are so close together that speech in the ordinary distinct tone is unnecessary.

Even as she looks Fenton says something to Miss Fairfax at which she lifts her arms from the railings and looks at him. Not unkindly—oh, no, no, no!—only too kindly! And her smile! The tortured child above can see it plainly in the moonlight, that now is flooding the sky and overpowering the lamplight. There is rebuke in it, perhaps, but only the rebuke that means forgiveness, and—and a great deal more.

Sidney laughs, and catches her hand.

'Come, let us take a little run through the garden this lovely night,' says he in his happy, debonair way.

He is speaking in his ordinary tone now, and the words come clearly to Maden.

Miss Fairfax seems to hesitate a moment, then, as if a little against her better thoughts, and yet as if not able to resist the growing charm of the night—or her companion—she turns towards the steps of the terrace, her hand always in his (she had not made more than a slight effort to withdraw it), and presently he and she are out of sight.

CHAPTER XVI.

'Passions, like seas, will have their ebbs and flows.'

For a long time the girl stays upon her knees, looking into the silent garden. They have gone! They have passed out of sight behind the rhododendron hedge that divides this garden from the other. Everything has gone!

Just at first, in the shock of her anger, this seems possible to her; but 'everything' is never really gone from us so long as this world's sky is over our heads.

Languidly, as if half dead, she rouses herself presently from her crushing dreams, and, dragging herself again to the clock, looks at it.

A quarter to eleven!

Suddenly a feverish anxiety seizes on her—to go to him—to go at once—to have all her fears ended, or confirmed. Yes—yes—yes! But is she late? Half-past ten he had said, and now—— And if it is true—oh no, it can't be! A convulsion of trembling overpowers her at this thought, and compels her to desist from the fastening of her cloak.

Then, with a strength one would not have dreamed of in such a frail and slender body, she pulls herself together once again.

Well, if so—if it is true—if he is false—then he will be glad of the excuse of her failing to meet him at the appointed hour—to get away, and—and——

But if not—if he is not false—then he will be there.

Cold now and shivering, though the night is exceptionally warm, she steals down the staircase, trembling at every turn lest she may be heard, and presently reaches the little door near the armoury that leads to the gardens.

How it creaks! With her heart in her mouth she waits, then draws it a little further open, then waits again—and now, now at last her way is free to her, and with a sort of relief she runs out into the scented, moonlit, peaceful garden.

The soft freshness of the air beating on her brow cools it. The stars have now come out more brilliantly in the clear sky, and the few luminous clouds that are floating across it scarcely dim their brightness.

'Day is past!
Stars have set their watch at last;
Founts that through the deep woods flow
Make sweet sounds, unheard till now;
Flowers have shut with fading light—
Good-night!'

With swift feet she flies across the delicately-cut sward to where he had told her to meet him. Fear, anger, desperation—but anguish, too, and love—are in her heart.

Will he be there?

When at last she does see him, hidden amongst the rhododendrons, a gasping sob bursts from her. She pauses for a moment in her bird-like flight, pressing her hand to her heart, and then in a moment the distance between them is nothing at all, and she is lying on his breast, her arms around his neck.

Oh, he has not forsaken her!—he has waited for her, after all!

There are many fools like Maden, and God help them all, say I!

There is no sound upon the night air save the rushing of the river down below, and the girl's quick breathing.

'What a little whirlwind!' says Fenton, crushing the slender figure in his arms.

There is no question now of whether he may or may not kiss her lips: hers are pressed vehemently, despairingly, against his.

'Say it—say it!' demands she presently, leaning back from him.

'Say what, my darling?'

'That you do not love her! Oh, I saw you with her in the garden out here, and I thought I should have gone mad! You'—passionately—'*don't* love her, I know—I *know* you don't; but'—with a quick burst of rage—'*say* it!'

She stamps her foot.

'Of course not.' Fenton's voice is low and guarded. 'But, for Heaven's sake, speak more quietly!'

He draws her back still further into the shrubberies, more out of the lights that are still streaming through the drawing-room windows.

'And, after all,' says he, 'I think it is I who ought to feel aggrieved.'

'You!'

'Even I who speak.' Her little bursts of temper, as he calls them, always amuse him. He is incapable of understanding the under-current of pain and anguish out of which they have risen. 'Here have I been waiting for your little highness for quite half an hour, with not so much as a cigarette to console me, only to receive a severe scolding at the end.'

Was that all? Has he forgotten the kisses so freely given, that even already she is repenting of? His lightness, coming on the head of her own overwrought feelings, drives her nearly mad.

'Is it so much to you to wait?' asks she, in a stifled tone.

'To wait for you—a great deal.' The tone is still teasing, careless.

'Well, you need wait no longer,' says she.

Turning, she walks rapidly out of the little sweet-scented, vaguely-lit spot where they have been standing—not so rapidly, however, but that he, rushing after her, with a queer new feeling in his heart, is quite in time to catch her and draw her back again. In the doing of this his hand, striking against a short jagged branch of a tree, gets a rather ugly scratch, tearing the skin and causing a few drops of blood to run down his wrist.

'Oh! what is that?' cries she, recoiling from him first, and then creeping closer, as if fascinated. 'It'—her small white, flower-like face grows whiter still—'it is blood!'

'Why, so it is!' says he, laughing. 'Now, see what your unkind pranks have done for me!'

He is laughing, but she takes it with terrible seriousness.

'Do you think it was my fault? Oh, dearest, no!'

'Nonsense! it is the merest scratch.'

'But when——'

'And quite an old one; the skin got broken again, I suppose.'

'It isn't true!' cries she vehemently, if softly. 'You hurt your hand just this moment, when——'

'I pulled you back to make you listen to reason,' interrupts he audaciously.

'Or——'

She pauses, and looks up at him. A stray moonbeam straggling through the branches, perhaps in search of her, lights up the two large tears that are lying in her eyes, making the dark, impulsive face even more adorable.

'Come, I must mend your hand,' says she.

She pulls out her handkerchief and binds it carefully round the torn skin. Fenton, with a sense of amusement, lets her have her will, half guessing that this tender ministering to him is a strange and lovely joy to her.

'Now'—anxiously—'is it better? Does it hurt you much? I wish you could know how sorry I am. Are you sure it feels easier?'

'Quite—quite sure. Indeed, it feels almost well,' says Fenton enthusiastically.

'That isn't another one?' asks she.

'Another?'—slightly at a loss.

'Lie'—simply.

'Oh, Maden, what an awful word!'

'I don't care.' She seldom does care, poor child! 'You know you did tell me one a moment ago about its being an old wound.' She pauses. 'To think I should have hurt you!' says she.

The strongest resemblance to a remorseful pang that Fenton has ever known shoots through his heart now.

'But, any way, I didn't mean it,' she goes on. 'I couldn't,' she sighs softly. 'Oh, how fond I am of you!' says she.

In another moment she is in his arms. Dear, *dear* little girl, how sweet she is! This new mood suits her so. She nestles closer to him, and a little quick breath parts her lips; it is an expression of perfect happiness.

So still, so still is everything! The very quiet seems part of her joy; it 'is like a hand laid softly on the soul.'

'Do you know,' says she after a while, 'I don't care at all now about Miss Fairfax. I know that you love me—me only. You wouldn't have had your darling hand torn like that, and borne without a murmur such pain'—she evidently thinks he has been heroically enduring tortures—'for anyone but her you loved, and that is——'

She puts up one little hand, and in the sweetest way draws down his face to hers.

'Is me? Isn't it?'

Once again Fenton, case-hardened as he is, is conscious of a feeling of shame; it is the deeper because of the strange, ridiculous fancy that of late has crept into his heart that he is half in love with this little wild girl. His feeling for her is at all events the one only honest liking for any woman he has ever known.

'You—or no one,' says he, a little huskily.

'I must go now.'

She looks round, and then, pushing the branches aside, gives her attention to the house. It is dark downstairs. No longer any glimmer of light in drawing-room or dining-room. The billiard-room is at the other side.

'Oh, it must be dreadfully late!' cries she.

'Not so very late; stay for a little while,' entreats he, his hand almost crushing hers.

'No, no!'

She slips from him, and out on to the gravelled walk. The moon is shining brilliantly down upon her—a little seductive figure, with her black hair and gleaming, mischievous eyes. She moves a step or two, hearing him follow, then pauses again and looks back at him over her shoulder.

'When I came . . . a scolding was not the only thing I gave you,' says she saucily.

There is an impetuous crash through the bushes towards her, and at this moment the moon, so often unkind to lovers, goes smartly behind a cloud.

'Maden!' calls he.

But Maden is gone. The darkness has swallowed her up. In the faint, far distance the sound of small flying feet may be heard—no more. And now, when the moon comes out again, sailing in all her glory over an undimmed sky, there is nothing for Fenton to see but an empty, if lovely, garden, and no sound but the rush of the river that divides The Towers from the Dower-house.

He can see the handkerchief upon his hand, however. Hers! Slowly he unwinds it and takes it off. It is slightly stained with blood. Raising it, he presses it to his lips.

'On my soul,' says he, 'if I had only money enough, I'd——'

CHAPTER XVII.

> 'But take heed:
> I say, be wary; look between thy feet,
> Lest a snare take them, though the ground be good.'

Now that her happiness, her excitement, is at an end, it is with fear and trembling that Miss Royce approaches the house. How will it be with her if all the doors are locked? She

tries the armoury door first, being nearest to her, but that resists all appeals. The butler, no doubt, had fastened that on his way downstairs. The billiard-room window is wide open, and laughter and voices come to her through it as she stands trembling in the outer darkness; but, naturally, there is no help there.

Making her way eagerly to the front-door, in the mad hope that perhaps someone might have forgotten to close it so early, she finds it hermetically sealed, and a little more wandering proves the side-door that opens out of the schoolroom just as unkind. The conservatory, then. No!

A sensation of sickness almost overcomes her. Oh! what is she to do—out here in the dark night, with nothing but the ghostly shadows to keep her company, and with the horrible fear that someone may go to her room and find it empty, and—— Oh, *why* had she come out at all? or, being out, why had she not thought of going back sooner? And then all at once the memory of the time spent with Fenton comes back to her. Again her eyes are looking into his—again she feels his arms around her, his kisses on her lips, and repentance dies. No! a thousand times no! Whatever comes, she has been happy for once—for *once* in all her life.

This little delirium dies, as things must, and again, standing beneath the veranda, she ponders as to how she is to get in. Of course, she could knock and be at once admitted, either by one of the servants, or perhaps by Mr. Verschoyle himself, who is still in the billiard-room. And she might, perhaps, explain that she had gone for a walk because of her bad headache—she is not always truthful, poor Maden!—but, then, they would be sure to notice that Sidney had been absent, too, for some time, and would connect both things, and——

No, no; it was not to be thought of.

Crouching against the ivied wall of the terrace, and lifting her head to let the night dew fall upon her bursting forehead, her eyes suddenly rest upon a window—rest and stay there.

Oh, dear, kind Heaven, it is open! She has only to run up the veranda-steps—to lift it a little more—to make her way through the dark drawing-room—to run upstairs to her own room, and all will be well; and there will be no one to meet her, to question her. Lady Maria, Mrs. Verschoyle—all the women are in bed, or in their rooms, and, indeed, have been there an hour or so.

Slowly, cautiously, she runs up the steps, lifts the sash, and, aided by the moonbeams, makes her way through spindle-legged chairs and dainty tables, past screens that might topple over at any moment, and great jars filled with scented flowers, without upsetting anything, and so gains the hall.

It is bright with light, but empty and silent. Not a sound comes to her from any part of the house, except now and again a faint roar of laughter from the billiard-room, that seems reminiscent of Dicky Browne.

She is safe!

Lightly running across the hall, she mounts the stairs and reaches the first corridor. Already a sense of delight in her adventure is filling her half-savage little soul. If only one dared more, one could enjoy more, and fear makes nothing but fools of most. Here is she, after a quite wild adventure, coming back safe, undiscovered, and——

The opening of a door—the shining of a small lamp—and Mrs. Verschoyle, in a white cashmere dressing-gown, comes out of her room, and, as if hardly believing her senses, stands quite still and stares at her.

It is a supreme moment. Through Miss Royce's facile brain runs a quick thought as to what is the best face to put upon it. The little shawl around her shoulders, the hat hanging loosely on her hand, preclude the possibility of saying she had not been out. *What*, then?

All at once a recklessness, that is always part of her, overrides everything else, and she stands still, staring back at Mrs. Verschoyle (who is most genuinely astonished) with her small, haughty head thrown back, and her black eyes glistening. There is battle in them.

'Out? You have been out?' says Mrs. Verschoyle, as though hardly believing her senses.

'Yes; I have been out'—concisely.

The tone brings Mrs. Verschoyle back to her usual calm examination of all things. Besides, something in the girl's face——

'It is very late, is it not, to be out of the house?' says she coldly, but gently.

'I don't know.' Miss Royce's tone now is reckless to the last degree. 'Your world and mine seem to differ so much, that——'

'My daughter's *governess*,' says Mrs. Verschoyle—good and

charming woman as she is, she cannot resist the emphasis on the 'governess'—that term of servitude—'should not be so much out of her mother's world as not to know the *convenances* of her life. You say you don't know that you should not be out of the house at half-past eleven o'clock—but you *ought* to know.'

'I have seen you and many others "out of the house," as you call it, later than that.'

'Very likely. But that was when Lady Maria had a dance. You must have known—you must have thought yourself, that——'

She pauses, not desirous of going on—not wishing to expound her iniquity in cold blood, and colder words, to this girl standing before her in the flickering, uncertain light of the lamp she holds. Her tone is very gentle still, in spite of the fact that the girl's face has grown defiant.

'I thought of nothing,' says Maden, her eyes on the ground. The white lids droop over them, thus hiding the blazing anger that lives in their depths.

'Nothing?'

'Nothing, except that my head ached badly after all that hateful bazaar business, and that no opportunity was given me to go out and cool it.'

'You think,' says Mrs. Verschoyle after a pause that is quick with meaning, 'that we are neglectful of you! But'—kindly—'you should remember that neither Lady Maria nor I knew you had a headache.'

'A headache and a heartache are easily hidden,' says Miss Royce, making a little attempt to pass her. But Mrs. Verschoyle, laying a hand upon her arm, stops her.

'No; let us see this out,' says she. 'You talk of headache, and'—regarding her anxiously—'heartache.'

'No, no'—quickly. 'That was a mere figure of speech.'

'Well, then, as for the headache—you see, it troubles me that my girl's governess should lay neglect to my charge; but all day I saw you from time to time, and it seemed to me that you were enjoying yourself during the morning, and'—her clear eyes here meet Maden's fairly, and with meaning in them—'in the afternoon too.'

'You *watched* me, then?' says the girl.

Like a flash the accusation comes from her.

'Watched you!'

Mrs. Verschoyle flushes through her clear, delicate skin. *Had* she watched her? What an odious thought, and what an odious girl, to suggest it! If she had glanced towards her once or twice, it was only to see that Sidney and she——

Poor Mrs. Verschoyle! After all, those who rush to the succour of their friends are very apt to fall into the net themselves, and then who pulls them out? She had certainly had no thought of compromising Miss Royce through her surveillance of her; she had thought only of saving Cecil pain.

'I think you must have watched me, to know so much,' says Miss Royce coolly. 'And why? Did you grudge me, then, my one day—*my one day?*' Suddenly she lifts her head and lets her eyes be seen, and all the rage and fury of her soul, that is pouring through them. 'My one day, out of all your many!'

She stops as if choking, and flings out one hand against the wall nearest her, as if for support. Unkind wall! A little trickle of blood from the small pretty hand runs down its painted sides.

'I think you had better go to bed,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, who, to do her justice, had not seen the injury done to the small hand. She had turned away at once. There was no more to be said. And the girl had always been distasteful to her, though why she hardly knows, but to-night she is actually repulsive.

She goes in her usual slow way to her bedroom, not heeding the little stricken figure in the darkness behind her.

This seems hard, unnatural; but there are few people in this conventional world who would not have done the same. There are many who would have done a great deal worse—who would have given their daughter's governess her dismissal on the spot.

That stringent measure would have destroyed all Mrs. Verschoyle's later fears. But she does not dismiss her. She shrinks from the action. Perhaps—perhaps after all there is nothing in it. Gaining her room, she sits down before her glass; her maid had been dismissed an hour ago, and only the volatile disposition of Lady Maria, who had sent her word to come and gossip, had led her to sit up to this late time—to Miss Royce's discomfiture.

Now, in the safe seclusion of her bedroom, Mrs. Verschoyle gives full rein to her fears. To be out in the grounds until

half-past eleven, when all decent people who have no dances in hand are usually abed! What was she doing? And—was there anyone—with——

Mrs. Verschoyle's thoughts grow faint here. Oh, of course not. Of *course* not. And yet——

Is it wise to give Jinnie into her care—Jinnie, who is so sweet, and wild, and . . . dreadful?

She must only wait and see! She certainly could not be unjust, and though Miss Royce had been anything but respectful to her, as her employer, just now, still——

Mrs. Verschoyle's gentle nature asserts itself here.

Well, we have all got tempers of our own, and the girl no doubt was overwrought after her long day's work at the bazaar; and, besides, the adulation she had received (and which was so new to her, and—thoughtfully—very bad for her) had unhinged her brain.

At this point she locks her door, and, sinking on her knees, prays for herself and all mankind.

A thought of Miss Royce coming to her (in the middle of a prayer for Jinnie), she once again renews her supplications to Heaven, and prays earnestly for that poor little sinner—prays that she may not be injurious in any way to—Jinnie!

CHAPTER XVIII.

'Quick glances, like the thrilling wires, transfuse
The telegraphic look!'

To-day, the second of the bazaar, has opened in perfect splendour. Very different is its entrance into the world from that of its brother of yesterday. This day has begun life as a thoroughly well-behaved child, and seems likely to sustain its character to the verge of old age.

Carry, who yesterday was too much occupied in the shooting-gallery to give any thought to the morrow, now recollects that she had promised someone—that tall Mrs. Ronaldson who had the fifth stall on the right-hand side—to sell some remaining six tickets for something for her. One or two she disposes of, and now walks anxiously about, determined to make up for lost time.

The attendance is much fuller to-day, on account of the

weather for one thing, and, for another, the second day of a bazaar is regarded by the poorer classes as a time for making cheap purchases. Few people care to take away their 'wares,' and so for the sake of the charity in hand they sell them cheaply, and at the eleventh hour for a mere trifle. Mrs. Langley-Binks, who was born amongst commercial people, and has the ineradicable longing for a bargain that it takes hundreds of years to destroy, is taking large advantage of this decadence on the part of her sister stall-holders, and, under pretence of being immensely liberal—considering she has taken a stall herself—is buying in many of *their* little 'bits' at far less than their honest value.

The concert-room is again open, and into it Mr. Browne, because it affords him such a fund of amusement (suppressed amusement), and Mrs. Berkeley—for the same reason, perhaps —and many others because of sheer idleness—wander after a while.

Miss Langley-Binks, ticket-book in hand, seeing Amyot at the end of a bench, goes for him. People disposing of tickets are allowed in free.

'Oh, Mr. Amyot,' says she, with awful gaiety, 'I have been looking for you everywhere!' Richie shudders. 'A tea-cosy. I am sure *you* will take a ticket from me, whoever else may fail me.'

'Delighted,' says Richie, with a frozen smile.

'Two, perhaps?' with what she fondly, but erroneously, believes to be a witching smile.

'Three!' says Amyot, without a groan.

Perhaps—who knows?—hang it all!—he may have to marry this confounded girl, after all. It is easy enough to talk of going to the Antipodes, but it's not so easy to leave the dear old place—and—and all one's friends. There are moments when Richie's heart fails him.

Miss Langley-Binks, delighted with what she afterwards calls his *empressement*, goes off to find 'fresh woods and pastures new,' leaving Amyot, not *désolé*, as she is quite sure, but immensely relieved.

In between the songs and other things recitations may be heard, and Mr. Popkin is now about to hold forth at the top of his high squeaking voice. His eye is on Carry Desmond, who, sitting next to Mr. Browne, is beginning to feel uncomfortable. The curate's eye means business.

And, after all, she has no right to be here at all; she came in ostensibly to sell tickets, and here she is chatting gaily with Dicky Browne. She hasn't up to this felt dishonest, because no one on earth would care to listen to a recitation from Mr. Popkin; but now all at once her conscience smites her, and she tries to rise from her seat. In vain. Mr. Browne has caught hold of her frock, and, without the rending of that necessary garment from her body, flight is impossible.

'Sit tight,' says he, 'and meditate upon your sins. This is going to be Popkin's best sermon, and it is addressed to you.'

''Tis not!' says Carry indignantly.

'You are wrong as usual, my dear girl. Look at him.'

'I won't,' says Carry.

'Very ungrateful. *He*, poor dear! is looking very much at you.'

He is, indeed. All the curate's forces are directed at Carry, and it is not possible to believe he has chosen his recitation without the idea of an appeal to her. Always with his glance full on her, he begins:

> '"Oh, ever thus from childhood's hour
> I've seen my fondest hopes decay.
> I never loved a tree or flower,
> But 'twas the first to fade away.'"

'Good heavens, Carry, you'd better consult somebody!' whispers Mr. Browne hurriedly. 'Old Blande isn't bad. How are your lungs—your heart? You must let me look at your tongue presently.'

> '"I never nursed a dear gazelle
> To glad me with its soft black eye,
> But when it came to know me well,
> And love me, it was sure to die.'"

'Carry! I feel distinctly anxious,' says Mr. Browne, whispering again. '*Do* you love him?'

'I wish you'd let me go'—wrathfully.

'Because, if so, my poor child, your doom is sealed. He seems to me to be uncanny, a kind of a magician of some unholy sort. Carry, answer me!'

'I suppose you think you're funny,' says Miss Desmond furiously.

'Funny! At such an hour as this! Caroline, I must have an answer. *Do* you love that man?'

'No!' says Carry, the more vehemently in that she has to whisper it.

'My dear girl, you lift a weight off my mind. But why didn't you say so before? I fancied you might have fallen a victim to his charms. Now I quite understand how matters are. Popkin, beyond doubt, has the evil eye. And if a poor little innocent gazelle could not escape him, or a simple flower, where—where on earth could you and I be? And his eye, the fatal eye, is on *you*, Carry. Let us rise and flee!'

Carry gladly rises. Passing Mrs. Berkeley on their way out, who happens to be standing at Mrs. Ronaldson's stall, she stops them to ask how things have been faring within. Whereon Dicky gives her a graphic description of Popkin's recitation.

'Isn't he too silly for anything?' says Mrs. Berkeley. 'I used to call him "Yass, yass, yass"—you know that silly way he has of saying the simple "yes"—but after this I shall leave out the *y*.'

Carry laughs involuntarily, but heartily, and is on the point of saying something, when Amyot comes quickly up to her.

'They are going to draw for that tweed now,' says he. 'Wouldn't you like to come?'

'Oh, I should.'

She gives a little hurried nod to Dicky Browne and rushes away with Amyot.

'How handsome Mr. Amyot is!' says Mrs. Ronaldson, looking after him.

'Very,' says Mrs. Berkeley. 'But on his last legs, I hear. Not a penny. I expect poor Lady Maria would wish him in a far country.'

'But why?' asks Mr. Browne casually.

'Well, her cousin, you know, and so utterly impecunious. One's poor relations are never very dear to us.'

There is a touch of bitterness in her tone. Have her relations been glad to put a county or two between them and her?

'I quite agree with you,' says Mrs. Ronaldson, who has only lately come to the neighbourhood, and hardly knows the ropes as yet, clever though she is. 'Poor relations'—shrugging her pretty shoulders—'are impossible. They have, as a rule, very little manners to speak of, and literally *no* clothes.'

'Oh, my goodness!' says Mr. Browne faintly.

At which both women laugh.

'Well, have they?' asks Mrs. Ronaldson. 'I defy you to contradict me. As for me, whenever I ask a poor relation to stay with me, I send her first a decent cheque, so that she may show up properly when she does come.'

'How careful!' says Mr. Browne.

'More careful than you know. Very often the cheque proves too much for them. They keep it, and *don't* come. So we both benefit, and my conscience is clear for another twelve months. See?'

Mr. Browne sees.

CHAPTER XIX.

'Art sick? Art sad? Art angry with the world?
Do all friends fail thee?'

The names are actually being drawn as Carry Desmond and Amyot come up. The drawing is taking place behind one of the stalls, and the folded papers are lying in the Rector's hat. This seems a voucher for the honesty of the raffle.

Miss Langley-Binks, having from afar seen Richie go behind the scenes, has followed him. She is indeed, as a rule, a little shameless about her pursuit of him; but this time an excuse lies ready to her hand—she, too, has taken a ticket for the roll of tweed.

'Oh, Mr. Amyot, don't you hope I'll win?' says she.

'I don't know,' says Richie. 'Would tweed suit you? Are you fond of it?'

'Oh, it isn't *that;* it's the winning. I have set my mind on getting this tweed, and whatever I set my mind on I—it's queer, isn't it?'—with an engaging smile—'but I really almost always get it.'

Amyot shivers. Has she set her mind on him? There seems to be no second question about it. Well, there's always the ranch, and the far, far distance.

At this moment Cecil, who is drawing the papers from the immaculate hat, says quite clearly:

'Miss Langley-Binks!'

Richie is conscious of a desire to laugh aloud, which, how-

ever, he nobly suppresses. After all, if she has failed over a beastly old roll of tweed, she can't be so almighty strong. And, of *course,* he won't have to marry her, after all—something will turn up. This modern Micawber recovers his spirits instantly.

'I'm afraid you've lost,' says he. 'Perhaps your mind wasn't sitting long enough.'

Here he is astonished by an act on Miss Langley-Binks' part hitherto unprecedented: she actually leaves him.

He follows her departing figure, which goes away with a greater rapidity than he has ever noticed in her actions before, and finally disappears behind the stall at the very end of the room, where (he is unable to see this, however) she precipitates herself upon the bosom of a friend. The friend, providentially, is five feet six, and stoutly proportioned.

'What is it, Aurora? What is it, my lovely crumb?'

'Oh! he said—he said——'

'That unkind young man again!—that Amyot *bear!* But it is only his dreadful manners, dearest; I know he loves you. Come, now, *what* did he say?'

'Oh, he said I was a *hen!*' says Miss Langley-Binks, now nearly in hysterics.

'A hen! Aurora!'

'Yes'—with increasing vehemence—'*a brooding hen!*'

'Good heavens, Aurora! your brain must be disordered. All this fatigue has turned your head. He——'

'And that'—now with a smothered shriek—'I had not been *sitting long enough!*'

'I think you ought to come home,' says her faithful friend, in austere accents. This last statement has proved too much even for her.

'Oh, no, no!' gurgles Aurora.

'Then explain'—severely.

But sobs choke Aurora's utterance.

'Then you *shall* come home,' says the faithful friend, and presently she removes her.

* * * * *

In the meantime the raffle is going slowly on. Name after name is called out, but never Carry's; and now the little folded bits of paper have dwindled lower and lower, until at last there ought to be only two left. Carry grows pale with excitement. Can it—can it be true that she has a real

chance? Oh, how slowly—how awfully slowly—he undoes that little scrap!

'Mrs. Longden!' reads out the Rector in a clear voice, and Carry very nearly gives way to a scream of delight. Then a last dreadful fear attacks her; if, after all, her name had never been put in—if they had forgotten that she had taken a ticket! Her blood runs cold. The Rector has been fumbling for the last bit of paper, and now peers curiously into the hat.

'Why, there's nothing here,' says he, 'and I thought one hundred was the number of the tickets.'

'Yes, certainly,' says the lady at whose stall the roll of tweed had been exhibited. She, too, peers into the hat, but in vain—not a vestige of paper is to be seen.

Poor Carry! Her face falls, and a rather choking sensation is troubling her throat. She is about to slip noiselessly away, when Amyot, who too has been examining the hat, says quickly:

'Why, what's that?'

And there, certainly, hidden beneath the lining of the Rector's tall hat, is the missing slip of paper.

'Come back, Carry!' says Amyot, catching her sleeve.

And now the paper has been opened, and the Rector, with open pleasure, calls aloud: 'Miss C. Desmond!' Carry is a pet of his.

'How curious—how very curious!' says he. 'My dear Amyot, I'm immensely obliged! But for you, I should probably have gone about with that roll of tweed upon my head, if not upon my conscience, for the next twelve months.'

So Carry won the tweed.

'Fancy it's being there all the time!' says she faintly, when she and Richie have seated themselves upon a bench in one of the corners. 'Why, it was bound to be mine from the start! Oh, Richie, is it fair, do you think? No one had a chance, you see, but me.'

'The chance was your name getting in there instead of somebody else's,' says Richie. 'Of course it is fair. And'—affectionately—'I'm jolly glad you've won it!'

'Dear old Richie! Oh, Richie'—ecstatically—'if you only knew what it means to me!'

'Why, a new gown, of course.'

'And more—much more than that.'

'Would it run to a gown for Miss Desmond, too?'

'Yes, yes, certainly; but it isn't only that, either——' She checks herself abruptly, though she seems to be on the very brink of a declaration. 'It isn't often luck comes our way, Richie, is it?'

'Once in a blue moon.'

'I wish'—gloomily—'one could sometimes get up a bazaar for one's self.'

At this they both laugh in spite of themselves. But their mirth is short.

'It's beastly to be poor,' says Richie, relapsing once again into gloom.

'You may say that,' says Carry, with heartfelt meaning. 'I wouldn't care for myself, really; but poor darling auntie is in such a hole just now. I think'—taking her knees into her slim embrace—'I told you about it: she's got to pay up twenty pounds on an old loan by November next. She'—with a heavy sigh, and a growing mist of tears in her kindly eyes—'is in *such* a pucker!'

'I remember—you told me. I say, Carry, there's that red cow of mine—the brute without the horns, you know. I hate her—I do, 'pon my honour! I hate her so much that I'm bound to sell her sooner or later, and she might bring in——'

'If you say another word'—wrathfully—'I'll never speak to you again!' She looks at him with frowning, angry brows. 'Can't I have the comfort of telling you my troubles without your saying things like that? And, besides, all is not lost yet. I'—colouring slightly—'am thinking out something; I've got an idea, in fact, and I'm going to work it.'

'An idea! What is it?'

'Ah! well, we'll see. By the way, Richie, what did you say to Aurora just now?'

'To Miss Langley-Binks? Say to her? I don't know. Why?'

'Well, it must have been something, because directly after you had been speaking to her she flashed by me with her face on fire, and evidently as angry as she could be; and that says something. You know, Richie, you ought not to be rude to her—no, indeed! I really do think you ought to marry her.'

'Oh, I dare say! It is all very fine for you! *You* aren't asked to marry her!' says Amyot indignantly.

'I'm asked to marry somebody else just as bad!' says Carry, in her turn indignant.

'Yes; but you won't do it.'

'I don't know'—despondently—'when I think of poor auntie's troubles and everything; and things can't go on like this for ever. And there's no one else to marry.'

'Well, I must say girls are easily satisfied,' says Richie contemptuously.

He casts a disparaging glance at her—a glance meant to wither her and her weak leaning towards Popkin, whom Amyot in soul abhors. But if he meant to wither Carry, he finds himself mistaken.

'Do you mean Aurora?' asks she, with a little grimace. 'Well, poor girl! it *is* stupid of her to admire you so much; but, surely, *you* should be the last to censure her!'

'Look here——' begins Amyot.

But this admirably severe beginning has no ending. Carry tucking her arm into his, pulls him closer to her.

'Oh, I can't quarrel to-day,' says she—'not even with you!' This is evidently meant as a high compliment. 'Why, only for you I shouldn't have won my lovely tweed! That was a lucky shilling, Richie, you gave me. Oh, by-the-by'—with a rather conscience-stricken air, and a searching in her pocket—'here it is! I got it from auntie to give you. But really, Richie'—with a rather shamed shake of her head—'I never thought of it until this minute.'

She is holding out her hand to him with the shilling in it, but he pushes it back roughly.

'Oh, hang it, Carry! As if I wanted that beastly thing!'

'I don't suppose you want it,' says she; 'but you must take it, all the same.'

'I shan't indeed,' says he. 'If I can't do *that* much for you——'

'Oh, you might—you might indeed!' says she earnestly; 'but auntie wouldn't like it. It would make her very sorry. She would fret over it. That'—a little sadly—'is another thing about being poor, Richie, isn't it? One suffers so much more from pride—of sorts.'

'I dare say'—moodily—'but I tell you what, Carry: that's a lucky shilling. Oh yes, I know, of course, it isn't the shilling that won the tweed, but it has something to do with

it. Why can't you make a hole in it and hang it round your neck?' He is half in fun, half in earnest.

Carry hesitates. It seems to herself as though she has grown superstitious all at once. There is Irish blood in her veins; and perhaps—— And if this lucky shilling should help her in this new venture of hers, that is quickly growing to perfection in her brain——

'You mean that you don't wish to take it back?' says she, still in a hesitating frame of mind.

'I mean that I want you to keep it as a talisman,' says Amyot, who cannot bear to think she holds herself so far aloof from real friendship with him as to refuse to take a shilling from him in an hour of need.

He looks so earnest about it, and they are certainly always on such brotherly and sisterly terms, that Carry for the last time pauses.

'Well, if you really think it might bring luck——' says she slowly; and then, after a full minute's secret thought, 'I shouldn't wonder if you were right. If not the *real* shilling that won that tweed, still, it represents it.' Her eyes grow quite mystical. 'Yes, yes; as you say, it may be lucky, and I will hang it round my neck.'

She is silent again for a moment, as if thinking. If she were to hang it round her neck whenever she went out in search of——

There is no doubt but that she is very Irish!

'Yes—it's settled,' says she at last, with all the air of one who has come to a decision over, let us say, the Armenian question. 'I'll wear it. But how shall I bore a hole in it?'

'I'll come up to-morrow—no, by the way, we'll be at The Towers to-morrow; but I'll come up the day after, or any day that will suit you, and do it for you.'

'All right,' says she in her bright way. Then suddenly she springs to her feet.

'Oh, I say, Richie! I haven't yet filled up Mrs. Ronaldson's ticket-book for this'—pulling the book in question out of her pocket. 'I must do so this minute. It is to be raffled at five sharp.'

'How many more tickets?'

'Only one, thank goodness!'

'Then sit down again. I'll take it.'

'Indeed you shall not, Richie'—very severely. 'You have

spent already a great deal more than you ought to have spent.'

'Ask the Bishop, then,' says Amyot, with a little grin. 'He loves raffles, I'm told.'

'Oh! I've been told already to steer clear of the Bishop—and his wife, too,' says Carry, laughing. She steps briskly into the middle of the hall, and looks round her for a likely customer.

CHAPTER XX.

'A bitter and perplexed "What shall I do?"'

The day is waning, and already the stallholders are able to say to themselves that undoubtedly the bazaar has been a success. And, indeed, it would have ended without a hitch anywhere, but for Carry—poor Carry, who, as a rule, only tumbles out of one catastrophe into another.

She is wandering aimlessly round now, seeking whom she may devour, with regard to the last ticket in Mrs. Ronaldson's raffle-book. Nearly everyone has given the orthodox shilling, and it is hard to ask twice; but something must be done. It is five minutes to five exactly, and at five the tickets are to be drawn. Good gracious, she must hurry up! But who *is* there?

All at once her eyes light on a small, very kindly-visaged elderly lady sitting on a bench talking to another lady of her own age. Who is she? Carry racks her brain to try and remember if she has ever known—ever even heard of—her before, but nothing comes of the effort. Well, any way, she is a stranger, and can't have taken a ticket, and so she'll try her. She can't say more than 'No,' that's one comfort—and she may say 'Yes.'

With a rather nervous, if wide and lovely, smile on her frank young face, Carry charges up to this kindly-looking matron.

'Will you give me a shilling for this raffle?' asks she in a low tone.

She has been told to speak low, in case any of the new Bishop's people should be near.

The kindly-looking matron looks up at her, and, seeing her,

pauses. Whatever she had been *going* to say, this is now, at all events, what she does say:

'I thought raffles were not allowed.'

'This is only a little one,' says Carry, with a nervous laugh, 'though the Benares brass tray is quite big and very handsome.'

The strange lady's smile broadens.

'You know the Bishop has forbidden raffles.'

'Yes—so awfully silly of him!' says Carry confidentially.

She might have said more, but that a little sound emanating from the other strange lady sitting beside the one she is coercing into taking a ticket stops her.

She looks quickly at her; but there is little to see—her face is hidden in her handkerchief. Is she ill?

Carry is reassured by her companion's indifference. If she were suffering, surely this nice-looking woman, with her kind eyes and smile, would hurry to her assistance! She goes back to her business.

'You will take a ticket?' says she. 'It is the very last, and last tickets are lucky. I've just won something myself on a last ticket.'

'Something delightful, I hope,' says the stranger.

'Yes, something I wanted ever so much,' says Carry, beaming afresh as she remembers all that the roll of tweed is going to be to her.

'You are sure last tickets are fortunate?'

The stranger seems to pause, as if undecided, yet drawn by Carry's statement.

'Quite—quite sure! You will give me a shilling?'

'But what will the Bishop say?'

'Oh,' says Carry, bending over her, and speaking in a low, mysterious tone, 'don't be frightened about that. *He'll never find you out.*'

At this the stranger's face melts into a smile that Carry cannot help thinking must soon widen itself into hearty laughter; and as for her companion—'Hysterical, poor thing!' thinks Carry.

'Not to be found out is evidently the principal thing,' says the stranger. 'Well, here's the shilling. I suppose I may depend upon you that the Bishop won't hear of it?'

'You may indeed. At all events, it won't be from me,' says Carry gratefully. She tears off the slip, and gives it to

the stranger. Mrs. Ronaldson, wise woman! has had her books made out as numbers instead of names. 'You are a hundred and fifty,' says she.

'That's very unkind,' says the strange lady, glancing up at her quizzically, 'At all events, before you go, I hope you will say I don't *look* it.'

'Oh,' says Carry, breaking into a merry laugh, 'you don't, *at all!* You look as young as anything.'

'I must look like you,' says the stranger, laughing. And then, gently: 'May I ask your name?'

'You may indeed. I'm Carry Desmond, and I live at Tudor Hall; and if ever you want to come and see our part of the world, I'm sure auntie and I will be very glad to see you, and we hope you will come and lunch with us.'

'Thank you,' says the strange lady very kindly and gently; 'I think I should like very much to come and lunch with you.'

Carry gives her a little gracious parting bow, and, crossing the room, goes straight to Mrs. Ronaldson.

'It's all right; I've got the last ticket filled—one hundred and fifty.'

'Oh, you good girl!—when shillings were lying so low, too! Who gave it?'

'That nice-looking elderly woman over there on the far bench—no, not there—the other side.'

Mrs. Ronaldson turns upon her a stricken face.

'Not that woman, Carry?'

'Certainly that woman,' says Carry, a little angrily. 'And why not, may I ask? Who is she?'

'Only'—into Mrs. Ronaldson's voice a tragic note has come—'only the Bishop's wife!'

'Oh, oh!' says Carry. Words seem beyond her. 'And I told her the Bishop would never *know*, if she took a ticket. . . . And I said the Bishop was *silly!* Oh, Mrs. Ronaldson, what is to become of me?'

But Mrs. Ronaldson is now in such convulsions of laughter that advice from her is hard to get.

'Go to him,' gasps she at last, 'and get absolution. Throw yourself on his mercy. He is to give an informal address before he leaves to-night, I'm told, so you can easily get hold of him. It will be a hair skirt, to a moral, and no more bon-bons till Candlemas. A light sentence. I only trust I am

not buoying you up with false hopes, Carry; he may order the white sheet and the candles, but——'

'Oh, bother!' says Carry indignantly, swinging herself out of her stall and away from her.

But even as she goes she finds that all present—that is, most of the younger people—are congregating together—moving by twos and threes to the end of the big room, where a tall, stout, benign-looking man is standing, conversing with Anthony Verschoyle and others. That must be the Bishop. Is he going to give that address now? Has Mrs. —— (she really has forgotten the new Bishop's name, so little interest has she taken in him)—has his wife told the Bishop of her misdemeanour? Any way, she is just as bad as Carry herself. *She gave* the shilling to the immoral raffle. But what's the good of that? Even if that fact were to exonerate her—Carry—from blame, she would certainly not betray poor Mrs.—Mrs. 'Bishop.'

At this moment she finds Richie at her elbow, and, clutching him eagerly, pours into his sympathetic ears all her story.

'Wasn't it unfortunate?' says she at last.

But even Richie fails her. He has taken the tragedy as a big joke, and is shaking with laughter.

'Really, Richie, I think you, at all events, might——'

'Caroline, be silent,' says Mr. Browne, who has just joined them. 'The Bishop is on the war-path!'

And, indeed, the Bishop has just begun his impromptu address—an address, as he is bound to see, to be given to the younger members of his diocese only. The elder ones, too tired out from their exertions during the day, or too wary, have cautiously abstained from putting in an appearance, and the Bishop, who is as understanding and kind a man as possible, and one to make allowances, decides on addressing the word or two in season he has to say to the young specially.

Of course he begins on charity. The bazaar means charity. But from that he drops into more personal ways.

'The mind is like the ground,' says the good Bishop, in his most solemn tones. 'It should be cultivated, watered, enriched from year to year.' ('Ask him what's the best thing for *your* mind?' whispers Mr. Browne to Carry strenuously.)

'Good seed should be sown in it,' goes on the Bishop earnestly in his slow, rather fat voice. ('Oh, hang it! we'll have to get Carter's list if this goes on,' says Dicky *sotto voce*.)

'Not cheap or spurious stuff; and all weeds should be eradicated, more especially, and above all, that deadliest of weeds—deceit!'

Carry grows very pale.

'Oh, Dicky, do you think he means me?' asks she, trembling.

That ticket sold to the Bishop's wife is weighing more heavily than ever on her.

'Who can say?' returns Mr. Browne lugubriously 'I did think—didn't you?—that he was looking very much in this direction.'

'I think I'll leave,' says Carry feebly.

She half rises.

'If you do, you give yourself away at once, and are a marked sinner for life,' says Mr. Browne, with conviction, at which she sits down again promptly.

Meanwhile the Bishop's slow, deliberate voice has been going on. He has left the nervous ground of deceit now, and is leading up to the consequences that surround it, and, with a modesty most becoming, has descended from his personal eloquence to that of Solomon.

'Withhold not correction from the child.'

Here, unfortunately, his eye happens by chance to fall on Jinnie—who is gazing at him with a stony glare expressive of deep disgust—so that she catches it full. Jinnie is raging! She had firmly believed, when coming up here to the end of the hall, that she was going to see a conjurer of some sort. There were conjurers at the last bazaar—and now, what sort of a thing is this for a bazaar? Why, it is just like church!

'Withhold not correction from the child,' repeats the Bishop, now held by Jinnie's glittering eye, 'for if thou beatest him with a rod'—as though the rod had touched her, Jinnie springs to her feet—'he shall not die!'

The Bishop pauses, and then an awful thing happens.

'You're a beast! You're a beast!' screams Jinnie, waving her hands frantically. 'No, I *won't* be quiet!' presumably to someone in the background—to Carry, really—who is trying to draw her down and into subjection. 'He *is* a beast, and it's unfair, it *is*. I *won't* be beaten with rods. You're a nasty, nasty man'—this to the poor Bishop—'and I'll tell mammy about you, and she——'

But here she is forcibly removed by Mr. Browne, Carry,

and Amyot, to the open air, where she still stands sobbing and shrieking, and shaking her little hands.

The address is hopelessly at an end.

'Dear, dear, dear!' says the poor Bishop, who is really the very kindest man.

And that is all; he retires into the background.

Mr. Browne, who is consumed by a mirth but very ill repressed, is striving to soothe the incensed Jinnie.

'I quite agree with you, my dear Jinnie! It was outrageous —a perfect breach of the peace! You will be fully justified in calling him out, my poor child; and I'd strongly advise your doing it. Such open attacks are not to be countenanced. Call him out, Jinnie, and I'll back you up. I'll be your second.'

'Horrid, unkind old thing!' sobs the indignant Jinnie. 'Rods he said! Rods indeed!'

'Yes, it was rods. You heard it, Amyot, didn't you? And you, Carry? Rods certainly was the word.' Mr. Browne is growing magisterial in his wrath. 'This cannot be lightly passed over. What shall we do with him, my poor injured innocent?'

'Sell him,' says Jinnie eagerly, who has been deeply impressed by the doings of the last two days. She has seen that all the things that were sold in her mother's stall were taken away and never appeared again. And there were things called auctions, where men stood up in big chairs, like the slaves in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' and people gave money, and—— She is a little confused. But perhaps they were sold, too. Oh, if only that nasty old fat man could be sold to someone who would take him away, like mammy's pretty things, and never bring him back again!

'A most excellent suggestion!' says Mr. Browne. 'I shall see that it is done instantly. Ah, Miss Royce, that you?' seeing Maden coming hurriedly up. 'Poor dear Jinnie has been most unjustly assailed, and indeed threatened. To avoid an action for assault and battery, I would suggest to you that home will be now the best place for her.'

'Lady Maria and Mrs. Verschoyle are very angry. You are to come home at once, Jinnie,' says Miss Royce, hardly deigning to notice any of the other three present. Her small, vivid face is alight, her eyes flashing. She had been ordered off peremptorily by Lady Maria to see to her grand-daughter, the

report of Jinnie's outbreak having spread, and Miss Royce was not pleased at her errand or the manner of its conveyance.

She marches off Jinnie, who is always cowed by her, in a stony silence.

Amyot laughs.

'I heard they had at first thought of having fireworks for this bazaar,' says he, 'as a sort of wind-up to it. Quite providential they didn't. Jinnie has provided them gratis.'

Mr. Browne is looking after Miss Royce.

'Quite superfluous, as you say,' returns he a little absently. 'In my opinion, we have been having them all along!'

Carry, meantime, has slipped back to the bazaar, to find that the Bishop's wife has just won the Benares brass tray.

'Well, any way, she can't say much to me *now*,' thinks Carry, with deep self-gratulation.

CHAPTER XXI.

'Think naught a trifle, though it small appear.'

VERSCHOYLE had refused to hear a word about his guests leaving him the day after the bazaar, though Lady Maria had arranged for her return to the Dower-house on that day. No, she would be tired, Anthony had declared, and, besides, he was bent on giving a little dance—the simplest, most informal affair—to the stallholders and their pretty assistants: just a few neighbours, nothing more, and without the light of his mother's countenance how could he hope to make it a success?

So he coaxed her, and Lady Maria, who, to confess a truth, still takes much joy in looking at a dance, gives in gracefully, and consents to patronize what she calls 'Anthony's little impromptu.'

'That's so good of you,' says Anthony, kissing her affectionately.

'Oh, my dear,' says Lady Maria, 'what is there I wouldn't do for you? You are all I have now, Anthony; you know that.'

The old, soft eyes fill with tears. Her thoughts have gone back to Jinnie's father, to the elder born, the first baby that had lain upon her breast! She looks at Anthony. How good he is, and what an honest soul is his! A tall man, too,

and upright in stature as in mind. Not so fair to look upon, perhaps, as the heart's idol she has lost—but still, a man, every inch of him. She sighs again, but the tears have died out of her eyes. Truly she has still something left.

'Yes, you are all that is left to me, my darling,' says she. 'But you are a great gift, Anthony—I feel that.'

'Now,' she might have added. Anthony indeed had played very considerably 'second fiddle' whilst his brother was alive, and it is only of late years that his mother, unconsciously, has become conscious of his sweet and strong nature.

'You mustn't flatter me out of all common-sense,' says he, laughing and kissing her again. 'I'm very ordinary clay, I assure you. But I'm ever so glad you will stay on until to-morrow. By the way, couldn't you let Miss Royce come down to-night, after Jinnie is in bed? Do! It seems awfully beastly, letting the poor girl stay up there all alone, whilst the rest of us are dancing.'

Lady Maria, who is in a softer mood than she has been for years, hesitates.

'She plays very well,' says she. 'Of course . . . this little dance of yours . . . got up so instantaneously, has left you without time to provide musicians.'

'Of course.'

'Well then, Miss Royce will probably be a help to you. Yes, she can play! I'll let her know that we would be glad if she would——'

'Oh, not like that, you know,' says Anthony hastily. 'Tell her we'll all be delighted to see her, and that we hope she'll come down, and that if it wouldn't trouble her to play a waltz or two——'

'A waltz or *two!* My dear boy, she will of course be only too glad to help you to make your dance a success. She is a most reasonable creature, though Jane, I fear, has taken a dislike to her—why, I can't imagine.'

'Pulled Jinnie's ears, I suppose,' says Anthony lightly. 'Well, that's all right; you'll get her to come down, and——'

He doesn't get beyond the 'and,' which perhaps is wise. If spoken, the continuance of his sentence would mean that Miss Royce, as far as in his power lies, should have a good time. He has always felt a little uncomfortable about the fact that here, in his own house, that 'poor little girl up-stairs' has not been made as happy as she might be. That

monkey Jinnie (he is very fond, however, of the 'monkey') has held her in thrall all through, or so he has been told.

* * * * *

The dancing-room is now in full blaze, all the wax candles in their beautiful, innumerable sconces being lit all round the walls. There had been little time for anything, but Cecil and Carry, assisted by the others, had put flowers here and there, and the result is very happy.

Even Mrs. Berkeley, who has arrived with her hair and her cheeks even redder than usual, has been heard to say that it was quite wonderful how much has been done, at a moment's notice as it were.

'Only hope the supper hasn't been lost sight of in the general rush for outward beauty,' she says to the person nearest her, with a sniff.

The rooms were somewhat empty when she arrived. She always comes early and goes late, with a steady determination to see the beginning and the end of everything—'to get her penn'orth,' as Mr. Browne very vulgarly expresses it. And now the lovely old ballroom is alive with pretty faces, and, alas! with many ugly ones.

Miss Langley-Binks has come like the Assyrian cohorts of old. She is positively 'gleaming with purple and gold,' an awful combination that, nevertheless, suits her (one feels this is difficult of belief), and has been actually cordial—more, even dreadfully affectionate to Amyot, who had had the ill luck to meet her on her entrance.

Carry, during a pause, notices this, and is very glad for Richie's sake. Poor, dear old Richie! To be a cowboy would be awful!

Aurora is, indeed, particularly nice to Amyot—afraid, perhaps, of that little outburst of temper of hers yesterday, and of losing her own chance down here of gaining a place in that haven called 'good society,' where she would be. And Richie is very nice to her, too. Whether this change of front on his part arises from a feeling of remorse at having made her in some vague way unhappy during that last hour at the bazaar, or a growing determination to go in and win, not her fortune, indeed (he cares little for that or her), but the restoration of the old place—the home that years have made so dear to him—who can say?

'He is thinking about it really now,' says Carry to herself.

'And he is right—quite right. Ah! her mother has joined them. Is he going to be nice to her too? Well, to be nice to her is very wise! I think'—with a melancholy reluctance —'that I had better begin to be nice to Mr. Popkin!'

And, indeed, towards the end of the evening, she is so far 'nice' to him that, when he proposes to her as usual, she says the usual 'No' so kindly, so gently, so altogether regretfully, that Popkin becomes jubilant, and filled with the blest, if somewhat previous, assurance that she has said 'Yes' *almost*—at last! whilst Carry can think of nothing but that Richie, who must have seen this silly curate with her, has failed to come to her support.

'Mrs. Binks har to-night?' asks Mrs. Berkeley, in her queer intonation. She makes a point of never calling her enemy by the first name.

'Tremendously "har,"' says Mr. Browne, with an air so innocent of offence that no one could have found fault with it. 'Over "thar," on the lounge, making Amyot happy.'

'Good heavens! is that really poor Mrs. Binks? What a get-up! Thought she was coming to a fancy-dress ball, evidently. What's she meant for? Eh? What's she posing as?'

'Amyot's mother-in-law,' says Fenton, laughing.

Mrs. Berkeley shrugs her lean shoulders.

'He's paying a heavy price,' says she. 'But hardly so heavy as the price she must have paid any decent dressmaker to consent to make that gown she is wearing. Where'—lifting her eyeglass—'where on earth did she get it?'

'Didn't you hear?' says Dicky Browne, in a profound whisper.

'No!'—eagerly. 'Who told you? What is it? Where, then?'

'In a raffle yesterday. But I think, perhaps, we ought not to speak of it. She may like to tell us herself later on. I have always shrunk from spoiling other people's delightful little surprises.'

'I don't know about the delightful,' says Mrs. Berkeley, who is somewhat nettled at the take-in: 'but as to the surprise, it's all there.'

And, indeed, Mrs. Langley-Binks' gown is a thing of terror, and a pain for ever. She had bought it six months ago, poor woman!—it is impossible not to be sorry for her—

and has kept it religiously out of sight of all women until a sufficiently important occasion should arise to allow of her wearing it. To-night she deems sufficiently important, and has put it on at last, glad in the belief that she will astonish all beholders.

And, indeed, she has! Her belief is most liberally justified.

'As for your absurd joke about her getting it in a raffle, I shouldn't be surprised at anything she would do,' says Mrs. Berkeley with emphasis. 'For the past two days—she started at dawn the first day, and ended at midnight yesterday sharp—she's been buying up all poor Mrs. Daintree's bric-à-brac for almost nothing. You know that silly little idiot of a woman, don't you?—Mrs. Daintree, the wife of the cotton-mill man? Well, it appears she bought the most expensive bits of china for her stall, to outdo, I suppose, the people who——' She pauses.

'Yes, we know—who are not in her set,' says Fenton quizzically.

'Well, those china jars and pots and things could not possibly be sold in a place like this under a heavy loss, any way,' goes on Mrs. Berkeley. 'The Daintree woman, it appears, bought them at some Bond Street place, instead of sending to good old Whiteley's, where she might have had very nice little bits, to look at, at threepence three-farthings each. What does one do with the superfluous farthings, I wonder, that one gets in change? If collected, there must be a fortune in them.'

'I shall go in for them at once,' says Fenton. 'I have just heard of quite a sane old gentleman who died leaving ten pounds in threepenny bits, tied up in the leg of his old trousers.'

'And Mrs. Daintree to start on such a frolic as that!' says Mrs. Berkeley, twisting her glass again in her eye. 'Last person in the world to sell anything to advantage. She evidently thought that to be able to sell a few cups and saucers at tenpence each, that cost a guinea, would bring her into society. Proves nothing to me beyond the fact that she's dangerous, poor creature, and ought not to be at large. However, that's beside the mark. What I wished to say is, that Mrs. Binks romped in at the end, after coquetting about it all along, and bought everything straight away for a mere song.

'Just like her, mean old thing!' says Carry, with all her extraordinary vigour. 'She tried to buy some of that beautiful old lace in Mrs. Ronaldson's stall, but Mrs. Ronaldson wouldn't let her.'

'Do you know, I think I rather like Mrs. Ronaldson,' says Mrs. Berkeley languidly.

This causes an instantaneous stir amongst her audience. Good heavens! what next? That Mrs. Berkeley should like *anyone!*

It occurs to Mr. Browne that *he* would like to sound the 'next.' Things are always occurring to Dicky.

'She strikes me,' says he, 'as being delightful.'

'Delightful?' Mrs. Berkeley turns an inquiring eye on him.

'Altogether so!''

'A trifle fast!' suggests Mrs. Berkeley.

'That's what makes her altogether so.'

'Well, fast if you like, but not furious,' says Mrs. Berkeley, falling back and trifling with her fan, which is very old, and has signs of repairs about the ivory sticks. 'However, we were discussing Mrs. Binks, weren't we?—not Mrs. Ronaldson. By-the-by, what a guy her daughter made of herself at the bazaar! Turkish maiden was she, or a Circassian? Fancy a Circassian with a figure like that! Lilian Daintree posed as Scotland, and looked as little ridiculous as she could help, poor girl! covered with those hideous thistles; but Miss Binks—she should have called herself India.'

'India?' asks Carry, puzzled.

'She'd make a capital elephant,' says Mrs. Berkeley, with the usual little lift of her shoulders.

'I think her dress became her,' says Carry valiantly.

'Yes?' Mrs. Berkeley looks bored. 'Not a costume for a *bazaar*, in the wilds down here, at all events!'

'Why not?' says Mr. Browne, who sees a little breaking of the peace is imminent, and determines to avert it if possible—he is fond of Carry. 'It was distinctly *bizarre*, any way.'

At this feeble joke some of them are good enough to laugh with a view to help him in his little effort, and the subject of Miss Langley-Binks' gown fades into oblivion.

And beside, something else is happening just now. Miss Royce has entered the room, a roll of music clenched in her

right hand. Without a glance to right or left, and with her small dark head thrown a little back—defiantly, thinks Fenton, whose eager gaze is watching her every movement—she walks straight to the piano. Dancing is about to begin.

CHAPTER XXII.

'Beholding heaven, and feeling hell.'

Miss Royce had been sent a kindly, delicately-worded little note from Lady Maria, to the effect that, if not tired, she would be glad if she would come downstairs at nine to-night, and play some of her charming waltzes for the young people whom Mr. Verschoyle had asked to a little impromptu dance.

Miss Royce had paled during the reading of this note, and had at once decided on refusing, even though the refusal might cost her her situation. She was Jinnie's governess, not a hired musician for Mr. Verschoyle's entertainments.

Then, all at once, a longing to go down and see the gay scene below proves too much for her. Why not go and see the lights, the dresses? Better, a thousand times, the humiliation of appearing as the poor governess who is called in to help their pleasure, than to sit up here all night in this dark, lonely chamber, listening to the sounds of music and laughter coming up to her from the dancing-room and the hall.

And besides—a thrill runs through her—she might venture to put on the pretty little amber-coloured Indian silk she had bought when coming to the Dower-house, under the mistaken impression that sometimes she might be asked to dine with 'the family.'

'The family' had not wanted her presence, however, at dinner, privately amongst themselves, or when having guests, and the charming little gown had lain hidden at the bottom of her trunk ever since her arrival at the Dower-house. She had never once worn it.

Oh, to wear it to-night! To come down looking really well dressed, looking like all the rest of them, for once! She lets her face fall into her hands, as if to hide the sudden rising colour that is dyeing it a glad crimson. Oh, to let him see her as he has never seen her yet, in a dainty evening

gown, and with her neck and arms—— They *are* pretty—yes, they *are*—and like snow!

She sits down and scribbles an answer to Lady Maria—a very discreet one, in spite of the fact that her heart is thumping against her side, partly with anger, partly with excitement. 'She'—so the letter runs—'is always pleased to oblige Lady Maria in any way. She will be in the dancing-room at nine, as Lady Maria wishes.'

'Excellent creature!' says Lady Maria, having finished the note. 'Jane is quite wrong about her. I shall make her a substantial present at Christmas. Or has she a birthday? Do people in her position have birthdays? I shall make inquiries. Of course, if she hasn't, Christmas will do.'

Perhaps Lady Maria had not been prepared for the yellow silk. At all events, as Miss Royce now sweeps up the room, with a cold disdain of all things carved upon her strange face, Lady Maria is conscious of a sense of incongruity between the gown and Jinnie's governess. She is, however, as has been said, a prey to beauty, and presently her touch of amazed annoyance fades into one of mere surprise, and after that she leans back amongst her cushions again, and lets a little wave of admiration break pleasurably over her.

'Charming! A little symphony in black and yellow!' says she, turning to Mrs. Verschoyle, who is near her. 'A perfect vision—a dream, my dear Jane! There are immense possibilities in that young girl, I assure you.'

'I have never denied that,' says Mrs. Verschoyle slowly, and almost sadly. She, too, is watching the pride, the hatred, on the dark face as Maden comes up the room.

'She holds her head to admiration,' goes on the Dowager with enthusiasm. 'A girl like that, Jane, must be beneficial to our Jinnie.' She holds a part-proprietorship in the engaging Jinnie. 'She will teach her to regard beauty as one of the best things life can give her—to cultivate it wherever she goes. Real loveliness in art or nature is a joy. I, old as I am, have not been dead to the æsthetic instincts of the day. I should like Jinnie to follow its lines—in moderation, of course.'

'Ah! is there any moderation?' says Mrs. Verschoyle. 'Æstheticism goes far, it seems to me.'

'One must go far to gain any end.'

'Some of its apostles are hardly to be followed, at all events,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, in a cooler tone than she usually uses

towards her mother-in-law. 'You remember that Mr. Vigors we met in town last year? You admired him! He was intensely modern; but I have heard lately that he is not even known now by respectable people. Some story——'

* * * * *

Miss Royce is at the piano. And now the room is filled with the brilliant opening bars of the latest waltz. Maden's nature—fiery and deeply artistic, deeply sensitive—is naturally musical. Her touch rings clear and true, and all the passion that the composer has thrown into the music, and much, *much* more that he has never dreamt of, is now throbbing beneath her fingers. Never did dancers dance to better strains. The very spirit of the waltz seems to have entered into them. Anthony, with his arm round Cecil's waist, feels all the love and longing for her that has been his for many months, now mount to a passion hardly to be restrained.

Pausing for a moment next the piano, he bends over the little flying fingers.

'A modern Pied Piper, if in woman's robes. Who could resist your music?'

Miss Royce gives him the faintest smile in return, or is it a near approach to a sneer?

And now he and Cecil are gone again, and Maden's playing grows even more brilliant, more seductive, though the soul within her feels numbed—deadened. Round her float the gay forms. The piano is placed in a recess, and from everywhere the sounds of happy mirth reach her, *crying* to her above the music that she is giving to these revellers—*calling* to her to come out and away, and join in the happy moment.

But who is she that she should dare to answer and accept that call?

Steadily go the small fingers—more and more passionate rings the music.

'How beautifully she plays!' says a pretty, light-hearted girl to her partner. 'She seems to enjoy her own playing. I suppose she will turn out a genius some day.'

But it can hardly be said that Miss Royce is enjoying herself. She sits there apparently quite calm, her eyes fixed upon the key-board. Yet

> 'She
> Whom the god's love, Tranquillity,'

has passed out of her life for ever.

She has not once lifted her eyes since first she sat down to play, and still, impossible as it sounds, she knows that now Cecil Fairfax is dancing with Fenton. A sullen despair fastens on her, whilst her cheeks know a brilliant colour for once, and her heart seems on fire.

Suddenly she is conscious that once again two people have come up, and are standing beside her. She has not seen who they are, yet a strange trembling troubles her, and for the first time a discordant note sounds from beneath her hand.

And now Cecil is bending over her—has caught the small, tired fingers in her own larger, if more exquisitely fashioned ones, and has, with a pretty glance of apology, mingled with a kindly authority, raised Maden's hands from the piano.

'No more—not another bar!' says Miss Fairfax, smiling down at her, her beautiful face tender in its solicitude.

'I am not tired,' says Maden coldly, ungraciously.

'Oh, you must be. Don't you think so, Sydney?'—to her companion. 'And, besides, they have all stopped dancing for the moment, so now you can rest.'

'For the moment!' says Maden, with a bitter smile.

'Longer than that, I hope.'

Miss Fairfax has released the girl's hand, and is leisurely drawing off her long gloves.

'Yes?' Maden has not looked up. 'You are sanguine. Who do you think is to play the rest?'

'I shall,' says Cecil gaily.

'You!'

Miss Royce does look up now, to see the beautiful, trusting eyes smiling into hers, and to note the loveliness of the naked and rounded arms.

Cecil laughs.

'Oh! I know what you mean. I shall prove but a very poor substitute. I hardly expect to be received with open arms after your charming playing. Still, perhaps I can fill a void for a little while. Now'—with gentle suasion—'*get* up, and let me run my hands over the keys before they begin again. I feel actually nervous.'

She almost makes Maden leave the music-stool, and, having displaced her, seats herself before the piano, and strikes a few opening bars.

'You—you going to play, Cecil?' says Fenton with surprise.

He had, indeed, had no idea of her meaning when she led him towards the piano just now.

Cecil nods brightly.

'But—I cannot allow it—it is impossible,' stammers Maden, now very white. 'Lady Maria——'

'Will be very glad that you should have a rest,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, who has just come up, and has not only heard the last words, but quite understands the entire situation—'and you must make it a long one. When Miss Fairfax is tired, I shall take her place. Believe me, it gives me pleasure that you should enjoy yourself when it is possible.'

She has not forgotten that scene of a night or to ago, and she speaks kindly, if without friendliness. Something in the girl—suppressed, difficult of getting at—has repulsed her. But her keen sense of justice, or conscience, or whatever it is, had been hurt by that midnight interview with her daughter's governess. If, as the girl had hinted, she had been neglectful of her duty towards her—had been passively unkind—she must look to it that she does not so fail in the future. 'Go,' says she with a smile. 'You need not be in the least unhappy about Miss Fairfax, or anything else.'

'Perhaps, then, Miss Royce,' says Sidney, 'you will give me this dance—if dancing can be called a rest.'

'A change is always rest,' says the girl quietly.

They move away together, as Cecil's fingers once more create a chord. It is a minor one.

CHAPTER XXIII.

'At sixes and sevens.'

'So glad the poor garl is getting breathing-time,' says Mrs. Berkeley, who, having danced incessantly until this moment, has now given in to 'the extreme heat,' as she calls it, but really to the imperative orders of advancing years. The Infantry boy has beaten a retreat again this evening, and so very little is left to the lean siren in the way of amusement save scandal and small-talk. To dance all night, even if partners were forthcoming, would make a most unforgivable morrow. 'Awful hard to be a governess! Mere machine, don't you know.'

'How very pretty she is!' says somebody enthusiastically.

'Pretty? Very pretty in her own line,' says Mr. Popkin critically. 'It's not mine, however.'

He casts a languishing glance at Carry, who doesn't see it. She is too deeply engaged watching Richie's third effort to escape from Mrs. Langley-Binks. *Once* he had fought his way gallantly, casting the huge matron behind him, regardless of all consequences. The second tine, when she sailed down upon him, he was near the conservatory door; then he had made an attempt to plunge through the glass beyond, and, failing, had, with all the courage of despair, told the advancing matron that he was dancing this with her daughter. Unhappily Aurora was sitting behind a big myrtle-bush at the moment, and had risen with alacrity.

'Ours?' she said. 'Really? Do you know, I had actually forgotten it.'

Now is the third descent of Mrs. Langley-Binks, and it is with a face of scorn and a bitter eye that Richie, breaking loose from her coils, approaches Mrs. Berkeley's party.

'Nice colourin',' goes on Mr. Popkin, in his little squeak. 'Dancin' with Fenton now, I see.'

'Sometimes I think she is beautiful,' says Carry reluctantly. 'Only, if I could be beautiful, I shouldn't like to look *like* her, some way.'

'She's got the beauty of the devil,' says Mrs. Berkeley. 'Pretty, but troublesome, I'd label her.'

'Could a woman be pretty without being troublesome?' asks Anthony, laughing, who has just come up.

'Ask us another,' says Mr. Browne sadly.

'To leave vexed questions and come to a fact,' says Mrs. Berkeley, 'I think it would be impossible to deny that women can be troublesome *without* being pretty! Mrs. Binks, for example. Ah, here you are, Mr. Amyot!'—making room for him near her. She has a weakness for young men—'boys' as she always calls them, with charming friendliness. 'We were just talking of Mrs. Binks.'

'Mrs. Langley-Binks?'—with question in his tired eyes.

'Mrs. *Binks*'—with decision. 'We were saying she could be troublesome.'

'Were you?' says Richie, letting his brow fall upon his hand.

A deep sigh escapes him. Evidently he is in the last stage of exhaustion. The Binks chase has been keen.

'She's a very stupid woman,' says Carry, most unexpectedly, and with even more than her usual awful directness.

Mr. Browne laughs.

'Well, she *does* give herself away a good deal,' says he.

At this the long-suffering Richie loses himself altogether, and bursts into the wrath that for hours has been consuming him.

'I wish to Heaven she'd give herself away once and for all, and be done with it!' says he in a fearful growl.

Even Mrs. Berkeley, who seldom laughs, now retires behind her fan, and chokes there quietly for a little while.

'My dear Amyot, what gross ingratitude!' says Dicky Browne. 'I have always understood that Mrs. Langley-Binks has shown the most affectionate interest in you!'

Richie who is in no mood for chaff, rises abruptly and goes over to Carry.

'I say,' exclaims he suddenly, 'I'm dead sick of all this sort of thing! Let us go for a good five-mile walk to-morrow, Carry, up to the Glen and back again.'

'I don't know that I shall,' says Carry.

Amyot stares at her. 'Et tu, Brute?' Is she, too, going to turn against him, to fall away from him—Carry, his own familiar friend?

'Oh, you needn't look like that! I don't know why I should go anywhere with you. You saw me with Mr. Popkin a while ago, and left me stranded there—never once came to the rescue.'

'He's with you now, too, and you don't seem to mind it.'

'There's safety in a multitude. But I was alone with him that time of which I speak. You *must* have seen him, Richie—we were sitting right under the big myrtle, and he was talking . . . and . . . and you saw how I hated it, and never came. That'—with her honest, indignant eyes on his—'is true now, Richie, isn't it?'

'Why should I help you to get rid of Popkin?' demands he gloomily. 'They all say that the best thing you can do is to marry him. Why should I, who am your friend, try to prevent you from doing the best thing for you?'

'I don't think, after all, I ever could,' says Carry thought-

fully. 'It's his nose, I think. . . . And his voice, that's horrid! They're *both* horrid!'

'Everything is horrid,' says poor Richard, who is now at a very low ebb. 'Even you! . . . So you won't come for a walk to-morrow after you leave this?'

'I don't think I went as far as that,' says Carry, relenting.

'You will come, then?'—eagerly. 'You promise?'

'All right,' says Miss Desmond with her usual boyish, off-hand air and one of her happy smiles; whereon Richie feels the tension round his heart somewhat relieved.

CHAPTER XXIV.

'There's neither honesty, manhood, nor good-fellowship in thee.'

Out here in the starlight the night is sweeter than the day. The stars are standing in a clear sky, blue, luminous. Now and again a pale cloud floats across them, but only for a moment. Tranquillity marks the heavens to-night.

The corners lie rich in shadows. Over there, where the rhododendrons, now in their full glory, are sleeping upright—few flowers are so haughty as the rhododendron flowers—the darkness is complete. How silent the world has grown! How remote! No sound anywhere.

Maden, almost oppressed by the universal calm, leans forward on the garden-seat, as if listening, longing for a break into this strange, beautiful—too beautiful silence.

'What is it?' asks Fenton in a low tone.

'Oh, the terrible silence!'

The girl's heart is throbbing.

But even as she speaks the silence is broken; from somewhere—is it to the right or the left?—two notes float upon the air.

It is a wandering cuckoo. Two notes are all she has, and they sound now deep and loud upon the midnight air; sound incessantly, until the ear grows mad with the repetition of it.

'Are you a witch?' says Fenton, catching her hand. 'Did you invoke that bird? Sometimes I think you are. You have bewitched me, at all events.'

She pulls her hand out of his.

'If I was only sure of that!'

'I wronged you,' says he lightly. 'If you were a witch you would know the truth. Well, are you satisfied with your cuckoo? He has broken your silence, at all events. As for me, I hate the bird. The terrible monotony of his cry gets on one's nerves. Poets sing of the cuckoo as though it were another word for spring, but for my part I think it annoying. Come, you have hardly said a word to me yet, and yet you rail against silence. That queer little gray bird compelled you to speak when I could not! By-the-by, what a beastly row it's making.' The cuckoo is, indeed, uttering its hideous two notes with unabated zeal. 'What are you thinking of? Tell me.'

'I was thinking of Miss Fairfax. She thought of me—thought I was tired. She was very kind.'

'To me, certainly—yes.'

'No, no, to me!' She turns to him, and lays her pale little cheek against his. 'Oh, I am so happy!' breathes she. 'And how lovely the night is! And how kind everybody is!' She pauses a moment. 'Miss Fairfax was kind.'

'She is always kind,' says Fenton.

'But kind to *me*. If she loved you, she would not have given me to you as she did to-night. I was wrong, Sidney,—I must have been. If she and I could have changed places to-night, I would have stabbed her, rather than have let her go away to—dance with you.'

Her voice has grown faint with passion, and some fear.

'My dear child, stabbing is out of fashion. What ridiculous thoughts your brain harbours! As for me——'

'I don't care what you think. I'd kill anyone who interfered with you and me. And'—slowly, growing a little calmer, with the calmness of despair—'I'd kill myself, too.'

'Don't talk like that!' says Fenton with a quick utterance.

'Well, no, not again. And, besides, there is no reason. She doesn't love you; she sent you away with me to-night, and—do you remember?—she sent me to lunch with you at the bazaar, the other day. Oh!'—clenching her little hands—'I was angry then, but I am not now.'

'A good thing,' says Fenton, laughing, and taking the little clenched fingers, he opens them one by one.

'She has a kind, kind heart,' says Miss Royce.

'Of course. People round here all call her an angel, you know.'

A brief silence. Then, 'Would *you* call her that?'

'Why not? You yourself see how kind she is, how superlatively good.'

Even a deeper silence falls upon this. Fenton has been taking to heart her speeches—those about Cecil's not caring for him, her being willing to give him to another, and to help that other.

His thoughts grow concentrated. Perhaps, after all, this girl is right, and Cecil in reality does not care for him. If so, good-bye to his one chance of redemption, of rising out of his money difficulties. And, beyond doubt, Cecil has shown him little of love's jealousy. She has thrown Miss Royce at his head many a time, though whether she meant it——

Perhaps she is angelic enough to be above earthly jealousies. . . . Into this deep question her voice breaks:

'If you call *her* that, what do you call *me*?'

It is Maden's voice. A low voice—painfully suppressed—held back, as it were.

Fenton laughs; his lighter mood is never far from him.

'The very sweetest thing on earth,' says he, taking her hand and opening the little half-clenched fingers negligently upon his palm.

His action, his words, or the manner of them, and his laugh, all tend to enrage Maden.

'Don't speak to me like that. Don't!'—with a sudden outburst of suspicious anger. '*She* is an angel, and I am a——'

He lays his hand lightly on her lips, stifling the word.

'Sh! What a word for a little girl like you to utter! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you bad child! And, after all, why reduce me to abject misery like this? I said you were the——'

'I don't care about that. I don't want such speeches from you. They are unreal—unreal'—passionately—'as you yourself are! Tell me that you think me more of an angel than she is. Oh no'—sharply, as if stung by some truth. 'Not that! Say that you hate angels. Oh!'—vindictively—'*how I hate her!*'

'You have hit upon a great truth,' says Fenton, with gravity. 'An angel would always be the deuce of a worry to

most of us. I hope Fate will never force me to live with one. I'm afraid it would be bad for the angel.'

'Are you ever in earnest?' says the girl, her wrath still smouldering. 'Do you ever honestly mean anything? Is life nothing but a jest to you? Am—am *I* a jest to you?' Her small white face grows rigid. 'If ever you play me false,' says she, 'you will regret it to your dying day.'

It had been on Sidney's mind for a long time to tell her that he is leaving on Sunday morning, the day after to-morrow. Fear of an outburst of distress on her part has hitherto held him silent, but now it occurs to him that here is a fitting opportunity in which to break the news. The old copy-book heading comes back to him. 'An opportunity once lost is never to be regained;' and though the somewhat frivolous retort of a distinctly frivolous person to this solemn admonition is to advise the sluggard to immediately 'make another opportunity,' the old adage holds good.

'Do you know what makes me so fond of you?' says Fenton. 'It is that your moods are so many, and so unexpected. You are Tragedy now, and all at once a most desirable Melpomene, and yesterday you were something else; and to-morrow —to-morrow you shall prophesy as to what you *will* be. You are one charming, everlasting surprise. But as to playing you false, my little tragedy queen, I shan't have time for that.'

'Time?'

She looks up as if startled.

'It is true. I shall have no time. That ought to bring the colour of relief to your cheeks. I leave this on Sunday next. So now, you shameful little unbeliever, what have you to say?'

'On Sunday!' The words can barely be heard as they pass her pale lips. 'You are going!' And then, 'Oh, no, no, no; it *isn't* true!'

She leans towards him, as if in an agony of apprehension, to read his face, and he can see that her body is shaken by emotion, that her small slender shoulders are trembling. Her face is vivid, eager. For a moment there is silence. Fenton, caught by the extraordinary despair and passion of her face and manner, remains speechless. There is not a stir, a movement in the night; the very music in the drawing-room has ceased, and there is nothing that redeems the

monotony of the night save the ceaseless sound of the river —rushing—rushing always to its destiny.

'It isn't true,' says Maden again, not sharply now, however, or with the smallest semblance of defiance or of distress, but in the dull tone of one who knows she is fighting hopelessly.

'Why should it not be true?' says Fenton. He speaks impatiently, annoyed by some new stinging feeling at his heart, hitherto unknown. 'My dear girl, you didn't suppose I was going to stay here for ever, did you?'

'Once—you told me it was folly to think.'

'Well, so it is, about one's worries. This can't be a worry, however. You have done little but quarrel with me since first I met you, so that I should think my departure will be relief. It will mean a cessation of hostilities, at all events.'

He has put on an air of lightness that he is far from feeling. Fear of a scene is on him. What will she do—say? If she goes back to the house after one of her usual storms, comment will be roused; if even with red eyes, people will notice them. After all, he was a fool to tell her of his going to-night.

He is a little astonished—perhaps, so strange is one's heart, a little disappointed—when she says quite calmly:

'You are right. It will be a relief.'

'You take it like that, then,' says he involuntarily. 'What a fraud you are, after all, Maden! I quite thought you would be sorry.'

'Did you? Why should I be sorry? Are you sorry?'

'I am, God knows!' says he.

The words spring from his lips almost without his knowledge. It is the nearest approach to truth he has ever uttered to any woman, and, indeed, the spirit of that wet person who is supposed to live uncomfortably in a well (let us hope by her own desire) seems to have entered into him for one brief moment. The girl catches this honest sound, and holds it, and with the knowledge of it comes strength and courage.

'Well, I am not,' says she. 'You are right—you have troubled me. Once gone and . . . forgotten, peace will come back.'

'You mean that?'

'Why should I not mean it? Of course I mean it.'

'What a heartless little monster!' says he, striving after his old treatment of her, but failing utterly.

There is a genuine pique, and, indeed, a great deal more, in his tone.

'Ah, I am not the only heartless monster!' She laughs deliberately, yet so naturally that he hardly realizes that the mirth is forced. 'You have played with me a long time, have you not? I now can play with you.'

'That is not true,' says he, passion swaying him. 'I swear it—I swear that it——'

'Ah, "swear not at all." It is idle work. And, besides, there is no time! You know you said that; but I mean it, literally. I must go in.'

'No, no, not for a moment!'

He has caught her hands.

'This very moment——'

She tries to draw her hands from his, and at this moment, whilst they both stand almost struggling with each other, the cloud that has lain so heavily across the heavens draws apart, and the moon shines out, glorious, resplendent in the majesty of her calm, and shines straight on the face of Maden.

On the strange, beautiful, now mocking eyes; on the delicate little chin, upturned as if in defiance; on the soft curling hair; on the parted crimson lips; on all the tender curves of her exquisite body, clad in its clinging silken gown of amber hue.

'Maden,' says he, in a low but vehement tone, 'how dare you speak to me like that? You know you love me, as I love you.'

'That is what I do not know.'

'You do—you shall!'

He takes her almost violently into his arms, and holds her there. His heart is beating vehemently against hers.

'There is "no time,"' says she—evidently those words have beaten themselves into her brain—'to thrash out that question. You are going. This is our last meeting—our farewell.'

Her voice sounds stifled.

'Our last? No! I must see you again.'

'You must!'

Some wild thoughts seize on her; she throws back her head and laughs, softly, imperfectly, but yet with some kind of terrible mirth.

'What a strange girl you are! Why do you laugh? By

heavens! sometimes I think I'd like to shake the life out of you!' says Fenton savagely.

'You forget,' says she. 'It is my many moods you love, my little varieties. I was Melpomene a while ago, and to-morrow I was to be something else. Well, I have only anticipated to-morrow. Take your hands from my arms; you hurt me.'

Her tone is imperious. He releases her.

'You will see me again, however?' persists he.

'How can I, even if I would? To-morrow we go back to the Dower-house—I, and my charge, and my two warders.' She laughs afresh. 'Small time will be given me for a meeting with anyone; and, besides, is it not well as it is?'

Knowing her power now, she trades on it.

'To-morrow evening——'

'There were several evenings'—with a bitterness thrown back—'when you said, or hinted, you would be down here by the river to meet me, yet you never came. I am not in a mood to bear that neglect again.'

'I tell you that to-morrow night I——'

'To-morrow night Mrs. Verschoyle may have friends to dinner, and your presence might be necessary for the entertaining of them. It has so happened.'

'How bitter you are,' says he, 'and how unjust! Well, look here. You know the flags that Anthony sometimes waves on the turret to please his mother—the red to say all is well, the green to say he is coming to see her next day. Well, I'll float that red flag to-morrow evening if all goes well, and if you see it you will come at nine o'clock?'

'If I can'—languidly. 'And now really I must go.'

'Kiss me first.'

'So many kisses! Are you not tired?' says she, in a voice that might almost be bored. She laughs carelessly.

'Tired!'

She has to tear herself out of his arms.

CHAPTER XXV.

'I am old now,
And these same crosses spoil me.'

Carry is the first to bid her host adieu (and, of course, Lady Maria, who is her hostess as well as Cecil's), and leave The Towers. She leaves very early—indeed, directly after breakfast—and seems, suppress it as she will, to be distinctly in haste to be gone. Verschoyle had begged her, first to remain to luncheon, and then to let him send her home in the pony-trap. But she would none of it. She had told her auntie, old Miss Desmond, that she would be with her at eleven, and as for being driven home, she would far rather walk.

'Carry, are you bent on crushing me finally?' Verschoyle says, at which Carry laughs, and then, suddenly recollecting the memorable roll of tweed, gives in.

'It would be a pity to exterminate you entirely,' she says. The last word is an echo from her half-Irish breeding. 'Well, thank you, I will take the pony.'

So it is arranged, and Carry, stepping briskly into the dainty little trap, drives off victoriously with the tweed sitting up beside her as straight as if it knew what wonderful things are to belong to it in the future. As Carry drives off, it seems to those looking on as though she has a big, bulging baby beside her.

Perhaps the poor tweed had meant to carry out its dignified deportment from The Towers to the very door of Tudor Hall; but if so, it is mistaken. Carry has hardly rounded the rhododendrons in the drive, when she hears a shout behind her, and lo! here is Amyot.

'You may as well take me with you,' says he, scrambling in beside her, and flinging down the tweed—the immortal tweed that is yet to play so many parts—to the bottom of the trap. 'It will save Verschoyle some trouble, and he can send the portmanteau later.'

He pushes down the poor roll of cloth, until now it is made a mere footstool of by both of them. A footstool! That cloth! But from menial services many great things have sprung to fame. Perhaps the tweed thinks of this, because it lies unresisting, meek and still, beneath their desecrating feet.

'My goodness, Richie, what a tornado you are!'

'Well, as you were going my way, and as we are going to have that walk this afternoon, I thought I might as well come with you. You can drop me when I reach my place.'

'Oh no; better come on and see auntie. She'll give you some luncheon, and I know she will be dying to hear all the news.'

'Well, there you are to tell it.'

'Not I. Somehow, I've a clever knack of forgetting all the principal points. Now you can help me to remember them. I say, Richie, shall we take our rods with us this afternoon? It's a dull sort of morning.'

'And a sniff in the wind, too,' says he, looking south-west. 'Yes, let us. You have one of my rods at your place, haven't you? I left it there last day; and your flies are as good as mine any day. And up there by the Droon——

* * * * *

It is now very close upon noon. All the other guests at The Towers have gone except Cecil Fairfax and Lady Maria's contingent.

Lady Maria has been a little fussy all the morning—Mrs. Verschoyle a little anxious. Excitement is to children what dissipation is to its elders, and Jinnie, overdone by all the splendid joys of emancipation she has known during her visit to her uncle, the bazaar, and through the treatment generally she has received at The Towers, now finding these glories belong to the past alone, knows a collapse!

She had risen languid, weary, and most decidedly fractious. She didn't want to go home; she wanted to stay here with Uncle Anthony and the swans; 'twas nicer being here than at home; and so on—not all her mother's, and grandmother's, and Miss Royce's entreaties availing to bring her to a better frame of mind.

'She is quite upset, almost ill, poor little darling!' says the poor little darling's grandmother to Anthony, some time after breakfast.

'Then why take her away? Why take yourself away? She will be quite as safe here as in your place, and I should have the pleasure of your company, and'——laughing—'hers.'

'Yes, yes, I know, dearest. But——'

'She would be *quite* safe here,' says Miss Royce, who happens to be with Lady Maria.

Her voice really sounds quite natural, but to herself it rings false, hypocritical. Surely they will notice it, and it will betray her! . . . But, oh! to spend another day beneath the roof that shelters *him*, with all the other guests gone!

'Dearest boy, it is out of the question,' Lady Maria is saying with decision. 'I don't think the child actually ill, though Jane protests she is. But Jane, as you know, is easily frightened where dear Jinnie is concerned. Now, I am not.'

Anthony laughs.

'No, I assure you, my dear, I am not. I can see at once where real disease lies. But even if Jane's absurd theory should prove correct, and the child *is* ill—which God forbid!—still, I think our poor little beloved will be better in her own home, and much nearer to that estimable and clever creature, Dr. Bland.'

'That's why you are taking her away,' says Verschoyle; 'though, of course, one can see at a glance that you are not in the least frightened about her.'

'True, my dear,' says Lady Maria, who is in her heart so perturbed about the 'only Jinnie' that Verschoyle's little touch of irony goes by her. 'I feel sure it is a mere passing indisposition. Jane would make it out a serious attack, but I——'

'Anthony'—all at once Mrs. Verschoyle is in their midst—'I have come to tell you that Jinnie——'

She can go no further. Lady Maria, as pale as a sheet, is facing her—almost threatening her.

'What — what — what? Not more feverish? No new symptom? I told you, Jane, there was more in it than you fancied—you are sometimes so rash, Jane! Where is the child now? How is her temperature?'

'Quite normal, or nearly so,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, smiling. 'Did I frighten you? I am so sorry! I only wanted to tell Tony that the carriage might as well be ordered at once, as Jinnie has as last consented to leave him. There has been a good deal of bribery and corruption, I'm afraid, but still the point is gained. Why'—patting Lady Maria's shoulder affectionately—'you look quite pale! Your mother, Anthony, is a perfect slave to Jinnie's whims, and fears each wind of heaven that blows upon her.'

'My dear Jane,' says Lady Maria, recovering herself, 'I

have only just now been explaining to Anthony that it is you who are so foolish about the child.'

'I dare say we are all foolish together,' says Mrs. Verschoyle in her irresistible, conciliating way. 'At all events, I think home air will be the best thing for Jinnie, with a nasty dose from Dr. Bland.'

'Oh, poor little Jinnie!' says a new voice.

It is Cecil's, who has just come into the hall through the armoury door, followed by Sidney Fenton. As she passes Miss Royce to go to Lady Maria, she smiles at the former; but Miss Royce refuses to see the smile, letting her eyes fall to the ground.

Fenton is speaking to Anthony. After a minute, Miss Royce lifts her eyes from their obstinate stare upon the marble pavement beneath her, and glances quickly at Fenton. In spite of her resolution of the night before, there is question in her eyes—nay, more, demand. Catching the swift glance, he reads it rightly, and answers it as he knows she wishes it answered. His eyes say as in a flash: 'In a moment I shall be with you—a long moment to me—to hear what you have to say, and to——'

'Miss Royce,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, 'the carriage will be ready in five minutes. Will you be so good as to go upstairs and see that nurse is wrapping up Jinnie very warmly and comfortably?'

Miss Royce hesitates—for a second only, however, before Lady Maria breaks in:

'Oh yes, Miss Royce; do, pray, go and see that the dear child is fully clothed; one never knows how these slight illnesses may end. I assure you, my dear Jane, I have no apprehensions whatever; but I hope, Miss Royce, you will see that her warm coat is put on her, and a silk handkerchief round her neck; the throat is always so troublesome.'

Miss Royce, thus twice ordered, goes slowly up the hall and the broad old oaken staircase, and so out of sight.

Ten minutes later she comes down again with Jinnie, who is pale and red-eyed, and has all the air of a captive being driven to her doom, besides being so muffled in furs that one might suspect her of going to join Jansen on his Arctic trip. Both are swept by the anxious mother and grandmother across the hall and into the waiting carriage. A few last words are cried to Anthony by Mrs. Verschoyle as they start,

and then twenty minutes' steady driving up hill and down dale brings them to the doors of the Dower-house.

Jinnie is at once taken up to bed. She is, in truth, very feverish now, and very languid. Miss Royce follows her slowly. Her whole nature is in revolt. After all that silent signalling between him and her, she had not been able—been allowed—to see him again!

'Well, never mind!' She throws out her arms recklessly, The halls are destitute of spectators. To-night at least is hers. She will go up and watch for the red flag.

CHAPTER XXVI.

'Love walked among the fields of yellow waving corn,
For the poppy blossomed red where his weary feet had pressed;
And my door stood ready open for a long-expected guest,
But she never, never came, night or morn.'

Cecil Fairfax had been hardly aware as to how the time was flying. She had been wandering all the morning in the gardens with Fenton, and had only reached the hall in time to hear the discussion about Jinnie; and when Miss Royce had gone upstairs to see to the safeguarding of that valuable little person, Cecil had learned, with a kind of shock, that all the other guests were gone, and Lady Maria's party on the point of going.

Reluctantly it comes home to her that she, too, must go; that, indeed, her adieus have been a little tardy in their saying. But it had been so sweet out there in those lovely gardens, with . . .

She does not dare to pursue that thought, yet the very side-glance at it that she allows herself brings the warm and generous colour to her cheek. Was ever garden so fair before? Was ever day so bright? Was there at any time an old house so beautiful as this? Oh, how happy she has been during these past few days!

She had indeed thought, dear, foolish virgin! that her fool's paradise was a veritable heaven.

But now she must go.

'Has my carriage come, Anthony?'

She steps lightly to Verschoyle's side. Lady Maria and

her party have gone their way, and Fenton, too, has disappeared.

'Yes, an hour ago,' says he ; 'but I ordered it round to the yard, as you were not ready for it. I was glad you were not ready.'

Verschoyle is altogether unaware of that long, sweet, dangerous wandering about his gardens, having been engrossed by Lady Maria's troubles all the morning, and those smaller trials that come under the head of hospitality, such as speeding the parting guest, and so on.

'Do you know, I felt a little aggrieved at first when your carriage came. I said, "What a hurry she is in to be gone—to leave us!"'

He smiles at her—a little reproachfully.

'Oh no, not that—far, far from that!'

Something in the intensity of her manner, so unlike her usual calm, sets his heart beating.

'Don't stand here in the draught,' says he quickly. 'Come into the library while you're waiting. I'll send a message, but you know it will take a little time.'

'Send word, however.'

'Yes.'

A servant passing by at this moment, he calls to him that Miss Fairfax will want her brougham at once, then follows her into the cool, large library.

It is a charming room, with two huge windows opening on to a veranda outside, from which steps lead to the gardens. Inside the room is charming; all round the walls are lined with bookcases, guiltless of the ungenerous glass that forbids one to touch a wanted volume on the inspiration of the moment. To have to wait and open the glass doors, sometimes even to unlock them (but this last is barbaric, positively actionable, and should be put down by law), destroys the inspiration, and leaves one a prey to murderous inclinations.

Cecil, as she moves, knows that there are many flowers in the room—not small flowers, but great sweet-scented bunches of flowering shrubs gleaming from costly jars, whilst on the crystal writing-table is a bunch of roses. A few rare and exquisite engravings line the walls where the bookcases leave room, and here and there may be seen a charming water-colour by some well-known artist. It is a room to love—to live in.

Miss Fairfax, glancing round her, tells herself this with a start, as though for the first time, after all these years, it has come home to her that it is Anthony's room.

Although now it is well into the month of June, a little fire, brilliant if small, is burning on the hearth. With all the windows open, and the gay winds sweeping in and out at their own fond will, the heat of it is hardly perceptible, and Anthony is of opinion that no modern ornamentation of any kind can outdo the honest fire ; that is the real ornament.

'You really meant that?' says he presently, when she has cast herself happily and luxuriously into a big armchair of the right sort, and he, standing with his arm on the mantelpiece, is at liberty to look down and admire her. Such heartfelt admiration—so true, so earnest, so honest.

'Meant?' She glances up at him, her beautiful face a little curious, not at all apprehensive.

'That you were not in a hurry to leave?'

'So far from that'—she pauses to laugh, softly and happily —'that I acknowledge I'm quite sorry to go.'

'Yes?'

He has taken his elbow off the mantelpiece, and has come a step or two towards her.

'Yes? Is that a question? My dear Anthony, if you put me to it, I'm afraid I must confess that I should rather like to——' She pauses. 'Oh no, I shan't go further than that.'

Her mirth is of the idlest, the merely happy manner of one speaking to an old friend, with no *arrière pensée* whatever. She rises as she speaks, and goes nearer to the fire and him, standing, indeed, on the hearthrug close beside him.

'We have tastes in common,' says she prettily. 'I, too, love a fire somewhere in the house all the year round.'

'If——' begins he. But he does not go on. To speak to her here, now, in his own house! Impossible!

'If what, Tony?'

'Oh, I don't know ; I quite forget what I was going to say.'

'Just like a man,' says she, with a little indifferent air. And then, after a pause : 'What a delightful time you have given us! I don't know when I have enjoyed myself so much. And everybody says the same. You make an admirable host.'

'Nothing more than that? Must I take my laurels as a host—*only* that?'

'Why, who can say,' says she, 'how the years may develop you? You may be posing as something better far, a year from now.'

'That would be my ambition,' says he. . . . To pose as her husband!

'One's ambitions so seldom come off,' says Cecil. 'May I poke the fire? It is getting very low, and I love a blaze.'

Her light dress of pale blue crepon, with its pretty ribbons, is perhaps a little too summery for the day, which has now clouded and darkened, and looks distinctly sullen. A little chill, indeed, has fallen on the air.

'What is there that you may not do?' says Verschoyle, in a low voice.

He does not even attempt to take the task out of her hands. He cannot, indeed, resist the delight of seeing her poke his fire in his house, almost as though she were the mistress of it. Oh that she were!

She is bending over the fire, trying to compel a blaze, breaking a little block of coal to get the desired effect, but without success.

'How obstinate!' says she, laughing, and, going to the scuttle, she draws out a little slack and throws it quickly upon the slumbering fire.

She had hardly arranged for the result. As she still bends over it, the fire breaks into a mad blaze, unexpectedly, gloriously, and the bright flames, perhaps in revenge, go straight towards the crepon frock, and finding it very friendly, Miss Fairfax—in one minute, as it seems—discovers that she is on fire.

A mere momentary agitation, of course. Anthony has beaten down the flames, without so much as an injury to his hands, and all that comes of it is a scorched side to Miss Fairfax's pretty gown, and the memory to Anthony, which lasts for ever, that for a full half-minute he had had her in his arms, close against his heart. And all is over now; at all events, she is lying back in that comfortable chair, looking very pale, but half amused.

'I don't care in the least,' says she, 'as your hands have not been hurt. Let me look at them again.' He gladly lends them for inspection. 'No'—thoughtfully—'nothing. And yet, Anthony, out of much smaller beginnings terrible things have arisen.'

'Your frock is a terrible thing,' says he, glancing at it.

'Oh, nonsense! As if a frock mattered! Why, I might have been burnt to death if you had not been here.'

The smile flies from his face; he grows pale.

'Even if I had not been here, it was the slightest thing. Oh no, you could not have been burnt.'

He speaks like one frightened by a thought hardly to be borne.

'But indeed I might'—laughing a little nervously, as though impressed by his manner. 'And more: I might have burned down your beautiful house, which would have been far, far worse.'

'Don't!' The word comes from him sharply, painfully. There is a ring of acute physical anguish in it. Then, with more calm: 'How can you talk like that, Cecil—and to me? That you —*you* should be hurt! Do you think my house, or anything I have, could be weighed in the same scale with you—Cecil?' He goes straight to her, and, catching her hands, compels her glance to his. 'A moment ago you began a speech, but you never ended it. May I know the ending now?'

'Oh, that!' she laughs. His face is so quiet that not the smallest inkling of his meaning enters into her. 'It ought to have been lost sight of in view of this overwhelming tragedy.' She glances at her burnt skirt with a smile. 'What I was going to say then was, that your house is so charming, your entertainments so delightful, that I should like to take up my residence here once and for all. For ever!'

She laughs again, the happy laugh of one whose mind is untroubled, but almost as it breaks between her lips it dies away. Passion has overcome his calm at last. His face is white as instinctively he goes to her and lays his hands upon her shoulders.

'Stay—*stay for ever!*'

He releases her a moment later, and goes on more quietly:

'You think the house beautiful. Is it beautiful enough for you? Will you have it?'

'No, no!' She has risen to her feet, her face as white as his own. 'Don't, Anthony—not another word! . . . There is no need for another word.'

'No, of course not.' His voice sounds a little hoarse, a little unlike his own, but by a supreme effort he has recovered him-

self. He has stepped back from her. 'And yet, another must be said.'

'Not another!' cries she in a stunned little way, putting out her hands as if to ward something off. 'It is useless.'

'I can see that, but still answer me, Cecil, if only for the old friendship's sake. There's—someone else?'

'Ah, you should not ask me that.'

She is trembling now, and all at once he knows that his suspicions, hitherto only half grounded, are true. It is Sidney Fenton she loves.

'I am terribly in fault,' says he. The shock of this discovery has brought him back to his senses, and he is looking at her with such nerve that she almost cheats herself into the belief that he does not really care. The wish is father to the thought, and she is glad to grasp at this reading of his manner. 'I know I have behaved as no man *should*—in his own house—to his guest; yet'—with a sort of honest defence of himself—'as many a man *might!* I have gone out of my way, indeed, to make you regard me in a bad light. But you will forgive me, Cecil?'

'Dear Anthony, you know it.'

She holds out her hands to him in the dearest way. Her eyes are full of tears. As he sees them, his self-possession again fails him. He crushes the beautiful white hands between his own.

'Don't look at me like that. I don't deserve a tear of yours. I have behaved abominably. To speak to you here . . . I couldn't help it.'

He stoops and presses the palms of her hands to his lips, one after the other.

Suddenly he looks up.

'It is Sidney,' breathes he.

He feels that he *must* know. If it is true, her eyes will fall, her cheeks flush—the truth will show itself. . . .

She does flush, faintly, delicately. And then a haughty light wakes in her eyes. She draws her hands out of his. . . .

Five minutes later he is in the hall to see her off. Her carriage is at the door, and Sidney Fenton is beside her, laughing, uttering some absurd jest, to which, for once, she seems a little indifferent. Her air is absent.

As she goes down the steps and into the carriage, Anthony takes her hand; her fingers tighten on his.

'Don't hate me,' murmurs she.

Her tone is hurried; she seems hardly to know why she says it.

He makes no reply, but there is a look in his eyes that haunts her for many a day and night afterwards. It is, indeed, with a strange reluctance she bids him good-bye, and hears him give the coachman directions to take her to her own home. Sidney has sprung forward to say a last word to her, his handsome face looking handsomer than ever to-day, yet her last look is for Anthony, and a strange, superstitious feeling that in leaving him—refusing him—she is leaving all good behind her, troubles her on her homeward way.

For all that, it is Fenton's sunny smile she carries into the house with her, and dwells on all the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER XXVII.

'A wolf's cub will be wolf at last,
Though all its days with lambs are passed.'

Dissipation has, indeed, been the undoing of Jinnie. Arrived at home, her irritability assumes alarming proportions, and her temper, a little treacherous at the best of times, now knows no bounds.

At four it suggests itself to her mother that the doctor alone can cope with these difficulties, and Dr. Bland, 'that delightful and useful creature,' according to Lady Maria, is sent for. He says at once that Jinnie is a little *done*, a trifle feverish—at which dreadful word Lady Maria's heart dies within her, and rapidly her mind runs to typhoid, scarlet, even brain fever. She has, indeed, almost arranged a fitting epitaph for a child cut off in the flower of her youth and beauty, when Dr. Bland again breaks in.

'Nothing dangerous. Nothing, really. Must be kept perfectly quiet, and *never* alone! No excitement, however; no unreasonable arguing about this or that—in fact, give her her own way' (this advice is superfluous). He will call in again in the morning.

'Not to-night?' in a suppressed tone of agonized fear from Lady Maria.

Oh no! quite unnecessary. He will write out a little prescription which they will send for at once. And above all things, she must not be left alone. She seems a little overstrung, a little excitable.

'Ah, yes, darling child! So abnormally clever,' breathes Lady Maria.

The doctor nods. He has his own ideas about Jinnie, and though fond of her, as most people are, would often like to prescribe for her a sound whipping. She gives him a fiendish grin now, as he bids her adieu, and, afraid of laughing in the face of the extreme gravity of her grandmother, he beats a hasty retreat.

'You see, she must not be left alone, Jane,' says Lady Maria directly his back is turned.

'Alone! of course not, dearest. If you will stay with her now, until I have finished my letters——'

'Certainly, my dear, And—er—don't hurry with your letters, Jane. I—I should like to stay here'—absently, as if thinking.

'You mustn't tire yourself; I shan't be very long. I, of course, shall sit up with her all night; but don't you think Miss Royce could remain with her during our dinner-hour, and a little beyond it—say from half-past seven till ten?'

'Until twelve, surely, my dear, considering you are going to sit up the rest of the night.'

'Oh no. I shall send her to bed at eleven. I don't think she looks very strong, poor girl! Of course we shall be in and out, you and I, all the time.'

She speaks in the voice of one troubled by extraordinary anxieties. Of course neither of them sees the ridiculous side of the question, and the tremendous and wholly unnecessary fuss they are making about a mere attack of indigestion, consequent on undue excitement and over-indulgence in cakes and sweets. What mother and grandmother ever could?

Miss Royce, when told a little later of the programme laid down for her for this evening, makes no remark. This is as well, perhaps. From half-past seven until ten she is to sit in dear Jinnie's room, to soothe her if she wakes, to watch over her if she sleeps. A little mutinous expression gathers round the corners of her scarlet lips as she receives her commands, and there is a touch of distinct insolence in the air with which, always silent, she turns and leaves the drawing-room.

But in the hall—alone—with no one to see her, her wrath bursts forth. She is voiceless as in the room she has just left, but her face, her gestures, are eloquent. The little touch of French blood in her declares itself now. To stay! To wait beside that child whilst *he* is waiting for her in the copse below! No—a thousand times no! A black rage takes hold of her, her whole face is darkened by it, and she stamps her foot upon the marble pavement beneath with a force that almost hurts her.

It is a nurse, then, they would make of her, a mere servant! What further indignity are they inventing for her humiliation? What fresh insult are they preparing for her?

And now another thought coming to her in the midst of her hot wrath, she pauses, paling a little. Had they heard? For a long time she has suspected Mrs. Verschoyle of suspecting *her*. Has she discovered something about to-night's assignation with Sidney? and is all this pretended anxiety about a child who is suffering from a mere bilious attack but a ruse to keep her—Maden—secured in the prison of Jinnie's room, so as to leave him free later on to marry Miss Fairfax? Like lightning the thought rushes through her impetuous brain, and as quickly she believes in it. Oh, how mean! How detestable! Well, grinding her small teeth, let Mrs. Verschoyle do her best, or her worst, to thwart her—and—let her succeed if she can. There is a saturnine smile on the little flower-like face that transfigures it out of all beauty as Miss Royce goes up the stairs to her own room. No, the white teeth close again ominously. Not Mrs. Verschoyle, for all her spying (poor Mrs. Verschoyle!), or Lady Maria, or all the devils in hell, shall keep her back from her tryst to-night. The smile grows almost contemptuous as she enters her room.

At half-past seven precisely she goes to Jinnie, who is sleeping the sleep of the just, allowing Mrs. Verschoyle, who is sitting by the child's bedside (afraid to leave her, though she sleeps so soundly—on account of the doctor's orders), to go and dress for dinner.

'What a pose!' thinks Miss Royce with a curling lip; she regards Mrs. Verschoyle's anxious face as a clever piece of acting. But she settles herself near the bed with an air of elaborate if sullen determination of never leaving Jinnie again until ten o'clock strikes.

But at a quarter to nine Jinnie's room has no occupant save Jinnie alone, who is still asleep—but now tossing and tumbling amongst her pillows restlessly—whilst Miss Royce, with flying feet, is running across lawn and meadow towards the flowing river, and to the copse beyond, where love lies waiting for her!

The dainty cambric gown that she is wearing, and which she made herself with the intuitive sense of perfection that belongs to her, and that has made her dread the extreme charm of Cecil Fairfax's face, floats behind her in the delicate night breeze, and on her dainty head is the little red cap she so much affects—in private. A little red cap that belongs to the days that have nothing to do with the days at the Dower-house, and that she loves with a singular affection, as though it embodied in its redness and coquettishness all the liberty, however marred with unpleasantness of many sorts, that she had ever known.

Her thoughts fly with her—and before her. Will he be here, waiting for her? Or will she have to wait for *him?* Oh no! A laugh springs to her lips. Not after that last scene with him yesterday. He will be here, only too glad to come. It is *he* who will be waiting this time.

* * * * *

She is right. He is here, though sorely against his better judgment. All day he had played with the question: Should he, or should he not, go to meet her? without arriving at any answer. Her face, as last he remembers it, was mutinous, passionate, even forbidding, and with a strength of obstinacy in it of which he had not believed her capable. It was this unforeseen factor, this unexpected strength, that had warned him to go no farther. If he were to go, to see her again, how would it be with his determination to marry Cecil Fairfax? Cecil was not one to trifle with, and that girl could be troublesome—if abominably pretty. Better see her no more . . . and going as he is to-morrow . . . No, he will *not* go to meet her; yet all the time, even as he swears this to himself, he knows that he will go; and, indeed, as after dinner he passes through the halls, and into the moonlit garden, it is not Cecil's face that he sees, but the dark, eager, passionate, lovely face of Maden Royce. It accompanies him all the way to the little copse below, near which the river runs with eternal energy, slowly, desperately, as if fighting with time and change; even

when he has seated himself on a fallen trunk of a tree to wait for her, it is still clear, still brilliant—*so* brilliant that when, suddenly lifting his eyes, he sees her coming towards him—an elf belonging to the wood, as it were, a slight thing in a floating gown and a crimson cap—for a moment he regards her as an apparition!

He throws his cigar far from him, rises, goes to her, and in a moment, with a low but merry laugh, she has flung herself into his arms.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

> 'From this bleeding hand of mine
> Take this sprig of eglantine,
> Which though sweet unto your smell,
> Yet the fretful brier will tell,
> He who plucks the sweets shall prove
> Many thorns to be in love.'

'I HAVE been waiting for hours,' says Fenton after a while.

'Do you good,' says she saucily. *His* having been here first has given her fresh confidence, and an air of victory that sits charmingly on her piquant face. 'You thought *I* should be the one to hurry to our trysting-place; but now you see! Hah!'—gaily stepping back from him, and defying him with a charming gesture—'*now* you see!'

'Yes, I see.'

His tone is full of admiration. He sees *her*, at all events—this exquisite little sprite, in her light frock and scarlet cap, posing amongst the grasses and the leaves. There is a touch of sadness in his air. It occurs to his pleasure-loving nature that it will be hard to leave her, yet ruinous not to leave her. And, besides, he is at his last gasp so far as money is concerned, and to support her as well as himself. . . . Impossible!—not to be thought of for a moment.

The sadness of his voice has touched her. Has her pretended carelessness hurt him? All at once her mood changes, and step by step she draws nearer to him, her hands held out.

'Don't mind me,' says she sweetly. 'I like to vex you sometimes, you know, only to—to know that you love me—to make you show it. But I won't again—oh, no, no! I am

sure now that you love me, and me only. You *do*'—laying her hands lightly on his shoulders, and gazing into his eyes with 'eyes that speak of love again'—'don't you?'

'You know it,' says he a little huskily. The supreme moment has come. He must tell her now or never. The selfishness of the man overcrowds his love—that is, the contemptible feeling he would call by that name—and in the very midst of her tenderness for him he deals her a death-blow. 'You know it.' His voice is almost indistinct in his agitation. 'And that is why I hate to think of the hour—the hour now very near—when I must leave you.'

Her arms are still round his neck.

'Leave me!' Slowly, slowly the loving arms loose their hold, and she falls back a little. He would have held her, indeed, but something sinewy—strong—in the slender body evades his grasp. 'You are going, then?'

'Yes, of course'—irritably, because of his agitation. 'You must have known——'

But she brushes all that aside.

'Will it be soon?'

'To-morrow.'

For the life of him he could not have said another word—softened the announcement.

Silence falls upon them.

He had expected an outburst—one of her mad, wild expressions of reproach and grief combined; but, to his amazement, she receives his news with extraordinary composure. He can see her face quite plainly. It is uplifted now to the east, where the first star of night is peeping from behind a pallid cloud, and thought alone lies on it. She is thinking—calmly, earnestly, dispassionately. No sign of passion or distress disfigures the beautiful features.

All at once she lowers her glance to his.

'It isn't true, is it?' says she in a little vague sort of way, that is always, however, quite calm.

He nods his head.

'Not to-morrow? *That* is not true?'

Her eyes are wistful and gentle, and they search his as if sure of a denial of the dreadful truth.

'Going I *am*,' says he with a brutality born of his nervous horror of the misery he can read through her extraordinary calm. 'Come now, Maden. Would you have me give up my

profession just because you want me to stay here a day or two longer?'

She ponders for a while.

'I shall never see you again, then,' says she in a stony sort of way.

'What nonsense! The world is a small place, and Ireland (we are ordered to Ireland) is only a few hours' journey away. At any moment I could be back here. Come, do be reasonable, darling.'

'Why, I will,' says she. She overcomes herself. Her face is very white; but she smiles at him most naturally. If this is to be the end of it all, well, she tells herself, it shall be a good end. 'And so you are going?' says she. 'And to-morrow! And is it a very delightful place there, where you are going? Ah! it will be more amusing than this place, any way.'

She laughs lightly.

Fenton, a little taken aback by her change of mood, and not clever enough to see the terrible restraint she has laid on herself—the mad courage that is sustaining her—says regretfully:

'I don't know. Gayer, perhaps, but not happier. *You* won't be there, for one thing. I shan't have you to talk to.'

It is the refinement of cruelty, though, to do him justice, he does not mean it. He is, as usual, thinking of himself only, with a great pity—inasmuch as this little charming companion will have dropped out of his life, leaving him so much the poorer.

She turns her eyes on him for a moment.

'True; but there will be somebody there after a while.'

'Maden!'

Really, her callousness on such an occasion as this shocks him.

'I said "after a while"—not quite at once. You will not forget me in a day or two, will you?'

'You know that I——'

'Oh, yes, yes, yes!' She pulls her little cap off, and runs her fingers quickly through her dark hair. 'You won't find it easy to replace me, will you?' With the courage of despair—with a sort of miserable pride—she makes a dainty little *moue* at him. She looks lovely as a dream in the still moonlight, with all the leaves around her, and the moon above her, gazing at

him from under her long lashes, with her most provoking air —the air of a born coquette. But, oh, the anguish at the heart of this poor little coquette! 'You see, I am not like everyone,' says she, braving it to the last.

'You are not, indeed,' says he moodily. 'There is no one on earth like you. But how coolly you take all this—with a laugh, by Jove! whereas I——'

'Oh, you—you!' She points a little jesting finger at him. 'How do *you* take it—with a tear? And how would you have *me* take it—with tears, too? No, no! Why should I cry for you, when you will not cry for *me?*—when you will leave me!'

'I leave you because I must—because I am a poor devil at my last penny. But I love you—I——'

'Better than Miss Fairfax?'

Even in this supreme moment her undying, her unconquerable, jealousy of Cecil Fairfax, born of so true an instinct, rises to the surface.

He catches her suddenly and presses her to him.

'Yes—well; but answer!' commands she breathlessly.

'Look here,' says he. 'This is probably our last hour together, and I swear to you that if Cecil Fairfax were the only woman in the world, I should never love her.'

'If she and I were drowning,' persists the girl, with a faint touch of passion, 'which would you save?'

'You—and you know it.'

'And yet you leave me! There, *go.*' She pushes him from her, and runs away towards the opening in the glade that leads to the path beyond. Here she looks back. 'You will write to me?'

He reaches her side again.

'The very moment I get there.' He has no hesitation at all about saying this. Indeed, in his present mood—in his grief, that for the moment is real, at losing her—he would have promised anything; and, beside, he is quite an adept at writing love letters. They are, as a rule, of the briefest; but, then, he can put so much into them—so much that sounds a great deal to the receiver of them, so little actually! 'You were going,' says he reproachfully, 'without even bidding me good-bye.'

'Good-bye!' She echoes the word forlornly, and all at once, as if the meaning of it has come home to her, and has thus

killed her cruel pride, she breaks down and trembles violently. The tears rush to her eyes, and fall over her ashen cheeks. 'Oh, I cannot—I *cannot* say it!'

She flings her arms round his neck, clings to him for a moment wildly; then, dragging herself away, rushes like some wild, wounded thing through the underwood, and out of sight.

CHAPTER XXIX.

'Yet weep I not for human misery,
Nor for the stars' complaining,
Nor for the river's wailing.
I weep for thee alone; most miserly,
Keep all my tears for thee!'

Reckless, desperate, she makes her way back to the house, some last remnant of sense compelling her to hope that she may gain it without her absence having been discovered. With a view to this she enters quietly by a side-door. From this, however, she must cross the entrance-hall to gain the staircase to her room, and in this hall she finds herself confronted by—Lady Maria!

The elder woman's face is a study of suppressed anger and disgust, and the girl, after one glance at it, reads her doom. Somehow the knowledge, instead of further depressing her, raises her already overstrung nerves to a very dangerous pitch, and a mad inclination to laugh aloud is the one desire she knows.

'Come in here,' says Lady Maria, pointing to the library door.

She speaks quite quietly, but the deadly anger beneath her composure is quite clear to Miss Royce. Instead of daunting her, as I have said, it only augments the passionate rebellion in her breast. How can she, who has lost all, care for the petty wrath of this old woman?

'I thought you understood you were not to leave my grand-daughter until ten o'clock,' says Lady Maria, her beautifully-modulated voice still under full control.

'I am not your grand-daughter's maid!' retorts Miss Royce insolently.

'That is quite true. You are her governess, however, and she was left in your charge. It was late, no doubt, to expect you to sit up with her; but she was your little pupil, and she was very ill.'

'If the child was as ill as you seem to think,' says Miss Royce, with a shrug of her slim shoulders, and a slight increase of the insolence she has already shown, 'I think her mother would have been the proper person to sit beside her and look after her.'

'I suppose you know,' says Lady Maria calmly, 'that you are being very impertinent?'

'I'm not so sure of that,' says Miss Royce, with a bitter little smile. 'But I am clever enough to know that anything a person in my position may presume to say to a person in yours, calculated to offend, is always *called* impertinent, however just it may be. For the rest, I did not engage with you as nurse-maid to your grand-daughter—to see her through all her childish diseases—but to teach her her lessons.'

'One of her lessons, I presume,' says Lady Maria, still keeping her temper admirably, 'has something to do with propriety of conduct. To be out of one's house until ten or eleven o'clock at night comes hardly under that head.'

'There are times,' says Miss Royce in a low, furious tone, 'when everyone in this horrible world feels they must be alone!' She stops, as if choking.

'Were you alone to-night?' asks Lady Maria mercilessly.

'What is that to you?' says the girl, turning upon her so fiercely that anyone else might have shrunk from her; but Lady Maria, her old keen eyes unflinching, looks back at her expectantly. 'Would you spy upon me night and day? I tell you—and your question confirms it—I am never alone! You grudge me even a moment to myself.'

This is very far from the truth, but passion now has caught and is swaying her. Lady Maria and Mrs. Verschoyle, if cold and unbending, have always been scrupulously kind and just to her, and very considerate.

'It is Jinnie, Jinnie, all day long with you and that child's mother,' goes on Miss Royce, with extraordinary violence. 'What was I beside her? I, too, am a human thing, who can know grief and joy, and love and hate, as well as another; yet what was I to you? Nothing! Nothing but a machine to work your will, and look after the child you love. But it is

all over—*all!*' She makes a tragic movement with her arms, throwing them out and a little upwards. 'I am not your slave!'

'I am very glad to know that you are nothing whatever to me,' says Lady Maria, with such perfect calm as seems actually cruel in the face of the other's passionate excitement.

'I shall not stay here,' says the girl, who has grown reckless now.

'I think that very probable.'

'I suppose you imagine you are dismissing me,' says Miss Royce, with a sudden smile, so vivid, so contemptuous, that for the first time Lady Maria's self-possession gives way. She frowns. 'But you make a mistake. It is I'—superbly—'who am dismissing you!'

Lady Maria's frown disappears. She looks amused.

'In the meantime,' says she politely, 'I would suggest to you the advisability of going back to your pupil's room. Mrs. Verschoyle, whose motherly instincts you seem to rate so low, has been with her the greater part of the evening. She went up there, indeed, directly after dinner—to find you gone. You misjudged her, you see, when you thought you could safely desert her child to-night without fear of discovery. Mrs. Verschoyle is not the sort of mother to leave her child entirely to the care of a—hireling!'

Lady Maria feels a little ashamed of this later on—so much so, indeed, that she refrains from all mention of it to Mrs. Verschoyle.

'I shall not go back to Jinnie's room,' says Miss Royce with cold decision. 'Send one of your maids if Mrs. Verschoyle wants assistance. I am not a servant; and, besides'—deliberately—'I have come to the conclusion that I dislike children.'

'You prove yourself not only insolent, but heartless!' says Lady Maria.

She rises and rings a bell.

'I am not heartless!' bursts out the girl violently, whose heart, indeed, at this moment is filled with almost unbearable agony. 'It is *you*—and *yours*—who are devoid of all feeling! I——'

Lady Maria makes a slight but imperative gesture.

'Leave the room,' says she curtly.

It is the last straw. So might she have spoken to, so might she have dismissed, one of her housemaids.

Miss Royce stands choking with rage for a moment; then, still speechless, turns and walks, not only out of the room, but out of the house, and into the cold, sweet chillness of the night air.

* * * * *

It is very dark now. Above, the stars are all afire, and the tops of the firs are silvered by the light of the crescent moon; but down here amongst the trees, the shadows in the thick parts of the plantation are very dense.

She had run with all the speed of an enraged creature when she had passed impetuously through the open hall door, and had not ceased to run until these shadows overpowered her; but now she pauses, hesitating a little, as if sobered suddenly by the change from light to dark, from the heat of the room behind her (how far behind her now, to all intents and purposes!) to the soft-blowing wind about her, and . . . utter desolation!

She pauses, as if trying to place things; and then suddenly it all at once comes home to her. She is alone! No home—no friends—no lover! *Nothing!* And *he*—he will be gone to-morrow! . . . She flings herself face downwards on the grass. 'Thou sayest it . . . I am outcast!'

A dry, gasping sob breaks from her. Oh, dear God, to be dead, and done with it all! To cease!—to be silent, deaf, sightless, without thought!—to *feel* nothing!

For many minutes the wild, untutored heart thus beats itself out against its bars, and then she rises wearily. A sort of passionate longing arises within her to go back again to where she had last seen him, to fling herself on the damp, dewy grass, and kiss the place where his dear footsteps trod—to go where she will never, never, *never* see him again! And presently, with grief and despair and hopelessness dragging at her tired feet, she goes down to the ash grove.

Coming to the river, she pauses and watches it for a moment eagerly, hungrily, then goes on again, looking back at it now, and now again, as though it draws her to it, but still resisting it. No, no; there will be time for that . . . afterwards!

Presently she goes down the soft, deep bank, mossy and still sweet with the later autumn flowers, and now the grove is before her; and *now* . . .

She stops, uplifting her hands to her face as if to check

the cry that rises to her lips—the wild outcry of joy, of passionate delight, that is making her tremble from head to foot. For there, in the darkness beyond, to which she has now grown accustomed, she can see the tiny red glow of a cigar.

He has not gone then! He has *not* deserted her—he is still here! A thrill of rapture rushes through her. All her sadness, her depression, is gone; her eyes grow brilliant; a brilliant colour, too, springs to her pale face. Oh, what a good, what a gracious world it is, after all! *He*, still, is *here!*

Alas that it should be so! With a sob in her throat she runs to him, fleetness and fire now in her little feet, so tired a moment ago.

'Sidney!' cries she in a strangled voice; and, indeed, he has barely time to rise and catch her before she falls into his arms.

'Maden, my darling, what is it?' asks he, his voice as filled with astonishment as with anxiety. To come back again at this hour!

'I have left them for ever!' gasps she presently. 'They were cruel—too cruel! I shall not go back! Take me with you, Sidney—take me!'

'This is madness!' says he, frowning but paling, as he feels the little living, beautiful creature throbbing within his arms.

'Not this,' cries she, clasping him closer; 'but it *will* be madness indeed for me, if you leave me here! They have cast me out—oh, those devils of women! . . . and where—*where* shall I go? . . . Besides'—with a strange and rapid change of tone—'I want to go nowhere except where *you* are, Sidney.' And now, throwing herself back to look at him: 'You *do* love me, don't you?'

'You know it!'—passionately, the passion, in spite of him, breaking through the prudence that warns him that to give in now will tend to his undoing in the future.

'Ah! Then it is all right!' cries she, with the little broken, happy laugh of a tired child. 'And you *will* take me with you!'

'You don't know what you are saying,' stammers he, a revulsion of feeling making him put her slightly from him. 'I cannot take you with me. I am at my last penny—stone broke.'

'I don't care ; I will work for you, slave for you, scrub for you. *Only* . . . let me be with you.'

'Maden !'

'Oh, I know—I know, but I don't care !'

'This is mere temper,' says Fenton. 'You are angry with Lady Maria and the rest of them, but it will blow over.'

Even as he thus fights against her, and against all his instincts, he wonders at himself. This girl—a mere waif and stray, or a little obscure nobody—has so far influenced him that, in opposition to his real easy-going nature, and his conscience that is easier still, he argues with her, with a view to saving her from herself and his undeniable desire for her.

'It is not that,' says she. 'If that were all, Lady Maria and I would have had no words to-night. But I knew, when you told me this evening you were going away, that I could not live without you. If this quarrel had never happened, I should still have followed you.'

She looks at him, her eyes on his, gleaming in the moonlight—and there is no shame at all on her lovely face.

'Do you know what you are saying ?' asks he hoarsely. His arms have tightened around her. 'I have told you I cannot marry. If I were a rich man, Maden . . . that would make all the difference. I could then—honourably—take you away from all this misery, but——'

'I don't want you to marry me,' says the girl quietly. 'I don't want you even to think of anything that might chill your love for me. Let me be *with* you . . . that is all I ask.'

'Is your reputation nothing to you ?'

'Nothing is anything to me—but you !'

There is a long silence. Then his better angel touches his elbow once more, and surely he must, in his own careless way, have loved her above most, when he answered to that angelic suggestion.

'I cannot let you do this thing,' says he.

His voice is firm again, his air resolute. He makes an effort to put her from him, but she clings to him the more, pressing her soft lips against his cheek.

'You can—you *must*.'

'No !'

He almost flings her from him.

She catches a branch, and for a little while looks at him searchingly.

'Go, then, if you will,' says she, in a low tone. 'Put me out of your life, once for all. But remember'—slowly—'I shall not have the courage to face life without you.'

'You will find another home,' begins he, like one who does not know how to word his sentence.

She helps him here.

'You are right. I shall, indeed, and speedily. I shall find it—*there!*'

She points to the deep and flowing river to their right. There is no passion, no vehemence, in her gesture; yet a terrible certainty that she means what she says makes his blood run cold. That little slender figure . . . lying beneath the ever-moving river . . . cold, senseless, with wide, dead eyes. . . .

With a stride he catches her again, and holds her to him. His heart is beating madly.

'Remember, it is your own doing,' says he hoarsely, selfish to the last.

CHAPTER XXX.

'Charity suffereth long, and is kind . . . rejoiceth not in iniquity . . . believeth all things, hopeth all things.'

THERE is considerable consternation in the Dower-house to-day. Miss Royce is gone! Her bed had not been slept in last night, and the prettiest of her gowns is not now hanging in her wardrobe. Lady Maria, if repentant at the idea of being over-harsh to her some hours ago, is for all that very angry and disgusted.

'You know, Jane, I said nothing—nothing *really*, to drive her to running away; but, as I have often said to you, she was not a person to be trusted—to be allowed into any respectable household.'

This is such an astounding piece of news, that naturally Mrs. Verschoyle grows a little bewildered.

'I quite thought you liked her, even admired her,' says she at last.

'My dearest girl! Surely you forget. *I* to say a favourable word for that miserable creature, who so shamelessly neglected

our poor little darling! Oh no, Jane! I certainly thought her pretty——'

'I thought her vulgar,' says Mrs. Verschoyle.

'Did you? Well, this last act of hers proves it. To go like that! But of course there was a man connected with it somewhere. She was too pretty for her station in life. You may remember a conversation I had with you about her beauty, and I told you then, my dear Jane, that it was one of my first causes for distrusting her. I quite recollect saying that that sort of person should be ugly.'

It seems hopeless to argue with her, and Mrs. Verschoyle, who is wise in her generation, gives it up.

In the afternoon, Anthony, with Fenton and Mr. Browne, drop in for tea, and once again the perplexing question is threshed to the bitter end.

'Mammy says she went away in a tantrum,' says Jinnie, in the middle of a most engrossing argument as to Miss Royce's leaving thus suddenly, whereon everyone stops short, and Mr. Browne bends an inquiring glance on Jinnie.

'What sort of a vehicle is that?' asks he. Even on the most solemn occasions Mr. Browne finds a difficulty about refraining from mirth. 'Two wheels or four?'

At this Captain Fenton laughs aloud, and Mrs. Verschoyle, who almost unconsciously had been studying his features, now turns aside. Oh no, of *course* not. He has had nothing to do with the girl's disappearance. He could not laugh so lightly if—— It was inexcusable—*unpardonable* of her, to have harboured such a thought for even a moment.

'I assure you, all I said was that she should not have neglected Jinnie—that she should not have been out so late. It was quite half-past eleven,' says Lady Maria, addressing Captain Fenton. 'I'm *afraid* I suggested to her that she had gone out with a view to meeting somebody, and, of course, without *proof*.' Lady Maria spreads her long, little, wrinkled, jewelled fingers abroad, in extreme self-depreciation. 'That was abominable! I *know* she went out to meet nobody, and that temper alone has been the cause of her sudden disappearance from amongst us. Don't you?'

'I think it probable,' says Fenton. 'But then, you see, I knew so little of her, beyond meeting her here, and in some of the houses round.'

'True.' Lady Maria pauses. 'I regret that suggestion of mine, however,' says she presently, in a low tone.

'We must all regret,' declares Mr. Browne suddenly. 'Regrets come by the hundredweight. Do not, however, I beg of you, dear Lady Maria, give up too much time to the one associated with Miss Royce.'

He is smiling genially, but is there meaning in the smile? Again Mrs. Verschoyle glances at Fenton, but Fenton is smiling too.

'Regret is another word for folly,' says he, breaking into Dicky's disquisition. 'Take my word for it, Miss Royce knew very well what she was about when . . . Ah!——'

He stops suddenly. Cecil Fairfax has just come in.

'Is it true?' asks she, in a little grave way, holding Lady Maria's hand.

'Quite true,' says Fenton, who has followed her up the room. 'And I have just been allaying Lady Maria's touches of conscience by telling her that I fancy, from what *I* have seen of Miss Royce, she is quite capable of arranging her own plans. She struck me as clever. Eh?'

'What I think,' says Miss Fairfax—her beautiful face still grave and anxious—'is, that she will soon come back again. It was a childish freak—a fit of anger. Oh, I hope it will be so. How'—a slight suspicion of tears gathering in her eyes—'how *pretty* she was! Didn't you'—to Fenton—'think so?'

'Yes, distinctly pretty,' says he indifferently.

'You think she will come back,' says Verschoyle, leaning forward.

He has been watching her face—the only face in the world for him—and has marked in it the almost divine grief and longing for the return of the girl who last night had run away from them. There is no censure in the gentle eyes—no horror, no disgust, only pity and forbearance, and a desire to see her safe once more.

'Oh, I *do*,' cries she, with something in her soft voice that might almost be termed vehemence. 'I feel sure of it: don't you?'

Again she addresses her words to Fenton, as if his opinion alone is dear to her, a fact that Verschoyle, with a sigh and a slight frown, acknowledges. Fenton, on his part, is conscious of a sense of amusement that is not altogether without its bitterness.

'I have not studied her,' says he. 'But you are doubtless right. Criminals'—he laughs lightly—'always return to the scenes of their crimes. Isn't that what the sages say?'

In his soul he is hoping, and, indeed, is certain, that Maden will never again revisit Hillesden.

'Poor little girl! I liked her,' says Cecil gently.

Her glance is still for Fenton, and now at last, so direct is her gaze, he loses in part his self-possession.

'So did I,' returns he haltingly. 'She was very original.'

'*I* loved her!' cried Jinnie. 'I hope she'll come back soon. She told me stories, sometimes, about fairies and things. A queen fairy there was always, and a king one, too. And the king one was like you, Sidney.'

A rather uncomfortable silence follows on this, though why, no one can say. Mr. Browne, who is always full of resource, breaks it.

'Jinnie!' inquires he anxiously, 'who was the fairy queen like? Me, wasn't it? *Take time.* Sort of delicate kind of beauty like mine. Eh?'

'No, she was like Cecil,' says Jinnie. 'Fair and tall, and big, *big* eyes.'

Cecil laughs.

'Miss Royce herself was far more like a fairy queen than I am,' says she. 'But you and I, Sidney, should feel complimented. Evidently she admired us both. Poor little thing! I wonder where she is now?'

'Yes—so do I,' says Fenton agreeably.

'Had she any money?' asks Verschoyle, as if struck by an uncomfortable thought.

'Most fortunately, I paid her her salary two days ago,' returns Mrs. Verschoyle. 'So she has enough for the moment —for a little time—at all events. I am so glad to know that. Because I really think she would have gone away, even without what was owing to her, she was such a queer, proud, passionate girl.'

'She left a great deal of her clothes behind her,' says Lady Maria discontentedly.

'She will have to come back, so,' says Jinnie hopefully. 'She loved that little blue blouse with the sparky stones. Perhaps she'll come for it to-morrow.'

'Perhaps so,' says her mother.

But Miss Royce comes back no more to the Dower-house,

and presently the delightful sensation her romantic disappearance had created in Hillesden dies away, and people begin to forget her. It takes but a very few days to do this, and, indeed, before September has half gone by us, things have settled down again. Mr. Popkin has returned to his wooing of the reluctant Carry, and Miss Langley-Binks to her pursuit of the dejected Richie. Fenton has left The Towers, with a promise to return shortly after Christmas, and a tender pressure of Cecil's cold little hands that means very little to him, but enough to her to make her dream of, and long for, the coming of the new year. Old Miss Desmond has begun to tremble at the near approach of November, when she will have to pay up that overdue old loan of twenty pounds, of which but ten is producible. And Carry—Carry has begun to put in motion the machinery of her grand plot.

CHAPTER XXXI.

'What thou intendest to do, speak not of before thou doest it.'

The plot itself had been maturing for a long time in her busy brain, but the winning of the tweed at the late bazaar had brought it forth. She had heard several times of how people made very handsome weekly sums out of the sale of their rabbits, and being a most excellent shot as women go, she had even tried her luck with those cunning little beasts; but somehow the swish-swish of her petticoats, go as delicately as she could, always gave them the warning signal, and the flash of their little wicked white tails was all she ever saw of them as they disappeared into their burrows. Of course, there was an occasional success, but that counted as nothing to a girl eager, and longing with an almost passionate desire, to make money out of the troublesome little wretches that destroyed darling auntie's garden—to compel them to pay off the debt that lay on the poor old lady's head, and troubled her night and day, and so put an end to it for ever. It seemed such a trivial sum. Ten pounds! Any day, every day, kind-hearted people give twenty times that sum to deserving charities; but, then, Miss Desmond would have no charity given to her: nor, indeed, did anyone, save Richie, know of the trouble she was

in. For all that she kept locked in her own old sorrowful breast.

But Carry, you see, had thought of a plan to help her—a plan that Miss Desmond would not have listened to for a single moment—at which, indeed, her decorous and beautiful old hair would have risen with horror; so Carry said nothing about it to her, and smuggled the bundle of tweed up to her own room, without so much as Miss Desmond's being aware of its presence in the house—a deceitful proceeding that became a stern duty under the severe probity of Carry's heart. If auntie cannot help herself, then, foul means or fair, auntie must be helped.

This is the evening when the successful smuggling was accomplished, and Carry, having secured her bedroom door against all intruders, lays the precious bundle on her bed, and opens it.

My goodness, what a lot there is of it! Why, there is enough here to make a dress for auntie, and a skirt for herself, besides leaving plenty over for . . . Carry sits down on the edge of her small snowy bed, and goes into agonies of silent computations.

Presently she rises, opens a drawer in the old cupboard, takes out a certain garment, and lays it prone upon the bed beside the precious tweed. The garment shall be nameless; it might shock the sensitive nerves of a few if it was given openly to the world, and why draw unnecessary blood? Carry herself has evidently no fear of the garment in question; so little, indeed, that presently she is measuring it, and pinning some of the delightful tweed on to it, and cutting here, and snipping there, until at last the pliant tweed has grown somewhat into the shape of the 'nameless thing' on the bed. There is, however, one change that must be made. Carry stands, scissors in hand, frowning over this. Yes, certainly . . . the tweed replica must be a little fuller about the kn—— But if so . . . How perplexing it is!

It is quite late before Carry goes to bed.

The delicate morning air, stealing in through her open window, wakes her. Her first thought is for her work of the night before. Flinging herself back on her pillow, she regards it with great admiration. It is hanging on the door of the wardrobe opposite, and is only pinned together, but even so it answers all her expectations.

Never again, when she goes out shooting, will she find her silly skirts knocking against, or else being caught in, the briers, and so giving those wily rabbits a chance of escape. Now they will never hear her coming. And what a good thing that Richie had taken the trouble to make her so excellent a shot! Really, Richie is an invaluable friend; but even to *him* this must never, *never* be told. Nor to auntie, either. They—it is awfully silly of them—but she feels sure they would be mad with her. But if Richie were to see her! He might, you know. 'Well'—recklessly—'I don't care!'

She is out of bed by this time, and has flung her window a little wider to listen to the morning song of the world outside. Such duets, such trios! Such sad sweet monotones! All this enters into her; but presently she comes back to the mundane present. To ensure the success of her scheme she must go down to-day to old Murphy, who lives a little outside the village—old Murphy, who buys in all the rabbits, hares, wild-fowl, and so forth, for the London market, besides keeping an inn. If he will help her (and surely he will, for her father's sake), then she will take out the pins from that strange garment over there, and bind it safely together with needle and thread, and then 'go a-hunting.'

The afternoon sees her in the little town, close to Murphy's inn, a distinctly guilty look upon her face. It does seem a little dreadful, having to come here and ask Murphy to buy, perhaps mythical, rabbits. How can she be sure, even with the help of *it*, she will be able to shoot them? Still, Murphy, in this her hour of need, is her only refuge, and so, after a second struggle with herself, she walks up boldly to Welcome All, as the good Murphy *now* calls his house, though once it had been only too well known as the Sign of the Flea.

Mr. Murphy, a native of Cork, had left the city of the Lee in his earliest youth, and finding himself after many years in the neighbourhood of Hillesden, with some small means in his possession, had set up there an inn, and in a moment of what he fondly deemed to be brilliant inspiration had called it by the above too suggestive title.

To him, it seemed a truly lively name for his new venture, and he quite chortled when the hanging sign, drawn and painted by a travelling 'artist,' was hung over his door. The artist had transformed the flea proper into a huge brown

grasshopper, being perhaps too delicately minded to paint the real thing; but in spite of his noble effort towards civilization, Mr. Murphy insisted on the name being written in clear print above (so as to avoid mistake, perhaps), and the grasshopper as he stooped, in a painfully poised position, seemed only too ready for a pounce.

Altogether it was too realistic, *too* lively, and customers fought shy of Murphy's inn—so shy, indeed, that presently the brilliant propounder of its name found himself on the brink of bankruptcy.

It was then that Mr. Desmond—who for some years had been doing his best to get through the acres of Tudor Hall—had come forward to the help of his countryman (poor Mr. Desmond was always trying to help everyone, except himself), and, with the lavish generosity that had ruined him, had by a timely cheque set up the bankrupt Murphy once again in life. It was not money thrown away. Murphy changed the title of his house—''Twas unlucky,' he said—and called it, as a more hopeful sign, Welcome All. This the many cockneys who stayed there off and on changed to Welcome Hall, which, of course, gave it quite an astonishing push, seeming patriarchal and aristocratic. After that, indeed, Murphy had prospered amazingly, whilst his benefactor went lower and lower, until kindly death seized him.

No one could accuse poor Mr. Desmond of drinking, of gambling, or of unfaithfulness to the wife who died before him, and adored him to the last; but, still, all things went. He had run through his own property in Ireland, and then through his wife's in England, and all in the happiest way. He was one of the most regretted men, in his own world, when he died.

* * * * *

'Can I speak to you for a moment?' says Carry, walking through Mr. Murphy's door and into his shop, with all the speed and nervous energy of one who has been for hours making up her mind to a plunge.

Murphy, who is standing behind his counter, comes quickly forward. He has small, twinkling eyes, an abominably long upper lip, and a most pleasant air.

''Tis an honour ye'll be doin' me, miss, to spake to me at all,' says he with immense bonhomie, largely mingled with respect.

He is a big man, with a wonderful stomach, and this he strokes affectionately as he regards her.

'Oh no,' says Carry. 'To tell you the truth, Murphy, I want you to do something for me. I'—nervously—'I'm a little troubled.'

Murphy looks at her.

'Trouble is worse than murdher,' says he sententiously. He opens a small door that leads from his shop to a tiny parlour within. 'Come in here, Miss Carry, an' tell me all about it.'

Carry follows him. The little room is neat and cosy, though a smart fire burning in the grate renders it uncomfortably warm. But the big man's face has a touch of sympathy in it that smooths her way for her.

'It isn't *my* trouble, Murphy,' says she. 'It is Miss Desmond's. She——' She stammers a little.

'An' how is she?' asks the Irish giant tenderly. 'Fegs, 'twas only a month ago I went by yer house, an' I saw her, an' grand the old lady looked, praise be! But if she's in any way pressed, Miss——'

'Well, she is, Murphy, and—and it has occurred to me that I might, with your help—make things easier for her.' Poor Carry's eyes now are full of tears.

'Faith, 'tis like yer father ye are,' says Mr. Murphy, with quite unbounded admiration. He is leaning against his round mahogany table. To *sit* in company with a Desmond would never have occurred to him. 'Ye have a plan in yer mind now, I can see, an' proud I'll be if I can help it out. Himself'—meaning the late Desmond—'was the divil all out at thinkin'. Why, I remimber'—here he grows enthusiastic—'whin the Sheriff himself came down here an' thried——' Here he breaks off suddenly, finding himself on tender ground. 'Ah, he was a great man—a great man entirely!' says he, sheering off very cleverly.

At this Carry tells him that her desire, her hope, is to kill the rabbits on her aunt's property, and give them to Murphy to sell in London.

'I know you have many other people who supply you with rabbits.'

'That's thrue, miss.'

'And therefore I know I am a great trouble to you—even asking you to help me.'

'Throuble! An' is it throuble ye'd be spakin' of to me, who would not be above ground this minnit but for yer father! Throuble isn't a word, miss, to be used between you an' Jim Murphy.'

'You are kind—too kind,' says Carry in a little choking way. Oh, he *will* help her, then!

'Kind! No,' says Jim Murphy; ''tis yer father was kind to me. An' I'm tellin' ye this, miss, that yer father's daughther is all the world to me.'

'But I want you to understand this, Murphy,' says Carry, her face pale and her eyes a little strained, 'that, of course, I can't supply you with as many rabbits as the others can, and perhaps——'

'Not a ha'porth o' difference would that make in my thrade,' says Mr. Murphy. 'One here and there can always go to market along with the others.'

'One! Oh, I think I can send you a great many more than that every week,' says Carry eagerly.

'The more the merrier, miss. The fac' is,' says Mr. Murphy, leaning towards her, and speaking in a low voice, 'that I've quite a big business in London now. But that's tellin', ye know, an' 'tis only herself'—his wife—'knows it; an' I leave it to you, miss, dear, not to repeat it, or I'd have all my prices raised wid these divils round here. Your father was a good friend to me, miss, an' Jim Murphy ain't the one to forget it; an' ye may bet yer life, miss, that I'll do what I can for ye wid the rabbits! But'—Mr. Murphy's face lowers, and his eyes seek the ground—'if I might, widout givin' ye offence, say a word, 'tis that I'm sorry to me heart, miss, that you should have to come here to-day to ask this thriflin' service of me.'

'It is not trifling, Murphy, and I shall always remember your kindness,' says Carry.

With a certain dignity she extends her hand to the giant before her, who clasps it as if it is a empty eggshell, bowing the while.

'I'm thinkin', miss dear,' says he, having released Carry's hand, 'that maybe ye'd be wantin' someone to carry down here the little bastes for ye, when kilt. An' ye know, Miss Carry, that 'tis the world an' all to git boys now to do anythin'—even barrin' the expense of payin' thim. But there's that farm on Clover's Hill, miss—ye heard I got it, belike? An'

three times a week I've got to go past yer gates to reach it, an'——'

'Yes, I heard; and I was so glad you got that farm,' says Carry cordially.

Indeed, there had been a rather sharp competition for the farm in question when it came to the hammer; but Murphy, who was then what he called himself in the bosom of Mrs. Murphy (who was all his family), 'a warm man,' had bid above all others, and so became master of the coveted bit of land.

'Thank ye, miss. Any way, 'twill make it aisy for me now to help ye in this underthakin' o' yours. I'll be at yer gates widout fail three times a week, barrin' accidents, an' if ye can manage to send somewan to the enthrance-gate wid the rabbits to meet me on thim occasions, I'm thinkin' it may be savin' a thrifle of throuble to ye.'

'You are always thinking, Murphy, of other people, it seems to me,' says Carry gratefully. 'You are very good to me, at all events, and I can hardly say how obliged I am.' She pauses, drumming her fingers on the table. 'You—you *won't tell anyone*, will you?'

'Not I, me dear—no, nor Mrs. Murphy, eyther. You aren't goin', miss, widout a cup o' tay? Herself is out, but she'll be in in a minnit, an' quite put out, miss, if ye go widout a sup o' somethin'. A glass of madeira, miss, now? Yer poor father——'

'I'm afraid I can't stay any longer,' says Carry; 'but you can remember me to Mrs. Murphy, and tell her I shall never forget how kind you have been to me, Murphy, and how grateful I feel.'

'Arrah, nonsense, Miss Carry! an' what are ye sayin' at all, any way?' says Murphy, looking extra firm because of the tear in his eye. 'Grateful is not a word, miss, from you to me—but from me to *you*. All I have in the world I owe to you and yours.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

'Think, timely think, on the last dreadful day,
How you will tremble there, to stand exposed,
The foremost in the rank of guilty ghosts,
That must be doom'd for murder!
Think on murder!'

It is half-past five, and the pale gray light of the lovely September morning is spreading over the dull expanse of lawn that runs in its neglected fashion southward from the porch of Tudor Hall. It is now lighting up, in delicate misty fashion, the thickly-wooded sidelands that slope also southwards and somewhat to the west, and lays bare the sandy-looking soil below in the tall bracken, its green now tinging to yellow, and the small dwelling-places of those tremendously domesticated people, the conies.

The gray light, growing more mellow now (perhaps in spite of itself), is gathering round a figure standing just inside the copse on the left, and peering intently towards the lively warren below. It is seemingly the figure of a slim and graceful lad, gun in hand, and clad in knickerbockers and a short loose coat. The stout little boots that cover his feet prove the latter to be remarkably small for even a lad of his size, and the legs, with their long stockings, are thin to a degree. On the head of this silent, watching, waiting boy sits a Tam-o'-Shanter, that gives him quite a coquettish air. Boys are not, as a rule, coquettish, and thus this cap—or is it the cap, or the knickerbockers, or the entire ensemble?—gives him the air of a juvenile, if delightful, masquerader.

Bang—bang! The report rings through the still, misty air, and the boy runs sharply down the hill, to find three rabbits waiting for him—though through no overpowering desire of their own. Quickly catching them up, with a half-frightened look to right and left, he hurries up the hill again, but very little burdened by the weight of his bunnies. He has hardly reached the top, however, when a loud cry from below reaches his ears:

'Hi, there! Stop, you young rascal! So I've found you at last, have I? Stop, I say, or, by George! I'll put a few ounces into you.'

For a moment the lad stops as if petrified, casts a hasty glance behind him down the hill, from whence the voice evidently comes, and then, with a vehement exclamation, flings the rabbits into a hole beneath a beech-tree—flings an armful of dried leaves over them (even in this supreme moment the young reprobate does not forget to hide them), and then races away at the top of his speed.

Excellent speed, too. It leaves the man behind—puffing and blowing up the hill—very far in the rear by the time he gets to the top of it. Perhaps rage had a good deal to do with the puffing and blowing—you know it is impossible to give a really good swear running at your best uphill—because now, when the pursuer, looking round him, sees nothing in view, no prey, not even a pair of heels, he gives way to a short and naughty word, and is evidently so much the better for it that anyone might feel quite sorry for him, in that its expression has been so long delayed.

The boy, still running, but now a long way off, suddenly finding himself in an intricate place—all briers, and trailing dog-roses that trip one's footsteps at every turn—stops affrightedly, and looks back in tremulous fashion. Not such a hero as one might imagine, after all; a very sorry coward, plainly.

'Oh, it was—it *was* Richie!'

A little turn of the head, and an overhanging bough knocks the Tam-o'-Shanter off the boyish curls, and Carry Desmond stands revealed in the tweed breeches and coat the bazaar had so kindly provided; in boots and long stockings—in fact, in a rational costume. The New Woman, no doubt, will applaud Carry. But, alas! Carry herself is ashamed of it; and yet never in her life has she looked so well. This ought to touch the Old Woman!

The way is thorny before her, in every sense, and she makes an effort now to gather up her petticoats, so as to conquer successfully the briers in her way. But petticoats there are none to clutch, and again she dashes boldly through the angry tangle, in a haste that might be called frantic, because of the fact that Richie is somewhere there behind her, and may even now be on her track.

She has picked up the cap and placed it once more upon her shapely head. Carry, who had never been regarded as even good-looking, though, somehow, everyone admired her—

that is, *herself*—now, in this extraordinary costume, looks charming. Half a boy in her nature, this dress appeals to her in some strange way, so that she instinctively responds to it—and thus, delighting secretly in the part she is playing, looks better than ever she looked in all her life before. Fine feathers undoubtedly make fine birds, but poor Carry had never had fine feathers. But these new ones, that are so far from being fine, suit her, as often some chance fancy dress—hitherto the last thing that would have been thought of by its wearer—happens to be the one thing most suitable to his or her style.

'Fancy it's being Richie,' breathes she, still running.

Her thoughts run with her. The rabbits, of course, are safe. He certainly could not have seen where she threw them, and this afternoon she can get them again, and leave them with the others where Murphy will find them, and take them away. It is the second week of her venture, and already she has made four pounds. Why, shortly—very shortly—she will be able to give auntie enough to pay that hateful debt—and without her knowing a word about it, too. That is the principal thing. Poor darling old auntie would be so distressed at seeing her in . . . She looks down at them.

But four pounds already!

And all honestly earned. Murphy had at first—at least, she *thought* he had at first—made an attempt to give her more than he gave the others, but she had asked about things, and now she knew it was all right. And, indeed, it was! Murphy, who would willingly have doubled the price of rabbits where she was concerned, had seen, after a short interview with her, that it would not do, and had given in. It was the easier for him to do this, in that he found she was an excellent shot. 'A raal clever crathure,' he called her. 'An' the divil wid the gun.' He was, indeed, so filled with admiration that he would fain have praised her high and low; but he knew how she felt about it, and he kept her secret as he would have kept his life.

Carry, now finding herself unpursued, continues her way more slowly to the house.

It is only a little after six o'clock. Auntie, who never rises before nine, will be safe in bed, and if she has missed getting her usual number of rabbits, still, she will gain something in the fact that she will not have to circumvent the maid-of-all-work, who is generally on the prowl when she comes home in the morning. She has been driven by this 'general'—general

nuisance, Carry calls her—to enter by the drawing-room window at times, the assiduity of the 'general' being so great as to block the ordinary ways of doors. But this morning, if Richie has stopped her money-making, he has, at all events, made it possible to her to get back to her room unseen by anyone in these too, *too* modern clothes, and perhaps indulge in a good sleep before breakfast. Any way, auntie can't hear of her escapade *this* time.

After all, she finds the respectable doorway entrance still denied to her; the 'general' had secured everything last night, and the hall door must evidently have successfully clicked after Carry's morning departure. Never mind—the drawing-room window is always a gentle friend.

She slips through it now, and through the somewhat ghostly room itself, and upstairs—one stair at a time, though really there is nothing to be afraid of, as auntie, of course, is in her deepest slumber; and so along the corridor, and so to the turning to her own room, and so into—auntie's arms!

Not literally. . . . In this dim and darkened tiny corridor, lit by but one window at its end, and that shrouded by curtains, the light is only just visible, and Miss Desmond, in a trailing dressing-gown that has seen an eternity already, finding herself standing between the quasi light and a frightful burglar, gives way to a spirited scream.

'Stand back, fellow!' cries she valiantly, 'or I'll call my niece!'

This admirable defence seems to cow the burglar. 'My niece' seems, indeed, a word to conjure with. 'My niece,' however, is now trying wildly to slide behind a big old-fashioned stand on which some cloaks and hats are hanging. This sliding suggests to Miss Desmond the idea that he wants to get to the other side of her—her back, in fact—and there to make a speedy end of her.

'You would murder me!' cries she shrilly. 'But beware! I have but to raise my voice, and a dozen minions will surround me. Go, you bold bad man, before the worst befalls you.'

Poor old Miss Desmond, her eyes now starting from her head, but her outward courage unimpaired, sees the awful thing behind the stand creeping further and further towards her, as she fondly believes; as a fact, the 'awful thing' is standing stock-still, frightened out of its life.

'Ha, would you?' cries Miss Desmond. 'Would you murder a

defenceless lady? Then take your doom. John!'—with the air of a Viking—'call Miss Desmond! Carry!' There is real meaning in this cry. 'Fly to me. Thomas! Michael! William! Ho, there! Come this way.' There is not a John or a Thomas or any other man in the household, and perhaps the knowledge of this lends a truly heroic command to the old lady's voice. Perhaps it is this knowledge, too, that makes her turn to the burglar. 'You hear, man? Run, I advise you, whilst you can—or would you stay here to be flayed alive? Ho, there, Thomas! run—run *this* way; you are taking the wrong turn. Here in this corridor! And bring the gun, William—your master's blunderbuss, and his bloodhound. It will take you *all* to capture this bloodthirsty scoundrel. Carry! Carry! *where* are you?'

'Oh, auntie!' says the bloodthirsty scoundrel, whose knees are now shaking together, though it must be confessed her soul is shaking with laughter. 'I am *here!* Don't you know me?'

Miss Desmond comes to a standstill; she lifts her eyes. The daylight, now growing so bold as to fight with the curtains that overhang the window, has conquered them . . . and is revealing all things. The shabby corridor, the old woman in her even shabbier magenta dressing-gown, the disconcerted conspirator in her terrible male attire. Even in the midst of her embarrassment and genuine fear, Carry feels a sense of resentment against that magenta gown, and with the resentment knows angrily that she is rather tickled by her aunt's appearance, although, in spite of the antiquity of her garments, Miss Desmond is notably neat and nice and dainty, as she always is. Oh, well, never mind; the rabbits will make that old dressing-gown disappear into the limbo of the past, when once the debt is paid. . . . She has no time for further thoughts.

'It is you!—*you!*' says Miss Desmond, who has now drawn quite close to the terrible apparition. And then, 'Oh, Carry!' cries she, in the tone of one who would say, 'May God forgive you!' after which the poor, pretty old soul bursts out crying.

'Oh, auntie, don't do that!' exclaims Carry, stricken to the heart, and beginning to long, like Rosalind, for something to cover her legs. 'Why—why should you be so sorry about it? After all, auntie, now, what have I done?'

'Done? Look at you! Oh no'—weeping afresh—'*don't*

look at yourself! Oh, what a disgrace! And you, who have always been such a good girl, Carry, and so well brought up, and now to dress yourself in—in——'

It seems impossible to her—of course, it would be impossible to any modest-minded maiden lady—to continue this sentence.

'I'm a good girl now,' says Carry a little rebelliously.

'In those clothes!' Miss Desmond does not look at them, but waves a hand in their direction. 'Oh, Carry, I thought you the last to so far forget yourself!'

'I have been forgetting *myself* indeed,' says Carry a little bitterly. 'I have been thinking only of——'

Generosity checks her. She cannot say the 'you' to this trembling, frightened, and, as she well knows, adoring old woman.

'Of whom?' This hesitation has only added to poor Miss Desmond's fears. 'Carry, where have you been? Where have you come from? Who—*who* have you been meeting? My darling child, confide in your old auntie. I know girls—sometimes—have lovers.' Miss Desmond had not been of the lucky ones. 'But what sort of man can he be, my dearest, to require you to dress up like that? Oh, he must be a most conceited fellow, to wish you to look like—like'—giving way to grief once more—'himself.'

'Lovers! What on earth are you thinking of, auntie?'

Carry stares at her with unbounded astonishment.

'I am thinking of the fact of your stealing out of the house at such an early hour. Carry, darling, tell me who you went to meet.'

The latent sense of humour in Carry here takes fire.

'Rabbits,' says she.

'Rabbits?'

'Yes—bunnies. They don't love me, however, with the ardour with which I love them. Look now, auntie; I'll tell you all about it. You know those dreadful rabbits that are always making havoc of your garden—that are even worse than the hens? Well, I had heard that Murphy—you remember him? down in the town, you know—is buying rabbits right and left for the London market; and I thought if he would buy ours it would help us a lot, and give us money to pay that abominable debt.'

'Oh, my dear, that debt!' says Miss Desmond, conscious

of a fresh twinge of the fear that has saddened her all the summer.

'So I went to Murphy, and he was very good about it, and seemed quite anxious for our rabbits; so I determined to shoot them.'

'You?'

'Yes; why not? You know I am an excellent shot, though I say it as shouldn't. Richie taught me.'

'But'—but how does all this explain your present—attire?' says Miss Desmond.

'The rabbits must explain that,' says Carry. 'It seems they can't bear petticoats. They rustle, don't you see, and the bunnies are so wary that they can hear the slightest sound. It had to be the debt paid, auntie, or—no breeches.'

This awful word reduces Miss Desmond once more to the verge of hysterics.

'Better—far better—be in debt to the end of our days than have you so lost to all sense of decency,' sobs she. 'Carry, take them off—take them off *at once!*' She points vehemently to the lower part of Carry's figure. 'Oh, have you thought, child? Have you considered? Oh!'—incoherently—'if your poor mother could only see you now!'

Instantly Carry is conscious of a sense of deep gratitude that her mother is *not* here to see her. Memories of sound and handsome spankings come to her mind. The late Mrs. Desmond, though sweet and kind and lovable for the most part, had had at times—her moments! The gratitude therefore is permissible; though afterwards comes the comforting recollection that even if she *were* here, Carry herself would be too big (too old would have had no deterrent effect upon her mother) for spankings of any sort.

Then from mother to father her mind runs quickly. That laughter-loving, easy, happy-go-lucky father seems now almost present to her.

'Dad would have liked them,' says she a little disconsolately.

She stares down at her extraordinary garments, and half unconsciously pats the lower—the most outrageous—of them with a kind, brown, friendly little hand.

'Oh, your father!' says Miss Desmond, with would-be disparagement. But all at once she, too, remembers the tender, large (too large) heart of her brother, and all his goodness

to her all his days, and she lapses into silence, trying to forget how the very largeness of that heart had reduced them all to poverty. Presently she rallies. 'I suppose even your father would have liked his girl to be a girl,' says she.

'I think any father would like his girl to do all she could to help those she loved,' says Carry.

'But not at such a sacrifice. Do you think I would sacrifice you to pay this debt? No, no! Nor would he.'

'There is no sacrifice,' says Carry.

'There is—there is. Go and take off those dreadful things, Carry. I cannot bear to see your face above them. I never thought I should turn my eyes willingly from your face until—now.'

'Well, willingly or unwillingly, you shan't turn it from me even now,' says Carry; and, with a swift gesture, she catches Miss Desmond's face between both her hands, and compels her to look at her.

'Come, now. Did I ever look so well in my life? I should have been a boy, auntie; and if I had been, oh, how I should have plagued you! and how you would have loved my plaguing! As it is, I am only a girl, but not so useless, after all. I shall be able to pay that horrid old debt, and, as a protection against burglars, I am A1. You know how I frightened you, who are so full of pluck. My goodness, auntie! where did you learn all the bad language you hurled at me? I'm shaking still.' She slips her arm round Miss Desmond's shoulders. 'I remember every word of it; and in this attire, and with that slang repertory, I shall be able in the future to terrify any decent burglar out of his wits.'

Miss Desmond is not proof against all this love and wit. Her last chance of dignity is to change the subject.

'You are cold, my poor child,' says she, clasping Carry's fingers.

'No wonder, after the fright you gave me. But you are cold, too. I'll tell you what: I'll light a fire, and get us both a cup of tea.'

'But—but you'll change your—your—your things first,' says Miss Desmond, who cannot bring herself to call them clothes, and is greatly afraid lest the maid may meet Carry.

'Of course. It won't take long. Now go back to your bed and get warm. But kiss me first'—laughing—'to show there is no ill feeling.'

Miss Desmond enfolds her in a loving embrace, pushes her from her, cries 'Hurry!'—then pulls her back again. The eternal feminine has risen to the surface.

'Where did you get them?' asks she.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

'When youth and beauty meet togither,
There's worke for breath.'

For quite two weeks Richard Amyot had been hearing from different sources that there was poaching going on in the rabbit-warren at Tudor Hall.

'Nonsense,' said he at first to his old factotum, who was his bodyguard, his gardener and his steward in one.

'They do say it's a fact, sir—and they two pore ladies all alone there. Shame to 'em! says I.'

The 'two pore ladies' might have resented this speech, but it was not meant for them.

'But what have you heard?'

''Tain't I who've 'eard—I'm short o' hearin'; but Plowden's man he do say as there's firing in that wood from five o' the clock out.'

'Well, there's firing in most woods,' said Richie, who, however, was beginning to feel angry.

'Ah, ye'll have yer joke, sir. But it's gun-firing they speaks o'. And with the old lady there 'tis enough to frighten her out o' her life—the very sound o't.'

In spite of his jesting, Richie's blood took fire there. To frighten an old lady, that was bad enough for hanging; but to poach on the lonely, unprotected grounds of a poor old lady, ah! that would require hanging and quartering—only quartering first. Richie grew bloodthirsty; but he was determined to say nothing to Carry about this miscreant—this abominable poacher—lest she should tell Miss Desmond, and so give the dear old thing unnecessary anxiety, because, of course, it could soon be put an end to. He would see to it.

And he was as good as his word. Once, indeed, in 'seeing to it,' he almost came upon the poacher, and, but for an untimely trip over a fallen root, would have caught him. But

the rascal was fleet-footed, as rascals, of course, must be, and so he had lost his chance.

But chances are in abundance so long as the morning light lasts, and to-day it is lasting excellently as he trudges in secret fashion through the outlying woods that surround the warren. A pretty penny, no doubt, that fellow is making out of poor Miss Desmond's rabbits, while she—she is trying to make both ends meet, and to pay that dolorous debt besides. At this point Richie used to laugh a little. As if he could let her want for a paltry ten pounds! He has saved five already (alas, poor Richie! you have grown a little shabby of late), and the sale of that strawberry heifer next month——

'Sh! what is that?

A breaking of twigs, but very delicately . . . And now a dead silence. Richie stands still, crouching somewhat behind the bracken. He glances over it—the rabbits' favourite feeding-place—and sees twenty-five or so of those small, nibbling things hop into the open. Then a shot . . . another. . . . And then two bunnies lie prone upon the ground.

'A bad day's work for our poacher,' says Richie, with a vicious smile. 'I'd have done better in one shot.'

He is running, whilst he speaks, sideways through the tangle on his left, instead of straight across the warren as he did last time—and which he then recognised to be a mistake —and now, rounding a little, pauses a moment.

Yes; there, coming up the slope, the two rabbits on his arm, is the poacher. At once he knows him as the lad who had escaped him last time. Leisurely, as if a little tired, and yet with the spring of youth in his footsteps.

'Well, I have you now, gun or no gun,' says Richie, setting his teeth; he had not thought of bringing his own with him.

Making a slight détour that he knows will bring him face to face with the poacher in two minutes, he goes forward. He has calculated to a nicety. Here is the open spot into which he is to advance and secure that daring young scoundrel, and now—now his footsteps can be heard—and now——

'Hah, I have you at last!' cries Amyot furiously, starting forward. Battle is in his eye, determination in the arm advanced. The arm has, indeed, almost clutched the poacher, when suddenly it drops as if paralyzed to its owner's side. 'Carry!' says he.

Women, as a rule, bear small shocks better than men. Carry, finding that the earth will not open and swallow her up, thinks of the next best thing, and finding a dense mass of nice clean bracken near her, drops her gun (which providentially does not go off) and subsides into it without a second's hesitation.

'It is you, then,' says Amyot, advancing ruthlessly towards her, in spite of her evident desire for seclusion.

'Stay there—don't come a yard nearer,' cries Miss Desmond with authority, largely mingled with fear. 'Stay there, Richie, I command you.'

'You are ashamed of yourself,' says Mr. Amyot sternly. 'And no wonder. So it was you I chased the other day—you, posing as a poacher!'

Words fail to express his disgust. Carry, raging under it, grows defiant.

'So it was,' says she. 'And it was *you* who threatened to put ounces of lead into me.'

'Oh, that's all very fine!' says Richie, stammering a little, however. Good heavens! fancy his having even thought of taking a pot shot at Carry! 'You—you laid yourself open to it, you know. It was your own fault.'

'Oh, don't let us have the old Eve story over again,' says Miss Desmond, her voice contemptuous and strong still, even from the lowly position she has been obliged to assume.

'Well, why did you run?' asks Richie.

'I suppose a person can run if she likes. I might as well ask you, Why did you run?'

'To catch you.'

'Me! are you sure it was me?' Her tone now is malicious.

'If not you, the poacher you pretended to be. Oh, of course, you think you have the best of the argument, and all that . . . and I don't see how any fellow could state his case to you, whilst you are sitting there buried up in those ferns. But you know very well I never meant to fire at you, and that I came here only to protect your interests and Miss Desmond's, and jolly sorry I am I ever took the trouble.'

He turns indignantly, as if to march off.

'Richie! wait a moment.'

'What for? If I thought you were going to explain——'

'Well, I am,' says Carry, though without meekness. 'You

are bound to hear about it sooner or later any way, from auntie, so I may as well have the first of the story.'

Then she gives him a little rapid sketch of her doings (her misdoings, according to auntie), and the fact that already she has had as much money from Murphy as will enable her shortly to pay the remaining ten pounds of auntie's debt. The end of her tale leaves Richie filled with remorse and admiration.

'Why didn't you suggest this plan to me?' says he reproachfully. 'I could have come and shot them for you.'

'You, who are so hard-worked already? Oh no. . . . And, besides, I quite looked forward to the honour and glory of doing it all myself. And now'—sighing heavily—'now I find I have done very little beyond making you and auntie angry with me.'

'Angry! I angry! Not much,' says Richie emphatically. 'I think you are a regular heroine. But how on earth did you make the clothes? Stand up, and let us look at them.'

'Oh, I couldn't,' says she, getting a little deeper into the bracken, and evidently covered with confusion.

'Why not?'

His tone has now changed from the remorseful one to one of open curiosity.

'Oh, I don't know.'

'Do, any way,' says he. 'I want to see how you look.'

'Oh, horrid, horrid!' murmurs she, gathering her arms tightly round her knees, as if to hide them from him.

'I don't believe it, Carry. If you won't get up of your own accord, I shall make you.'

With this he catches her from behind, and lifts her forcibly to her feet, she distinctly protesting, yet struggling with a desire for laughter all the time.

Then a little silence ensues. Carry, standing perforce before him, shrinking, blushing, uncertain, longing for the old, dear wishing-cap of her fairy-tales to come and hide her, is still intent upon the study of his face. What will he say—think? How will he take it?

He takes it with a roar of inextinguishable laughter.

Carry frowns and draws back.

'What are you laughing at?' demands she vehemently.

Amyot struggles with his mirth, which has now grown almost tearful.

'At you,' gurgles he. 'Oh, Carry, if you could only see yourself and how funny you look !'

'I'd rather look funny than like a fool,' retorts Miss Desmond, with pardonable rudeness, considering all things. With this she turns and makes for home.

'Where are you going ? Carry, wait.'

'What for ?' demands she in turn. 'To be insulted again ?'

'Insulted ? Nonsense !' He has run after her, and caught her arm. 'Who's insulting you ? Not I. Besides, I haven't half admired your costume.' He stops short, that old wild mirth possessing him again. 'They are excellently cut,' says he, his voice shaking. 'The *tout ensemble,* indeed, is beyond reproach. You should cock the cap a little bit, Carry, and——' He gives way altogether here. 'Oh, Lor' ! If Popkin could only see you now !' says he.

'Mr. Popkin is quite welcome to see me,' says Carry, with extraordinary dignity—'he or any other man ! I should not be afraid of Mr. Popkin's judgment *He* has *some* common-sense, *some* intellect !'

'Has he ?' says Richie, in the tone of one to whom a new and impossible view of things has been presented.

'Oh, I knew how it would be with you,' declares Carry with bitter denunciation ; 'what you would think, with your silly old notions. That's why I sat down amongst those stupid things'—pointing to the unoffending bracken, which, indeed, looks rather the worse for wear—'when I saw you coming. You are the rudest man I ever met in my life.'

'Oh, I say !'

'Yes, you are ! There is no one on earth so rude as you are. No matter what you thought, you shouldn't have said anything.'

'But I didn't say anything. Now what'—aggrievedly—'did I say ?'

'Enough'—stiffly—'in my opinion.' She flings up her head, and prepares for a fresh departure.

'You're wrong—quite wrong,' cries he. 'Come back, Carry.'

'Why should I ?' She turns to look at him, and there is withering question in her eye. 'To be made a jest of again ? To afford you more amusement ? *You* may regard me as a merry-andrew if you like, but I——'

'I don't. It is not like that I regard you. Rather like a new——' He hesitates as if struggling with his brain.

'Woman'—sarcastically.

'Not a bit of it. What's the name'—impatiently—'of that girl in Shakespeare who goes about in—er—*you* know! You remind me of her.'

Carry pauses. Does he mean it? Certainly there is a change in his tone.

'I told you you were wrong,' goes on Richie eagerly. 'I declare honestly, I never saw you look so nice before.'

'Then why'—only half mollified—'did you laugh?'

'That's it. Can't you see? The fool "who came to scoff remained to pray," or praise, rather. I felt mad with you at first—I confess that—but now that I know all, and have seen you. . . . Look here, Carry, so far as I think, you ought never to dress any other way but that.'

'You mean it? Really?' Carry's face is a picture of delight and content. Her flagrant, open pleasure at his flattery might be amusing, if it were not so very pretty.

'I do indeed. And the little cap suits you, too. And so you are making money by the rabbits?'

'I am really. Of course it is slow work, but——'

'I'll tell you what. I'll come and help you. Two guns will be better than one, and if I tell them *I'm* shooting your rabbits, it will put an end to all gossip.' (One might have thought it would give rise to it.) 'Will you be here to-morrow morning?'

'At six sharp. It's awfully good of you, Richie, and I'll be looking out for you. And—and I don't feel anything like so uncomfortable about wearing these things now.'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

'And if you knew what jubilees
Begets, in sad souls, a friend's glance,
You'd look up where my window is,
As if by chance!'

At six *sharp* Mr. Amyot has been found in the woods of Tudor Hall during the past fortnight. To-day, even at half-past six, the light is a little uncertain, and so he and Carry find their shooting bad. So bad, indeed, that now they have decided on letting the bunnies go free for another twenty-four hours—a decision arrived at very cleverly, as the rabbits, on their first ineffectual shots, have retired into their dens, apparently for ever!

'The season's over, Richie,' says Carry disconsolately, subsiding on a bank beside him.

'Not *yet*. This is an exceptionally dark morning.'

'No, it's over. You mustn't think I'm despondent. I've got more than enough now to make up auntie's bill, but . . . And even if I can't make any more money for her now, Richie, I can in the spring. The light will come back again then.'

'In the spring! Oh, hang it all, that would not be fair sport,' says Richie.

'Not fair?'

'To the rabbits. That's their close season, you know.'

'Oh, I see. I'—very penitently—'quite forgot. The poor little ones, if their mothers were shot, would have to die of starvation.'

'And so would your clients in town, later on.'

'Die! My clients there! *Why?*' says Carry, a little startled.

'Can't you see? It is really murder on a most tremendous scale. I shouldn't go in for it, Carry, if I were you. If the mother rabbits are killed by you, their babies die then, and you will be not only guilty of the deaths of those innocents, but of all the middle classes of England, as there will be no rabbits left to supply their daily needs.'

This extraordinary pleading goes to Carry's heart.

'I shall certainly not shoot rabbits when their little ones

want them,' says she. 'And, any way, Richie, I think it is a cruel sport. Only that auntie might be made happy, I would not shoot them at all. Come, let's forget it; sit down here'—motioning him to a seat beside her—'and let us talk of something pleasant. How are you getting on with Aurora?'

'Do you call that pleasant?' asks Amyot with distinct indignation.

'Why not, Richie? You should not take it like that. *I* am your friend if anyone is, and besides——' The girl's soft, wide, frank smile (a little sad, perhaps) touches him. 'I can feel for you. If *you* don't want to marry Aurora, *I* don't want to marry Mr. Popkin, and yet—I'm going to.'

'To marry him—that scarecrow?'

'Yes, isn't he like that?' says Carry, sighing. 'But what's the good'—mournfully—'of our calling him names? I've called him a *lot* of them myself, but they don't help me a bit. I'm sure I'll have to marry him, Richie, at last. You see, I may be able to save auntie *this* time, but next year—or the year after——'

'It's abominable,' says Richie angrily. 'Good heavens, to have to marry a thing like that! Why, his legs rattle in his trousers, and his chin is nowhere. Don't be a fool, Carry!'

'I know a fool as well as you do,' says Carry dejectedly, 'but, my goodness! what am I to do? Auntie's debt can be arranged this time—it might even be arranged again; but the lease of this place will be up next September, and then——' She stops as if suffocating. 'Then we must turn out, auntie and I, and—— What on earth is going to become of us?'

'Still, if you wait, something might—surely *something* might happen.'

'Wait! I'm not of the Micawber tribe,' says she. '*Wait!* Why, I've waited now for ten long years, and nothing has happened to help us. No one has come forward to do us any good. No one has even gone so far as Mr. Popkin, who has asked me to marry him! After all'—with dismal gratitude—'I suppose I ought to be thankful to him; small mercies are better than none; only—I'm not.'

Richie sits still, his face troubled.

'Ten years! That's nonsense, you know,' says he. 'You couldn't have been waiting for anything when you were nine.'

'*Couldn't* I? Little you know about it! I've always been

thinking of how to get rich. But I'm likely'—with a forlorn shake of her head—'to wait for ever in this forsaken place. Riches are the only good; I'm going to insist on their putting that on all the new copy-books at the school below, but I'm afraid the grammar is queer. Not that I care for money, Richie, really—only, if I had it, I'd love it.'

'Well, I don't see where you are now,' says Amyot, in an aggrieved tone. And, indeed, this very contradictory speech might have puzzled most people.

'I want to help auntie, for one thing—to get out of debt *for ever,* for another. It's quite plain,' says Carry. 'But it will never be, if I don't accept Mr. Popkin's handsome offer to provide for me and auntie for life. . . . I told him I *should* have auntie to live with me—with a view to choking him off, but it had the contrary effect. He seemed quite wild with delight at the idea of supporting auntie.'

'Perhaps he's made a mistake,' says Richie; 'has mixed up one Miss Desmond with the other, and in his heart loves auntie.'

Here they both give way to most irreverent laughter.

'Too good to be true,' says Carry presently, her mirth subsiding before the awful possibilities of the future. 'Well, if I refuse him, I shall still wait for something better that may never come: and wait—and wait until—— After a while auntie says my charms will wane. Never mind the charms'—breaking into irrepressible mirth—'they exist only in auntie's imagination; but—*isn't* she a dear? So quaint, so charming!'

'I gave Miss Desmond credit for more sense,' puts in Richie, interrupting her a little rudely, it must be confessed.

'More sense! Oh, Richie!' She casts a disdainful glance at him. 'She is full of it.'

'Not if she tells you such very *untrue* things.'

'I don't know. It's not so untrue, after all, Richie.' Carry, crossing her long and slender arms over her knees, looks into space. 'In four or five years more I shall be quite an old, *old* thing!'

'Even so,' says Richie—'though it's about the worst lie I've ever heard—you would still be too good for Popkin! So you might as well wait till then.'

'Ah, but *he* mightn't!'

'Rot!'—eloquently, if vulgarly—'I should think he *would*, and only too gladly.'

Carry laughs.

'Why don't you make that bargain with Aurora?' says she. 'Perhaps she would wait, too.'

'I haven't made the first bargain yet,' says Richie gloomily. 'And I declare to you, Carry, when I do, I think the same hour will see me put a cartridge into my good old gun, and fire it into my brain.'

'Oh, Richie!'

'I shall excuse the fact to myself, at all events, by knowing that I must have gone mad!'

'You oughtn't to talk like that,' says she sharply.

'Why not?'

'It's wrong. It's wicked. I should be a great deal angrier with you, Richie, only you know you don't mean it.'

'Do you? I don't,' says he moodily.

'You aren't an idiot, are you?' says Carry angrily. 'Why, look here, if you would rather die than marry her, why die? *Don't* marry her! Even to be a cowboy, though that is awful, would be better than being dead. But at the same time, Richie, she is not so bad as you think. Why, you yourself, only a few weeks ago, said she was a "decent enough sort of a girl."'

'Did I?'

'Yes, of course you did.'

'I never saw anyone more anxious to see me made wretched than you are,' says Richie reproachfully. 'You're worse than the Dowager.'

'I'm not, Richie—I'm not indeed!' exclaims Carry, cut to the heart by this speech. 'And to prove it, Richie, if you really feel that all the money she has, and the restoration of the old place, could not compensate you . . . for—for other things . . . why, go away and *be* a cowboy—though that will make auntie and me very sorry.'

Her nice, kind, earnest eyes are wet.

'You mustn't be sorry,' says Richie. 'Even if I went there —to California—I'd be sure to come back to you after a bit— perhaps with my pile made: who knows?'

Carry shakes her head. She evidently doesn't believe in cowboys.

'Well, I needn't be a cowboy, if it comes to that. I——'

He pauses. 'I—I could enlist, you know, if that would suit you better.'

'Enlist?'

'Yes. It is such a comfort to talk to you, Carry; one can discuss things with you, and I've never had a mother or a sister, or even a cousin. But you are just like a sister . . .' He moves nearer to her, and tucks his arm comfortably round her neck. 'I'm sure, whether I'm a cowboy or a soldier, I don't know what I shall do without you.'

'I'm glad you feel like that,' says Carry, slipping her arm round his waist, 'because it's just how I feel to you. *I've* never had a brother, and you—you just fill the place.'

'It's a splendid thing to have someone that one is really fond of to speak to,' says Richie, sighing, and drawing her nearer to him (there isn't much occasion!).

'And who is fond of one,' supplements she.

'Ah! that's half the battle. And when one knows people ever since one was born——'

'Oh, you're wrong there,' says she, loosening her arm *slightly* round him. 'You were born long before I was.' The woman has asserted itself, even in the boyish Carry.

Amyot laughs.

'Five years,' says he—'*nothing* nowadays. Would you make me out a Methuselah? Well'—going back to his subject—'what would you have me be?'

'Not a cowboy, any way,' says she. 'You spoke of enlisting.'

'Yes. I expect it will come to that.'

'Lucky you! I wish *I* could!'

'Well, so you can—now!' He gives a swift but eloquent glance at her present 'get up.' 'As you *are*, you'd make a first-class young Volunteer; and even in the Regulars there would be no one to touch you in your regiment, I'd lay a bet!'

'I suppose you think you're funny,' says Carry, rising with excessive dignity—a dignity that would have been perfect if only those beastly things had come down a bit lower. But they were born so! '*I* don't! And, any way, I'm going home now.'

'I'll go with you,' says Richie.

'Certainly not!'—stiffly. 'It would put auntie out very much.'

'Nonsense, Carry! As if I am not always with you!'

'It isn't *that*'—frowning—'but in these clothes——'

'She is bound to know that I know, sooner or later.'

'Better later; and, any way, she has not ordered breakfast for you.'

'Nonsense again! Breakfast for two is breakfast for three; and, though you are so dreadfully inhospitable, I know Miss Desmond will give me something to eat. Besides, I'm starving, and it's a long way back to my place.'

'Well, come,' says Carry.

She laughs, and the ice is broken. The ice is always brittle with Carry.

CHAPTER XXXV.

'Oh, tell me less, or tell me more.'

Do you remember,' says he presently, 'something I said to you before the bazaar? We were out fishing, I think, and I asked you what you were going to wear at Cecil's stall. I don't know what you said, but I recollect quite well saying that a rational costume of some sort would suit you down to the ground.'

'Yes, I remember. But you did not mean anything; you couldn't'—going back in her mind to that remote hour—'have meant anything.'

'No—a stray shot only. However, it was a good one.'

'What *did* you mean by it?'

She is a little sore still.

'What I mean now—that it is awfully becoming to you.'

Carry laughs in spite of herself. Compliments to her are always a superior kind of joke—nothing more.

'I'll have to leave it off very soon,' says she; 'there is no light in the early mornings now. To-day, only that you were there, I should have gone home at onee.'

'Why not try the evenings? Best time of all for rabbits.'

'I couldn't,' says she, shrinking a little. 'People might be about then; and, besides, there is very little light in the evenings, either.'

'Well, that's true.'

'Anyhow, I have made the ten pounds,' says she, with

sudden touch of eager delight, 'and auntie is released from her present fears, whatever the future may bring.'

They have come in view of the house by this time, and on the doorstep a small and dainty figure may be seen standing, her hand to her brow, scanning the landscape o'er.

'That's auntie! My goodness! why has she got up at this hour?' says Carry, stopping short. 'She *hates* to see me in these clothes, and to see me with *you*, Richie—that would mean perdition! *You* must go that way'—pointing to the yard—'*I* this way. Like Philip of Macedon and somebody else, we shall probably "meet anon."'

She runs quickly through the laurels on her left, that effectually hide her from the anxious figure on the hall door-steps, and, making a little turn, afterwards reaches the library windows, and, scrambling through one of them, glides up the old staircase, going softly, lest a rustle should betray her, and so reaches her room in safety.

A rustle, indeed, might have betrayed her! She knows this as, with a step as swift and nimble as a cat, and a hysterical desire for laughter, she goes upstairs and disappears round its ancient curves almost before a looker-on could imagine she had been there.

Certainly auntie had been on the look-out for her. Auntie has been *uncertain* about her morning sleeps ever since she first found Carry had gone in for shooting. But to-day of all days, what on earth had waked her? Very awkward, too, because perhaps, if she (Carry) had been seen with Richie, auntie might have blamed Richie in a way, and said little unkind things to him—that is, if auntie *could* be unkind to anyone.

In her room now, Carry tears off the objectionable garments, dives into the orthodox respectable ones, and, after a glance at herself in the cracked old glass, runs downstairs again.

The hall door is wide open; the light is rushing into the old hall, and a breeze with it. The breeze is a little cold, a little raw—a forerunner of the wrath to come, when winter will be full upon us.

Yet, in spite of this chill, this sudden rising of the wind, old Miss Desmond, who has the courage of her race, stands motionless, looking always down to that point where the rabbit-warren lies.

Suddenly two small but capable hands are laid upon her shoulders.

'Auntie!'

Miss Desmond turns with a little cry.

'Oh, my darling girl, you have come home at last! Oh, Carry, I can't bear this shooting business! *Where* have you been?'

'Why out,' says Carry.

'Rabbiting?'

'I am afraid I can't say that, I shot so few—fewer'—brightening—'than I shot yesterday. *Ten* brace, then! How's that for a silly young maid?'

'Oh, I think maids should not shoot at all,' says Miss Desmond reproachfully.

'Then other maids could not live,' says Carry. 'But, auntie darling, what are you doing here at this hour? Why aren't you in your cosy bed, eh?'

'Why aren't *you?*' asks Miss Desmond sadly. 'Carry'—the old lady's tone grows tragical—'don't try to deceive me. You *can't* like murdering those poor little creatures down there; yet you are doing it, to save me from dishonour. Oh, my darling, I know all! Do you think I can sleep when I know you are out there, destroying your youth and your beauty in a desire to help me? Oh, no, Carry! Last night I went to sleep, but my sleep was troubled, and all at once I felt you were not in the house, and——'

'You must not have any more such feelings,' says Carry, drawing her into the dining-room—'no, not another! For one thing, the season is over for me, because I can't shoot in the dark; and, besides, I've made the ten pounds you and I want; and for the rest, I find I'm not a born murderess—at least, not until I *must* be one again!'

She pauses. Her voice has broken.

'Carry, Carry!' says her aunt, catching her in her arms.

'Oh, it's done—it's done now!' says Carry, bursting into a passion of tears. 'But I can't kill them again. No'—vehemently—'*never*. Their eyes, their poor little kicking legs——' She pulls herself together by a gigantic effort. 'You're shivering, auntie—so am I. These sunny mornings are a fraud; and, besides—I met Richie just now coming home, you know'—with a sob—'and he said he hoped you would give him some breakfast.'

'Richie!'

'Yes—and he told me he was awfully hungry. What is there?'

'Eggs,' says Miss Desmond tragically.

'That will do'—thoughtfully—'with a little bacon. And I think I'll light a fire in the dining-room, auntie. I—I think he is out there somewhere, and if he feels as like a frog as I do, he will be glad to see a fire somewhere.'

She looks out of the window.

. 'Ah! there he is——'

'Is he?'

Old Miss Desmond looks out, too. And there he is, beyond doubt. She throws up the window.

'Come in, Richie. Come in, my dear. Why do you stay there?'

'I'm coming,' cries Richie heartily; and in another moment he is within the hospitable if barren house. And, indeed, it is Richie in the long-run who lights the fire, and helps Carry to cook the admirable dish of ham and eggs that presently comes upstairs.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

'Fragile beginnings of a mighty end!'

So Carry made the ten pounds that sets poor old Miss Desmond's heart at rest—for a time; and so the world goes by Hillesden, so swiftly, so monotonously, that it is with a rush of wonder that one wakes to know that winter is over, and 'spring has come up this way' once more.

Only the bare beginnings of that loveliest of all seasons—a mere baby of a thing, very delicate, but full of sweet life, for all that, and with a great promise in it of better things to come.

Already in hedgelands, and such wild enchanting ways as hide the violet and the 'rath primrose,' tokens can be met with, every day, of their coming; although as yet February has only dawned, and fires are lit in all the rooms, and one goes about shivering, wrapped up in silks and furs. But time, though it has carried us thus far, has failed to show

the right or the wrong of Miss Royce's going. It has, indeed, told nothing at all about her.

This chilly February has brought Sidney Fenton to The Towers again straight from Dublin, where he has been quartered for the past five months. It has brought Mr. Browne there also, why he hardly knows himself, as his invitations for that month if put together would make him a complete—if scarcely decent—suit of clothes; and, really, to go to the same house twice in a year argues the coming of old age! Still, a distinct friendship for Anthony Verschoyle, that almost reaches the word affection, has swayed his decision. He is very desirous of Anthony's happiness, and two or three things during his late visit showed him where that happiness lay. But there seemed to him to be a little hitch, a little uncertainty about it, and—well, he told himself it was curiosity alone made him accept Anthony's second invitation to The Towers.

So the spring has brought him, too, to Hillesden; and more than that! It has brought Jinnie to a state of overflowing energy very difficult to combat. Even Miss Royce's successor, an excellent person of uncertain—or, rather, very certain—age, with admirable testimonials, and a wart on her nose, is unable to control her. Jinnie, who has never ceased to regret Miss Royce—whose supervision, indeed, had been ever of the lightest, and who had let her go her own way, in the kindest fashion, so long as it did not interfere with hers—naturally detests the 'new woman,' and gives her, it must be confessed, an uncommonly bad time.

Besides the guests I have named for The Towers, there are a good many others expected there. Amongst them, Sir Reginald Baring, the distinguished painter, and Lady Audrey Osborne, a pale, haughty old maid, of even *more* certain age than Jinnie's governess, and a cousin of Verschoyle's; she was in the act of being painted by Sir Reginald in town, and anxious that nothing should prevent the world—*her* world—from seeing her angular attractions in Burlington House next season, had written to Anthony to give her house-room whilst Baring was with him.

Who has the pluck to refuse an unmarried woman anything? I have heard of married women being rather unhandsomely treated; but, after all, that discovery carried its excuse with it—there was a man to her back. But the

spinster! Anthony, who did not want to entertain Lady Audrey, although she was his cousin, wrote her a most cheerful answer, giving her to understand he would be charmed to receive her, and having posted the letter felt like a hypocrite for three hours.

Having told this deliberate lie, and on paper, too, and knowing that Sir Reginald is coming, Sir Anthony goes down to his mother's; where, being her day, a considerable number of people have assembled, Mrs. Berkeley and the Langley-Binkses amongst others.

'Baring is really coming this time,' he tells his mother; 'you know he disappointed me before, the time of the bazaar, on account of influenza, but he can be depended upon now. Good heavens!'—his voice breaks off and he frowns slightly —'how far off that bazaar seems!' He stops, frowning still, but in a thoughtful way.

Mrs. Verschoyle, who is near Lady Maria, after a hurried glance at him, tells herself there is pain in his thoughts.

'When are you coming to spend a "long and happy day with me in the country"'—quoting idly—'to meet him, mother? He is an old friend of yours.'

'And a delightful one,' says Lady Maria, 'though I'm afraid I'm too old to amuse him now, whatever I might have been twenty years ago. Shall we say from Saturday to Monday, then?'

'From Saturday to Monday week, rather! Baring has come to study children in their first stage, and as he is himself a little overdone, he had better do it here with the fresh air and that.'

'Decidedly better. Have you provided a child?'

Jinnie, who has been sitting on her grandmother's knee, here steps off it.

'*I'm* a child,' says she, with enormous dignity, and in her sharpest treble; 'I'd like to be painted—but not too *much!* Not like Mrs. Berk——'

Here several people fall upon her bodily, and choke off the awful termination of her sentence. *Who* is painted too much? All refrain from giving even an *eye* answer to the question—that is, as much as possible! Here and there, it seems, it isn't possible. The flesh is weak!

'Dicky Browne will be with us, too,' says Verschoyle, breaking the dreadful pause; 'also Anstruther, and others. You

must come, mother. How can we get on without you ?' He turns suddenly to Cecil—'We can't get on without you, either ; you will promise to make up our house party—I can depend upon you ?'

'You can indeed,' says Cecil, laughing. 'I know your house parties of old.' With the sweetest smile she turns to him : 'I think I should have gone to you, even if you had not asked me.'

Anthony gives her a strange, sad, questioning glance for answer, then turns to his mother.

'Saturday next, then ? And with an indefinite end to your visit ?'

Lady Maria laughs and shakes her head at him.

Yes ; she will go to him, but only for the time specified. And she will depend upon him to bring all his guests down to dine with her on Wednesday. She would like to do something for his guests, even in a *little* way, and especially for Sir Reginald. As for Lady Audrey—well, she seemed a kind creature, if a little——

Lady Maria, as usual, has her own way, and to-night there is a dinner at the Dower-house, given specially, as she said, for Sir Reginald Baring. Jinnie, I regret to say, has been given a promise that she shall come down to dessert. This was at Lady Maria's urgent request, a request given in to only too readily by Jinnie's mother—who had been interviewed by Jinnie five minutes before—and who is as bad as the child's grandmother in the way of denying her dead husband's child nothing. Jinnie of late has been permitted to come down to dessert every night—'*small* nights,' she calls them—but to come down to a 'big night !' this fills Jinnie's soul with glee.

Besides, she will meet Sir Reginald, with whom, contrary to all expectations, she has become quite a boon companion.

He has been painting, during the past days, a little naked baby of two years, belonging to one of Anthony's tenants ; and Jinnie, a charmed spectator, has been permitted to sit quietly in a corner during the proceedings. She has made herself even useful—Jinnie *useful !*—by keeping the baby in humour !

Lady Maria had been not only enchanted, but almost insufferably proud, at Jinnie's success in this art ! She had kept the baby good all day, when even its own *mother* had failed.

'Oh, that child is full of promise,' said Lady Maria to Sir

Reginald, when he told her of Jinnie's prowess in the painting field of his studio. And indeed she is!

* * * * *

No wonder, then, that Jinnie is looking forward to this 'dessert' with Sir Reginald, who has praised her high and low since his arrival.

It is not time for her to come down yet, however, and in the meantime conversation is flowing freely.

Mrs. Berkeley, as usual, is talking at the top of her extraordinary falsetto. She is sitting on Mr. Browne's right, but on her left is an elderly gentleman of huge dimensions generally, and specially in that part that Mr. Browne very rudely alludes to as his 'tummy.' Her Infantry boy having deserted her for younger and fairer charms, she has now dedicated herself to the more mature, the less beautiful, but decidedly the richer, Mr. Shine. He is an Anglo-Indian, fifty or thereabouts, and fabulously rich, say some people.

'Dreadful dull, the country.' She is talking to Mr. Browne *for* Mr. Shine (a little trick some people have), with her best Society air—the air that verges on boredom. 'Specially in this part down har.' (She means 'here.') 'They really don't seem to know what day of the week it is, or the hour! Never saw people so dead-alive. Give something to shake 'em up a bit.'

'How would you begin, for example?' asks Mr. Browne anxiously. His tone suggests the idea that he is athirst for knowledge. The portly Mr. Shine, who is on her other hand, has been apparently struck dumb by her powers of conversation, mingled with immense admiration of her personal attractions. So Dicky perforce comes to the rescue. Mr. Shine has fixed his oyster eyes on her, and is listening eagerly, a little appreciative smile on his lips. He is, in fact, like Mr. Carroll's sun—'*Shining* with all his might.' (The pun is Mr. Browne's; pray forgive it.)

'Oh! . . Ah! . . *Well,*' says Mrs. Berkeley, whose witty impromptu in answer to this question has not yet been evolved, 'least said, soonest mended, you know, and to wake up these aborigines—*you* understand, of course'—sweetly—'that I am alluding to no one here to-night—would take a bigger mind than mine.'

'*Could* there be a bigger?' says Mr. Browne, throwing a world of admiration into his treacherous eye; 'still, I think I

know someone who . . . and as like turns to like, you know, you had better let me introduce you to' (this in a low tone)——

'Not a woman, I *hope,*' says Mrs. Berkeley, checking him.

'Not much!' Mr. Browne's face is dark with indignation. 'Fancy my introducing a woman to anyone! Horrid lot, aren't they?'

'Go away! you're a bad boy!' says Mrs. Berkeley, with the affectionate smile she reserves for men alone: whereon Dicky, seeing he cannot well obey her at this moment, the dinner being only half through, and taking his dismissal at its worth, goes on valiantly, if plaintively.

'I'll go, all too soon,' says he. 'But in spite of your cruelty——'

'Mine? Am I ever cruel? And who is it you wish to make known to me?'

'Why,' glancing across her expressively, 'your next-door neighbour. The poor man has been casting murderous glances at me for the past five minutes. I'm young to die. Let me live yet a little while.'

'Stupid!' says Mrs. Berkeley, shrugging her meagre shoulders. 'He'—softly, so that the next-door neighbour may not hear—'was made known to me an hour ago.'

'An hour ago?' questions Dicky, as if hardly believing his ears. He had, however, heard the introduction.

'Yes, of course.'

'She is a woman of genius. She knew that two great minds once met . . . It will be an everlasting grief to me, but I resign you! May he make you even *half* as happy as *I* should have done.'

'Hypocrite!' says Mrs. Berkeley, with her most juvenile smile.

'Oh, it's all very well to go on like that now,' says Dicky reproachfully. 'Mr. Shine,'—leaning a little forward and catching the Anglo-Indian's eyes—'what are your views on bimetallism, and the decrease of the rupee? Mrs. Berkeley'—'Dicky!' furiously in an undertone from Mrs. Berkeley—'is quite an authority on *both* subjects.'

'My dear Mrs. Berkeley, is this so?' says Mr. Shine, waking up brilliantly. 'Now look here, as I see it' . . . and so on.

'If he'll only marry her and take her away to far Hindustan, what a happy family the Hillesden folk may still be,' says Mr. Browne, to himself, as he turns aside to make himself agreeable to the prettiest girl at the table. Hitherto Mrs. Berkeley has frustrated his desires in this direction, so he has taken safe and quick means to get rid of her.

And, indeed, if he only knew it, he has done the lively widow a good turn. Mrs. Berkeley, for once in her life, has 'struck ile'—as Mr. Gilead P. Beck would say. The Anglo-Indian, being permitted to have all the talk to himself—Mrs. Berkeley having nothing to say on the rupee, and being hopelessly ignorant on the subject of bimetallism—gets up from dinner later on, believing himself the most eloquent, and her the most intelligent creature in the world.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

'The brave, 'tis true, do never shun the light ;
Just are their thoughts and open are their tempers,
Freely without disguise they love or hate ;
Still are they found in the fair face of the day,
And Heaven and men are judges of their actions.'

Conversation at the other end of the table is going briskly—perhaps a little too briskly.

Jinnie has just arrived in a very simple frock of white muslin, and a sash of innocent azure, and with, too, a brain terribly wide awake considering the hour. So far, however, beyond a distinct refusal to sit next Lady Audrey, and an even *more* distinct determination to sit in Sir Reginald's pocket, no open breach of the peace has occurred. Even when Lady Audrey addresses her as 'my good child' (which really has *no* meaning), Jinnie creates no public disturbance, and nobly refrains from assault and battery, though evidently it goes hard with her.

'I *do* hope, dear Sir Reginald, you are not over-exerting yourself whilst down here,' says Lady Audrey presently. She gives him one of her maiden smiles. 'People like you, so hard-worked, should do *nothing* when in the country. It is only we—useless butterflies of the world—who should do anything there ; for you it should mean perfect repose.'

'*Dear* little Butterfly,' whispers Dicky Browne to his pretty girl, who gives him an answering glance, but cleverly refrains from a smile. Lady Audrey's eye is on her. The Butterfly disapproves of pretty girls. Sir Reginald has made it apparent, since his coming, that he admires *this* one.

'Even *I* am quite ashamed of taking up some of your time that should be given to rest alone,' she simpers. 'Still, I am an excellent sitter, am I not? Like a bit of marble!'

'It is quite a pleasure, I assure you,' murmurs Sir Reginald.

'Oh, that is *too* kind!'—with a languishing air. 'But I hear that this morning you were painting someone in the studio. *Is* that wise, when you have come down here expressly for your health?'

'He is incorrigible,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, laughing; 'we can't restrain him. He has begun a study that promises to be really wonderful.'

'Yes?'—eagerly. 'Of whom?'

Lady Audrey bends towards her. For the first time it occurs to Mrs. Verschoyle that Lady Audrey has designs on the unfortunate Sir Reginald.

'Ah!'—mischievously—'you should not ask me so *publicly*. The fact is'—lowering her voice—'it was a little woman, charming and young—oh, yes! very young.'

Lady Audrey stiffens.

'Nothing from the nude, I hope,' says she in a sepulchral tone. Elderly unmarried ladies are often a little indecent.

'Well, I'm afraid——'

Pause.

'Sir Reginald, Lady Audrey is anxious to know if your study of this morning was—draped.'

'I'm afraid not,' says the genial painter. He has caught the twinkle in Mrs. Verschoyle's eye.

'I had no idea,' says Lady Audrey, almost closing her spinster lids, 'that Anthony would permit such—such extraordinary proceedings (to say the *least* of them) in his house.'

'But she was so charming,' says Sir Reginald. 'Every limb so rounded—every smile so sweet. It was a delight to paint her, and——'

'No more, *please!*' says Lady Audrey, with an indignant sniff.

'And she was only two years old,' continues Sir Reginald, finishing his sentence ruthlessly. 'Such a dear little naked child. By-the-by'—suavely—'can you give me a sitting at twelve to-morrow? A little early, but——'

'A most reasonable hour,' says Lady Audrey.

Her tone is still a little starchy—the word 'naked' has offended her—but everyone feels the episode is at an end. Everyone, however, is wrong.

'Are you going to paint *her?*' asks Jinnie in a tone she firmly believes to be a whisper, but which reverberates through the room. As though her voice is not enough, she makes vigorous use of the valuable first finger, directing it at Lady Audrey.

'I hope so,' says Sir Reginald smoothly. 'But people as a rule, you know, Jinnie, do not point, or make personal observations out loud. And, besides——'

He had done his best, poor man; but it would take a Napoleon to frown down Jinnie.

'What! Her, and not *me?* That ol——'

A severe pinch from Mr. Browne, who has got up under pretence of getting some grapes, delivered at the critical moment, put an end luckily to the unfinished word.

Providentially, too, Lady Audrey has been carried away by Mrs. Verschoyle into a dissertation on the requirements of the poor, and thus a terrible catastrophe has been averted.

Sir Reginald, however, is greatly annoyed; and Jinnie, after another fresh sally, finding him for the first time cold to her witticisms, turns her dark, curious eyes full upon him. There is a little fear in these usually defiant orbs.

'What have I done?' demands she, in a wonderfully subdued tone for the dauntless Jinnie. There is even a suspicion of tears in it. She is devoted to Baring, and this queer coldness of his, that she does not at all understand, reduces her to the last extremity.

'You have been rude,' says Baring in a low tone.

'Well, I don't care'—rebelliously. 'You've been cross to me. You are looking *horrid* at me. And you are unkind too'—as if all the foregoing were nothing to this. 'You are the unkindest pig I ever met. You are painting that nasty little baby of Mrs. Jones's, without a bit of clothes on her—not so much'—here Jinnie grows choked with sobs that threaten to be loud and deep—'not so much as her shimmy! And you've

never painted *me* like that.' Sensation at table. 'Though I don't *care !*'—passionately. 'I'd *hate* to be painted like that. I want my pinky frock on me, an' my sash. I——' Miss Verschoyle rises, and, standing well back, regards Sir Reginald with a crushing air. 'I'll *never* love you again! You're a beast, you are! You're painting that nasty wobbly baby, an' now *her*.'

Again the terrible forefinger defines the situation.

'Yes, my dear,' says Lady Audrey, addressing the irate Jinnie with what she honestly believes to be a fascinating, but what in reality is a most forbidding smile. 'Sir Reginald has most kindly consented '—Jinnie begins to think of the local concerts—' to make my poor face a masterpiece. You surely don't object to that, little girl!'

'Was he painting you this morning?' asks Jinnie, her queer eyes searching Lady Audrey's.

'Certainly. We must say "yes" to that, Sir Reginald, eh? This very morning'—archly.

'In the studio?'

Lady Audrey nods.

'In the studio, I think, Sir Reginald?'—with an engaging smile.

'The same place where he painted Mrs. Jones's baby?'

'The very same'—with quite a touch of hilarity.

'*Had you your clothes on?*'

Frightful silence!

Lady Audrey has sunk back upon her chair with evidently a threatening of hysterics. Mrs. Berkeley is choking behind her fan, and Mr. Browne, who ought to have known better, is, I regret to say, apparently in the last stage of apoplexy. Fans up to this have not been permitted to men, and thus handicapped, Mr. Browne has perforce to decline behind his napkin.

Lady Maria, with a glance at Mrs. Berkeley, rises promptly. It is a *little* too soon, but the situation must be saved—and *such* a situation!

The women all rustle away to the drawing-room, and Jinnie, thank Heaven! goes to bed.

* * * * *

'You will come over to-morrow and take luncheon with me?' says Lady Maria to Cecil, just at her departure.

'Thank you, yes,' returns Cecil brightly.

Involuntarily her glance goes towards the corner of the hall where Anthony and Fenton are standing. Anthony interrupts her glance.

'Won't you ask us, too, mother?'

'My dear, of *course*. You and Sidney and Dicky.' She laughs her pleasant old laugh. 'The more the merrier. Men are scarce always in these small places, and always welcome.'

'Shall I be welcome?'

Fenton has crossed the hall to Cecil's side. He throws a great deal of meaning into his question.

'You?' says she, smiling; and then, trying to control the little touch of feeling that is agitating her: 'Yes. Do come!'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

'After all, the most natural beauty in the world is honesty and moral truth, for all beauty is truth.'

Out here on the terrace, so balmy is the air that one can scarcely believe summer has not arrived once more in mad haste. But 'February, fair maid,' only is with us—a maid still young, as maids should be, and very frivolous! The air is almost warm, and from the parterres beneath the breath of the coming flowers is ascending delicately, nervously. Not the breath of such unfriendly blossoms as 'The snowdrop cold, that trembles not to kisses of the bee!' but violets and sweet alyssum, and a few early anemones, dainty if gaudy; whilst all round and everywhere are the splendid daffodils, those fair and haughty damsels 'that take the winds of March with beauty.'

Cecil, leaning over the iron railings of the terrace, and noting the beauty of the glorious day—the thrill in all things growing—is conscious of a strange sense of delight—of joy. She feels uplifted and happy—too happy for mental analysis of her mood. It would have troubled her to ask her whether the charm of the day, or only of the minute, has thus exhilarated her; making her feel that wings are superfluous things to certain mortals, and that she at any moment, without accessories of any kind, could soar 'twixt earth and heaven—with heaven in reach, if she so wills it.

She glances towards her heaven.

'You thought I would not come back,' says Fenton in answer to that glance, and *à propos* of something just said by her. 'Did you really believe I could keep away?'

His tone is low and very soft—and distinctly reproachful. To be reproached by her lover always touches a woman: and Cecil specially would be open to sentiment of this kind, her nature being generous in the extreme. All through luncheon, Fenton, who had returned to Hillesden for this special purpose, had paid assiduous, if very careful, courtship to her; so careful, indeed, that Anthony alone of all men there had noticed it; and with the knowledge, as it came to him, came not grief only, but despair.

'I don't know that I thought at all,' says she, slow but uncontrollable tears gathering in her eyes.

'Does that mean, Cecil, that you don't care?'

'I don't think you ought to say that.'

She has recovered herself again, and, glancing at her, he, whose judgment has never been at fault before, is uncertain now as to whether she loves him sufficiently to throw in her comfortable lot with his impecunious one; a doubt, but a slight one.

'Perhaps not.'

He leans over the railings and looks towards where the last gleams of the sun are now clinging to the hills, as though beseeching them to keep dread night away.

'There are many things I say that no one cares for,' murmurs he sadly. He does the sadness perfectly. 'But you! I *did* believe in you.'

'You may'—softly—'believe still.'

She draws her breath quickly as she says this, and now that it *is* said, she makes a movement as if to go, but her hand is lying on the railings, and Fenton, with a quick gesture, lays his own upon it. Thus capturing it, he waits—holding it closely—and expecting every moment an indignant removal of the slender fingers within his, but, after a first gentle repulse, the fingers lie calmly in his own.

So, then, the victory is his. Now to propose, and then . . . Yes, he will speak. Her hand is still in his. Yet . . . Something holds him back, checks him. To the day of his death he never knows what it is, but that he *does* hold back is true. He hesitates, and that instant's hesitation changes the current of more lives than one.

He is still holding her hand, but now she softly removes it —not sharply, not distrustfully, but with a gentle determination. As she does it she smiles at him. There is a great friendliness in her glance, with a certain shyness that makes her beautiful face even more beautiful; but this the man beside her fails to see.

The withdrawal of her hand, however, warms him to his work. He must secure her now or never—now, before she hears anything. *That other* is uncertain! From day to day troubles may be expected from her. But with Cecil once secured—why, Cecil's money may keep 'that other' silent.

He turns to Cecil, the very words of his proposal on his lips, when she stays him. There is a pretty light in her lovely eyes, and a sweet pity on her lips.

'Sidney.' That clasp of his hand on hers has made him one with her, she believes in him so truly. 'Sidney, do you remember last summer?' She is feeling very confidential with him now, and very happy. Oh! he would never have taken her hand like that and held it if he didn't love her! 'How beautiful it was, and yet——' Her face grows a little sad. Then, 'I often think of it—of *her*.' The last two words are breathed so low, he does not hear them.

'And I too,' returns Fenton tenderly, thinking she is alluding to his visit at that time to The Towers.

'I am sure of it. You always seemed to me,' glancing at him straightly, 'so good at heart. That,' a little shyly again, 'is why I have made such a friend of you. Do you know I, too, Sidney, never cease to think of . . . that poor little girl.'

Fenton turns aside, and, looking over the railings, throws a pebble into the midst of a blooming bunch of 'butter and eggs.'

'I wonder what became of her?' continues Cecil, laying her own arms upon the railing.

'I wonder!' says he.

He had been on the point of proposing to her, as has been said. Any thought that way lies dead and buried now—for the present.

'You have heard nothing?' says Cecil sadly. 'She liked you, I think—at least, I often fancied she did.'

'She has not written to you, then, or told you anything?'

He laughs as he asks this—a laugh very imperfect. 'She has told me nothing.'

'What a sad, silent little creature! I often hope, Sidney, I may meet her somewhere and help her.'

'A delusive hope.'

His face is still turned away, but his voice is as natural as ever.

'Oh no; one life drops into another very often. I am quite sure I shall see Miss Royce again. Not here, of course, but——'

'"In that station of life into which it has pleased—the *devil*—to call her,"' quotes Fenton, looking at Cecil with eyes as clear as day, and a light laugh. Who the devil was that had pleased to call Miss Royce into her present state of life, he refrains from saying.

'Cecil, come in and have some tea,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, coming suddenly to the window. And Cecil, with a little sigh, turns and goes indoors, Fenton at her elbow.

They are not the only fresh entries. Cecil has barely had time to take her cup in her hands when Jinnie rushes tumultuously into the room.

'Jinnie, darling, what dreadful manners!' says Jinnie's mother. She has said it so often that one wonders why she is not ashamed of saying it again. She opens her arms, however, and the child springs into them.

'I've seen Miss Royce!' cries she.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

> 'And thou wert aye a masker bold:
> What strange disguise hast now put on?'

'Miss Royce!' says Lady Maria, holding out her pretty hands apprehensively. 'Impossible, darling!'

'Yes, I did,' a little indignantly; 'down by the river.'

'Miss Royce!' says Verschoyle. He turns to his sister-in-law. *Could* she have come back?

Fenton, who had been standing very close to one of the windows, now turns leisurely and gazes out of it, his back to the room.

'No, no; impossible—as your mother says.'

'It is *not*,' says Jinnie hotly. 'I saw her quite plain! She had a new frock on her, and her face was white. An' I called to her. I screamed out my *biggest*' (this is saying a good deal, as all her listeners allow), 'but she didn't hear me. She ran away, back by the bank and into the wood.'

'And you?' asks her mother.

'I wanted to run after her, but Miss Sterling wouldn't let me. I *hate* Miss Sterling—she's a pig!'

'Jinnie, my *dear!*'

'Well'—cheerfully—'she *is*, anyway. I wish she would go away. An' I wish Miss Royce was coming back again. Maybe'—hopefully—'she is.'

'Go and take off your things, darling,' says her mother, who at heart is a little disturbed. Why on earth should that wayward girl have come back here again? Is she in want? Oh, surely not. Poor girl! Had they been too harsh to her?

'I will in a minute,' says Jinnie, 'but I haven't said "how-d'ye-do" yet.'

Anything to make a delay. Jinnie, who as a rule has to be bribed to be polite, now goes round the room, making the most courteous greetings to everyone, except to Fenton. Coming to him she pauses, and having made a careful survey of his features, puts both her thin little hands behind her back.

'Why do you look so cross?' asks she.

'*Cross!*' Fenton recovers himself instantly. 'And to *you*, Jinnie? Colney Hatch will get you yet if you don't be more careful.'

'Well, you *were*,' says Jinnie, a little puzzled by his change of countenance. 'What were you thinking of?'

'Of the dreadful fact that I must leave *you* to-morrow.'

He laughs, and catching her by her tiny elbows, lifts her high into the air. It is quite true that he is going. Verschoyle and all of them are aware of it. He has some leave still remaining to him, but he has arranged to spend it elsewhere. He has been, however, a little vague about his movements. Anthony was aware that he was in difficulties of some sort—money difficulties principally, and there was a suggestion of his sending in his papers. Verschoyle had offered to help him, but Fenton had laughed it off. Sufficient unto the day

was the evil thereof; and he might be able to hang on still for a bit—and if not——

He was always vague.

'You'll come soon again?' says Jinnie, who is very fond of him. Cecil, who is near her, draws her on her knee.

'Almost immediately!' returns he gaily.

He gives a swift glance at Miss Fairfax as he says this. She is indeed his last card, and, in spite of his present difficulties, when he came here he determined to play it—with small hope of success, however, until this evening, and even now he is not *quite* sure. Nevertheless, with ruin hanging over him, he is still light-hearted and débonnaire.

'By-the-by, Anthony, I think I ought to say good-bye to the Langley-Binkses and a few others this afternoon. They've been very civil to me. It would be only decent, eh?'

'I am sure they would appreciate it,' says Anthony with a smile. 'If you go through the upper meadow you will reach the Langley-Binkses' place in half the time.'

There is extreme cordiality in his air. It is impossible to restrain the longing to get Fenton away from Cecil as quickly as possible.

'Your charm increases with your years,' says Mrs. Verschoyle as he bids her good-bye. She smiles, but her tone is very cold. That old strange distrust of him is alive again. Why is he in such hot haste to go? And to say good-bye to the Langley-Binkses, of all people, who as a rule have been nothing to him, save butts for his idle sarcasms. And he, of all people, to put himself out to please—to propitiate a living soul! 'Such courtesy as yours is delightful nowadays,' says she.

'You say too much,' returns he, pressing her hand affectionately—he is quite equal to most occasions—'but if I have *your* appreciation——'

He says good-bye to Lady Maria and to the others, and finally to Cecil.

Miss Fairfax is standing now a little drawn back from the rest, and partially hidden by a curtain; but 'lovers' eyes are sharp to see,' and Verschoyle, with a sense of maddening misery, is certain of the fact that Cecil's hand lies clasped in Fenton's for quite half a minute—that a light has grown within her eyes that never shone for him—and that, as

finally Fenton leaves her, the girl's eyes follow him to the door.

Sweet and honest eyes, it is well they can follow him no farther.

* * * * *

Fenton's feet do not go towards the old meadow that will lead so quickly to the home of the Langley-Binkses ; on the contrary, they go quite in the opposite direction.

He, indeed, 'gathers up his loins,' as the Scriptures say, and runs swiftly, by hidden ways, to that old trysting-place of his and Maden's—the ash-grove.

Knowledge of the other sex has brought him to this spot. Women—those sentimental fools—are sure, like murderers, to come back to the scene of their . . . folly.

But he does not find Maden here. For all that—after glancing round to assure himself, not that she, but that no troublesome third is present—he goes to a little chestnut-tree now half bursting into leaf, and, stooping, lifts a plain white stone beneath it.

It had often before been a silent post-office for Maden and for him. Now again it fulfils its duty. A little note lies beneath it :

'I am here. I have followed you. I know your intention. But as long as life is in me, it shall never be fulfilled. I must, I *will* see you. Meet me to-night at Ingham.'

Fenton's frown is a little ugly as he reads this. What a nuisance it all is ! But, by Jove, what a spirit she has ! Through his depression and rage a sort of sullen admiration for her stirs him.

It does not stay him from his determination, however. This thing *must* be put a stop to, now, at once, and for ever ! If she insists on seeing him to-night at Ingham—so be it. It would no doubt be dangerous *not* to see her. But when he does, he will declare to her fully his intention of marrying Cecil Fairfax—if fate so far helps as to make that desirable heiress accept him.

Of course she will *not !* It would be just his luck all over, to be refused by her ; and, indeed, so uncertain is his belief in Cecil's love for him—an uncertainty heightened by the fact that he has no smallest affection for her, and is not in

touch with her on any point, and does not in the least understand her—that he decides on writing to her from The Towers before his departure, and proposing to her, giving—very recklessly—his address at Ingham. If she accepts him, he will be able to explain away any unpleasant gossip later on, should it arise, about Maden's having been there, too, at that particular time—Maden he had always felt could be nasty—but, and he laughs again involuntarily, Cecil will refuse him. Well, he shall so word his letter that, if it is to be a refusal, she need not write ; if an acceptance . . . what the deuce of a bore life is likely to be !

In the meantime . . . Maden.

Well, he must buy her off. His thoughts grow puzzled here. Has he the money, in his now somewhat impecunious condition, to buy anyone off? And, more, had he the world's wealth, could he buy *her* off? She—he pales a little . . . remembering . . . Is she one to count and balance money against love ? He feels himself all at once between the devil and the deep sea. *How* on earth is he to get out of this embroglio ?

Any way, he will clench the matter to-night. To-night ! no later. He will write his letter of proposal to Cecil, the answer to be sent to Ingham, and there, with Maden present, will fight the battle out to the bitter end. The last penny he has shall be Maden's if she consents to part without a row ; and even after the parting——

He stops here. *After* the parting will come his marriage with Cecil, and any money he *then* will have . . . no, it does not bear looking into.

Troubled as he is, he still remembers to pay that visit to the Langley-Binkses, who are immensely delighted with it, and afterwards goes back to The Towers, with barely two hours left to pack his clothes, to make necessary explanations to Anthony, and catch the six train to Ingham.

CHAPTER XL.

'And now the heaven is dark, and bright, and loud
With wind, and starry drift and moon and cloud,
And night's cry rings in straining sheet and shroud :
What help is ours if hope like yours be none ?'

'After all, Anthony, I find I must leave here this evening. Horrid grind, but can't be helped. A telegram from a lawyer-fellow of mine.'

This is a distinct lie, but even the best of us lie sometimes —distinctly!

'My dear fellow, I'm so sorry.' Anthony tries to throw a touch of real regret into his tone, and on the whole gets through his first bit of hypocrisy very successfully. 'Where are you going? Town?'

'No, Ingham. He has got a case there, and thought it better, as I was so near, to see me without delay. I shall stay there till to-morrow morning — then run up to town. After that'—he laughs suddenly—'probably the Deluge.'

'Money difficulties?' says Anthony with sympathy. Now that his cousin is going away from—*her*, he feels not only cordial towards him, but positively grateful. 'If I can do anything, Sid——'

'No, no. I don't mind confessing'—gaily—'that I'm stone broke; but I've an arrow in my quiver still, and, if it hits home, I swear I'll settle down to all the domestic virtues at once!'

Anthony pauses in the act of lighting a cigar, and glances at him sharply.

'Settle down'—a sudden pang of fear shoots through his heart—'to all the domestic virtues!'

'You mean——' questions he.

'Well, look here, I'll tell you. Don't call me a conceited ass; but I—have some reason to believe that Cecil—oh, hang it! it's very hard to put it, but—well, I think she likes me above most, you know.'

'You say you have reason——'

Anthony's tone is strained and harsh.

'Some—not much, I confess. Why I should have any

seems extraordinary; and yet I honestly think that in asking her to marry me, I'—laughing—'run the risk of her saying "Yes."'

'The risk?'

Verschoyle has turned to the fire, afraid, perhaps, of the other's seeing his face.

'Well, yes; to confess the hateful truth, Tony, I don't admire her. Why she should like me——'

'Oh, this room is intolerable!' breaks in Verschoyle violently. 'What the devil do they mean by making a fire like this?'

He strides to the window nearest him, the one opening on to the veranda, and flings it wide.

''Tis warm, isn't it?' says Fenton genially. To do him justice, he has not the remotest idea of Verschoyle's love for Cecil. 'What I was going to say was, that I can't imagine Cecil's caring for a fellow like me. Now, *you* would be more the sort of——'

Verschoyle interrupts him.

'Go on,' says he. 'Never mind me; I don't come into this at all.'

'That's just what surprises me,' says Fenton amiably. 'She is quite the sort of woman that I am sure you will marry some day; but for my taste she is too statuesque—too cold. I dare say I could get on well enough with her, however, if——' Here Verschoyle makes a sudden movement—a dangerous one; but Fenton, going on happily, quite unconscious of the other's emotion, stays the torrent that was impending. 'The question is, would she get on with me? I hardly come under the class of the domestic creature. "If you want to know me, come live with me," says some old and, I can't help thinking, very immoral proverb. It would be a wild mistake with *me* as its hero. "If you want to live with me, don't try to know me," would be nearer the mark. That proverb should be reversed.'

'For you; not for her,' says Anthony in a stifled tone. 'To know *her* would be indeed a liberal education.'

'I'm not high-flown, Tony, as you know. I don't aspire to the clearer airs; I find them, as a rule, chilling. But if she will condescend to accept me, she will suit me in some ways—off-ways, you know—admirably. She has money, for one

thing—that covers a multitude of virtues—and she is certainly bred-looking, and——'

'You actually mean to propose to her, then?'

'My dear chap, have you been deaf all this time? Certainly I mean it; it's my last chance, and if she—well——' breaking off. 'It's deuced rude, you know; and I honour her—I *do*—above most women, and that's what makes me feel rather sneaky about it. For one thing, I always swore to myself I'd never marry for money; and now! . . . I was on the very point of asking her this afternoon—you remember' —confidentially—'she went out on the terrace with me after lunch?'

'Yes. Well'—Anthony's face is as white as death, but, standing near the open window, out of the glare of the lamps, it can't be seen—'why didn't you?'

'On my honour, I hardly know. I expect I shied, as it were, at the last moment—a final shrinking from giving up my freedom.'

'Was that it? . . . You felt *quite* sure, then?'

Verschoyle stops as if choked.

'At that moment?—yes, quite,' says Fenton cheerfully. 'To tell you the truth, I don't feel anything like so sure *now*. I dare say I've made one of my many mistakes. A girl like her—of the "icily regular, splendidly null" sort—could hardly fancy a person of my calibre. In fact'—modestly—'I begin to think she's too good for the likes of me; but, still, I'll risk it. I have ten minutes still, and if you will give me a pen and paper, I'll write to her.'

'*Now?*'

'The better the moment, the better the deed, and I feel very virtuous and domestic at this one. It must be your influence, Tony.'

He laughs, flings the end of his cigar into the fire, and rises and moves towards the writing-table.

Verschoyle moves, too.

'There is no post to-night,' says he hoarsely.

'I know that; but what do I want of a post when you are here? *You* will send the letter to her to-night in time for me to get a reply to it to-morrow morning at Ingham. I shall be there till the ten train; that will take me on to town, to my old quarters.'

He takes up a pen, hesitates, then looks back at Anthony with his most inconsequent air.

'Look here—what shall I say to her?'

'My God, man! are you *mad*—to begin a new life for *her*, and you, like this?'

Verschoyle lays his hand upon his arm—almost drags him back from the table.

'Always serious, Tony,' says Fenton, amused. 'Sometimes I envy you. But I don't think you need be unhappy about this new life of mine. I expect this beginning of it'—shrugging his shoulders, and pointing to the still unwritten proposal—'will also be the end of it. Now give one a moment, like a good fellow.'

'But think.'

'I'm thinking as hard as I can. Now'—laughing—'how would *you* begin? Oh, I say'—quickly, but laughing still—'when she gets my letter, Anthony, *she'll* be thinking, if you hold on to me like that, that I've got the jigs. You'll spoil my last chance.'

He makes a swift gesture, and Anthony, answering it, draws back. After all, what right has he to interfere—to try and save her? None!

'I've told her,' says Fenton presently, looking up from the letter he is now deliberately folding, 'that—but, look here, I'll read it to you.'

'No, no!' says Verschoyle indignantly.

'Why not? It isn't a love effusion. "My dear Cecil——"'

He rattles it off in spite of Verschoyle's angry disgust, who, indeed, never heard one word that was in it.

Someone else does, however!

'You see,' says Fenton, 'I have told her I shall be at Ingham until ten to-morrow. She is to answer it there if she means "Yes"; to send *no* answer if she means "No." Nothing can be simpler, and I really don't care which it is. *She* wouldn't suit me, but her money would.'

'Have you ever thought,' says Verschoyle, now white with rage, 'what a damnable thing this is that you are doing?'

'Well, I have,' says Fenton agreeably. 'I'm a barefaced beggar, I allow; but, after all, I'm an honest one. I *say* what lots of other fellows mean, but *don't* say. Well, here's the letter. I leave it to you, old fellow, to have it sent. If she

gets it in an hour from this, she can answer it by the next post. I've told her all about it: that if she *will—you* know—I'll hear from her to-morrow; and if I don't—which I fully expect—I'll know she will have nothing to do with me, which will prove her of sounder mind than I believe her now.'

The letter is in Anthony's hands. His fingers have tightened over it. There is strange gray look on his face.

'If you don't hear to-morrow, then, you will understand that she has refused you?'

'What an old raven!' said Sidney, laughing. 'Yes; you have it in a nutshell.'

'You mean to marry her then?'

'If she will have me.'

'But——'

Anthony breaks off sharply, and both men turn towards the open window. What is that strange sound that has come through it? A cry? A groan?

It is gone almost as they turn to listen.

'An owl, perhaps,' says Fenton carelessly. 'Well, my time is nearly up. I leave that letter to you, Tony, and I know you will send it on. I give it into safe hands.'

'I shall send it,' says Anthony, his tone dull, as of one thinking of something else.

To buy him off—that is the thought. These two men, so different, have had the same desire within the last few hours. To buy off—somebody!

'Why do this thing?' says he. 'You don't care for her—and——' He hesitates again. It is a delicate subject, and if he should guess wrong! 'If you want money——' he blurts out suddenly.

'My dear fellow, what a superfluous question! Was there ever an hour in my life when I didn't want money?'

'I can help you.'

''Pon my soul, Tony, I think you're about the best friend a man ever had,' says Sidney, with such honest gratitude in his eyes as makes Verschoyle feel a double-dyed hypocrite. 'But, you see, it's like this: I'm drained dry, and even a loan from you, however handsome——'

'It need not be a loan,' says Anthony in a stifled tone. To half his kingdom he would enlarge his offer, reserving the other half only for Cecil.

'Oh, come, I say! don't do the good Samaritan too far:

and, beside, even a gift wouldn't do me. I'm dipped to my neck, and only a rich wife can pull me through.'

'Have you once thought of—*her* ?'

'I have indeed'—frankly; 'and not only once, but very often. I was bound to do that. Whether I've got to think of her in the future depends on you and that letter you hold'—pointing lightly to the letter still held tightly in Verschoyle's hand. 'If Cecil will have me, well and good. If she will not have me, well and good too. As you may see, I approach this subject with an unbiased mind. To confess the whole truth to you, it is a matter of convenience'—he laughs aloud, and very heartily, here, as if tickled at his own idea—'to save myself from bankruptcy. But I know, at the back of my heart, that if she does not answer that letter you hold, I shall be—well, not to be impolite, excellently contented. I hear the wheels coming round to the door, don't I? Well'—holding out his hand, in which Anthony mechanically lays his—'till better times; and don't forget that letter, Tony—send it at once. My fate depends on the answer. But I know it is safe with *you*.'

He laughs, squeezes Anthony's hand affectionately, and rushes out of the room.

CHAPTER XLI.

'In the wood where I wandered astray,
Came the Devil a-talking to me,
O mother! mother!
But why did ye tell me, and why did they say,
That the Devil's a horrible blackamoor? He
Black-faced and horrible? No, mother, no.'

Anthony, thus left with the fatal letter in his hand, stands motionless, his eyes bent on the carpet. The letter, tightly crumpled in his grasp, takes little of his attention, his mind being bent on solving many thoughts. So intent is he, indeed, on these perplexing, nay, miserable problems, that it is only when a small, hard hand descends upon the paper he is holding—evidently with the intention of appropriating it—that he comes back to the present moment, and the fact that there

is someone in the room beside himself. He turns sharply. For a moment he stares, as if not believing. Then—

'Miss Royce! You!

He would have said more, perhaps—redeemed himself from the suspicion of discourtesy so foreign to him—but for the moment he feels benumbed. She—why should *she* be here? That child Jinnie, then, was right. She *had* seen her But that she should come here, and just after his interview with Sidney, the suppressed agony of which is hardly to be calculated! And this girl! *Why* is she here—and *now?*

'Yes; that is still my name,' says Maden, so calmly, in such a still way, that the bitter irony of her remark goes by him; and, out of his natural grace, he blames himself for his evil imaginings. Recovering himself almost immediately, he says courteously:

'I am glad you have come back to us again. But'—gently—'I think you should have explained a little, or written.'

'Explained!'

Miss Royce frowns. Does he *mean* it? Is it possible he doesn't *know?*

'Well, yes. My mother was a good deal put out about your—that is, your sudden disappearance.' Verschoyle says this in his most ordinary way, whilst still fighting with his doubts that *will* not be suppressed. 'And so was Mrs. Verschoyle; and as for Jinnie! . . . But you have seen them all, perhaps?' It is his last, most *impotent* hope.

Miss Royce's lip curls. Mrs. Verschoyle!

'Oh no!' Her tone is contemptuous. It assists Verschoyle's troubled thoughts, and fixes them upon the small, defiant figure before him. She is exquisitely dressed, if very simply, and the face he had always admired (as Cecil, too, had always admired it) is looking exquisite, too—only a little drawn, perhaps a little older. 'I have not come back here to see Jinnie, or even'—with a slight touch of insolence—'Mrs. Verschoyle.'

'Then?'

Verschoyle's question is imperative. Miss Royce answers it in kind.

'I came here,' says she, her small, white face defiant and mutinous, 'to see . . . Sidney Fenton.'

For a few seconds Verschoyle's heart seems to cease beating.

To see Sidney Fenton! His hand closes convulsively upon the letter. This girl, then, has come here to see Sidney—a girl believed to be lost to them for ever; gone away in a fit of anger—anger in no way connected with Fenton. Was she, indeed, *ever* connected with Fenton in the minds here—in *any* of their minds? A few words culled at random, and thought nothing of when said, now come back to him, as things will in strange times Surely Dicky Browne and Carry had given little hints now and then. . . .

'Captain Fenton?' says he very quietly. 'He was here only this moment.'

'I know that.' A queer smile disfigures her mouth for a second. 'And now he has gone. But he has left that letter behind him.'

'You know that?' says Verschoyle, surprised.

'So much'—coldly—'and a great deal more. I know what that letter contains, for example. You'—her face whitening—'will give it to me?'

'I'm afraid I can't do that,' said Anthony.

'Even though you know its contents?'

'Even then.'

Miss Royce flings up her arms passionately.

'Oh, *fool!*' says she. 'Do you know what *that* means? Destruction to you and her! When I see him——'

'Probably that will not be for some time.'

'*It will be to-night, and at Ingham.*'

'Ingham!' Verschoyle is conscious of a desire to kill someone. My God! what a liar that devil is! 'I don't believe it,' says he violently. For the first time in all his kindly life he insults a woman. 'He has gone there to meet his solicitor.'

'I think not,' says Miss Royce dryly. 'For solicitor, read—*me*.'

There is a little pause—a pause that is terrible.

'He was to meet you at Ingham when he left here?'

'Beyond doubt.' She turns up her small head and her shoulders with a wonderful gesture. 'And beyond doubt we shall meet shortly. I shall arrive there nearly as soon as he will, by catching the express.' Here she glances leisurely at the clock ticking on the marble mantelshelf behind her. 'He was at the Dower-house to-day, was he not? I had seen Jinnie, as of course you know, and that decided me. *She* never conceals anything, so I felt sure she would tell of

my being in the neighbourhood—otherwise I should not have let the child see me. I had other cards, of course, but I felt the talkative Jinnie would play the present ones perfectly. I left a little note for Sidney Fenton beneath a stone that was an old friend of ours for many days—a stone—down in the——' Here she struggles with her audacity ; it seems to forsake her. 'Down in the ash-grove.' She barely brings out the word. Memory is too strong for her. She stops, as if suffocating, for a moment—a moment only, however—and then goes on. 'He found it.'

'How do you know?' asks Anthony ; and then quickly, 'You met him?'

His fingers tighten on the letter he holds.

'No ; I only watched him. It was my business to see he got that letter, and'—with a fugitive smile—'I never neglect any business that concerns myself. He has gone to Ingham, and there he will wait for me. He thinks'—with a nonchalant shrug—'he is going to make me a scene ; but when he sees me, all that will be at an end. I shall know how to manage him. When *with* him'—with a touch of passionate pride—'I can always influence him. It is when he is away from me I fail. And he is so uncertain.' It is terrible, the extraordinary calmness, the deliberation, with which she discusses Fenton and her own miserable situation. 'That is why'—pausing again, and letting her eyes rest meaningly on Verschoyle's—'it would be so unpleasant for his *wife*, should he marry. Once he saw me, she——' A little gesture finishes the sentence. For the first time Anthony notices the *strength* in the small face, still so pale and childish. 'I really think I should give up that letter, if I were you,' says she.

'Miss Royce," says Verschoyle, his face like a stone, 'I have refrained up to this from asking you any direct personal question. Now, in Miss Fairfax's interests——' He hesitates, as if stung by the mention of her name in this wretched discussion, then goes on : 'As you seem to know the contents of this letter'—glancing at it—'and of my cousin's intention to propose to Miss Fairfax, I must ask you one question. What are you to Captain Fenton?'

'Does it require an answer?' Her low, soft, *trainante* voice is clear and distinct. A little hostile smile curls her lips. '*Will* you have your "pound of flesh"? Well!' She draws

a short, sharp breath that must have hurt her, though still she smiles. 'I am——'

'Miss Royce, stop!' cries Anthony almost violently. All at once he feels like a coward. '*Say nothing.*' What a little creature she is, and how young! Dear God, is it just that some men should live, and go their ways unpunished? 'It's unfair; it's beastly unfair!' cries he contritely. 'I—I beg your pardon.'

'You have asked me a question, and I shall answer it,' says she, with cold determination. 'You shall know what you'—again her eyes seek his—'*want* to know. I——'

'*Don't!*' says Verschoyle. 'Miss Royce, take care! Say nothing that you will wish unsaid to-morrow.'

'I shall not wish it unsaid. And'—with sudden wild passion—'I wish *nothing* undone. Nothing! nothing!' She stands a little further away from him, clutching the back of a chair. 'You think I know what *shame* means. That I am afraid. That I shrink from saying it. No! no!' She laughs suddenly through her hurried breathing — a laugh that Verschoyle hopes in his soul he will never hear again. 'You mistake me there. I am bad—bad all *through*, I tell you! And now for your answer. I am——'

If she grows suddenly white, to the point of fainting, her eyes gleam with a fresh and splendid fire.

'Miss Royce!'—imploringly.

'I am Sidney Fenton's mistress!'

In slow, distinct syllables she says the dreadful words!

CHAPTER XLII.

> 'Have ye not seen sometime a pale face
> (Among a press) of him that hath been lad
> Toward his death where he getteth no grace,
> And such a colour in his face hath had
> Men mightë know him that was so bestad
> Amongës all the faces in that rout?'

Of course he had known it: yet the verification, the actual saying of it, sends a rush of rage through Verschoyle's heart. Not rage against her—this small, violent, untamed thing, but against Fenton, that damnable cur. And she—that *she*, Cecil,

his heart's delight, should lavish one thought on him! For a mere fraction of time, a repulsion towards her, a distinct contempt, adds to the fury of his pain—then dies away. . . . So spotless as she is, how could she dream of treachery—of guilt like this?

Treachery! He leans heavily against the table and tries to collect himself. Why, only ten minutes ago that devil had sat here at this table and written a letter asking Cecil to give herself, her life, into his keeping. This very letter that now he holds! No doubt the pages are covered with vows of love and of devotion, and whilst scribbling them from a brain well trained in such effusions, he had talked to him of marrying, of growing domesticated, whilst all the time he had been making arrangements to meet Miss Royce—that pale, slight thing over there—within an hour, at Ingham.

The passion, the disgust, in him is so high that he turns upon Maden, who is standing motionless, her hand still upon the back of the chair, looking straight at him.

'What proof is there of this story?' demands he sternly. 'Is there any truth in it? Will you swear to it?'

'I will swear to it,' says she; 'but do you think it requires swearing to?'

'He must be the devil incarnate,' says Verschoyle, still unable to control himself. 'To lie thus to *her*—to lie to an angel!'

'It is the business of devils to lie to angels,' says Miss Royce. 'He has not yet, however'—pointing to the letter—'lied to your—Miss Fairfax. It is *you* who will lie, if you let her have—that. But'—slowly, deliberately—'I would not have you think your cousin a confirmed liar. To *me* he never lied!'

'To you——'

There is such anger in his face, such a desire to say things best left unsaid, that she stays him by a gesture almost regal, and therefore wonderful in one so small and slight.

'Never!' repeats she coldly. 'I quite understood what I was doing. He never lied to me; I shall not lie towards him. He told me from the first he was too poor to marry me. I went with him, knowing quite well the probable fate that lay before me.'

She has not once raised her voice, she looks quite calm—a little scornful always, perhaps—but it is impossible not to

admire the truth, the generosity of her statement, that is meant to let the man who has betrayed her go scot-free of blame—towards *her*, at all events; yet in this same moment she is betraying him, most wilfully and of set purpose!

'I swear all this to you,' says she, 'and now I ask you to swear one thing to me—a small matter, no doubt, to all the world, but all the world to me. Swear'—her eyes resting on his, grown brilliant with pain—'swear to me you will tell no one what I have told you to-night. You, and you only, know the truth of my going from the Dower-house; swear that you will keep that knowledge sacred.'

She has not come an inch closer to him, but her dark sombre eyes are fixed on his.

'I swear it,' says Verschoyle gently. In truth he is now—his first great rage over—very sorry for her, poor soul! She should have been happy, but now . . . In her first and loveliest time of life . . . And that dastard! 'I swear it,' repeats he, little knowing what that oath will cost him in the very near future; though, *had* he known, he would probably have taken it, all the same. How could any man, for *any* consideration, give up this poor girl's confidence to the world?

'I knew you would; I knew I was safe with you,' says Maden, in a tone so sad, so fraught with agony of mind, that his oath seems doubly bound. She has shrunk away from him, and is now standing, almost huddled up, against the bookcase in the corner. A sudden strained silence—a horror of life—has overcome her beneath the kindly presence of this gentleman.

He had shown no disdain of her from the first. No open, insulting suspicions, no disgust, only a most gentle pity. And now—now when he knows all—his air has undergone no change. It is still quite courteous. His eyes rest on hers as kindly as they did before . . . before she had told him of her shame. Of course he must have known, but his chivalry in pretending *not* to know——

Her defiant attitude breaks down.

'Thank you,' says she. 'One good turn deserves another, doesn't it? Give me that letter in your hands. If you are too scrupulous to burn it, I am not—*give* it to me!'

'Miss Royce, I think you hardly understand.'

'I understand *this*, that—you wish to marry Miss Fairfax.'

'Leave Miss Fairfax out of it,' says Verschoyle, his teeth a little on edge. 'I shall never marry her. So there is an end to that question.'

He strides off to the window.

'So you say—so you don't think,' says Maden Royce, moving after him. She glides softly up. Her heart now is beating madly. This is her last throw. 'You love her. You know you do.' She lays her hand softly on his shoulder. 'And you, who love her, will you sacrifice her? That letter'—he is holding it still tightly crumpled in his hand—'*you*, her *true* lover, will deliver it, knowing—the consequences? Think, *think*, what her life will be with *him!* You heard him say a little while ago that he would be *glad* if she refused him! Ask yourself, then, what her chance of happiness will be in life; a bad life is a long thing. Long——' There is a stifled pause. '*Too* long!'

She sways a little.

'Why don't you sit down?' says Anthony. 'This chair——'

'No; I will stand. I am fighting for myself, Mr. Verschoyle, as you well know; but you—won't *you* fight for yourself—and for *her?*'

'What would you have me do?' asks Verschoyle, with some agitation.

'Destroy that letter, and marry her.'

'I'—he grows very white—'shall never marry her.'

'You can—if you only will.'

She draws nearer to him—her step slow, her whole face afire as she tempts him.

'You do not understand. It is quite out of my power.'

'There is no meaning in such a phrase as *that*,' cries she vehemently. '*All* things are in one's power if one only has strength and courage. Burn that vile letter, I tell you'—pointing at it with quivering fingers—'and marry her! You are a good man; you will make her happy. *She*'—with an angry contempt in her tone—'likes good men!'

'You forget——'

'I forget'—impatiently—'nothing! Mark my words; as sure as ever she accepts the proposal in that letter you hold, her life will be blighted. I warn you this night of that. I am unscrupulous. If he deserts me for her, *she* shall pay the penalty. I have followed him here to-day . . . I shall

follow him to-morrow . . . *and all his life I shall follow him!*'

There is deadly meaning in her black eyes as she says this, and Verschoyle, thinking upon Cecil, feels his heart contract. Fragile, childish as she looks, there is something in Miss Royce's whole air that tells him she will be true to her word.

'Whether he marries Cecil Fairfax or another, or whether he never marries,' goes on the clear, cold, yet passionate voice, 'so long as he and I live, I shall follow him! And, as I have already told you, when *with* me I can influence him. The woman who marries him will'—with a glad lightening of her whole face, eager, vindictive—'find her life a curse to her, rather than a blessing. For I swear'—with a quick touch of fury—'that whoever he marries shall rue it. She shall know no luck or happiness in her down-lying or in her uprising, so long as breath is left in me.'

Her face, always so white, is now dyed as though all the blood in her slight body has rushed into it.

'*Now*,' in a voice low but furious, 'you *know*. Will you burn that letter, or condemn her to a life that will be a very *hell*? For she loves him. I knew that—I saw that—before I took him from her. If he goes back to her——'

Instinctively her small hands clench.

'It is not my letter,' says Verschoyle.

'It is in your hands, however.'

'Entrusted to my care——'

'What does that matter? It will never be found out. You heard him say that if he did not get an answer to it to-morrow he would accept her silence as refusal. *Who* shall know of it save you and I? There'—flinging out her hands wildly towards the shining tiles—'is a fire: throw it in!'

She creeps to him, and, clutching his arm, shakes it fiercely.

'Throw it *in*, I say.'

'I am sorry,' says Verschoyle very gently, 'but he gave it to me, you see; he trusted in me, and—I dare not.'

'Yet you dare to risk the happiness of the woman you love!' cries she a little wildly. 'Love! What sort of love is that, when just for a little point of conscience, that satisfies yourself only, you would sacrifice her, *body and soul*?'

Body and soul! Verschoyle, standing at the open window, through which the mists of night are coming, in soft multitudes, vague, gray, impalpable, knows that his thoughts are vague as they.

And yet in his hand still lies the lying letter, and it is *his* hand that is to deliver it. His to pronounce her doom!

He has been the one selected by the betrayer of Maden to bring down ruin on Cecil's gentle life. Oh, monstrous thought! Better—far better—to dare her anger, her righteous indignation, and after that her terrible humiliation, and lay bare to her the character of the man she, in her purity, loved.

But his oath! It all comes back to him suddenly. His oath to Maden never to betray her secret—an oath so freely taken only a few minutes ago. Already it begins to gall him. No. *He* cannot warn Cecil, but——

A thought has struck him; he turns quietly to Miss Royce.

'I cannot betray a trust,' says he. 'But you—there is a straight course for you. Why, if you wish to keep Fenton, not go to Miss Fairfax and tell her what you have told to me?'

'Oh, coward!' says she. 'Are *you* afraid to face her then?'

'I am,' says he coldly. 'And I am coward enough, too, to shrink from breaking my promise to you to hold your secret sacred.'

This should have moved her, and it does, but not enough. To dissuade her from her full desire would have taken much more than honour, or kindliness, or . . . torture! So is she built.

Verschoyle presses his question:

'You will tell Miss Fairfax?'

'No'—the refusal rings out clear—'I shall never tell her; but—I shall wait.'

'Wait! For what?'

'For the marriage-day. After that I shall wait, too.'

'You have some horrible thought in your mind,' says Anthony violently. 'Say it!'

'Would you hear it?' She laughs imperfectly. 'Well, I shall wait until he and she are one. That is a good old phrase, is it not?—one!' Her black, soft eyes now gleam with a

diabolical fire. 'And when they are one'—a little rippling laugh passes her lips—'I shall tell her—*all!*'

'That,' says Verschoyle, speaking with difficulty because of the rage within him, 'would be the work of a devil! And you'—slowly—'don't look like that.'

'No?' She laughs again. 'You are ignorant, then, in some points. I told you you were a good man. Good men never know anything; it is their prerogative. Yet I'—with a most audacious smile—'am not a man, and I know everything. You, very courteously, say I am not like a devil. Let me tell you, however—I like to be honest, you know, when'—with a shrug—'it suits me—let me tell you, then, just now, that if I'm not a devil exactly, I'—ominously—'*feel* like one!'

CHAPTER XLIII.

'"Is this," quoth she, "the cause of your unrest?"
"Yea, certainly," quoth he, "no wonder is."
"Now, sir," quoth she, "I could amend all this."'

'I THINK you are wronging yourself,' says Verschoyle calmly. 'I do not believe, even now, after all you have said, that you would deliberately hurt a—a girl who had never hurt you in any way.'

'Oh yes, I would,' says Miss Royce, the old inscrutable look growing in her dark and lovely eyes. 'Don't count on that.' She glances at him. 'If he marries, I shall make, not only him, but'—with the most charming air and a quick smile—'Miss Fairfax, very uncomfortable indeed.'

Her voice is quite even.

'Is there no gratitude in you?' demands Verschoyle sternly. 'She was kind to you. Even now—she defends you. . . . Only to-day——' He stops for a moment, as if unable to go on. 'She liked you,' says he presently, in a low voice. 'Surely you would not harm her?'

'Her!' She represses herself by a violent effort, a dangerous light growing in her eyes the while; and then, all at once, the barrier is cast aside, and her passion bursts forth. 'Harm *her!*—the woman who would take him from me! the woman for whom, because of her accursed money, he would cast me

aside!' She looks like a fury as she speaks. 'Harm her! I tell you I would willingly kill her!' Her eyes are blazing. Then, all at once, just as he is preparing himself for a further outburst, her strange, versatile mind undergoes a change. The storm dies away, giving place to a look of cold resentment, of vindictive hatred. 'Beyond doubt I shall harm her, whenever I get the chance,' says she. The tone is low, but Verschoyle knows that she means every syllable of what she *has* said, and what she is saying. 'And if the chance does not suggest itself, I shall make one. She has shown no mercy to me; I shall show none to her.'

She nods her head slowly, and again he can see the strength that lies beneath the childish face.

'Yet she befriended you.'

'As a queen might a beggar'—contemptuously.

'Surely that is both unjust and ungracious.'

'It may be'—calmly. 'But if *she* were the beggar, and I the queen, I should still hate her, because she comes between him and me.'

'Is she, then, to bear all the blame—she who is blameless?'

'All.'

'Look here,' says Verschoyle suddenly, 'I don't believe you know what you are saying. Such injustice is mere madness. Clear your mind, and remember only that she was a friend to you, when few others were.'

Miss Royce's face remains immovable.

'So were you,' says she; 'and so you *are*. I shall never forget this hour, or'—earnestly—'you. As for her . . . Well'—with a bitter smile that sits most sadly on her youthful face—'I shall never forget her, either; I shall remember her until death takes one of us. I tell you all this because I like you, and because I think you would be happy with her. And I tell it you, too, because I want you'—indicating the letter by a gesture—'to destroy that. . . . Burn that lie in your hand, Mr. Verschoyle'—in an eager yet stifled tone. 'Think—*think* what it means to you and me! . . . And he doesn't care for her, and it is my life'—gasping—'yours and mine! Burn it! burn it!'—she breaks down—'oh, do! do!'

Again the mobile face has changed. The most pitiful expression has taken the place of the late revengeful one.

'Miss Royce——'

'Ah, no, not that tone! . . . Make yourself happy—and me, too.'

'I cannot,' says Verschoyle hoarsely.

'It is all over, then,' says she. She comes forward. 'It only remains to me to go—and meet Sidney.'

It is a parting shaft, and Anthony pales beneath it, but still is firm. He makes a decisive movement of his head; then, seeing her turn away, says quietly:

'You are not going like this. You cannot possibly go until you have had something to eat.'

Her pallor, her despair, has smitten him.

'No, I want nothing; no—really, Mr. Verschoyle, I mean it. Please'—in a hurried way, seeing him going towards the bell—'do not call anyone. I'—painfully—'would rather not have it known that I was here, or anywhere in this neighbourhood.'

'But——' begins Verschoyle.

She certainly looks very faint and ill, but he sees at once her horror of making her presence known. He turns silently to a little cabinet, opens it, and brings out some wine and a tin of biscuits.

'You will, at all events, take this?' says he.

He pours some sherry into a glass, and takes it to her, with the biscuits. She shakes her head at the latter.

'I couldn't eat,' says she faintly.

She takes the glass he offers her, however, and drinks its contents eagerly; her throat, her lips, her heart, poor soul! are all parched. A painful pity for her fills Verschoyle's soul.

'Can't I send you to your train?' asks he anxiously. 'You look very tired—done up, don't you know.'

His nervousness makes him a little garrulous.

'Oh no, thank you. People'—with a terribly sad glance at him—'such as I am flit here and there; they are never *sent* anywhere.'

'I shall be very glad to send you anywhere,' says Verschoyle, with extreme courtesy. 'I feel'—he hesitates—'Miss Royce, may I say that my cousin's conduct towards you is——'

She throws up a small clenched hand.

'Not a word!'

'I am silent, then.'

Verschoyle's grave face looks almost handsome now. His heart, indeed, is full of pity, of almost admiration, for her.

'I will not hear anything against him!' says Miss Royce. 'No; I have told you it was my fault. . . . As for this'—she lowers her eyes, and a little shudder goes through her—'he—he must answer for himself. I do not condemn him.'

Her loyalty, in the face of her own destruction, works even a stronger pity in the heart of Anthony. It wakes, too, a mad rage against Sidney, and words are on his lips to denounce him, to scathe him; but all at once he knows that such scathing will only augment the wound in the poor girl's heart, and he draws back the words that were almost said. Instead, seeing her white and miserable yet steadfast little face, he seeks to give her comfort—of a sort.

'If I may not speak of that,' says he very kindly, 'I may speak, perhaps, of your generosity. You have a good heart indeed. As for him——'

She interrupts him violently.

'No; I will not hear it!'

'I was not going to offend you in any way, believe me,' says Verschoyle gently; 'I shall not say one word against my cousin. Indeed'—slowly—'I think, perhaps, had happier times been his, he would have been a better man. I'—meeting her eager, expectant eyes—'think that, at heart, there is some good in him.'

It is the faint praise that damns, but Maden does not see that. A light of glowing joy springs into her small face, and with the joy is gratitude, so great as hardly to be determined.

'Oh, you are right,' cries she; 'there *is* good in him!' She clasps her hands suddenly over her eyes, pressing them—*pressing* them. 'Dear, dear God! how unhappy I am! Oh, there *is* good in Sidney! And'—her hands falling away from her miserable eyes—'you are as Heaven itself; you alone have seen that he is not—not altogether bad—as some, perhaps, would have it.'

For the first time in all this terrible interview, tears rise in her eyes, gleam there for a moment, then disappear. With almost superhuman strength she controls her weakness. She makes a movement towards Verschoyle.

'You have been very kind to me,' says she. 'I think there are very few who would have shown me so much—courtesy. I like to say this to you now, as I suppose it is the last time we shall meet. But—I shall remember your kindness always. A small return, but all I can make.'

She smiles forlornly, and, as if involuntarily, makes the usual customary gesture of farewell. Quickly remembering, she draws back her hand. It is the most pitiful thing. Verschoyle's blood mounts to his face.

'Won't you shake hands with me?' asks he.

'Would you shake hands with such as me?' returns she with a hard, forced little smile, sadder than any tears.

'Miss Royce! I wish you would not speak to me like that!' exclaims Anthony, his manhood rising in arms. Taking her hand in spite of her, he holds it firmly, and with the usual warmth that one would show to a friend. Poor, poor little soul! God help her! 'Do you think I judge *you*?' says he. 'I judge him.'

'No.' She puts up one hand quietly. 'No, I suppose you cannot see it . . . but if he is not, in my sight, the most righteous man on earth, he is certainly—the dearest!'

She turns and goes quietly to the open window; as she steps into the veranda she looks back.

'You will burn it, I think,' says she. 'If you *don't*—you know the consequences.'

Verschoyle shakes his head.

'Oh yes—you will! you will!' Moving away, a last word comes from her: 'Of course you will.'

She disappears into the night.

CHAPTER XLIV.

'Where are thy terrors, Conscience?
Where thy justice?'

She is gone, and Anthony is left alone, the letter still within his grasp.

For a long time he stands motionless, forgetful of the fact that he *is* standing, gazing with frowning brows into the fire.

What an infernal scoundrel!

His mind seems a blank but for this one thought. It seems to swallow up all others. What, indeed, is there to think of but Fenton's baseness, his incredible audacity, his——

Great Heaven! who would have suspected it? First to take away that poor child, and then, when tired of her, to come back here—here, and on the very ground of his abominable intrigue, to make love to another—to seek to bolster up his own falling fortunes with—with Cecil's fortune!

As Cecil's name comes to him, so does all the rest, and, dropping into a chair, he gives his mind full sway. He remembers how, not an hour ago, with growing rage, he had heard Fenton speak, in his cynical way, of his possible marriage with Cecil—a marriage that was to be all love on her side, none on his. But the indignation he then felt sinks into a feeble resentment, when compared with the fury that now possesses him.

Was it Heaven or Hell sent that girl to-night to tell him of her connection with this man? Man! the word is too fine—this scoundrel who, having destroyed the life of one human creature, would now with smiling face begin the destruction of another. For Cecil, with her delicate sensibilities, her high ideals, would be not one whit less miserable with him, as his wife, than the other—poor soul!—has been as his mistress. Surely it was Heaven sent the warning, before this letter, that must now be considered fatal, should be sent. A warning to stay his hand, to—— He rises and goes to the hearthrug. The fire seems to draw him. Leaning his arm upon the mantelpiece, he looks down into the glowing, inviting flames beneath.

'Burn it,' she had said; and Maden's face, as she stood before him, now fierce, now beseeching, shines at him out of the heart of the fire. Her own heart had not burned more fiercely with her wrongs—her fears.

'You love her! Will you, then, sacrifice her?' Maden's voice rings in his ears. Her presence seems still to pervade the silent, darkened library. 'I shall follow her.' She had been threatening then, and there was not only a threat, but defiance and determination in her air—a determination to ruin Cecil's life should Fenton marry her. 'I shall tell her'; and then again, 'So long as he and I are alive I shall follow him':

and again, 'She has shown no mercy to *me;* I shall show none to *her.*'

She meant it. She meant every word she said, and therefore this letter—he crushes it between his fingers—when sent, will condemn Cecil to a life of long, of sure misery, to a regret too terrible for contemplation.

He knows Cecil as perhaps no one else does, his love for her having created a clear path to her mind—her purity, her contemptuous horror of deceit, of treachery of any kind. And surely Fenton's proposal to her under the present circumstances is the deepest of all treacheries, the basest of all deceptions. He draws his clasped hands from behind his back, and glances at the superscription on the letter:

'MISS FAIRFAX,

'*Fairtown.*'

It is no doubt open to him to go to her, to lay the bare, disreputable facts before her, to give voice to the whole painful story. It is open to him, but, as he knows, impossible. He has given his oath to that poor girl to hold her sad secret sacred, and an oath once given is not to be recalled; and he knows, too, that had it to be given all over again he would still adhere to that oath; or—an oath *never* given—he would still have found it impossible to give to the world Maden's most melancholy story.

As it is, she has thrown herself upon his honour—upon his mercy, which, perhaps, means the same thing. No, he cannot betray her.

The letter! The letter, then. What is to be done with it? . . . Is it to go to Cecil, for her everlasting despair? A horrible pang of jealousy at his heart warns him that if it is sent to Cecil she will undoubtedly accept the proposal it contains. She will not even hesitate. She will accept the dishonourable thing, believing it, in the light of her own sweetness, to be true and earnest—the outcome of a heart devoted to her.

And once accepted, the sorry farce will be carried out to the end. She, the wife, believing always, loving, trusting—until the crash comes. He, the husband, acting a sordid

part, and, no doubt, longing for the crash that will be her doom and his release. No doubt he will so manage as to make the terms of their separation very advantageous for himself.

Great Heaven, what a prospect for her!

And here, in his hands—in the hands of the man who truly loves her—her fate lies. He looks again at the letter. . . . Her fate! A small, plaintive voice comes back again.

'You love her; will you, then, sacrifice her?'

He draws his breath sharply. If the letter goes she will be sacrificed, and by him—by him! But—— He leans a little heavily on the mantelshelf now, and a slight moisture grows upon his brow. . . . But how if it should not go? If she should never get it?

Instinctively the hand holding the letter thrusts itself towards the fire—then is drawn back again. No; the end is not yet.

Fenton had said in it that if he got no answer to-morrow he would accept her silence as refusal. So. . . . His brows meet in frowning thought. . . . Should Cecil not get this infamous letter, then, certainly, she can send no answer, and there will be an end to it all.

Once again he holds out his hand, with the letter in it, holding it over the brightest flame, and once again he draws it back.

Oh for a just decision! If only he himself did not love her, it might be easily made, but——

Is it, then, *because* he loves her, he has not the strength to save her? 'You love her: will you, then, sacrifice her?' The wild, plaintive voice of the woman Fenton has so cruelly wronged rings in his ears again. Shall he send the letter, and thus, wilfully—knowing all things—make the one woman he loves unhappy for life, or——

The minutes speed by. The sudden striking of the little ormolu clock upon the mantelshelf reminds him that now or never is his decision to be made. If she gets it within half an hour she will be able to answer it in time for the post that will reach Ingham to-morrow morning. If not——

Mechanically he rouses himself and goes to the bell. He can summon a messenger. Of course, she must have it. Of course—she ——

His hand is on the bell.

Suddenly he turns, walks quickly to the fire, and in a moment the letter is caught in the flames and reduced to a filmy, blackened nothing.

* * * * *

He watches it as it grows lighter, and still ever lighter—this small bit of useless burnt paper that a moment ago had held the meaning of four lives—till at last, a draught catching it, it floats upwards and is lost for ever in the recesses of the chimney. So it is gone!

He had watched its going with a strange fascination, but now that it is beyond his sight the glamour is broken, and the enormity of this thing that he has done comes home to him, and with it a great horror.

Dishonour!

The word brings a hot flush to his forehead. It seems to crush him. He who had held his head so high, who had spent so many hours only this very night in scorning Fenton, how is he now superior to him? Truly, dishonour has come to sit and sup with him to-night, to be his guest for ever.

A mad desire to retrace his steps takes possession of him. One boat must be left . . . he cannot have burned them *all*. It is still possible to write to Fenton—to explain. . . . That will be, however, to betray the secret Miss Royce gave into his keeping; but, then, only to her betrayer—scarcely to be called a treachery. And even now she must be with him, and has, no doubt, told him all—her knowledge of the contents of the letter, her interview with him, Verschoyle—all.

Yes, he will write to Sidney, openly declare his knowledge of his past, of his relations with Miss Royce, and explain how, on the head of it, he had destroyed the letter committed to his care, believing, if it were sent, it might cause grave trouble to Cecil in the future. If Sidney should, after this, still have the want of conscience to press his suit on Miss Fairfax, he must, at all events, find another means of conveying his proposal to her. He, Anthony, declined to be associated with it in any way. In the meantime, Sidney might understand that the infamous story of his conduct towards a young girl living under his aunt's protection would be a dangerous thing to give to the world. It should remain a secret between him and 'Yours faithfully, ANTHONY VERSCHOYLE.'

When Verschoyle, after many attempts, finally knocks off this explanation to his cousin, and looks at the clock, he finds it is already too late for the next post, that would have taken it to Ingham in time to be delivered at mid-day to-morrow. He gives way to a burst of rage, born of his desire to get this disgraceful act of his set right, and, as a first thought, decides on sending a groom post-haste to Ingham, riding half through the night if need be. He does not know the exact mileage between here and Ingham. A moment's thought, however, cools him down. Such a long ride at this hour would give rise to speculation in the servants'-hall, the usual hotbed of most private scandals; and should the groom he sent by chance discover that Miss Royce was also at Ingham, why, then—then . . . why, then it would come to Cecil's ears, and hurt her to her white heart's core.

No: he will wait. It is unfortunate, irritating, but not of any serious importance. Fenton will certainly go straight to his rooms in town from Ingham, and there receive the letter. It will be the delay of only a few hours really, and from town he can, if he is so greatly daring, write again to Cecil.

And he will—Verschoyle feels sure of this. His hand shakes as he re-addresses the letter that is, at all events, to explain to Fenton the dishonourable act of which he has been guilty.

He stands up, and takes a step towards the door with the intention of putting the letter in the bag, then stops. What is this thing he is doing? Saving his own honour at the cost of *her* misery—the misery of the woman he loves!

'Will you sacrifice her, then?'

His conscience will be clear. Cecil's life will be one long torture. Could selfishness go deeper? As in a dream he can see her—proud, cold, uncomplaining to the last, but with a soul killed, a heart crushed, lifeless, desecrated.

No—a thousand times no! A smothered cry breaks from him. The dishonour, the shame, be his—the humiliation, if the truth be ever known; but for her—safety, calm, peace . . . an escape from such stress and storm as in her pure heart had never been so much as imagined.

He walks to the fire, very deliberately this time, and flings his own letter into it, after Sidney's. His face has a determined look in it as he turns away. There is no fear, no remorse, now. His mind is quite made up and satisfied, what-

ever the consequences of his act may be. He has done his best for her; it is a point of conscience. Well, if he is wrong, why, it is *his* conscience, not hers, that will go to the wall.

CHAPTER XLV.

'For what wert thou to me?
How shall I say?'

February has slipped easily into March, and March—noisiest of months,

'Whose blithe reveille blows from hill to hill'

—has given place to April, and all day long death is giving place to life.

The little beechlings—tiny, baby things, with only two soft, rounded leaves, the backs of which gleam in the fitful sunlight like white satin—are swaying faintly in the lively breeze. It seems almost past belief that these delicate things can ever reach to man's estate, ever grow to the size of their giant forefathers, up, up, above them, sheltering them with their broad branches. Yet grow they do, and so do all the rest of the sweet nurslings in this best of all possible months.

Dear Spring! of whom one's thoughts grow always dearer; who catches one with a madness when young, with a tenderness when old. When its thrall is on us, how are we to escape it, to think of anything but—

'Of Spring which breaks with all her leaves,
Of birds that build in thatch and eaves,
Of woodlands where the throstle calls,
Of girls that gather cowslip balls.

* * * *

Of brooks that sing by brambly ways'?

With the coming of the late spring has come, too, to Hillesden the announcement first of Miss Fairfax's engagement to Anthony Verschoyle, to be followed very shortly after by the marriage itself. The bridegroom had brooked no delay, and the bride had given in to his wishes with what seemed, to Hillesden upper, extraordinary indifference; to Hillesden lower, very unnecessary obedience before marriage.

Anthony had waited many weeks before asking her to marry him—waited for another sign from Fenton, but plainly nothing came. Later on he heard he had gone abroad. Cecil had heard it, too—with what mingled feelings of shame and grief no man, or woman either, for the matter of that, ever knew. The scene on the terrace, when he had held her hand—had said words that she fondly believed contained the germs of a declaration of love to her—is always with her. She had waited that evening, and all next day, dreaming of his return ; and even when she knew that he had gone—gone without a final glance, even—she still for many days dwelt on the thought of a day that would bring a letter from him to her, that should dissolve all her doubts, and change them into happy certainties.

But that day never came, and slowly, slowly, she woke to the fact that he had never loved her, or else that, loving her (in her inmost soul she believed in his love), he had found good reason to abstain from attaching himself to her for life. And so he

'Loved, and he rode away.'

She had a great deal of pride, and she rose to the occasion. Whatever she suffered, she and her heart knew only, and to the outer world she was as she had ever been—calm, sweet, sympathetic. But in silence, when alone in the darkness of the growing, warm spring nights, she suffered. It seemed to her that she was left alone—desolate—one sad creature without kith or kin ! All the sweetness of the growing year was around her ; all things grew and loved ; she—she alone—was unsought.

She read a good deal at this time, preferring saddest thoughts, and at night some of them would come and stay with her, cruelly tormenting her, and making the tired eyes drop their usual tears faster and faster.

'Bees hum all day amid the young spring leaves,
The rooks caw loud from every elm-tree bough,
The sparrows twitter in the old church eaves,
But no voice cries for me, or calls me now.'

To such sad beliefs she gave herself, until Anthony, taking heart of grace from her very indifference to all things in this 'languorous spring,' made love to her in strong, right-down

fashion, and so in measure changed her mood. Impossible to say to one's self that 'No voice calls me now,' when a lover's voice is ever at your ear.

In time Cecil grew contented, if not satisfied; and from being contented, to—in spite of herself—find much comfort in Tony's presence. It even came natural to her, after a week's engagement, to call him Tony always, without an occasional Anthony—much to Lady Maria's delight, who saw in it a touch of growing love for Verschoyle, and who, being very fond of Cecil, was charmed at the approaching marriage. She had been somewhat surprised at the girl's ready acceptance of Anthony's proposal, because, although always eager to receive Cecil as a daughter-in-law, she had not believed she was in love with her son. But once the engagement became *un fait accompli*, she told Mrs. Verschoyle (who felt secretly a little uneasy about the success of the marriage) that she was the happiest mother alive.

And so it took place. Carry Desmond, who was chief bridesmaid, in a charming gown bought out of the few pounds left over from the payment of auntie's debt after the sale of the rabbits, thought Cecil very pale, but wonderfully bright.

'And, you know, Richie, I quite looked for other things; because, as I told you often, I'm perfectly sure she was in love with Sidney. You remember my saying it.'

'Yes; and as I said then I say now—rot!' says Mr. Amyot. 'I wonder how a sensible girl like you can imagine such a folly as that.'

'It isn't folly'—angrily. 'Only'—contemptuously—'you can't see anything; men never can!'

'That's right; give yourself airs,' says Mr. Amyot. 'Of course, now you have taken to bree——'

The remainder of his sentence, for one strong reason, is lost to posterity.

CHAPTER XLVI.

'Is it rapture or terror that circles me round, and invades
Each vein of my life with hope—if it be not fear?'

And now the marriage is over, and here, in this great world of London, in this big hotel, where Anthony has secured rooms for them, Cecil begins to feel herself a little lost. For one thing, she has just discovered that her maid has forgotten to put in her evening shoes, of all things; and her maid is not expected to join her until nine to-night. How on earth is she to get on without them? She has pulled off her walking shoes and her stockings with a view to putting on a dainty pair of embroidered ones, and an even daintier pair of shoes, and is now standing with her little naked feet thrust into her red Turkish bath slippers.

Ah, she ought to have brought Hatchett with her. She could have gone into Regent Street and bought her a pair of shoes in a moment. And now Anthony is waiting for her in the charming little sitting-room just across the corridor, and——

Suddenly it occurs to her that Anthony might be of use on this disastrous occasion. Anthony! She laughs involuntarily. Fancy making a servant of Anthony! Then something else occurs to her: the knowledge that in him she has someone who will always, and most willingly, be servant to her—one to whom her lightest request will be as law; one who will never desire to leave her; one who, however . . . cannot be dismissed.

This thought troubles her very little. She had always been fond of Verschoyle, and during these past weeks of her engagement to him had grown nearer to him, fonder of him, perhaps, than she herself knows. His gentleness, his tenderness, his intuitive knowledge of the small things that will please her, have pierced through her sad indifference, and made him not only dear, but actually necessary to her. She laughs again, the old girlish laugh that for many months has not made sweet her lips, as she tells herself that now no longer need she ever think or trouble about any mortal thing. Tony, her husband, will take all that upon his broad shoulders, even her shoes.

She opens the door, looks cautiously up and down the corridor, sees no one, but still hesitates. These slippers! She glances down at them disparagingly, yet they are twin charms in themselves—small, elaborately embroidered, and as *chic* as though made for the 'Light of the Harem' herself in some 'unspeakable' Turk's home. Evidently she forgives them, because, after another hasty glance up and down the corridor, she runs to the sitting-room beyond, where she knows Anthony is awaiting her.

'Just fancy,' says she, her usual delicate colour a little warmer, 'Hatchett forgot to put in any of my shoes!'

He has risen, and is coming quickly towards her.

'Except these,' says she, putting up a hand to stay him. As she speaks she smiles, and draws back her skirts with both hands to show the Turkish slippers beneath, and the little pearly-white feet within them that the kindly slippers only half conceal. 'And they,' says she, with a rueful glance, 'will hardly do to go about in, in this house, will they?'

'True. They are much too pretty,' says Anthony.

She laughs.

'Well! but what shall I do? Would you'—she glances at him—'will you——' She hesitates, and blushes, softly, shyly; she has hardly realized as yet, indeed, that he is her husband, in spite of her thoughts of a few moments ago in her own room; and to ask him to do such a trivial thing as this—this man, who only yesterday she would not have dreamed of asking to bring her so much as a rose—to ask him now to buy her so intimate a thing as a pair of shoes!

'What is there I wouldn't do for you?' says he, breaking into her gentle confusion.

'I know . . . but——'

'But what?' He has taken both her hands. 'Come, now. Is that a way to ask your husband to buy shoes for you? It should be, "Anthony, go out at once, and buy me the prettiest pair of shoes in town."'

'Is that the way?' She gives him a glance, saucy, if shy. It is as wine to Verschoyle's heart. Later on she will learn to love him. She will be his indeed. 'How do you know?'

'Instinct,' says he.

'Nonsense! Instinct has been overdone.'

'Well, then, I've known poor fellows who've been through

the mill before me, who have been married men for a long, long time. But all this is irrelevant. I feel I am going to be the most abject of the lot. I'm beginning well, you see.' He points to her feet. 'Any particular shop?'

'You know more about town than I do,' says she.

She slips her hand into her pocket and pulls out her purse and hands it to him. He does not take it, and a little change of expression in his eyes attracts her attention. Will she always, then, keep him at a distance? It is this thought that has brought that expression to his eyes.

'The old days are over,' says he, pushing back her hand with the purse in it. 'Would you deprive me of one of my greatest privileges?'

'No.' She turns away, her first blush now a crimson red, and lays her purse upon the mantelpiece. 'It is all so strange,' says she in a faint tone, full of apology, and of tears too—a tone that, taken altogether, heals the wound at once.

'I must take your measure,' says Verschoyle, 'before I go.' He drops on his knees, and, pulling off one of the Oriental slippers, takes her bare foot into his palm. 'Oh, dear little foot!' says he breathlessly, half silently.

Yet Cecil, waiting, feels with a faint thrill the lingering tightening of his fingers over it.

Pulling out his handkerchief, he measures the small foot not once or twice, either.

'You know it now—you *must*,' says she, quickly drawing back the foot from him.

'I must, I suppose,' returns he regretfully. He bends over her, and passionately, tenderly, kisses her instep twice. Then he springs to his feet.

As he does so he astonishes a look in her eyes—a look strange to him—and, driven by a vehement impulse, he catches her in his arms, straining her to his heart.

'You love me, Cecil?' It is a question.

'Yes, yes,' as if a little frightened.

Suddenly he holds her back from him.

'Oh no, you do not. Not yet, but you will—you will . . . in time.'

'I think I do . . . now,' says she, nervously, indeed, but with such a pretty, reliant, if shy glance at him, as sets his heart beating.

'You mean that, Cecil?'

She is in his arms now, and her eyes are answering his.

'I do. I—I think so . . . Tony! I want my shoes.'

She pushes him from her; it is a very delicate little push, but he gives way to it.

* * * * *

All down the corridor, and far into the street, and into the shop where such shoes as his beloved would deign to wear can be found, he goes; his hope, his belief in her final love for him, and him only, going with him, with leaps and bounds.

After all, he had done well to destroy that letter—a letter that inevitably would have made havoc of her life. And soon—though her love may not yet be his—soon she will love him, and him only.

Already her heart is opening to him. Would she have come to him just now as she did if she had not felt some love for him in her heart? And that light he had surprised in her dear eyes? That alone gave hope for a future that might yet be resplendent with joy indescribable.

An old cripple standing at the turn of the hotel that leads into Regent Street is surprised at having half a crown dropped into his grimy hand, as Verschoyle goes by him, hailing a hansom to take him to a certain fashionable shop—a shop for shoes—a little lower down in Regent Street.

Cecil, left alone, stands motionless by the fireplace. Lifting her eyes at last, she sees her purse resting on the marble slab above her. It brings her mind to a focus.

She takes it up, and holding it, looking at it, falls a-thinking.

How kindly he had looked at her just now! How gently he had spoken! How delicately he had let her know that now, from this time forward, she belonged to him, and him only! He had taken her into his care, his keeping—surely a good keeping.

How kind, how thoughtful, he has always been, and how strong! A man far beyond all petty sins, all dishonourable beliefs. And gentle, too. And more—oh, much, much more!

She breaks off her thoughts abruptly.

Is she? Can it be true? Does she?

Oh no! Impossible! She pokes the fire with the toe of her Turkish slipper, and gives herself a little shake. Is she growing sentimental about nothing? . . . Still, to be unjust! . . . And, after all, he *is* nice. And there is something in

the fact of having someone to look after one always, to love one, to get one's tickets, and order about one's tenants, and perhaps . . . perhaps . . . well, perhaps everything has been ordered for the best.

Would . . . that other . . . Fenton's eyes rise before her, caught out of the depths of a dead past. Would he have been as kind, as good? How near he seems to-night—that other! . . . And yet . . . what kind eyes Anthony has! Carry had always said they were handsome. . . . She rouses herself abruptly. She will go back to her room. She can put on her pretty black silk stockings, at all events, whilst waiting for Anthony's return with the desired shoes.

Opening the door, she goes out boldly into the corridor, forgetting now the fact that someone may meet her, and, having gone a yard or so, finds herself face to face with Sidney Fenton.

CHAPTER XLVII.

'Then came the Winter, with his frosty breath,
And made the world an image of white Death.'

A spasm contracts her heart for a moment. It is not born of pain so much, perhaps, as of a horror of past hateful memories. It is hard for a woman to forget a slight—when the slight is given by a man.

He to be here—he! And to-day of all days!

The lamps have been lit now, and the corridor is ablaze with their many fires.

'Fancy meeting you here!' she says, a little hurriedly, perhaps, but with extraordinary self-possession, considering how her heart is beating.

'My dear Cecil, surely all the astonishment should be on my side!' says Fenton, with a charming smile. He is looking extremely handsome, and, as usual, on very good terms with himself. 'To say nothing of the joy.' He bears her no ill-will on account of that answer to his proposal that never came. 'How often I have wished that we could be in town together, that I might take you about, and show you all the smart things, in which'—smiling—'in spite of your pretence at asceticism, I'm sure your soul delights. When did you come?'

'To-day.' He does not notice how faint her voice has grown.

'Only to-day! How fortunate! Then you can't be in a hurry back. And just now everything is full up. It promises to be a splendid season.' His voice, his whole air, is full of vitality. 'How long are you going to remain?'

'I hardly know.' Even fainter grows her tone.

'In leading-strings, then, of course! Who are you with?'

'I am married,' says she slowly.

'Married!'

'I am with Anthony!'

There is a moment's silence, that, for her, seems to contain a year's suspense.

'By Jove!' says he. And then, 'Anthony!' He is too surprised to say more. Verschoyle, of all men on earth!

'Lucky Anthony!' exclaims he presently, with a would-be rueful glance. Though, now that she is really beyond his reach, she seems to him all at once fairer, lovelier. And what a fetching gown that is she is wearing! Yes, she is prettier than he ever had believed her. Was she as pretty as that in the old days? 'You might at least have written to let me know,' he goes on, in an aggrieved tone. Not that he feels in the least aggrieved—a little chagrined, perhaps, no more; but all pretty women like to think one pines for them for ever. And besides, for the life of him, he cannot suppress the suggestion of passionate admiration, the cheap suspicion of eternal adoration, that he has been accustomed to lay at the feet of those whom for the moment he admires. 'But I know'—meaningly—'writing is not much in your line. Sometimes even you do not condescend to answer a letter that might be of importance to the *sender*, at all events—do you? At least, so I have found it. But'—reproachfully—'after all that *once* was between us'—effective pause—'you might, at least, have allowed me the small satisfaction of sending you a wedding-present.'

Cecil makes no answer. A wave of indignation has crossed her face. What had passed between them? If he remembers. . . . Then to speak to her like this. . . . It is a direct insult. Why is not Anthony here?

'So it was Verschoyle all the time,' says Fenton. 'How quiet you kept it! But do you think that secrecy was quite fair to me?'

'Sidney!' cries she sharply. There is anger, pain, and something else, in her voice. It is either regret or some faint shadow of it.

'Oh, of course, I know. I must say nothing now, and Anthony is your husband, and he is the one superlative in the world, and the rest of it.' He laughs a little disagreeably, and shrugs his shoulders. This *épanchement* is growing a little troublesome. 'And Anthony, I confess, is as good a sort as one is likely to meet. And rich. You did very well, very wisely, when you elected to throw me over!'

'I!' Her voice sounds stifled. 'What do you mean? Why say such stupid things? Is it a jest? I—you say—*I* threw you over?'

'At all events,' says he, a little curtly, nettled by her manner, 'you might have had the courtesy to answer my last letter.'

A long pause.

'Your letter?' She has taken a step towards him; her eyes are fixed on his.

'The letter I wrote you the day before I left.'

'Ah! you are thinking of some other letter—some other friend,' says she, smiling, but very pale.

'I am not, indeed. I wrote you a letter, and gave it into safe hands, to be delivered to you within an hour. I waited all the next day for the answer to it; but, you see'—with a shrug—'you were bent on refusing me.'

'Refusing you!' she stammers. Her face is like death now, her eyes looking unnaturally large in the pallor of their surroundings. 'This letter, then——' Her voice fails her.

'Held the presumptuous hope that you would deign to marry me.' He laughs a little. 'I told you in it, that if you did not mean to say "Yes," you were not to answer it. Well, you evidently did not mean "Yes."'

'No opportunity was given me to say "Yes" or "No,"' says she, in a low, strange voice; 'because I never got your letter.'

'No? . . . You mean to say you never got it!' exclaims he involuntarily. Then, as if recollecting, he stops suddenly; and, because the worst people have their good moments, he begins to wish his tongue had been cut out before he began this thing.

'Where did you post it?' asks she coldly.

'Post it?' He stops; his hesitation at this critical moment is fatal. ''Pon my word I can't remember.'

'Ah, *I* remember now,' says she sharply; 'you said you gave it to someone to send on to me.'

'*Did* I?'

'To whom?'—peremptorily. And as he hesitates—'To whom?' she repeats, with icy determination. Her usually pale complexion is now a dreadful white.

'One of the servants,' says Fenton hastily.

'That is a lie,' returns she very quietly. 'You gave it to no servant. It was to Anthony you gave it.' She waits for a moment. 'Speak!' cried she at last.

He makes a violent gesture of denial, that only the more confirms her in her awful belief.

'Not another word,' says she. 'It is quite plain, quite clear. It was Anthony to whom you gave it.'

'He must have forgotten it, then—mislaid it,' says Fenton with agitation. To do him justice, he would not have betrayed Anthony wilfully to gain any object on earth. 'I'd swear by Verschoyle,' says he. 'He is incapable of a dishonourable action.'

'So it seems.' She looks full at Fenton, and her smile is very bitter. 'Tell me one thing, however: Did he know the contents of your letter?'

'No! On my honour. No!' says Fenton, lying very readily and pleasantly.

Cecil, passing him, goes *not* to her room, but back again to the drawing-room, to wait for the return of her husband.

Much relieved by the speedy termination of what had threatened to be a scene, Fenton, stepping into the lift, gives way to thoughts. Verschoyle, of all fellows! By Jove! he'd never have believed it. Last man on earth to do a thing like that. Gone on her himself, of course; but . . . a low sort of trick like that! And Tony, who took rather a high tone. Well, you never can say what a man will do when a woman is in question.

Maden Royce, though she had confessed, or, rather, flung in his teeth, the fact that she had deliberately listened on the balcony, outside the library window at The Towers, to the reading of his letter to Miss Fairfax, had for all that withheld a good deal. For example, she had said nothing of her interview with Verschoyle, or of—a few other things.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

> 'Ah, yet would God that stems and roots were bred
> Out of my weary body and my head;
> That sleep were sealed upon me with a seal,
> And I were as the least of all the dead!'

ANTHONY, a few minutes later, coming up in the very lift that had taken Fenton down, walks smartly up the corridor to the pretty drawing-room, an extremely large and unfashionable parcel in his hands. He had refused to have it sent. He would take it himself, he said, and the man, though a little surprised at his wanting to drive about town with half a dozen pair of shoes, as they were paid for, after a struggle gave in.

'Here still, darling?' says he as he enters the room . . . then stops.

Is *this* the girl he had left, the gentle, shy, almost loving girl—this white, proud creature, whose glance is a stab? He flings the parcel on to a table near, and goes straight up to her. All at once he knows. His sin, if it was a sin, has found him out.

'Don't come nearer,' says she, in a very low tone. And then: 'Where is the letter Sidney gave you for me the night before he left Hillesden?'

She is searching his face, with eager, burning eyes. God only knows what hope was in her mind before he came; but, whatever it was, it is now dashed to pieces. He starts perceptibly, and a dark red suffuses his face for a moment. It goes, and leaves him ghastly.

'You got it then,' says she, in a terrible tone.

She shrinks back from him, scorn, horror, contempt, upon her face. She seems taller than she did half an hour ago . . . such a *little* time. And so stern, so unforgiving, and . . . so beautiful.

'Yes.'

'You'—with still some small hope in her wide, questioning eyes—'you didn't know what was in it, however?'

'Yes, I knew what was in it.'

A pause, during which her whole life tumbles to atoms at her feet—

'Battlements and wall,
And gates, and bridge, and all,
And nothing left.'

'You knew?'

'Yes, I knew!'

He does not lower his eyes before hers. It seems, indeed, as if he cannot take his eyes off her. So this is to be the end of it, he is saying to himself.

'You!' She chokes a moment. 'It is not true,' she says. 'He told me himself, only just now, that you did not know.'

'I'm afraid'—with a cold smile—'that also was untrue! You have seen Fenton, then?'

'Just now—outside there—in the corridor. I thank God I have. He'—she draws her breath sharply—'*said* you did not know.'

'He was very kind!' says Anthony, whose temper has now entirely deserted him. He—that devil—that *he* should be here to-night! Had he arranged for it?

'You say he lied?' says she.

'I said he was very kind.'

Cecil's hands clench involuntarily. What is she to believe—whom?

'Are all men liars, then?' cries she vehemently.

'I'm afraid you have not studied your Bible very diligently,' says Anthony, with a touch of insolent amusement.

At this moment he feels he could kill her . . . because he so passionately loves her.

'A taunt is not an answer,' says she. 'I ask you, is there no truth anywhere? Is all the world just one hideous, living lie? If *you* lie, and if *he* lies——' She breaks off. 'But for him . . . his lie at least was noble. He perjured himself to save you!'

A slow but strange sneer curves Anthony's lips.

'I told you he was kind,' says he.

'I don't believe he lied,' says Cecil suddenly. 'You say you knew what was in that letter?'

'One wastes time going over old ground like this.' He shrugs his shoulders. 'Yes, I knew.'

'Oh, impossible! *How* could you know, unless, indeed'—her face grows alive with scorn once more—'*you read it?*'

He looks at her, and there is something in his glance that

compels her to lower her eyes. Tall and slender as she is, he seems at this moment to tower over her.

'It is your privilege,' says he quite calmly, 'to insult me with impunity. No; I did not read it. It was read to me.'

'Read to you?'

'By Sidney himself. He read it aloud, to see if I approved of—his style, perhaps, before sending it. He knew you to be a little particular.'

Something here—some wretched touch of merriment born of the wretched situation—drives him into a most unseemly laugh. *She* to be particular, and to love that libertine!'

But she does not heed his laughter. She stares at him; her face has whitened.

'You say he read aloud to you the letter in which he asked me to marry him?'

'That very letter.'

'I can't believe you. I don't'—violently. 'You who could withhold a letter that did not belong to you, could say anything. You—who——'

Suddenly he turns upon her.

'How dare you!' says he in a low but furious tone, that makes her draw back. 'Take the truth as it is, but do not go beyond it. I got the letter to deliver—I did not deliver it. That is all.'

'It is not all!' cries she. She has recovered from the slight shock he has given her. 'There is more, much more to be said between us. You say, knowing the contents of that letter, that you deliberately kept it back from me, its rightful owner.'

'Deliberately.'

'But why—why?' demands she, throwing out her hands. She has advanced a step nearer to him, and her face, upraised to his, looks stricken as if by some mortal illness. To Verschoyle it is as a manifestation of her love for Fenton that has survived all things—and it maddens him. Had he only known it, she has not one thought for Fenton now. 'There must have been some reason, some excuse.'

'There was no excuse,' declares he heavily.

So it seems to him now, indeed, though at the moment he burned the letter he had been full of excuses for the act. Then it seemed almost a laudable deed—now it stands out red as a veritable crime. The horror, the awful wonder, in

her beautiful eyes makes more clear to him the enormity of it. Nothing could gloss over or condone the fact that he had kept back, and of set will burned, a letter meant for another; kept it back, too, after its having been entrusted to him—after his promise given that it should be delivered to her for whom it was written.

It had seemed quite a simple thing, only yesterday, to assure himself that when he put that letter in the fire he had done it for *her* sake, for *her* good; to save her from a scoundrel, a libertine, and one who had openly declared he felt no real affection for her—not even friendship!

But now all such past reasoning seems but as specious pleading for a lost cause. And yet, and yet—he would do it all over again, if it had to be done, for her sake.

'None!' She is trembling now from head to foot. 'You can stand there and tell me that!'

He is quite silent; and racked and torn by her torment, her enforced calm gives way.

'For God's sake say something!' she bursts out desperately. 'Say, at least, that there was a *reason*.'

She has drawn closer to him. There is still anger and condemnation in her eyes, but with them a strong appeal. In his present passionate rage against her and Fate and all things, he can see nothing but the condemnation. Well, so be it. She has elected to believe that hound's lightest word against her lifelong knowledge of him. She shall abide by her choice. A reason! Truly there had been a reason. And a strong one. The base betrayal of *another* woman by the man whom she, Cecil, even *now* delights to honour! If he could lay bare the whole truth to her at this moment, the triumph would lie with him—the humiliation with her.

But his oath to Maden lies heavy on him. Her pale, miserable, revengeful face rises before him in even this supreme moment—a face that had trusted him. No, he will not disclose her confidence. He has sunk low enough; he will sink no further. He will not give away a woman's secret to save himself.

'There was a reason, but I cannot give it to you.'

'To me! Now! At this moment! You have a reason that might explain everything, and you refuse to give it!'

Her breath is coming hard and heavily. It is her very life she is fighting for. If this man is really base and unworthy,

what lies before her? Nothing, save modern slavery; save to be tied—bound for ever—to a man whose own lips have branded him as liar and traitor.

'I refuse,' says he.

'You compel me to believe, then, that you deliberately kept back that letter for purposes of your own?'

'I compel you to nothing.'

His voice takes a harsher note.

'You compel me to think'—icily—'that you did this dishonourable thing to further your own aims, to gain your own ends, to—marry me *and my fortune*.'

If, in the bitterness of her spirit, she had meant to crush him, she has failed. He laughs contemptuously.

'Why should I want your fortune?' says he. 'That taunt might touch the man you love; it cannot come near me. There is no excuse for me, not one. I have told you that. But I burned that letter, not because'—with a smile that seems to scorch her—'I desired your fortune, but because I loved you. You were my very life, as you well know.' Were! Her heart hardens. 'Indeed, at that time I would willingly have sacrificed my life for you.'

'And'—her voice vibrating with contempt—'your honour, too, it seems.'

'True'—coldly. 'I find I have sacrificed both. May I ask what you propose to do?'

'Do?'

'Do you'—coldly—'desire a separation?'

'Not an open one,' returns she in a stifled tone. 'Think of all that would be said—the talk—the scandal—and your mother. I would not break her heart.'

'No! Only mine'—grimly. 'My mother is still in favour, then? As for me——' He pauses. Suddenly his face grows dark; he takes a step towards her. 'You forget I am your husband,' says he in a voice impossible to translate.

At this her courage, all the angry strength that was in her, dies away. She grows as pale as ashes. A low, quivering, shocked cry breaks from her.

'My husband! Oh no—no, no!'

There is such concentrated fear, such horror, such intense loathing, in her whole air, that Verschoyle, turning on his heel, leaves the room, and the house.

When he is gone Cecil creeps towards a table, and now,

utterly unstrung, flings herself into a chair near it, burying her face upon her arms. Some of her lovely hair has come unbound, and flows over the prone arms. She looks like what she is, an image of despair.

Yet, through this violent distress—this knowledge that already her young life has come to a most dishonourable end—a little thrill of relief lightens her burden.

He—Sidney—had not been untrue, then. He had not humiliated her in her own eyes. He *had* asked her to marry him. He *had* desired her as his wife.

Her self-respect seems all at once given back to her—resuscitated, as it were. But, and here her thoughts grow dark again, her anger rises afresh. All this past misery she has endured ; the silent misery of the woman who believes herself slighted by the man whom she has deigned to love—all this must be laid to the charge of the man who has married her. He it was who had made her suffer as she did. To him are due the long sleepless nights of waiting—wondering ; the cruel nights that told her she had been too tender in her manner to Sidney, that he had but amused himself with her, leaving her when it suited him to find others, fairer, dearer. Dear Heaven ! what nights those had been, and how she had suffered ! Would a lifetime blot out the memory of them, or help her to forgive the man who had caused them ?

No—a thousand times no ! She stands up, flinging back the loosened, beautiful hair from her haggard face. She may live with him before the public to save appearances—she is not of those who would court the curiosity of the crowd—but for the rest——

She moves impatiently, and her arm coming in contact with the brown parcel on the table that Anthony had brought to her, it rolls heavily to the ground and breaks open.

Out of one of the white boxes a little pair of shoes fall helplessly. Mechanically she picks them up.

Shoes—and for her ! shoes—and how pretty ! Was that what was in his hand as he came in—shoes for her ?

Her hands have grown very cold. She turns the pretty things backwards and forwards absently. He has good taste. And how well he knew what she would like. . . . He must have studied her. . . . He had seemed glad as he came in. . . . Such beautiful shoes—and for her !

CHAPTER XLIX.

> 'My heart is sad and heavy
> In this merry month of May,
> As I stand beneath the lime-tree
> On the bastion old and gray.'

Once again spring, that 'goeth all in white,' is with us, and the whole wide world is decked with happy smiles. The land is 'scattered with light,' and from tree to tree, from bush to eave, the sounds of merry twitterings echo and re-echo. So warm it is to-day, that all the buds of yesterday are nearly blown, and in the orchards

> 'The apple-trees in May,
> Whose green leaves make a little, tender night,
> With flowers for stars,'

are making the hours more lovely.

The close of this most heavenly May is near at hand, and the Verschoyles, who have been home from their honeymoon quite a month—it had been a shorter honeymoon than was anticipated by Hillesden—are now already acknowledged by that dignified spot as 'quite married people.' It was Mrs. Langley-Binks who had said that, and there had been a little unpleasantness between her and Mrs. Berkeley over it. The latter, who is always troublesome, had asked her with a suspiciously innocent thirst for knowledge, when people might consider themselves *quite* married? A month was it, or a week? And was there really a time fixed for it by the Lord Chamberlain, who had to do with all our morals?

Mrs. Langley-Binks had contented herself by going into hysterics, and saying she was indecent, and it all blew over eventually. But it quite crowded out the election excitement at Hillesden whilst the quarrel lasted.

The Verschoyles, whose return had been looked forward to with much eagerness, proved disappointing. They were not shy and blushing, and mutually adoring, but terribly sedate from the very first. There had been no lovers' ecstasies at odd moments, no half-concealed (but perfectly seen) pretty meaning glances from one to the other. The dinner-parties had not proved too long for them, and there had not been a

suspicion of their desiring to leave early the few balls given in their honour.

'A very sensible pair,' said some up-to-date New Woman. 'A most unloverlike pair,' said Lady Maria, in her own old heart, that of late has begun to feel older, and very sad.

To-day she is giving an 'at-home,' 'just to brighten up the people, dearest,' she says to Mrs. Verschoyle, who agrees with her that it will be a good thing, whilst knowing in her heart that Lady Maria is giving this party, and has given many others lately, solely with a view to studying Anthony and his wife when together. She has not had many opportunities during the past month of seeing her son, Anthony's visits to his mother being now very few and very uncertain. Is he afraid of having his secret read by those clever, loving old eyes?

He has come rather early to-day with Cecil, who seems in charming spirits, if one can forget the little touch of chill that has dropped into her air since her marriage. She is exquisitely, faultlessly dressed, and her hair is in the very latest fashion. She had always gowned herself well, but since her return she has shown herself positively extravagant over her frocks. Her trousseau—Lady Maria and Mrs. Verschoyle and the other privileged few had seen her trousseau, which was a vision of beauty—a trousseau not so many weeks old, has been discarded, and on several occasions, such as to-day, she has appeared in entirely fresh costumes; Anthony alone knows why.

'Straight from Worth,' says Mrs. Berkeley, who perhaps, in wealthier days, knew, surveying her through her long glasses.

At all events, the young Mrs. Verschoyle is the admired of all beholders—if scarcely the Cecil they had known before, very pale, very tall ('Has she grown?' asks Mrs. Langley-Binks), very beautiful, and very, very cold.

'What on earth has happened to her?' asks Mr. Browne of his one confidant—himself. Mr. Browne, like spring, has once again 'come up this way.' Last night he arrived at The Towers, causing a considerable skirmish there amongst the domestics, because of the fact that he had forgotten his luggage at the last junction—a disturbance only allayed by the arrival of a porter later on with all his goods and chattels on a truck—and getting a glimpse at things as they are at The Towers, he is now struggling in his own wise way to work out

the situation. His hostess is indeed so changed, that the elucidation of the mystery grows enthralling. 'Good heavens! perhaps somebody will marry me some day!' says Dicky, falling into melancholy. 'And if I get changed as much as Cecil, what the deuce will be the end of me?' Visions of ropes hang before him.

Not only Dicky, but many of her old friends wonder vaguely at this change in her. Still, she is always delightful, to-day especially, speaking to this one and to that, with a careful sweetness that should have disarmed criticism; and, indeed, it is only now, when nearly all the guests are gone, and she is standing on the terrace outside Lady Maria's drawing-room, that she lets the strange, new, perplexing look settle down once more upon her face—a face that used to be so noted for its gentleness, above and beyond all other pretty traits.

Anthony, in the grounds below, is still speeding his mother's departing guests, and Mr. Browne, who—with Jinnie, who is his shadow—is with her, marks how her eyes follow him.

'Awfully good-looking fellow, Anthony!' says he. 'Got such a nice head. Takes breeding to show a head like that.'

'Does it?' Her tone is indifferent.

'So I've heard, any way. But hearing is always a fraud. Still, I maintain that your husband, if not exactly handsome, could give many other fellows points——'

'Could he? His nose is a little too long, don't you think?'

''Tis a very *nice* nose,' says Jinnie suddenly, and with much force. 'It'—with deplorable rudeness—'is twice as nice as yours!'

With this parting shaft she walks indignantly down the terrace, and at the end of it sits on an upturned flower-pot, and, from her expression, plainly gives herself up to thoughts entirely misogynistic.

'"Give me a man with a nose,"' quotes Dicky. 'That's what the Duke of Wellington *didn't* say.'

'I'm sure he did say it,' says Carry, who has just come up in time to hear the last sentence. 'And if it's Tony's nose you're talking of, I like it. You do, too, don't you?'—to Cecil.

'If you ask me'—with a charming but supercilious smile—'I really don't.'

'No?'

'No!'—still smiling.

Carry, who is often very dreadful, regards her with lowering brows.

'Well, I do,' says she. 'In fact, I can't see any fault in him at all.'

'Ah!'

It is the faintest breath, but so full of meaning that both Mr. Browne and Carry instinctively glance at her. She is as calm as ever, and returns Carry's penetrating glance with one of amusement.

'Can you?' demands the terribly direct Carry.

'Dear Carry, *what* a question! Of *course* not,' says Anthony's wife calmly.

She fixes her eyes on Carry, and the latter, still frowning, turns abruptly and goes away.

'It is difficult to please everybody,' says Cecil, looking after her. 'I have offended you because I do not admire Anthony's nose! I have offended Carry because I say I see no fault in him! I am unfortunate.'

'Girls, as a rule, are fools,' says Mr. Browne amiably. 'We must try and forgive her; and you can see for yourself that you rather riled her over Anthony. Girls go in for ecstasies, don't you know. They expect even married people to say out just what they think. But I understand——' He pauses, and looks straight at her. 'Of course, *I* know you really think his nose adorable, and that he himself is not only one in a thousand, but the most delightful, the most honourable, man on earth.'

He is watching her closely. She turns slowly until her eyes meet his, then she lowers her lids. Her lip curls, and an intense scorn betrays itself on every feature.

'Honourable!' says she.

For a moment there is silence. Then suddenly she turns to him, that strange, unhappy smile again upon her lips.

'Why do you praise him to me? Do you think I don't appreciate him sufficiently—that I don't know his worth? Oh'—with a touch of cruel irony—'I do, I assure you. Do you know'—laughing, a most imperfect laugh—'you remind me of the Athenians of old, who sang the praises of their uncertain heroes with a view to making them popular with the crowd. Has Anthony, in your opinion, sunk so low as that?'

'Look here Cecil,' says Dicky Browne, 'I've known you a

long time, haven't I? I may say a word to you, eh, without——'

'Oh, it is useless,' says she quickly; 'I have known that you saw——' She breaks off abruptly.

'I have seen only that you and Verschoyle are not very happy. I desire to see no more.'

'There is no more to see'—coldly. 'We are not happy; we never shall be until death releases one of us. I say this to you, Dicky, because I know what I say to you is sacred. I shall, however, say no more. And'—with a fresh touch of agitation—'do not try to help us. You—Heaven itself could not!'

'Of course, I don't know where the thorn lies,' says Dicky; 'but to think of you or Anthony being miserable all your days seems too much for me. There must be some solution of this mystery. . . . I don't want to know what it is, but I do want to think that happiness still lies before you.'

'Happiness for *me?*' Her tone is now again quite low, and comparatively calm. 'Don't hope for that. Happiness for me is over. My life is over. Hope is dead.'

'Hope never dies,' says Mr. Browne.

'No?' She smiles faintly. 'Then Hope has gone to live with some more fortunate mortal; he no longer has his home with me. I tell you so much very frankly, because I cannot hide it. You have seen that we are not as—as'—stammering a little—'other people are. But what I have said to you now I have said to no one else, and——'

She looks at him intently.

'I have forgotten every word you have said,' says Dicky gravely.

At this moment someone inside the drawing-room calls out to Cecil to come in and have some tea.

'Some fresh tea, Cecil, now that all these tiresome people have gone,' says Mrs. Verschoyle at the window. 'Will you stay there or come in?'

'Come in,' returns Cecil pleasantly, stepping lightly across the terrace and into the room.

Anthony is sitting next his mother, talking to her, and the latter notices that he does not cast so much as a glance at the cold, beautiful creature who is his wife, as she enters the room.

'Take some tea to Cecil, Jinnie dearest,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, nodding and smiling at Cecil as she does so.

There has been a little lull in the conversation going on, so that Jinnie's answer rings out loud and clear.

'No, I won't!' says that criminal, in a prompt and awful tone.

'Jinnie!'—a low but dreadful protest from her mother.

'No, I won't—I won't ever—so there!' Jinnie is now wearing out the pattern on the carpet by a mad tattoo with her revengeful little feet. 'I hate her, I do! She said Tony's nose was too long.'

Silence falls upon the room.

'Oh, nonsense, darling!' says Mrs. Verschoyle presently. Her laugh is very nervous. 'What have you got in your head now?'

'She did!'—excitedly—'she did! I heard her; and I won't have anyone call Tony's nose ugly!'

Suddenly, like a little whirlwind, she rushes to Verschoyle, and, flinging her lanky arms around his neck, looks back with stormy eyes at Cecil, who has grown very pale.

Anthony makes a very handsome attempt at laughter.

'What a little partisan!' says he.

He draws Jinnie towards him very kindly, although he is conscious of a distinct pang caused by the child's words. Abject folly, he tells himself, yet not to be subdued. Plain he undoubtedly is; but, then, she need not have flaunted the fact that she thought so thus openly before their world. Fenton, of course, is considered handsome. Had her thoughts flown to him when she thus criticised her husband's looks? And how unlike her it all is!

His uncomfortable laughter dies away, and his face hardens. He bends it over Jinnie, who is still standing near him, an arm thrown round him, her attitude a desperate defiance of the world that dares to calumniate her Tony.

'I have one defender, at all events,' says he.

Involuntarily his eyes meet his wife's, who turns abruptly away. She had been watching him, and remorse, and some other feeling, is writ large upon her face. Is it self-contempt? With a sudden horror of herself, and as sudden a hatred of Jinnie, that she never afterwards quite gets over, she sinks gracefully into a chair close to the window, and waits on events.

'Oh, you have!' says Jinnie, who is a frightfully troublesome and mistaken little person, clinging even closer to him.

Verschoyle gently undoes her arms.

'But, you see, I scarcely need you,' says he. 'Your aunt has proved her preference for ugly people by doing me the honour to marry me.'

Again he looks straight at Cecil, a little defiantly, perhaps; and she looks back at him very disdainfully, beyond all doubt.

'I think you are slightly in fault, Jinnie,' says she, with a cold, calm smile. 'I said, and now I regret it, that your uncle's nose was, I thought, a little too long—not ugly. I do not remember using that word.'

She is so pale as she finishes this sentence that Mr. Browne makes a slight step towards her. But in another moment she is herself again, and is laughingly putting by Mrs. Verschoyle's apologies for her little daughter's indiscreet speech.

The whole affair indeed, awkward as it is, is at an end; but, slight as it is, it leaves an uncomfortable impression behind it, and a silence with which no one seems capable of dealing except Dicky Browne, who at times is really invaluable. Seeing Jinnie once more going to assert herself, he takes the initiative, and plunges into the void before she can speak.

'Jane!' cries he in a loud and shocked tone, 'come here!'

He has ensconced himself in the most magisterial of the chairs in the room, and is holding on his knee a book—a very delightful and charming book, that has afforded pleasure to many thousands of children—on which he has been hastily working with a pencil. It is a much-illustrated book, and the present holder of it is pointing to its cover with undisguised concern.

'Look at this,' says he, tapping the book sternly. 'Is it this sort of literature that Miss Sterling recommends to you?'

'That's "Aunt Louisa's Book of Nursery Rhymes,"' says Jinnie, who really ought to have gone beyond such pleasing trivialities, but has not. At times she has fits of devotion for 'The frog who would a-wooing go,' and 'The fox and his wife they had a great strife.' She speaks with a little puzzled air.

'Look again, my dear child,' says Dicky sadly, who has put a large *C* in pencil before the Rhymes. 'Surely, surely, Jinnie, at your age you can read? Is that word Rhymes? To me it

is Crhymes: "Aunt Louisa's Book of Nursery Crhymes!" Alas! what pernicious reading for the young!'

''Tisn't that,' says Jinnie, ''tis Rhymes.'

'Crhymes'—firmly. 'And in my opinion Aunt Louisa is the biggest crime of all. Such a book to let loose in any nursery. I haven't looked inside; I was afraid. But, seriously, Jane, I think someone ought to speak to Aunt Louisa, don't you?'

'No, I don't'—violently. 'She's lovely. And besides——'

'She doesn't spell lovely,' says Mr. Browne. 'I can't help feeling that the *h* and the *y* are too superfluous.' He points them out to her.

''Twas Rhymes always,' says Jinnie.

'Was it?'—thoughtfully. 'It isn't so now. Jane! will you compel me to believe you don't even know your *letters?* And such a big, big *C!* I shall have to speak to Miss Sterling, mildly, but firmly. She is not doing you justice.'

''Twas you put that *C* there,' declares Jinnie, who is now regularly on the war-path.

'This is depravity,' says Mr. Browne mournfully, 'and arises, no doubt, from a constant perusal of "Aunt Louisa's Nursery Crhymes." I shall write to her about her morals, and especially her spelling. However, my poor misguided child, as I have known you and loved you for so many years, I shall not betray your sad secret to the world just now. You shall be let off this time, to come up when called upon.

"Though lost to shame, to memory dear."

Far be it from me, Jane, to send you to a lonely cell! As for Aunt Louisa——'

He rises.

'Where are you going?' asks Jinnie anxiously.

'To find the kitchen fire. Flames alone can purify Aunt Louisa's crimes.'

'You shan't burn my book, you shan't!' cries Jinnie furiously. 'Mammy, mammy!' calling to her mother in her distress, 'he is going to burn Aunt Louisa!'

'No, Jane,' says Mr. Browne austerely; 'though I think she richly deserves it, I am not going to burn Aunt Louisa. Why should I? She was evidently born to be hanged. You should keep to the strict truth, my infant. Not Aunt Louisa, but her book, is to be consigned to the flames.'

'Well, I won't let you, I won't!' cries Jinnie, hanging on to his arm like a little vampire.

'My dear Dicky, what are you doing now?' asks Mrs. Verschoyle, coming up to them.

'Looking after Jinnie's morals,' says Mr. Browne with much dignity.

He had, however, created the diversion he desired.

CHAPTER L.

'Mine eye also is dim by reason of sorrow.'

Lady Maria, who has worked away at her knitting with almost feverish energy for quite five minutes after they are gone, now lays down her arms. Her task, perhaps, had proved too much for her, gallant as her old soul is.

'The marriage has been a failure, Jane,' says she, very simply and sadly, addressing Mrs. Verschoyle, who has lingered in the drawing-room after the departure of their guests, knowing the turmoil that is disturbing the sorrowful heart of Anthony's mother. At this she comes quietly to Lady Maria, and, kneeling down beside her, lays one hand with a half-embracing gesture round her.

'Yes, my dear—a failure,' says Lady Maria. All her wonderful vivacity is gone. Indeed, her beautiful old hands, that had been a toast, or something equivalent to that, in the last generation, tremble so much that she has to put them and the beloved knitting into her lap.

'Oh, I can't, I won't believe it!' cries Mrs. Verschoyle, almost as much agitated. 'Good heavens! what a happy thing it seemed—their marriage, I mean—and now . . . You remember, don't you, how Cecil before it looked so bright, so happy, so contented. You must remember, too, my saying to you that I thought she was much more in love with Tony than she herself knew?'

Lady Maria nods her head sadly.

'Did you notice,' says she, 'that whenever she addressed him—which was very seldom—she called him Anthony, not Tony! Anthony! and so coldly! Jane, some terrible thing

has happened, to separate them — to destroy their young lives!'

She stops. To Mrs. Verschoyle's astonishment, a mist of tears dims the keen old eyes.

'Don't be so unhappy about it, dearest,' whispers she, gently slipping both arms round her. 'There may be a misunderstanding of some sort, and . . . I think there is . . . But it may come right in the end.' She says it quite faithfully, but her tone has no hope in it, no life.

'To dwell upon that, Jane, is only to make one more miserable at the last,' says Lady Maria, who has read her plainly. 'I can see'—sorrowfully—'you think as I do. Jane'—suddenly—'come closer to me, my darling!'

She hesitates, as if uncertain how to go on, and a wave of colour sweeps across Mrs. Verschoyle's face. Though she knows Lady Maria is devoted to her, expressions of affection are very rare with the older woman; and, indeed, she has always treated Mrs. Verschoyle more as a friend, a *bonne camarade,* than a daughter, until now, when the grief that is consuming her breaks down all barriers, and lays bare her soul and her real love for the wife of the son who had been beloved beyond all the world.

'Come closer, Jane!' Mrs. Verschoyle, who is really at her feet, drags her cushion nearer to her. 'Have you noticed?' says Lady Maria, taking Mrs. Verschoyle's hand into her own trembling, feverish clasp. 'Have you ever listened when she is speaking to him? . . . So coldly, dearest, as if—as if she hated him. Jane!' in a frightened tone, 'what does it mean, my dear? Does she—does she hate him?'

'Oh, no, no!'—in great distress, the greater in that once or twice the same thought had come to herself. 'How could she hate him? dear, kind fellow, darling Tony! Oh, impossible!'

'She does,' says Lady Maria; the firm, rather authoritative voice sounds very feeble—very tired. 'Oh, my poor boy, my pretty Tony! You didn't know him when he was a tiny creature, Jane, with his hair so soft and so curly. Not so handsome as George, ever—but very, very pretty, and so manly. God forgive me if I loved his brother better than I loved him. If . . . I don't feel so sure about it now, Jane. Now, when I see that strange look upon his face, that dread-

ful pretence at gaiety, and his dear eyes so sad all the time . . . and his voice——'

'Mother dearest!' Mrs. Verschoyle's arms press her closer. 'Do not think of it like that. There is a mistake of some sort, some miserable misunderstanding, but it will all come right some day. No one could hate Anthony—no one could fail to love him.'

Lady Maria shakes her head.

'You are a good girl, Jane' (Mrs. Verschoyle will always be a girl to Lady Maria), 'the best; but I . . . know! He is in terrible trouble! I see it, I feel it.' Suddenly she begins to tremble. 'I wouldn't mind anything, Jane, if he didn't try to *look* happy. Oh'—bursting all at once into the slow, painful tears of old age—'that horrible trying! it cuts to my very heart. What can I *do* for him, Jane?'

'You will be quite ill if you go on like this,' says Mrs. Verschoyle tenderly, anxiously. 'Now consider; you are only imagining all this. Matters cannot be so bad as you suppose. For one thing, to do Cecil justice, I don't think she would wilfully be unkind to——'

Lady Maria's tears cease on the spot. She sits up stiffly.

'Don't name that heartless creature to me!' says she with cold anger. 'I dare say, for Anthony's sake, I shall manage to be civil to her *openly*. But——'

The 'but' is ominous.

CHAPTER LI.

'Last year, a brief while since, an age ago,
A whole year past, with bud and bloom and snow,
O moon that wast in heaven, what friends were we!'

To-night The Towers is *en fête*. Anthony, in one of the few interviews he permits himself with his wife, had suggested the desirability of returning the hospitality that her neighbours had showered upon them since their return from their honeymoon, and Cecil, coldly, had told him she wondered why he had not thought of it before. He might have given a very efficient answer to that question, but he did not. Her

coldness, her continued disdain, had, if she only knew it, left him dull to present duties.

But what should the return be? Even the most incessant list of dinner-parties did not seem equal to filling the void. 'Give them a dance,' suggested Amyot one day, when he was lunching with them. Oddly enough, Amyot is the one person in Hillesden to whom Cecil has been almost her own self since her return, if one excepts Mr. Browne—and he in quite a different way—and she caught on at once to his suggestion. Yes, a dance it should be!

Anthony, coldly acquiescent, utterly indifferent to anything once the world's eyes are off him, had nodded his head at that luncheon; and all at once the thermometer runs up at Hillesden in the hearts of all the young men and maidens there.

The dance is established.

* * * * *

The beautiful old reception-rooms are to-night ablaze with roses. The heart of the summer has reached us now, and

> 'From the depths of the green garden-closes,
> Where Summer in darkness dozes,
> Till Autumn pluck from his hand
> An hour-glass that holds not a sand;
> From the maze that a flower-belt encloses
> To the stones and sea-grass on the strand,
> How red is the reign of the roses
> Over the rose-crowned land!'

Roses, roses everywhere to-night in the old Towers, the greatness, the sweetness of them taking one captive at every turn. The gardeners had revolted a little at the onslaught on their flowers, but Cecil had had her own way, and the beautiful old house is filled all through with many-coloured roses, brought not only from the houses and grounds at The Towers, but from those at her own home at Fairtown.

She has come down now, although it is early still. But, then, she has grown restless of late, and a little impatient. Lady Maria, who, with her party (as is her wont on big occasions at her son's house), had driven over in the afternoon to dine and dress here, is, however, before her, with Mrs. Verschoyle—*and* Jinnie, who had been specially asked by Anthony, to please his mother.

Cecil, advancing up the library slowly, indifferently, stops

beneath a chandelier to pull up one of her long gloves. Beautiful always, she has surpassed herself to-night ; yet she is very plainly dressed. A white satin gown (*not* her wedding-gown), and only one little string of pearls around her neck—the latter a gift from her father in her girlish days. Of all the costly gifts her husband had lavished on her before her marriage, not one is to be seen.

'She might at least have worn the tiara,' thinks Mrs. Verschoyle bitterly ; she knows that the entire county who will be assembled here to-night had either seen or heard of that beautiful diamond thing, and would be on the *qui vive* to see it.

Lady Maria, after a courteous but cold greeting of her son's wife, drops back again into a pretended interest in the book she holds. She, too, had noted the *meant* simplicity of Cecil's attire, the utter want of ornament, save that one string of pearls, which, indeed, is almost priceless, but had not been given by the bridegroom. She has noted, too, with the eye of a connoisseur where beauty is concerned, that Cecil's haughty loveliness is sufficient for her, without any outside aid.

Jinnie, however, childlike—children are always slaves to beauty—has rushed up at once to Cecil, and, looking at her, breathes softly :

'Oh, you are nice to-night! You are!'

Anthony, coming in here, goes straight to where his mother is sitting beneath the huge coloured shade of one of the lamps.

'What a vision!' says he, in the usual light style he affects just now—a lightness so sadly belied by the heaviness that rests always on his eyes. He smiles at her as he says it ; and, indeed, Lady Maria, in her magnificent gray brocade and her blaze of diamonds, is a charming picture that might well be called 'Age defying Decay.' 'Jinnie, come here and admire your grandmother.'

'I can't! I'm admiring *her*,' says Jinnie, pointing a lean little finger at Cecil. Jinnie has no manners, and, indeed, if one takes into consideration the shortness of her skirts to-night, very little clothes.

'Never mind,' says Anthony, in a whisper to his mother. 'You have at least one *stanch* admirer.' As he says this he stoops and kisses her.

Jinnie, as usual, sees everything.

'Why don't you kiss Cecil, too?' cries she. 'She's just as lovely.'

A sudden silence.

Cecil had turned crimson for a moment, but now is pale as death. Anthony alone preserves his calm.

'People do not, as a rule, kiss in public,' says he with perfect unconcern. 'I make your grandmother the exception.'

Once again an angry red flames in Cecil's face. 'Oh, ready liar!' cries she to her own heart. 'When do we kiss . . . in public or in private?' A great anguish crushes her heart, an anguish she cannot understand.

'They do,' says Jinnie earnestly. 'I saw Jones kiss Fanny to-day.' (Fanny and Jones are servants in Anthony's home.)

'What is to be done with Fanny and Jones?' austerely demands Mr. Browne, who has strolled in from the conservatory, and has caught a glimpse of Cecil's face. 'Such vulgarity ought to be checked.' To Jinnie: 'Are you certain of your assertion?'

'What's that?' asks Jinnie.

'No evasions'—sternly; 'are you sure that you saw Esau kissing Ka——, that is, Fanny kissing Jones?'

'No, 'twas Jones,' says Jinnie, with wide eyes.

'The same thing in the end,' says Mr. Browne thoughtfully.

'Well, he did,' says Jane defiantly. 'I saw him, and he kissed her so funny-like, too, just like Fancy'—her canary—'kisses me.'

'Chaste salute,' says Mr. Browne. 'I regret, however, Jane, to notice that you somewhat countenance the levity of Fanny and Jones. I put Fanny first, as I feel sure she is the principal culprit. Am I really to understand that you approve of kissing in public?'

''Twas in the hall,' says Jinnie vaguely.

'That is no answer, and silence gives consent. I shall therefore at once proceed to kiss you in public. For long I have awaited this moment.'

He makes two tremendous ogre-like strides towards her, whereupon a skirmish ensues that threatens danger not only to life and limb, but to all the crockeryware and small tables in the room.

I am bound to confess Jinnie gets the best of it. She, as a rule, is too much for most people, and presently Mr. Browne brings his chase to a breathless close, seeing that Cecil's face is now quite calm again.

'The conservatories are charming,' says he, stopping near Anthony. 'They are well worth a glance before they are crowded. Come and look at them. I think, however, one of the lamps is a little high. Perhaps'—glancing at Cecil—'your wife will come, too.'

'Will you?' asks Anthony, glancing coldly at his wife over his shoulder.

'I think not, thank you,' returns she. Her voice is politely contemptuous.

CHAPTER LII.

'Life is a jest, and all things show it:
I thought so once, and now I know it.'

The dancing is well begun now, and, indeed, so far has the evening advanced that the dowagers and the papas (who are playing whist in a charming little room, comfortably far from the sound of the band) are beginning to dream of supper. It is the hour when gossip is rife amongst the non-dancers, and the elderly ladies, are thawing towards each other, and growing confidential. After supper they will be much more so, but even now little priceless hints and innuendoes are passing from lip to lip.

The feature of the evening is Mrs. Berkeley, who has annexed a fresh victim. Nothing so smart as her Infantry boy (who, indeed, had been sufficiently smart to get himself removed to some station far, far away from Hillesden), but solid. The new man is the Anglo-Indian, Shine by name, stout by nature, and reported to be as rich as Crœsus.

He had seemed much attracted by Mrs. Berkeley's elderly young charms on the occasion of their first meeting, and indeed, according to Amyot, who has watched Mrs. Berkeley's progress from afar, no one else has been allowed so much as 'a look in,' ever since that memorable dinner-party. And, strange to say, in spite of all Mrs. Langley-Binks' efforts, and they

have been leviathan, Mr. Shine has never wavered in his devotion to the widow since that night—'Mrs. B.,' as he now familiarly calls her, being very vulgar, poor man! But then, after all, he *isn't* a poor man. So Hillesden major refuses to call him vulgar, whilst Hillesden minor is discreetly silent. The man is well connected on one side, and really, as Lady Maria says, 'if he will only marry Mrs. Berkeley, and take her away, a debt of gratitude will be due to him.'

* * * * *

'Carry,' says Amyot, who is dancing with Miss Desmond, 'come out here.' He draws her towards an open window where there are seats. 'I've got something to tell you. I'm going to propose to that girl to-night, or'—tragically—'never!'

'What courage you have!' says Carry. 'I—I had thought of saying "Yes" to Mr. Popkin to-night, but——'

'Oh, don't,' says Richie. 'He's such an ass.'

'I must, however. Everyone wants me to do it. And he has come. I fancied'—with a heavy sigh——'being a big dance, you know, that he *wouldn't* come, but here he is.'

'As large as life and as ugly as ever,' says Richie, a little viciously.

'Oh, don't mind me,' says she affectionately. 'Tell me about yourself. So you are really going to propose to her to-night?'

'Yes'—suddenly. 'I suppose so.'

At this moment he lifts his eyes, and sees Mrs. Langley-Binks swooping down upon him with all sails spread.

'Here is her mother. By Jove! I'm not equal to that. To be taken in tow by *her* is too much. Why can't she leave me alone?'

He looks round, as if for escape, and finds Dicky Browne at his shoulder. Now, Dicky is a born diplomatist, and Amyot, without a second's hesitation, flings himself upon his tender mercies.

'Look here, Dicky. Here's Mrs. Langley-Binks coming towards us. She wants me. But will you for a little while hold on to her?'

'My dear fellow, what a sensational request! Where am I to hold on? To what? However, *go*. I'll face the foe alone. But what am I to do?'

'*Scalp her,*' says Richie viciously.

'A hopeless job,' says Mr. Browne. 'And not to be done.

You might as well dream of taking the breeks off a Highlander. Her hair is false. There, go. She's coming.'

Whereon Richie flies.

With the courage of despair, Mr. Browne stands firm, and awaits the coming of Mrs. Langley-Binks with a truly noble fortitude.

'I've been watching you from afar,' says she, in her own gay little way, and with a laugh that shakes the room. It is a long laugh, and gives her the opportunity of looking round her north, east and west for the vanished Amyot. 'And you looked so solemn, so unlike your delightful self, so—haw! haw!—intense. As though this frivolity was a trouble to you—as if your thoughts were miles away!'

'Not quite so far as that,' says Mr. Browne sweetly, a little bashfully indeed.

'And how far then?' demands Mrs. Langley-Binks with an elephantine attempt at playfulness.

'Only in the next room,' says Dicky, as if very nervously this time. 'Your daughter, Mrs. Langley-Binks, I hear, is there.'

'Did you hear so? Dear me!' says she. 'But—— Haw, haw, haw!'

Again her dreadful laugh expands her lungs, and the people on the lawn outside stand and wonder whether really all this late heat is going to lead to thunder.

'You're so funny always, Mr. Browne.'

'Do you know, sometimes I think I am,' says Dicky sadly.

At which Mrs. Langley-Binks gives way to another alarming burst of mirth, and goes on to the next group in search of Amyot.

'I should think the villagers in the next hamlet are "sitting up" by this,' says Mr. Browne in a dazed tone. 'Seven-leagued boots I've heard of, but a seven-leagued laugh——'

'Belongs only to Mrs. Langley-Binks,' puts in Mrs. Berkeley at his elbow. 'Have you heard the latest about her? She was discovered yesterday singeing her hair to make it grow. Her false hair! She had asked—well, I think I ought not to mention names, but she had asked some people to luncheon. And she was a little late, don't you know. And she sent for them to come up to her room—such pretty familiarity, you know. And there, as if by chance, they saw the singeing. Very clever, don't you think, eh? When I have to come to

false hair'—she is covered with it—'I shan't call in my friends and neighbours to see it singed. Awful good story, however, eh? One doesn't often hear one as good as that, don't you think?'—turning to Mr. Shine, who seems convulsed with mirth.

'Come and have some cup,' says he.

'This is getting too much for me,' Mr. Browne murmurs sadly to himself. 'I would I were in my little bed.'

'Really, d'ye know, so do I,' says Mr. Popkin at his elbow. 'All these young ladies—you know, eh? a little too kind, don't you think? I—hee, hee!—have had such a run from them. I, too, I assure you, Mr. Browne, would be abed, where —hee, hee!—if I may without irreverence say so, "The wicked cease from troubling, and the weary"—*I'm* the "weary"'—with a fatuous smile—'"are at rest!"'

Mr. Browne turns a thoughtful eye upon him.

'Why don't you go, then?' says he, alluding to the little bed.

'Ah, think how I should be missed!' says the curate, throwing his head pathetically on one side.

At this Mr. Browne turns tail and makes with all speed for an open door. It is bad to pound a man to a jelly in a friend's rooms!

CHAPTER LIII.

> 'Neither sleep, nor bread, nor wine,
> Seems pleasant to me; yea, no thing that is
> Seems pleasant to me.'

Verschoyle has come straight across the ballroom to where his wife is standing.

'Will you dance this with me?' says he abruptly.

He hardly knows why he crossed the room, or why he is now asking her to dance with him. It was the impulse of a moment.

'I am very sorry'—she does not look at him—'but I'm afraid I am too tired. I have this moment refused Captain Fortescue.'

'Not so much as a dance!' says he with a mocking smile. 'Yet, surely, during your short lifetime you must have given

a dance to even greater miscreants than I am—in your sight!'

His half-contemptuous air irritates her.

'It is difficult to understand you,' says she coldly. 'You have so many moods.'

'I shall be plain, then. You prefer, perhaps, not to be seen with me.'

'That may be counted among the absurdities, surely. As' —with an insolent droop of her white lids—'I have to be seen with you every day.'

'You will give me this dance, then?'

His tone is utterly indifferent, and even subtly amused.

'Certainly not!'

'But why?'

'I have already told you—I am too tired.'

'We need not dance it.'

For a moment a frown settles on her forehead, and she pales.

'Why do you so insist?' asks she, a proud defiance in her eyes. 'However, I shall sit it out with you, if—if'—scornfully—'you think publicity of this sort so necessary.'

His lip curls.

'So far from that,' returns he, his tone still half humorous —wholly indifferent, 'I was going to suggest to you a turn or two in the gardens—you look pale and tired; the air may do you good—where no one can see us.'

'In the gardens! Ah!'—with a swift and eloquent glance behind her, where the many electric lights are turning night into day, and revealing the figures walking up and down. 'That is where the real publicity lies.'

There is something cynical, sarcastic, in her air. It sits so ill upon her that Verschoyle casts a quick glance at her—at the pale, cold, disdainful, faultless face. Her eyes are downcast, and the long, dark lashes lie like shadows on her cheeks. How pale she is! Is it only a momentary pallor, or—— An awful fear shoots through his heart.

'Let us court it, then,' says he quietly.

Outside, in the cool dry air, the rest may do her good. She looks as if she wanted rest—or is it happiness, or hope?

She makes no reply.

The night is exquisite with moon and stars, that make the elaborate electric lights below look small and tawdry.

Theatrical always, they look much more so now, with heaven's lights above them. It is a singularly bright night, and only here and there in little paths, quaintly hedged by evergreens on either side, dwells the darkness that should belong to night—the restful, the calm, the holy.

They have stopped now, far beyond the reach or hearing of the many animated couples who are making gay the walks beneath the electric lamps. Only the soft, sleeping lawn lies before them, sweet with its night's moisture. Cecil's eyes wander slowly over it, unseeing at first, but at last noting the little glistening drops that lie in the cups of the half-shut flowers, and that decorate each blade and stem.

It seems like an enchanted grove. The music for the moment has ceased, and the voices of those behind her are too far away to disturb this miraculous silence, that seems to have caught and held the world. Time stands now, indeed, upon the borderland that divides night from day in these soft summer hours, when

> 'The deep dreamlike dew before the dawn
> Feels not the fingers of the sunlight yet
> Its silver web unweave.'

A stray sad wave of thought, piercing like a sword through the delicious drowsiness of her thoughts, wakes her to a full consciousness of the misery of the life she is leading—the life she will have to lead till Heaven's mercy brings her death.

She turns to Verschoyle.

'Why have you brought me here? What is to be gained by it, for you—or me?'

'I did not think of gain.'

'You forget. It was for appearances' sake you brought me here; *that* was for gain—to prevent our neighbours talking. Oh, I put it plainly! But neither you nor I, should we try with all our wit, could prevent that. As for me'—she is trembling now, but her voice is resolute—'I am tired of it all. . . . The eternal, useless pretence . . . the stupid belief that we have hoodwinked everyone into regarding us as a model couple . . . loving and beloved——' She breaks off shortly, tightening each hand upon her gown until the storm be past. And she does conquer, but the victory leaves her very white and cold. 'I am tired of it,' says she again, in a

low voice. 'The task has proved too much for me. I can pretend no more!'

'You mean——'

If *her* face is white, his is ghastly. She hesitates; then all at once bursts out:

'Oh, let me go away—anywhere—*anywhere* where I cannot see you! This is killing me—the deceit of it—the perpetual strain!'

'Anywhere where I cannot see you!' The words seem to repeat themselves in a thousand numbers, as though some distant bell were sounding them upon his brain. The brain—poor buffer!—reels a little, then recovers.

'For your sake,' says he coldly, 'I shall not consent to that until you have had full time to consider the consequences of the act you propose. The deceit, as you call it, and the strain are bad enough; but the position of a woman separated from her husband, you will find, is far worse—as society now goes.'

'I care nothing'—proudly—'about society!'

'Not at this moment.' He cannot altogether repress the bitterness of his spirit as he speaks. 'But you are only twenty-one, and life is unkind; it gives one a possible three-score years and ten. And'—all at once his eyes grow stern—'if you decide on leaving me now—well, go! But, remember, I shall never willingly look upon your face again. Should you repent your decision, don't'—with a cold smile—'come to me for help; all the remainder of your seventy years would not avail you to get my forgiveness.'

She turns upon him.

'How dare you,' says she in a low tone, but with terrible intensity, 'speak to *me* as if *I* were to be the pardoned one? You—you——' Agitation checks her for the moment. 'If you have forgotten, you must be mad!'

'I forget nothing,' says he abruptly—'especially where you are concerned.'

'Oh, as for me!'—contemptuously.

'Cecil!' Suddenly he catches her arms, and so holds her, a miserable, angry light within his eyes. 'I have told you a great deal——'

'You'—with indomitable courage, though her heart in reality is sinking within her—'have *confessed* a good deal.'

'Well, so be it. I have at least told you—that——'

She interrupts him eagerly, almost wildly.

'That there was a reason for your suppression of that letter. Ah!'—with a suffocating little sob, that might mean triumph, or almost insupportable joy, or, indeed, anything—'you are going to give it to me at last?'

She bends forward. Her soft eyes seem on fire in the moonlight. She stands, a little shrinking, a little wondering, her hands apart. Is he going to tell her?

'The reason still remains,' says he in a low voice. He feels choking.

'You mean—you will not tell me?'

'I cannot.'

She steps back, and breaks into a strange, cruel little laugh.

'And you—expect me to believe *that*—that some splendid cause compelled you to suppress that letter?'

'Certainly I do. To me, at all events'—his voice grows very weary—'it seemed a splendid cause,' he says.

Something in his manner moves her. She comes nearer to him.

'You have got the letter Sidney wrote to me,' says she coldly, but very gently, in the tone of one who is ready to give an enemy a last chance. 'I—I have not asked you for it before, because—because the contents were so useless, perhaps . . . or perhaps for some other reason. Will you give it to me? Surely you ought; it is mine—not yours. And—I should like to have it.'

She had hesitated at the 'and.' Up to that she seemed only eager to gratify a certain curiosity. But to Verschoyle the hesitation at the last savoured of a lingering, nay, a still overpowering, desire for Sidney Fenton.

'I am sorry I cannot gratify you,' says he icily. 'It is no longer in my possession.'

'You—you——'

'I burned it'—concisely.

'Burned it?'

'I have said so'—with a shrug. 'I thought the fire was the best place for it. Fire is very purifying, you know.'

'Burned it!' She repeats the words again, and her face grows haggard.

'You are more clever than I ever dreamt you,' says she in a slow, strange tone. 'What is it the lawyer people say—the

people in the papers ?—" You have destroyed the evidence of your crime " ! It was very wise, very clever ! But not'—with ineffable disdain—'very convincing !'

'I can quite see that my burning of Fenton's letter is to you fresh evidence of my depravity. I am quite aware, too, that you would believe anything against me—anything for *him !* As for that letter, the burning of it I consider no crime.'

He has drawn himself up to his full height, as if in defiance of her.

'But why ? Why ? How can you defend yourself ?'

Her contemptuous mood of a moment ago has deserted her. She is confronting him with anger, even rage, in her eyes—*and hope.*

'I do not seek to defend myself,' says Verschoyle immovably. 'It would be folly, with judge and jury and all against me.'

'You mean, by that'—unsteadily—'that I am not giving you a fair hearing ?'

'*That* you never gave me.'

'You mean it, then ?'

He is silent.

'You say nothing !' cries she in an anguished tone.

'I shall never say anything !' says Verschoyle, with such a sudden burst of fury that, though not, perhaps, altogether losing her courage, she still shrinks away from him.

When she looks up, he is gone ; and, somehow, with his going goes, too, all persistence in the thought of a separation from him.

No ; it is impossible. She must live her life out as it is. Oh, dear Heaven ! if he could only prove himself worthy—free from sin and dishonourable stain ! But that—that hope is dead.

Well, in spite of all she has said to him, she will stay—stay always. And perhaps—who knows ?—the waiting may not be too long : Death may come—the kind, the unkind, Death.

Kind it would be to her, at all events. The thoughts of some old writer rush to her mind as she stands on the confines of the dewy lawn, with all the stars above shining down upon her : 'We know nothing whatever about death for certain, save that it puts an end to the sorrows of life.'

CHAPTER LIV.

'And no man sees
Beyond the gods and fate.'

The supper dances are hardly yet at an end, and in the supper-room many people are still lingering. Here, indeed, the maiden ladies of too terribly certain age are congregated in small batches, discussing the latest scandal, and suggesting broadly scandals still to come.

'And all unmarried,' says Mr. Browne severely, regarding them with distinct disapproval, and from a safe distance. 'And no chaperons, I'm told! Very improper, in my opinion. Fancy marriageable old girls like that being let out alone! I shall speak to Cecil.'

He goes off, presumably to argue with Cecil upon the points of decency and decorum; but, wandering here and there, coming sometimes into shadowed corners and behind screens, creates immense discomfort.

'I've flushed more coveys to-night,' says he to one of his innumerable friends, 'than I've ever done in November.'

One pair, at all events, he refrains from disturbing. Amyot and Carry, sitting *tête-à-tête* on the top step of the staircase, are looking so gloomy, so altogether unworthy of Mr. Browne's attentions, that he leaves them in peace.

In the meantime the 'fascinating old girls' in the supper-room are having a rare good time. As has been said, everyone is on the *qui vive* to know whether or not Mrs. Berkeley will bring her open designs on the Anglo-Indian to a successful termination. But now, as the pair in question enter the supper-room, all the old eyes grow keen and all the old ears alert. 'What's he saying, my dear?'

They all bend forward, but the voices at the end of the table are still low. They are wary hunters, however, and so they wait—to find their reward presently.

Mrs. Berkeley, at a prolonged whisper from the infatuated Mr. Shine, as if overcome by what he is saying, loses herself a little, and lets her delight express itself in a raised utterance:

'Oh, Samuel! You are a perfect darling!'

That settles the question at once and for ever. They are *engaged!* The old girls fall back upon their chairs.

'She's done it!'

'And diamonds, if anything! She'd never call him "darling" under diamonds!'

'She's caught him. Poor dear man!'

And so she has. For once the old girls—and gossip—are right.

* * * * *

On the top step of the stairs Carry and Amyot are still seated. Their faces, as has been hinted, are downcast.

'So,' says Carry, bringing to an end an exhaustive and plainly disappointing examination, 'you did not propose to her?'

Richie is silent for a moment.

'No'—at last—'I didn't. Couldn't you see that? I'—gloomily—'would rather murder her than marry her.'

'Oh, Richie!'

'Yes, I would'—vehemently. ''Pon my soul I would! Sometimes—often, of late—I can hardly keep my hands off her.' His excitement dies suddenly away. 'Look here, Carry: I'm off to California at once.'

'Oh no!'

'Yes, I am. I mean it. There's nothing to be done here. The old place is up to its neck; it'—here the poor lad chokes a little—'must go! But I can't stay here, Carry, to see it go—to see it in another's possession. It has been ours . . . so long.'

'But, Richie dear——'

'No, don't try to stop me. I shall leave here to-morrow.'

'To-morrow?' Her voice has lost its usual wonderful strength, her face stiffens. 'To-morrow!'

'Yes. The sooner I go, the better. What's the good of staying here, eating my heart out over each stick and stone I have loved all my life? Don't try to keep me back. You are the only real chum I have in the world, Carry, so you ought to be the one to help me forward, to give me'—with a long-drawn breath—'some sort of heart about it. Look here: I can't say good-bye to—to all my old friends.'

She turns upon him, pale, indignant.

'Then, is it here . . . like this . . . you are going to say good-bye to *me?*'

'No, no. I was coming to that. To you I *must* say good-bye.' He looks miserably round him, shaking his head, as if to keep down the rebellious tears that are rising to his eyes. 'Oh, Carry! Isn't it all beastly hard? I wish—it is selfish, I know—but I can't help wishing you were ruined, too, and had to go to California.'

'Well, do you know, I'm not sure I'd choose California,' says Carry thoughtfully. 'Of course, I mean if I alone were ruined, and you were not going there. Cowboys, I've always said, are horrid; and I'm sure there are cowboys in California. Australia, now! There's a big field there, isn't there? And gold-mines, and things?'

'No; I'll go to California,' says Richie dejectedly. 'One place is as good as another, after this. This is home, you see, and all the rest of the world is a hotel.'

Silence falls upon them for a little while, and then:

'Will you meet me to-morrow, about five—I shan't go till the eight train—up at the old stream, where the Droon turns its elbow? Where——'

His grief at last gains the mastery over him. Oh, dear Droon! oh, good Droon! that has yielded him so many a fair half-pounder! He turns aside, and stamps angrily upon the step beneath him, as if by this outburst of wrath against his honest emotion he hopes to recover himself.

Carry tries to say something, but fails. No thoughts come to her. Her tongue seems tied. Richie going—Richie! Her best, her dearest friend. Nay, is he not her only real friend, as she is his?

'You'll be there?' says he at last, without looking at her.

'Yes.' Her voice is very husky.

Rising, the two forlorn ones descend the stairs—Richie to go straight to his beloved home, now all but lost to him.

CHAPTER LV.

'There is no woman living that draws breath
So sad as I, though all things sadden her.'

Mr. Browne has sauntered out for a morning walk, finding the day pleasant. Down by the river is his usual run, the river, like the day, being pleasant to him.

And as he goes he meditates on his next visit. It will begin to-morrow, and will land him in Hertfordshire, and he is wondering vaguely who the Stainworths have asked to meet him. He has already reached the river, and is far into the little wood on its left, before he comes to the conclusion that Mrs. Stainworth won't ask Evelyn Morne. There had been a little too much of him and Evelyn last time—too many corners, and too much of the old screen business. Yet Evelyn had been a nice girl, too. . . .

He breaks off suddenly in his sentimental dreamings. To his astonishment, he can see, there below him in the wood, a figure seated—a woman with something about her, even at this distance, familiar to him. She is sitting on a fallen length of timber, and surely, surely, he tells himself as he draws nearer, it is Miss Royce. There is hesitation, however, in his decision. But a desire to know that is inborn in Dicky—a sense that foolish people might call curiosity—urges him to the front. But even as he hesitates, making up his mind as to whether it is or is not Miss Royce, the figure turns her head towards him, sees him, and, rising, makes an effort to escape; but Mr. Browne, running forward, prevents this. It goes to his heart—though he always says he hasn't one—that she should regard herself as an outlaw.

'I say, Miss Royce'—coming up with her—'you remember me, don't you?' He takes her hand in spite of her, and shakes it warmly.

'Mr. Browne,' says she faintly. 'Yes, I remember you.'

The terrible sadness of her face, the extreme depression that seems to hang round her, make Dicky very uncomfortable.

'I'm glad of that,' says he kindly. 'But'—he stops,

touched by the shamed fear in the girl's eyes—'you don't look well,' says he. 'Not very fit, don't you know.'

'That's a mistake,' says she. 'I am well . . . in body. In mind I am distressed. Mr. Browne, I think—I know I can trust you. Will you answer me one question? Is it true that Mr. Verschoyle and his wife are unhappy?'

Dicky hesitates. It is certainly a large order. To betray Cecil's relations towards her husband is one thing, yet to let those unhappy relations continue, for the sake of a word or two, seems abominable—nay, more, criminal. To keep silence now may mean condemning Cecil to a lifelong unhappiness.

Dick temporizes.

'Who has told you that?' asks he.

'You must not ask me. I have heard it. That Mr. Verschoyle was unhappy was sufficient to bring me down here to-day. *Is* he unhappy?'

'They are both unhappy,' says Dicky slowly.

'She, too! I thought her too cold.'

'Mrs. Verschoyle?'

'Yes. I am sorry about her, as you tell me she is not as happy as she might be. But that is her own affair. She went here and there'—with a marvellously expressive movement of her thin shoulders. 'Women who love this one, and marry the other, are never to be really pitied. Still, she was kind to me always, and I was often very rude to her, and so we are quits'—with something of her old vehemence.

Her extraordinary reasoning is too much for Dicky, who wisely leaves it alone.

'But it is not of her I wish to speak,' says Miss Royce presently; 'but of—her husband. Once—though you never heard of it, I think—he was very good to me. *Good!*'—the low, subdued voice now finds passion in it—'oh, it is too poor a word!'

'And now you want to be good to him—is that it?' asks Mr. Browne lightly. 'That's very good of you, too. But how?'

'There is something—something that he knows, but that'—clenching her hands in a painful sort of way—'his wife does not.'

'Well?'

Dicky's face grows earnest.

'I might tell it to her—for his sake. Do you see? And yet——'

She grows silent; then, after a full minute, turns her strange, dark, glowing eyes full on Dicky.

'Sidney Fenton has something to do with it,' says she.

Mr. Browne, for once in his life, acknowledges himself taken aback. Does this little nomad believe that Cecil still harbours tender thoughts of Fenton? And then all at once the reaction sets in, and Dicky grows uncertain. He sticks to his colours, however.

'Fenton!' says he. 'You are surely mistaken there.' He stops a moment to look at her. Is she thoroughly base? Is this a step by which she hopes to extract money from Anthony or Cecil? Is she one of the modern blackmailers? He goes on: 'I always understood, however'—deliberately—'that Sidney Fenton had something to do with you.'

It is brutal, and he hates himself as the words pass his lips; but Anthony, as has been already said, is very dear to him, and—and justice is on his side, certainly! He pulls himself together.

'You are right,' says Miss Royce in a low, crushed little way; whereupon Dicky, who had been trying to keep up his spirits and applaud his line of argument a moment ago, now falls to the lowest depths of self-abasement.

'But that is all over,' goes on Miss Royce. 'He is a traitor.'

'Fenton?'

'Don't mention his name!' cries she fiercely; 'I hate to hear it. Yes'—violently—'traitor—brute he has been to me! Oh!'—wildly, clenching her right hand, as one might who is in the act to strike—'if—if he was here now!'

'I'm sincerely glad he isn't,' says Mr. Browne in his usual equable tone; 'and so will you be, a little later on.'

'What do you know?' demands she fiercely.

'Not so much, I acknowledge,' says Mr. Browne amiably. 'But you will permit me, at all events, to say that I should prefer your doing it when I am out of the way.'

Of this pleasantry Miss Royce takes no heed.

'Tell me,' says she eagerly. 'This trouble of Mr. Verschoyle's . . . it arises out of a letter written by Sidney to Miss Fairfax—she was Miss Fairfax then, you understand.'

'I don't, indeed,' says Mr. Browne.

'The letter'—stamping impatiently upon the ground—

'that Sidney wrote to Mrs. Verschoyle, and that Mr. Verschoyle destroyed.'

'I am entirely ignorant, I assure you,' says Mr. Browne, 'and'—anxiously—'I desire to remain so. I know nothing—nothing, really, and I don't want to know.' He is now thoroughly alarmed. Good heavens! To feel sure Cecil and poor old Tony are unhappy is bad enough, and to try to set them right is conscientious; but to have secrets told! 'I must beg you will tell me nothing,' says he emphatically.

'But——'

'It is impossible that I should listen! Don't waste your confidences on the barren air.'

She sighs.

'No one ever will listen to me,' murmurs she plaintively.

Her air is so seductive that Mr. Browne promptly stops his ears with his fingers.

'There, there,' says she in a final way, putting up her hands, whereupon his come down. 'Still, if only you would hear me!'

Up go his fingers again.

'Ah, no!' She motions to him again. 'I'll say nothing, but that there was a letter, and that it was my fault that it was destroyed—if destroyed it was. There was no fault in Mr. Verschoyle. He acted well—altogether well—for everyone but himself.' She looks at him, and, as if after a moment's inward thought deciding that he, and he alone, can tell the truth hereafter, goes on so hurriedly, speaking so rapidly, that Dicky himself, who is by no means a dullard, cannot prevent the flow of her words.

'It was a letter from Sidney to Miss Fairfax, asking her to marry him. He gave it to Mr. Verschoyle to deliver; but I, who heard all on the veranda outside, did my best to compel Mr. Verschoyle to suppress it. I never knew whether he *did* keep it back, but—I suppose he did, and I honour him for his breach of honour; and, besides, he gave me his oath not to——'

'Oh, come, I say! that's telling,' says Mr. Browne, who is looking very red and confused. 'I didn't want to know, you know.'

'Yes, I know'—dejectedly—'but I can't help it. I must tell someone, and you—you who are a friend of his, can make it clear.'

'In for a penny, in for a pound,' says Dicky with a groan. 'If I've got to help in this *galère*, you must make it clear to me. Presuming it was the letter that—er—made the Verschoyles uncomfortable, how did Mrs. Verschoyle hear about it?'

'Sidney told her.'

Dicky's face changes from its usual undisturbed urbanity to a very blackness of darkness.

'What a hound!' says he.

If he had trusted for sympathy from the slim, dark creature before him, so sad with her wrongs, he is mistaken.

'He is *not* a hound!' cries she furiously, all her small, dark, vivid face ablaze with rage. 'No one shall call him so in my presence.' She throws up her head with a little haughty gesture, and he can see beneath the anger in her eyes an undying love for her betrayer. 'He spoke of the letter to her, not knowing she was married to Mr. Verschoyle. He told me all about it—he himself. And I tell you this—hound as you call him—he would have bitten his tongue out before he would have done Mr. Verschoyle such an injury. He is *not* a hound! How dare you speak of him like that?'

'You see, you hadn't explained,' says Dicky gently. The loyalty, the devotion, of this forsaken girl to the man she loves, in spite of all his baseness, makes him sick at heart. 'I am glad he told you. When was it?'

'Only lately — when chance brought us together once again. I'—bitterly—'had arranged the chance. I shall follow him to his life's end—or mine! When he spoke to me of his meeting with . . . *her*, I thought of Mr. Verschoyle's kindness to me, and I came here to-day to see if I could not do something to—to give him a happiness that I shall never know myself.' She sighs heavily. 'Mr. Browne, could I see Mr. Verschoyle?'

'Why, of course!' says Dicky eagerly. 'Come back to the house with me, and——'

'Oh no! Not that. I could not go into her house—I *could* not! Besides'—cowering—'I might meet some of the others—Lady Maria—Jinnie.'

'Jinnie met you once, I think.'

'She fancied so. Let her believe it a fancy, if she can. But she is a strange child. So, then, as I cannot go with you

to the house, could you not arrange that I should meet him—say here?'

'I'm afraid not,' says Browne, who sees breakers ahead, should anyone witness the meeting. 'But look here! Why not see Mrs. Verschoyle?'

'See *her!*'—recoiling.

'Why not? What injury has she done *you?*' He accompanies his emphasis by a swift but meaning glance. 'After all, she couldn't have cared much for Fenton, could she? as she married Verschoyle. And I assure you, if you want to do a good turn to Verschoyle, you had better do it through his wife. Come, now! I can arrange for her, if you like; see her, and tell her all about it. It's the best thing you can do for Verschoyle—and you do owe him something, don't you?'

'A great deal'—faintly. 'But—to meet her face to face—she who always was so far above me—to meet her now!'

There is terrible anguish in the dark, unfathomable eyes. Heaven alone knows how deep, how cruel it is.

'I think you have mistaken Mrs. Verschoyle a little all through,' says Dicky earnestly. 'She has a beautiful nature; you may safely trust yourself to her. I advise you to meet her, not Verschoyle, and tell her all. You see, the injury you have done Verschoyle touches her even more than him.'

'That'—coldly—'I think little of.'

'But you do think of Verschoyle,' says Dicky promptly.

He stands silent, waiting for her answer, in a mortal fright, if the truth be known, lest his last allusion to Cecil should have spoiled all his plan.

'Does Mrs. Verschoyle ever walk down here?' asks Miss Royce presently, in a low and sullen tone.

'Not often. But if you wish to meet her here, I think I——'

'Where, then'—peremptorily waving off the end of his sentence—'does she usually walk?'

'Sometimes in the Fir Wood above you, but only now and then. However, I——'

Again Miss Royce, now haughtily, puts aside his offers of assistance, which are all, she well knows, meant for the good of Cecil.

'I shall be in the Fir Wood to-morrow at six o'clock,' says she. 'Near the old tree that was struck by lightning.'

She turns away abruptly, a frown on her brow, despair in her beautiful eyes. Dicky, sorry to the core of his somewhat flighty heart, because of her thus going, is making up his mind to run after her, and say something kindly that as yet has not been formulated in his brain, when she turns.

She stands irresolute beneath the trees a moment, a little sad, forlorn figure, with her eyes full of tears, and then she calls to him :

'Oh ! I have been bad to you. You, who have been so good to me ! Don't'—pathetically—'mind me. I—I am very grateful to you, though I suppose you will never believe it.'

She makes a gesture, a heart-broken one, that forbids him to approach, and presently she has passed under the branching trees, and out of his sight for ever.

'Oh, that Fenton ! What a damned brute ! A damned brute !' says Dicky furiously ; his eyes, too, are full of tears.

He turns and trudges back to The Towers, arranging on his way many things.

And, indeed, when he leaves in the morning, it is with the knowledge that the day must bring forth something, be it weal or woe, for the friends he loves so well, Cecil and her husband. He has laid the train ; it remains with the others to light the match. He would, it must be confessed, have dearly liked to stay and see the result of the explosion, but though he knows he would be heartily welcome, that both Cecil and Anthony are sorry for his going, still, if 'the result' should be reconciliation, he feels he will be well out of the way. 'Three is trumpery,' says a good old proverb. And, besides, Evelyn *may* be staying with the Stainworths.

CHAPTER LVI.

'One phrase was all his pleading,
He spoke of love and home :
To her who gave him heeding
He sang his question, "Come."'

Up here, near the lovely Droon, flowing so placidly on its way to the ocean—its mother—the evening is a very dream of

beauty. Soft clouds there, and little lilac ones here, and far, far beyond, a touch of crimson.

No touch of life save the soft buzzing of

> 'A tired honey-heavy bee,
> Gilt with sweet dust from gold-grained anthers,'

that comes to one on every side.

Carry, having reached a point near to that elbow of the Droon where Richie had directed her to meet him, sits down on a kindly boulder, and, finding herself in such sweet, sad solitude, takes her face into her hands.

'He is going! He is going!' Her cry is quite silent, but it is from her heart. Her only friend is going!

For a long time she sits thus, grieving sadly. Then she lifts her head. Time is dragging.

'How late he is!' thinks she, a little resentfully, perhaps; and then she grows ashamed of the reproach she has cast on him. 'Oh no! of course it would be *stupid* to expect him to come quite in time. With all his packing and——' She stops her thoughts, and, grabbing at a little hazel twig, pulls and pulls at it, until her emotion is conquered.

He has so much to do—preparing for his last journey. Oh, how will it be with him in California! Oh, if only she might have gone with him!

Her face is very white and tired; the lids of her eyes tell of a sleepless night. Her *only* friend is leaving her! What shall she do without him—without Richie?

Any way, she will never have another friend—never! This she is swearing to herself, when a slight noise behind her makes her turn quickly, eagerly. Ah, here at last! Here is——

She finds herself face to face with Mr. Popkin!

It seems the last straw. To talk to *him!* To have to listen to him—now—when Richie is going away in a few hours for ever! Nay, worse! When Richie may come at any moment—and with very little time to spare—to say his last good-bye to her—to say his last words!

'Dear me! dear me!' says Mr. Popkin, with his pretty simper. 'What a charmin' surprise! If I had known *you*'—tenderly—'were here, I should have come up a little earlier. All alone, dear Miss Carry?'

'Quite alone, Mr. Popkin'—her grave young face now severe. 'I came here because I *wished* to be alone.'

'Ah, sweet thoughts, sweet thoughts, no doubt!' says Mr. Popkin ecstatically. 'May I hope, Miss Carry—— *May* I drop the Miss? Dare I hope—*Carry!*'—this comes like an explosion—'that you gave me *one* of them?'

'The only person who calls me "Miss Carry" is our servant,' says she, with subdued wrath, 'and I wish her to be the only one. As for "Carry"—to call me that seems——' She stops as if suffocating. Her thoughts have flown to Richie. Oh, how long he is in coming! 'Only my friends call me that,' says she, in a low tone. 'To the rest'—nervously—'I am Miss Desmond.'

He mistakes her agitation. It conveys to him, indeed, the fond hope that *his* presence has caused it.

'Your friends!' breathes he fondly. 'But your lover, your faithful lover! You know who *he* is, dearest Carry! Would you have me seek a sweeter, a more familiar title still? Carita savours too much, perhaps, of the unstable Italian; but Car! How would that be, now? *Car!*' He spreads his black-gloved hands abroad as if in admiration of his last idea. 'Car,' turning to her with the black-gloved hands now decidedly on the way towards her, '*charmin'* Car!'

Poor Carry! Who can blame her if, with her heart sore and miserable for the coming loss of her friend, she loses her temper entirely at this outrageous desecration of her decent name?

She rises to her feet and strides up to him—a bigger, a stronger young woman in her honest rage than she, as yet, has ever been.

'Look here,' says she: 'say one more word of that sort—*one*, mind, only one!—and I'll pitch you head foremost into the Droon!'

She looks so fierce, so entirely capable of fulfilling her threat, that the curate retires a yard or two.

'Surely—surely you are makin' a mistake,' says he, still fatuously believing in his own conquering powers. 'I love you, dear Miss Carry; I would gladly make you my wife, though I don't disguise from you there are others who——'

'Go to them!' says Carry, following him along the path. He is now moving backwards slowly, terrified by her angry eyes, and the extremely suggestive movements of her impatient

young hands. 'Go to them as soon as you can. If you lived a thousand years I should still think you, as I do now, the hatefullest man on earth. How *dare* you bother me with your proposals? I don't *want* you. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth. Oh, go away! Go away! I can't bear to look at you.'

And, indeed, Mr. Popkin at this moment is not a pleasant object for the eye to rest upon. His jaw has fallen, his eyes are protruding; he looks distinctly crushed.

He gathers himself together presently, and in a distinctly dishevelled condition beats a retreat.

'Astonishin'—most astonishin'!' he mumbles to himself, as he disappears round the corner.

Carry—still standing, still with her fell eyes upon him—has barely time to see he is indeed gone, when over a boulder on her right Richie bursts into view, his face bright with excitement.

'Oh, Richie, you! You have come at last! How long you have been! I thought you would never come!'

She runs to him.

'Why, what's the matter?' asks he, surprised.

'Oh, nothing. That is, not *much!* Only Mr. Popkin came up here and found me, and—*you* know—he is always making love to me.'

'Oh, confound him!' says Richie, storming; 'isn't even our old fishing-place here sacred from him? And you—*you*, Carry! —you perhaps said——'

'I said I'd throw him into the Droon,' says Carry, in a boyish, shamefaced way, turning her head aside. 'I'm afraid I was awfully rude, but that's the last I shall see of *him*, any way—as a lover, I mean.' The word 'last' seems to have wakened in her a remembrance of what the present moment means. 'Oh, Richie!' cries she brokenly, 'I shall soon see the last of you, too.'

'No, no!' says he eagerly. 'Carry, I have the strangest thing to tell you. It's—it's an awfully sad story, but—I must be a brute, I think—but I can't *feel* sad. I didn't know them, any way, but when one's cousin and children are drowned——'

'Richie, what are you saying? *Who* is drowned? What cousin?'

'Oh, you know—Lord Amyot of Amyot. He was only a

second cousin, but he is dead, and his two little boys—drowned. Oh, I *am* a brute! But—but I'm the next heir, and—and I shall be able to keep on the old home now, and I shan't have to go away from this.'

He lays his head upon her knees, his face hidden against her gown.

'You——'

She tries to find words, but none come. To her horror, she finds she is sorry for his news. As Amyot of Amyot, he will be much farther from her than if he went as a poor lad without a penny to the Antipodes. He had been sitting at her feet, and when she feels his head upon her knees, she pats it softly, yet with a most forlorn despair within her heart. She can feel the short, dry sobs of shame and joy mingled that are shaking him.

'I'd have come up sooner,' says he at last, in a stifled tone. 'But when the letter came, and after that a telegram, telling me to go up to town at once to the solicitors' place to make arrangements about my being at the—their funeral. . . . Oh, Carry! the world is awful, isn't it? But—but I can't help feeling glad about the old place.'

'You'll be a great man now, Richie,' says she slowly. She is still patting his head, but her eyes are resting on the flowing river. 'No more Droon days now, I think. You are a lord, and a very great man.'

'That's what frightens me,' says he, sitting up, but still tightly holding her hand. 'I—I shan't know how to do it. I'm not used to it, you see. *You'll* have to help me, Carry.'

'I!'—scornfully. 'Do you suppose *I* have been used to it, as you say?'

'I don't care. You'll *have* to help me. We've been in the same boat for a long time—as poor as ever we could be—and now it shall float us ashore together. Look here, Carry'—he gets on his feet and drags her up beside him—'you'll marry me, won't you? I never knew it was *you* I wanted all along, until that letter came this morning. The moment I grasped the truth—and it took a long time, I can tell you—I said to myself, *Now* Carry and I are all right, and she can have as much money as ever she likes. *That's* the way it came home to me. It's all right, isn't it, Carry?'

'It is *indeed*,' says Carry tearfully, joyfully; after which it

only takes them a second to be in each other's arms, and to give and take a happy hug.

'It's a queer world,' says he later on. 'They used to call me "Poor Richard," you remember? And now I am poor no longer.' Perhaps the phrase had been a little bitter to him.

'Never mind, *I* didn't call you that. I called you only my friend,' says Carry.

'And yet,' says he reproachfully, when they are sitting hand in hand upon a rock, 'you would have given me up to the tender mercies of that conf—— that girl!'

'Did I?'—as if trying to remember. 'But then I knew you wouldn't. I did, really! That—I didn't know it *then*—but that, I'm sure, is why I encouraged you. If ever you *had* meant it, I should have——'

'Well?'

'Killed somebody!' says she. '*You* for choice.'

'Quite as well,' says he. 'And it would have economized time, for I should certainly have killed myself later on.'

'You have given me a very fine scolding,' says Carry, turning upon him. 'But how about all your eloquent defence of Mr. Popkin?'

'Pshaw! As if a girl like you would ever marry such a fool as that!' Which settles the question.

'Richie'—presently—'I want to tell auntie. Come home.'

'And I want to tell my side of the house. You go home and tell your auntie—*my* auntie now'—with an affection that goes to the girl's heart—'and I'll go and tell Mrs. Verschoyle. But tell Miss Desmond, too, will you, that I'll come to supper with her later on? It will be jollier then, when everybody knows all about it, and you and I and Miss Desmond can have a good talk over it all.'

'All right,' says she, giving him a last hug: 'I'm off. You must have a splendid supper to-night.'

She has gone quite a long way, when she is conscious of flying feet behind her.

'I say, Carry,' gasps he, pulling up, and looking not only considerably blown, but convulsed with laughter. 'I've had a last thought, and as all my thoughts are yours for the future, I felt I ought to tell you about it. I suppose—eh—you couldn't be married in those "knicks" you wear in the woods, shooting the defenceless rabbits?'

He knows her well enough to turn round abruptly after

this, and start back again on his homeward way with considerable speed.

'If ever—*ever*—you mention those things to me again!' calls Carry after him.

Conscious that *so* much has reached him, and that her threat being vague is all the more alarming, she sets out once more on her way to her home.

* * * * *

Richie, finding Mrs. Verschoyle at the Dower-house, has promptly stated to her his intention of marrying Carry Desmond.

'*Carry!*' says Mrs. Verschoyle, very pardonably surprised—as the relations between Carry and Richie had been treated very lightly by Lady Maria and herself, and, indeed, everybody, as not dangerous at all; as, indeed, a mere boy and boy sort of affair, not a boy and girl. Carry has been always so hopelessly queer and boyish. 'You mean Carry Desmond?'

'I certainly do'—a little piqued. 'I am not aware that there is another Carry anywhere near us.'

'Carry!' says Mrs. Verschoyle again.

'Well! What about it?' demands Richie, now furious. 'Is there another girl in the world as good as she is? or as pretty? or as charming? Come, answer me *that!*'

'No, no! My dear Richie, you——'

'Then what is it?'—violently.

'You really must not be angry with me, Richie,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, giving way to the laughter that has been struggling within her. 'It is only that I thought you and Carry were the last people to feel sentiment of any sort—and that you should feel it *together!*' Here her laughter increases. 'And Carry, of all people! But, my dear boy, are you *sure?* Carry has been adamant up to this. Are you *sure* she will marry you?'

'Oh, rot!' says Mr. Amyot, marching angrily out of the room, which naturally puts an end to the interview; though I am bound to say that Mrs. Verschoyle runs after him, subduing her unholy mirth, and patches up the quarrel so well that it never breaks out again. She tells him, indeed (which is quite the truth), that she would rather receive Carry as a cousin than anyone else she knows, and that she will go to her to-morrow to pay her a formal call of congratulation, and that Lady Maria shall go with her.

CHAPTER LVII.

'Marvel no more altho'
The songs I sing do mone,
For other lyfe than wo
I never proued none.
And in my hart also
Is graven with letters depe,
A thousand sighs and mo:
A flood of tears to wepe.'

'The best-laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft agley,' but not Dicky's! His small manœuvre comes to a successful conclusion. He had dropped a seemingly idle word or two to Cecil as to the beauty of the sky just now at six o'clock, and especially as to its charm in the Fir Wood where the opening comes—the opening made by the old oak-tree that had been blasted by lightning many years ago. Cecil, whose daily ramblings are as necessary to her as they are lonely, had seemed to catch at the description. 'Dear old wood!' she said; 'I shall certainly walk there to-morrow. I have not been there for a week, and I used to be so fond of it. I am fickle in my affections, perhaps.' All this had been said at dinner, and involuntarily her eyes travelled to Anthony when she used the word 'fickle.'

He, however, seemed entirely taken up with his fish, and looked as though utterly unconscious of anything she had said. Yet, no little word that fell from her lips was unheard by him, and that expression, 'Dear old wood!' had given him a ridiculous thrill of joy. She could love his place, then, even if she could not love him. Her prison was not altogether hideous to her! And 'fickle'—what had she meant by that? A chance word, no doubt. She had not been fickle to Fenton, at all events—with a grim smile. And again . . . She would go to the Fir Wood to-morrow at six o'clock. . . . To-morrow at six. . . .

* * * * *

The light is growing softer in the heavens, a little more delicately pink, as Cecil Verschoyle draws near that part of the Fir Wood where the gaunt old oak, that had been struck to the ground by lightning on one awful night in the sixties,

now lifts its mighty trunk, as if in appeal, to the heaven above it.

A figure standing near the oak gives her pause. It is not . . . of *course* it is not . . . but how like Miss Royce!

The likeness is accentuated, and, indeed, made very clear, when the figure, slight and vigorous, comes quickly towards her from under the blighted oak.

'I have waited for you,' says Maden in a dull, emotionless way.

'Miss Royce!'

Cecil's face shows extreme astonishment, no more—*at first!*

'Mr. Browne told me,' goes on Maden evenly, 'that there might be a chance of your coming here to-day. That was why I waited; I wished to speak to you.'

The small, dark, shapely head is held very high. She glances at Cecil through half-closed but very resolute eyes. There is no shame, no remorse, no contrition, in those strange, dark eyes.

'To speak to me,' repeats Cecil gently. She had always felt sorry for the girl in the past; she feels sorry for her now. 'If I can help you, I——'

'No one can help me!' cries the other fiercely—'no one under God's heaven.'

It is an outburst, a storm of passion, as quickly come as gone.

Then, in a twinkling as it were, the queer, versatile character changes once again, and with cold, insolent eyes she confronts Cecil.

'It is *I* who would help *you!*' says she.

There is a pause.

Cecil, though really she has not moved, seems to have taken a step backward, so great is her feeling of repulsion. Her usually gentle air takes now a tinge of hauteur.

'To help *me!* I hardly understand. I am sure'—gravely—'you mean to be kind; but I require no help from anyone.'

'And certainly not from me, you would add. Still, the mouse once helped the lion,' says Miss Royce, with a bitter little smile. 'Well, though you refuse my assistance, perhaps you will listen to what I have come here to-day to tell you.'

She pauses, and Cecil's heart for a moment contracts with a sudden, vague, nameless fear. So sharp is it that she fails to notice the growing terrible agitation of the girl before her, who is compelling herself against every instinct of her nature to give voice to her own degradation, her own miserable shame, because once a man had been kind to her. There is a deeper agony in the recital, in the fact that she is about to give her wretched story to the woman whom she had always deemed her rival.

For a moment they stand facing each other—the one heart almost as much disturbed as the other. Cecil is very pale. *What* is she going to hear? From Miss Royce's whole air and manner it is impossible to believe the words she is about to utter to be of small import. *What* is it? Why has she come here? Why did she leave so silently, so mysteriously? Had Anthony—— Oh, *dear* God! no, not *that!* Grant *so* much mercy! Oh! is not life unbearable enough without——

'What I am going to tell you,' says Maden, in a voice harsh, almost uncontrollable, 'I tell not for *your* sake—not to save you a pang—but because once your husband was very good to me; because he, in my hour of need, when others would have trampled on me, showed me nothing but kindness and courtesy; because he is the truest gentleman, and the most honourable, I have ever known. As for you'—slowly and with deliberation—'I have always hated you.'

There is indeed in her a passion of hatred that shakes her, as she looks straight at Cecil. For a full minute their eyes meet, and then, when Cecil would have spoken, Maden brushes her aside, as it were, by a wild gesture, and plunges madly into the sad—the cruel—details of her life's story.

With dreadful calm—with cruel calm to herself—she tells it, holding back nothing, suppressing nothing, and always very quiet in the narration of it. Once only she loses herself, and that is during her account, scant now and very brief, of her interview with Anthony—of that past sad night when she stepped into his library unawares, that night when he pledged her his word that he would never betray the secret she had entrusted to his care.

It is, indeed, at the moment when she talks of Anthony that first her strange, callous manner changes. The whole

past rises before her then—that scene in the library, and Anthony offering to send her to the train in his own carriage.

'You! You!' She turns like a small fury upon Cecil. 'Who are you, that you should make that man's life a misery to him? That man, your husband, of whom'—passionately—'you are altogether unworthy. Oh, I know—I have heard everything; he *did* burn that letter; he destroyed it, and he did *well* in the doing of it. He gave up his own honour to save *you*—you, who are so unworthy! I tell you I have heard *all*, and'—a little wildly—'the knowledge has driven me to'—she grows ghastly pale—'to the lowering of myself before you like this. He——'

She breaks off abruptly, sobbing wildly in the very madness of her passion and despair. That *this* woman should reject a love for which most women would be thankful, whilst she, *she*, should be rejected by him to whom she has given *all*—her youth, her love, her devotion—stands out like a red blot upon the map of her existence.

A sort of blind rage possesses her.

'Why don't you speak?' cries she fiercely. 'Has the truth been too much for you? Have you only *now* learnt the value of the man who is so high above you in all ways, and whose life you have made a torment to him?'

'You forget,' begins Cecil faintly; but the other will not hear her.

'I never forget!'—vehemently. '*Who does?* I always remember. I'—she stops and sighs heavily, mournfully—'I shall remember your husband until the grave closes over me.' She stops again, and again sighs. 'That will be soon . . . I pray. He'—slowly—'gave me his oath to hide my wretched secret, and he kept it—kept it, even when his own happiness was in question. For'—turning to Cecil—'he *does* love you: loves you'—with a most mournful break in her voice—'as a woman should thank God that she *is* loved!'

She waits a moment, but Cecil says nothing. In truth, she has been a little deaf to Miss Royce's last words, her former ones still ringing in her mind. A great peace has fallen upon her; the late dreadful turmoil of her mind is now at rest. 'The most honourable man!'

'To me, an outcast,' goes on Maden, with hasty, trembling breath, 'he kept his word. To me, whom almost anyone else in the wide world would have ordered out of his house. But

he gave me house-room, and welcome, and kindly attentions. Oh'—passionately—'if all men were like him!' She breaks off abruptly, as though words are too few to tell her meaning. 'He gave me wine,' she goes on presently, her voice low and faint, 'and food. He feared I was cold, and would have had me draw nearer to the fire. He would even have sent me in his own carriage to the train. All that'—she presses her hands to her eyes—'was nothing beside—— You see'—with a choking sob—'what I always think of is, that not once—not *once*—during the recital of my wretched story—and I told him all, *all*—did he cast one glance of scorn at me. He'—sobbing bitterly now—'was *sorry* for me. I could see that, though even *that* he tried to keep back lest it should hurt me. But for the rest . . . if I had been the best woman on earth—the most honoured of his acquaintance—he could not have treated me with greater courtesy. *Me! Me!*'

She stops, trembling from head to foot, then clasps her hands against her breast.

'Oh, my God!' says she, with a sudden sharp cry. 'How I have requited him!'

She is crying now most desolately, poor thing!

'Don't cry like that—don't!' cries Cecil suddenly.

She is very white. Oh, how she has misjudged and bitterly wronged the man whose only fault arose out of loving her too well! And *was* it a fault?

'It is a relief,' says Miss Royce, with a still, sullen air. 'Sometimes I cannot cry. Now you know all, Mrs. Verschoyle—how I have wronged you, hurt you, destroyed all your married happiness!'

'Oh no'—faintly—'not all! I pray God not all.'

An anguished expression grows upon Cecil's face.

'If I *could* pray, that would be my prayer, too,' says the girl, 'because your happiness involves *his*. But'—forlornly—'I never pray now. It has been all my fault—I know that. Still . . . I have suffered for it, and'—slowly, miserably, hopelessly—'shall always suffer.'

She looks steadily for a moment at Cecil, then, with a little gesture that *might* be a farewell, turns away and walks rapidly in the direction that will lead her from the Fir Wood to the open road beyond.

'Where are you going?' cries Cecil quickly.

Miss Royce glances back.

'To'—grimly—'find *him!*'

'Oh! but not *now*'—with earnest entreaty; 'you look tired—ill. Miss Royce'—she goes to her, and, taking her hand, holds it with an eager pressure. 'Miss Royce, you *must* not go to-night. Oh, my poor girl!'—she draws her to her—'stay with me and get rest and strength.'

'Stay with *you!*' The girl recoils from her, her face the colour of death. 'You ask me to stay beneath *your* roof!' She leans forward as if to get a clearer view of Cecil's face. 'Does that mean'—faintly—'that you could forgive me?' Here she turns aside, poor soul! as if shrinking from the audacious thought conveyed in her words. 'No, no'—in a stifled way—'that would be impossible!'

'Nothing is impossible,' says Cecil, very gently, still holding her hand. 'You have, I know, injured me in the past, but you have given me courage, hope, faith for the future. You have given me what no one else on earth could—renewed belief in the goodness of the man I have married.'

'To have doubted *him!*'

Miss Royce's voice is so low—it is, indeed, more a whisper to herself than anything else—that only Cecil could have heard it.

'Yes, I know. My sin'—tremulously—'is greater than yours, and yet I dare to dream of forgiveness. You have lifted a load from my heart, and'—a little brokenly—'even if my husband can *not* forgive me, still, I owe you a debt of gratitude. Do you know'—softly—'I have prayed on my knees night by night for the knowledge you have given me to-day, little thinking that *you* would be the one to set my heart at rest.'

Miss Royce, whose hand up to this has been lying passively in Cecil's kindly grasp, now tightens her fingers on hers with a vehemence that is full of passionate hope.

'You love *him*, then—your husband? Not—the other?'

'My husband,' says Cecil faintly, 'and no other.'

'Ah!'—with a little wild laugh—'then you *can* forgive.'

'There shall be no question of forgiveness between us two,' says Cecil firmly.

'You forget——'

'I forget all but the one great thing—that you have given me hope when hope seemed dead.'

Suddenly Maden flings herself on her knees before her,

and, clasping her knees, buries her face in the folds of her dress.

'Oh, to be like you!' she whispers, in the saddest, the most forlorn way. Her voice, her whole air, her very position, suggests that most terrible of all words—forsaken! 'And yet'—clinging closer—'if you knew *all* you might well pity me. My father—even my mother—forsook me! I was a burden to them, so one night they left me alone—a little child, a mere baby—in the street. A good woman found me—tired, weeping in an archway—lost! . . . Lost!'—with indescribable bitterness—'as I have ever been—as I am now—for ever! She took me home, and sent me to an industrial school. I seldom saw her, though she was my protectress. You see, nobody—not even *she*—cared for me. She got me work later on, but died a month after I came here to be governess to Jinnie.'

'And your parents?'

Cecil has drawn her up to her feet, and is looking at her anxiously, kindly.

'I heard of them once—twice. As years went by they . . . were well to do, at all events.'

'Then why not——'

'They cast *me* off,' interrupts the girl with indescribable hauteur, 'and I cast *them* off—for ever!'

'Poor, poor child!' says Cecil, thinking of—seeing—the figure of the little forsaken one, running here and there terrified in the wide wilderness of the London streets.

'Mrs. Verschoyle,' says the girl, her strange black eyes glowing with a sudden fervour, 'I think God will love *you* always; as for me, I was fore-doomed. Do you know what my *real* name is? Maden you have always heard, but that was because I was ashamed of the other. No; don't touch me! They christened me'—she shrinks backwards, and covers her face with her hands—'Magdalen!'

A deep, terrible sigh breaks from the hidden lips.

'See how I have fulfilled my destiny!'

There is a moment's dreadful pause. Then Cecil, going quickly to her, in the great beauty of her nature, takes her in her arms.

'All that is as nothing,' says she. '*One* fault! *One!* And to be condemned for ever! No; it is unjust.'

'It is *just*,' says the girl with strange solemnity. 'I have

sinned, and I am condemned, and my sin has found me out. I told you I had suffered. Who'—wildly—'*who* has suffered as I have done? He—the man I loved—the man'—passionately—'I *love*, and shall love for ever—he——' She stops dead short. 'He cares nothing for me now,' says she in a low tone, cruel in the intensity of its hopeless misery. 'He has forgotten . . . the old days . . . my love for him. Mrs. Verschoyle'—bursting out madly—'if hell isn't worse than what I have been enduring for the past six months, I think' —with a wan smile—'I shall be able to bear it!'

'You shall not go *there*,' says Cecil, holding her with her arms, if I can prevent it. Come back with me now, and I——'

'No!' She breaks away violently. 'I cannot—I will not —go with you. Mrs. Verschoyle, don't think me ungrateful. It is only . . . that——'

She fails to go on.

'At least, you will tell me where you are going? You will give me your address?' says Cecil, very gently.

'For to-night, yes; and—if you will deign to write to me, I shall let you know where I am from time to time. I want to know'—earnestly—'that all is well with—Mr. Verschoyle'—she hesitates; the old hate dies hard, but at this, the last, the supreme moment, she conquers it—'and with you, too.'

'I shall write,' says Cecil.

For a moment they stand so, a film of tears making each face dim to the other. Then Cecil, whose nature is the larger, leans forward and presses a kiss upon Miss Royce's cheek. She hardly knows if it is returned, but the girl's fingers have tightened on her arm, and her eyes are eloquent with emotion as she releases herself. She turns at once.

A little later the mists of the growing night swallow her up.

CHAPTER LVIII.

'I will face thy wrath though it bite as a sword.'

Cecil, having waited to see the last of the little slim figure as it disappeared round the wooded corner, turns slowly homewards. A turn in the trees brings her, to her horror, her

dismay, face to face with Anthony. He had remembered that conversation last night, and had come here with an undeveloped hope of being allowed to walk back with her. He comes quickly forward.

'Who was that you were speaking to?' asks he.

'Miss Royce.'

She speaks breathlessly. Her late emotion is still heavy upon her; and to meet *him*—now—of *all* the people in the world!

'Miss Royce! What brought *her* here? And to-day of all days!' He looks astonished. 'Did she come to tell you, then?'

He speaks quite casually, with considerable surprise, but nothing very much out of the way.

Cecil lifts her large, excited eyes to his. Does he *know* . . . and yet speak like this?

'Yes, she came to tell me.'

'But'—puzzled—'why *you?* I quite understood she had an undying dislike to you.'

'Dislike or no dislike,' cries Cecil vehemently, 'surely I was the first person who should be told—who should have been told long ago. It was cruel, wicked, to keep me in the dark.'

Verschoyle's face grows cold.

'True; you should indeed have been the first to hear of it, your interest in Fenton being so deep.'

'Interest in him—a man who——'

'A man whom you loved!' His tone is contemptuous.

'*Did* I ever love him?' says she miserably.

She has lifted her eyes to the good, strong, *not* handsome, but distinctly well-bred face above her, and an agony of regret wakes within her heart. Oh, it is *this* man she loves.

> 'Not a smaller soul,
> Nor Lancelot, nor another.'

Oh, to what low depths she must have fallen to have even believed that once she did love Sidney! . . . And yet she *had* loved him—in a sense.

'I leave that to you,' says Verschoyle coldly, indifferently.

'Oh, don't *cover* me with shame!' cries she, her mind half mad as she dwells on Maden's late revelations. 'I *could* not have loved him—I *could* not!'

'Your agitation'—with a bitter smile—'belies your words; it argues otherwise. This news of his intended marriage with Miss Royce—a very respectable step on his part, in my opinion—has evidently upset you.'

'*His marriage*—with Miss Royce—Anthony!' She takes a step nearer to him. '*Is* he going to marry her?'

'So it seems. I am sorry'—with a cynical lifting of his shoulders—'to *confirm* the bad news she has evidently told you, but it is quite true. It appears from a letter of his that I got by this afternoon's post that he has come in for a legacy of two or three thousand pounds. A small thing, but . . . well, it opens out possibilities in other lands. Australia is the land, I think; and he tells me he means to marry Miss Royce and take her out there with him.'

'To marry her!' repeats Cecil, as if dazed.

'No doubt'—with a very unpleasant smile—'you are surprised; but, you know, "Men are constant never." This fact of his marrying may surprise you—distress you, even'—mockingly. 'But what surprises *me* is, how did Miss Royce hear of the money left him, and his decision with regard to her? The news is not really twenty-four hours old, and he said in his letter to me he had not yet been able to communicate with her, because he did not know where she was. Yet, as you say, she came here to-day to tell you all about it.'

'No, no,' says Cecil, her voice low and choking; 'it was not *that* she came to tell me.'

'What, then, if I may presume'—with lifted brows—'to ask?'

'She came to tell me'—she pauses and struggles with herself—'*all!*'

'She told you?' His face has changed to a dull red.

'*All*'—faintly.

Verschoyle makes a strange gesture. He walks away a yard or so and stands a while, and then comes back to her.

'It is too late,' says he.

'I know it.' The little unborn hope that was in her mind now dies. No; he will never forgive. 'I do not hope for forgiveness, but'—in a stifled tone—'grant me justice at least.' She steps nearer to him, and holds out her hands, supplicating him. 'Surely, *surely* I should have been *told*,' says she, her lovely eyes resting upon his, reproach in their depths. 'I was

your wife—I had a full right to your confidence. However sacred your promise was to that unhappy girl, still . . . I mean'—stammering nervously—'*my* happiness should have been more to you than hers.'

'I could not see that your happiness was involved'—coldly.

'You *must* have seen it. How'—passionately—'could any woman know happiness, living with a man whose honour she had just cause to doubt? I *entreated* you that night—you remember—for an explanation, and you refused to give it. What could your refusal seem to me but confirmation of your guilt? Oh, I should—I *should* have been told. I have not been treated well, Anthony—not fairly. I am not pleading with you; I am only stating my case, as it seems to me. Oh, I know'—with vehement impatience—'I *know* the ordinary codes of honour—a promise, a word given, is not to be revoked; but all these past months . . . surely you might have found some means of destroying the terrible doubt that was in my heart.'

'Belief!'—bitterly.

'As you will; that does not alter the question. But when I was your wife——'

'You'—he interrupts her contemptuously—'were *never* my wife.' He waits for an answer, but none coming, he goes on: 'Not for one moment during the farce of our married life have you ever, by word or sign, shown yourself sympathetic to me. On the evening of our marriage-day, when you discovered that I had withheld the letter that would have wedded you to the profligate and scoundrel whom you loved——'

'That is not true——'

'You cast me off. *What* is not true!' cries he, turning upon her with ill-subdued rage within his eyes. 'That you did not love him?'

'Not then'—faintly; 'perhaps before—I——'

'Pshaw!'—savagely. 'You, who are so desirous for honour at all hazards, see that you do not perjure yourself! See, too'—disdainfully—'that you do not act the hypocrite.'

'You are going a little too far,' says she in a low tone.

'I would only warn you not to pretend to a friendship for me—now the truth has been laid bare—that you never felt.'

'I never pretend to anything,' returns she haughtily. 'I

desire only to apologize to you for any annoyance I may have caused you in the past; to acknowledge I was entirely wrong in my judgment of you; to acknowledge, also, my sense of your kindness, your nobility, to that poor girl on the night when . . . she found herself abandoned . . . and for *me!*'

'*And for you!* You find solace in that thought?' says he.

It is not a good thing to say; it is, indeed, a disgraceful thing. But the man's heart is sore within him, and he speaks out of the bitterness of it.

'That is unworthy of you,' returns she quietly, though her face is very pale. 'I think you will be sorry for it by-and-by. If you will not accept my apology, Anthony, nothing more need be said. And, indeed'—calmly now, and with admirable indifference, seeing that her heart is in mad revolt—'I am thinking more of the poor girl who has just left me than of your or my affairs. Her face haunts me. What terrible misery she has endured! What treachery! What deceit!'

Verschoyle regards her with a grim smile.

'And the traitor, the deceiver, is the man whose lightest suggestion you allowed to overweight your many years' knowledge of me and of my character.'

'You make it very hard for me,' says she. 'You will not accept the grief, the remorse, I feel. Are they not abject enough? You have refused me your forgiveness; yet only to-day I knew all—only to-day Miss Royce laid bare to me her miserable story, and told me of how you—you alone had helped her.'

'Any man on earth would have helped her under the circumstances. I beg'—with a cynical smile—'you will not put me on a pedestal for so small an act of courtesy.'

'It was not so small.' She looks at him very gently, if coldly; and he looks back at her with a miserable rage in his eyes. 'You kept her secret all these months against your own interest, your own happiness.'

'How do you know that?' says he. It is even a crueller thrust than the last, but his heart, half broken for six months, strikes now against the thought of hope and comfort. 'You have found out to-day that I am not altogether vile,' says he, 'but you have found it out six months too late. You accuse me of keeping you in the dark, of refusing to confide in'—with a short and bitter laugh—'my wife! And there is a great deal in what you say. I could have done all that. I

could have betrayed to you the infamy of the man you loved, the man'—fiercely—'you *love.* I could have broken my promise to that unhappy girl; but for *what?* . . . For you! *You,* who scorned, rejected me; who consented to marry me without loving me, and who, at one word from the man you *did* love, flung me aside like an old letter.'

'You will misjudge me to the end, I know.'

'I should not'—with a contemptuous smile—'presume to judge you. Consider how far wiser your judgment of Fenton was than mine. For example, *you* saw some grains of virtue in him; I did not. And yet he is now going to marry Miss Royce, and of his own free will, too. To retrieve a fault is to have it half condoned. Fenton must now be stamped as a model of all the virtues; and you alone read him rightly from the first. Who am I, that I should impugn your powers of judgment?' He laughs a little harshly.

'I think it will be better to say nothing more,' says Cecil gently, but with dignity. 'And yet a last word *must* be said. The evening of the day we were married, Anthony, you suggested a separation. . . . I would not hear of it *then*—but *now?*'

There is a long, an eloquent pause. 'It shall be as you wish this time,' says he.

He turns abruptly, and, striding across the meadow on his left, is soon lost to view.

CHAPTER LIX.

'Ah, when shades fell to light succeeding,
I scarcely dared look round:
"Love lies bleeding" was all my pleading;
Heart's ease I found.'

Cecil had dressed for dinner, and then sent a message to say she would not be down; she had a headache, she told her maid—a bad headache—and there was no untruth in her words. To meet him face to face, on such a conventional occasion, with all these tragic possibilities before her—separation from him, condemnation by her friends, isolation for the rest of her life—was impossible to her. And in the growing moonlight of this August night she sat in the window

of her room until all seemed still in the life downstairs. The movements of the servants going to and fro are now at an end, and the calm—the peaceful silence of the cold sweet moon—seems to have fallen upon the house, and taken it into its possession.

How still, how unspeakably quiet, everything is! Where can he be? In the library, perhaps. Thinking—thinking . . . as she is, too!

But not as she is. *His* thoughts, no doubt, are glad—filled with joy at the knowledge that soon she will be out of his life for ever. Gone! Put aside! A woman to be remembered with hatred, if remembered at all.

And yet once he had loved her! And with a great love! . . . Oh, if she had only known! Was ever woman so cruelly treated? Did ever woman so cruelly treat a man who loved her?

Death is a good thing sometimes.

The night attracts her. Rising languidly, she covers her neck and arms with a little soft cloak of white silk, and, going downstairs, walks into a dainty pleasaunce of many-coloured beds.

> 'The silent night, and this fair moon,
> And these, the gems of heaven, her starry train,'

seem to lay the gentle hand of healing on her troubled spirit.

With a sigh she passes by the beds of sleeping flowers, and, skirting the eastern side of the lake, passes into a larger garden beyond, and so into the shrubbery.

Almost with her foot upon the entrance to it she stops, feeling as if every drop of blood in her body has ceased to flow. There, in the moonlight, stretched at full length upon the warm sward, lies Verschoyle, fast asleep.

At first the knowledge that he is sleeping does not come to her, and the silent, motionless figure strikes her with dread. The one thought, *death*, is uppermost.

Then reason returns to her; her pulses now beat fast and furiously, and with silent but quick steps she advances to his side.

Presently she drops upon her knees and, bending over him, looks with sad eyes upon his face. Truth, honesty, earnestness—all these are writ large upon it. But in deeper print than all the rest suffering stands out.

Remorse almost overwhelms her as she gazes. It is *she* who has brought him to this. It is she who has destroyed his life. It is because of her, whom he has loved, that grief thus mars him.

She leans closer—closer still. . . . He is asleep. He will not know. Closer again, and now her lips have pressed with eager swiftness the closed lids.

Soft as the pressure is, it rouses him. He opens his eyes, and she, transfixed by fear of her own daring, still remains leaning over him, her eyes meeting his. In his half-consciousness—seeing those dear eyes so near him—he flings out his arms to catch her.

Cecil's breath comes quickly. Ah, he *does* love her still, then! He *does!* And even when, as all his senses in a second more return to him, he draws back the caressing arms, and springs quickly to his feet, she does not feel daunted. His *first* thought on waking had meant love for her; his second . . . But 'first thoughts are truest,' though 'second thoughts' *may* be 'best.'

He has risen to his feet, but she still remains upon her knees. The moonlight is full upon her, lighting up her beautiful face, and showing the tears that sparkle in her heavy eyes.

'What brought you here?' asks he unsteadily.

'I don't know. Chance, perhaps. Or God!' She makes a little gesture. 'Anthony . . . forgive me!'

'Don't kneel there,' says he hoarsely.

'*Let* me! It is my proper place!' There is indescribable dignity in her whole air, in spite of her lowly posture. 'Anthony! *Try* to forgive me!'

Stooping, he draws her up, almost roughly, to her feet.

'It is hard!' says he, in a stifled tone. 'How can I forgive you? How can you dare ask for forgiveness? Do you know what I have suffered during all these past interminable months?' His voice is trembling with a sort of smothered rage and passion and despair.

'If anyone could know it, I am that one,' says she. She presses her hand involuntarily against her breast, as though to still some dreadful pain. 'I . . . suffered too.'

'Your suffering'—sternly—'was of your own making.'

'Does that make it the less bitter?' cries she, and then suddenly, as if realizing that all hope is at an end, that (his

tone being so cold and unforgiving) she has indeed worked out her own undoing, that she has killed his love for her, she bursts into tears, sobbing pitifully.

'Oh, it is all over!' cries she. 'I have said all I can. I have said I was sorry. I have said everything. . . . But you will not forgive me.'

'How can you expect it!' exclaims he passionately.

And yet, when now she turns away, with a heart-broken gesture of farewell, his arms all at once close round her, holding her, forbidding her to go.

'You have scorned me. You have trodden me under foot. You don't deserve that I——'

'I know it.' She is clinging to him.

'Just now I heard you say'—one of his arms has slipped round her white neck, from which the silken cloak has fallen to the ground, leaving her beautiful naked arms and throat free to the moonbeams—'that you had said *everything* to me. One thing you have never said—that you love me.'

'Oh, I do—I do! I was mad—I was wicked! Oh, darling, *darling*, try to love me again!'

CHAPTER LX.

'Now all is said, and all being said . . .'

A few days later, Mr. Browne, who is now in the safe shelter of the Engadine, having found his attentions to the fair Ethel leading to very undesired results, receives the following letter:

'The Towers,
'*Friday*.

'Dear, good Dicky——'

'She must be *mad*, whoever she is,' says Dicky to himself, when he gazes, with an astonished eye, on the second adjective. 'But they are all awfully mad, as a rule.'

Then he glances, for curiosity's sake, at the address of the sender of this remarkable tribute to his unknown virtues, and saying, 'Oh, my goodness!' or something worse, sets his mind to the reading of the letter.

'Dear, good Dicky,

'I now know what you meant by sending me to see the heavens from the old oak-tree. It was to give *me* heaven! Can't I give *you* something, you best of friends?

'Always yours,

'Cecil Verschoyle.'

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