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The
Parting of the Ways

A NOVEL

BY

M. BETHAM-EDWARDS

AUTHOR OF "NEXT OF KIN—WANTED," "DOCTOR JACOB."

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13.	ON CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.	By Florence Marryat.....	30
14.	MISS KATE; OR CONFESSIONS OF A CARETAKER.	By Rita.....	30
15.	A VAGABOND LOVER.	By Rita.....	20
16.	THE SEARCH FOR BASIL LYNDBURST.	By Rosa Fouchette Carey.....	30
17.	THE WING OF AZRAEL.	By Mona Caird.....	30
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34.	A LIFE SENTENCE.	By Adeline Sergeant.....	30
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44.	NURSE REVEL'S MISTAKE.	By Florence Warden.....	30
45.	ARMINELL.	By S. Baring-Gould.....	50
46.	THE LAMENT OF DIVES.	By Walter Besant.....	30
47.	MRS. BOB.	By John Strange Winter.....	30

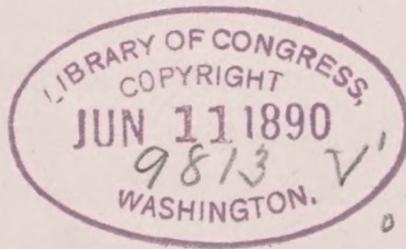
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Milla Barber
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THE PARTING OF THE WAYS.



PART I.

CHAPTER I.

DREAM-DAUGHTER AND DREAM-FATHER !

How much more do we oftentimes seem to know of strangers jostled against in a crowd, than of our friends and familiars ! These may remain lifelong riddles ; but one face fascinates us amid countless multitudes—a single glance of eyes unknown, now beheld for a moment only, reveals to us an entire character, a complete existence. We hurry on, our circle of ideal acquaintances enlarged, richer by another romance, none the less vivid because it wants a name. And who knows ? As we journey through life, we in our own turn may have suggested a similar train of thought. By a look, a word, a gesture, we too, for one brief moment, may have lifted some sympathetic soul out of the common world, have been accredited with gifts and graces that do not belong to us. So true it is that the half of life, often the better portion of it, appertains to mystery as night to dreams !

A young, bright, richly dressed girl, with a withered, elderly man, evidently her father, were traversing one end

of Europe to the other by express train. It was easy to see that this relation existed between them, although wide the difference as between one sweet apple-blossom and some hoary, corrugated stem upon which it bloomed. Equally self-evident the fact that they were all but strangers to each other: a marked, exaggerated, almost lover-like solicitude, not unmixed with nervousness on the part of the father—a timid, appealing tenderness on the part of the daughter, showed that they had as yet been very little together. An English merchant, he had very likely spent the best part of his existence in the East, leaving his daughter to be reared and educated at home. Parent and child could hardly be less alike as far as expression went.

Her face, so fair, ingenuous, and full of eager inquiry, had not the faintest trace of worldliness, much less of conscious wrong-doing in it; his wore an occasional look almost shocking to the acute observer. Shrewdness carried to a pitch of cunning, unscrupulousness that might possibly verge on cruelty, indomitable perseverance in the pursuit of his own objects, objects certainly neither noble nor worthy—such at least must have been the reading of the physiognomist.

A certain resemblance was nevertheless there; hair, eyes, complexion bespoke near blood-relationship, all beautified, transformed by the girl's youth, joy, and innocence.

Meantime, the hard, wrinkled face showed indications of real feeling, an almost passionate desire to please this new-found darling, this dream-daughter, this fondly cherished object of long, absent, laborious years.

Whenever the train made a halt, he alighted and tried to find something to please her—fruit, sweetmeats a book

with pictures in it; one might have supposed his amply filled purse were only good for such trifles as these. There was something touching in the timidity with which he offered his gifts. No suitor could have been more deferential, more easily elated or discouraged. Was she really gratified or no? He could hardly tell; the reception was always the same—a smile, a bright look of affection and gratitude, accompanied the same words:

‘You are too good, much too good, papa!’

Strange words to fall on ears like his, yet they seemed full of music for him. When the maid and the courier, who had accompanied the girl from London to Trieste, were not present, he would kiss and fondle her in a shy, awkward way; and his eyes followed her looks and gestures as if to divine every thought. He would have been better satisfied had she occasionally uttered a wish. Her quiet, passive contentment disconcerted him. Truth to tell, the girl was in much the same frame of mind as himself. He was not more anxious to testify his paternal devotion than she her filial love. At home, she said to herself, the task would be easy enough; a hundred opportunities must surely occur in a day. Shut up within the narrow confines of the railway-carriage, there was little to do but smile acquiescence.

A halting-place brought welcome relief to both. The homeward journey from Trieste to London was made by way of Venice, Innsbruck, and several attractive German cities, at each of which they stopped for a few hours or a night’s rest. They had now reached the last, and after a stroll and dinner, were to sleep there, proceeding next morning to Ostend.

It was a place worth getting a glimpse of; one of those historic German towns beside a beautiful river, with a sign

here and there, and a sign only, of the olden time—all else bright, bustling, airy. The spire of noble minster, a street of mediæval houses, or hoary gateway still remain to tell of bygone days, just as in commonplace nineteenth-century households some bit of family plate, furniture or jewellery indicates ancestry dating from the Crusades.

Just now, however, the town was travestied and hemmed round by a great toy-fair, still so popular an amusement in Germany. Between the city and the outer belt of suburban gardens and villas was a circle of gingerbread stalls, peepshows, and other penny merriments, all abundantly patronized by the townsfolk and the peasants. The sight diverted the two naïve travellers, as, followed by obsequious courier and maid, they made slow way through the crowd.

‘Is there nothing you would like here?’ asked the father again and again to no purpose.

The Nuremberg gingerbread, the carved woodwork from Berchtesgaden, the amber trinkets from Rügen, the ornaments in stag’s horn made at the city itself, the thousand and one knickknacks captivating other fair-goers, seemed to have no charms for this one, who now beheld them for the first time. The girl, young as she was, inexperienced as she was—could it be by instinct or by inheritance?—already evidently understood the value of money. She examined the pretty gewgaws with interest; nothing apparently escaped her observation. But it was clear that she did not care to spend for spending’s sake. On a sudden, however, a cry of genuine enthusiasm did escape her lips, and the father’s hand was once more feeling for his purse. At last she coveted a fairing—he was to have the pleasure of gratifying a wish. He turned round and glanced towards his daughter and the nearest booths, but she was stopping,

caressing something for a moment hidden from his view. He moved a step or two nearer and saw that, greatly to the amusement of the courier and the maid, she was fondling a little negro boy; a prettier live toy it were indeed hard to find. The child's jet-black face, all chubbiness, healthfulness and gaiety, and close-cropped ebon curls, were set off by a little coat of rose-coloured satin, gala dress for the occasion; nothing could be prettier, more picturesque than his appearance, as, standing before a panorama, he offered programmes to the passers-by, receiving, as may well be supposed, many a small coin.

He was perhaps seven years old, and his plump, well-cared for appearance showed that, no matter what his origin or his history, he had now a home and kindly protectors.

'Is he not a darling, papa?' exclaimed the girl, patting the little rose-coloured satin coat, pressing sweetmeats into the little black hands. 'And how intelligent he looks! I wonder where he came from!'

A curious expression, that she did not see, came over the old man's face. He glanced at the boy for a minute, scrutinized him even, much as if he were looking at some chattel offered for sale. Then, with the air of one who had satisfied himself with regard to the worth of the wares he was about to purchase, quick as lightning his purse was opened, and his fingers fumbled at the gold pieces.

'Would you like to have him?' he asked eagerly. 'To take home with you, I mean.'

If fortunate for the girl that she did not see her father's face as he made this offer, fortunate also for him that he did not see her own as she deprecated it with a gesture almost of horror. Her face flushed crimson, painful tears started to her eyes as she put the child away; then trying to recover

herself, and to feel that the proposal was natural from one accustomed to Eastern life, she simulated playfulness and made answer :

‘What would be thought of us if we even proposed such a thing? No, papa ; when we get back you shall buy me a poodle or a cockatoo.’

With a crestfallen air, conscious apparently of a breach of good manners, or of the etiquette of every day, he pocketed his purse, and the little party quitted the fair.

The incident had been noticed by no one, perhaps was not worth dwelling on, yet on the girl’s mind it left more than a passing cloud. She could not recover her spirits, do what she would. The bare suggestion called up by her father’s words was dreadful to her, the action of the proffered gold appalling ; and with the alertness of a naturally quick mind aculeated and quickened by strong sympathies and womanly instincts, she immediately accounted for the look, the speech, and the deed. But no, daughterly love immediately did battle with the base supposition ! Her father could never for one brief moment have dreamed of bartering for the child, purchasing a human soul by way of giving her a toy. He had been carried away by excessive desire to please her. Without her intervention he would, a second later, have retracted the offer.

Thus she endeavoured to reason away her misgivings, and to get rid of the disagreeable incident. The *table-d’hôte* dinner, at one of the best hotels in Europe, came by way of distraction. It was pleasant to see this cosmopolitan board, spread for strangers from all quarters of the globe, at which was heard a very Babel of tongues and was seen a variety of nationalities, not without a sprinkling of costume. The spectacle engrossed and animated. The unaccustomed

dishes afforded dinner-table talk. The vexatious incident of the fair escaped from her memory. When the pair, however, retired to the luxurious little sitting-room assigned to them, and tea was served, it came back. A fire blazed on the hearth. Home-life seemed to have begun already; if not now, when should they begin to know and trust each other?

Youth is naturally fearless, hence its charm; and this young girl had more than her share of downright impetuous initiative and daring. It was easy to see that, in spite of a certain superficial timidity, the timidity that belongs to little things, she did not in the least stand in awe of her unknown father; she was, perhaps, over-anxious to please him in trifles; she was longing to make him happy, as far as a daughter's affection could do so. But all the while she belonged to herself; her life, her individuality were her own to do with as she would. She was not moulded out of the soft stuff that easily lends itself to another's shaping.

'Papa dear,' she said, as he put down his newspaper and dropped into an arm-chair beside her—'Papa dear, I want you to tell me something.'

She paused and glanced at him; his look was very encouraging, and no wonder. Who, indeed, could have resisted such an appeal?

The autumn was chilly, and she wore a sumptuous pelisse of fur-bordered velvet, which, rich as it was, lent no heaviness to that erect, slender figure. Her bright hair, candid blue eyes, and fair complexion tinted with the wild rose of health, made up a very impersonation of the lovely Saxon maiden. Fairness, grace, and purity here reached their acme, and without a trace of sentimentality, much less schoolgirlish weakness.

The father's eyes sparkled with pride as he returned her glance. Here was indeed a daughter worth the toil of a lifetime, an heiress to be proud of. Dazzling visions flitted before his mind. He saw this beautiful, high-spirited girl wedded to some member of a noble house, bearing a noble name, mother to be of children lovely and gifted as herself. And although a wife, she would remain his daughter all the same. He did not wish her to marry a rich man; he wished himself to be the architect of her fortunes, the family fortunes. Wealth enough and to spare he had to give; all he asked from a son-in-law was position.

This reverie was abruptly broken by the words she now put to him.

'Papa,' she said in that sweet yet firm girlish treble, as she laid her cheek to his and put one arm lovingly within his own—'Papa dear, now tell me. How came you by your large fortune?'

CHAPTER II.

THE LURID STREAK.

THE question, natural and harmless as it might seem, was hardly uttered than repented of. As the girl looked up into her father's face awaiting an answer, she was startled at his changed expression; the withered cheeks, before colourless as vellum, were dyed with scarlet blushes; a lurid light, as of some dark, thinly veiled storm-cloud of passion, flashed from his eyes. He rose, and standing with his back to

the fireplace and the lights, seemed on the point of making a sharp rejoinder. But the hasty speech, evidently just upon his lips, found no utterance. That beautiful apparition of girlishness, affection, and joy checked his angry mood. He waited for a moment in order to recover himself.

‘How do other men come by large fortunes in such countries?’ he asked, affecting a tone of easy banter. ‘By trade, of course.’

‘What kind of trade?’ asked Rapha, with quiet persistence.

In the first instance she had wished her words unsaid. A daughter ought not to put her father to the blush. Might not the indiscretion in itself cause his vexation and embarrassment? On the other hand, the more they were to be to each other in the future, the greater the confidence that should exist between them; and stronger far, much more intense than these feelings actuating her with passionate fervour, was the desire to think well of him, to have no hesitancy about her daughterly love.

‘What kind?’ answered Mr. Rapham, with a rough laugh; ‘as if a girl could understand! All kinds, then.’

She looked still curious and unconvinced.

This jesting mood, following an expression of real concern and annoyance, made her feel uneasy. Already the conviction was dawning on her mind, how hard for this dream-father to become her friend! She was beginning to measure the gulf that separated them. Whilst she was longing to communicate every hope, almost every thought, to this new-found protector, at the slightest invitation to a confidence from herself he shrank back, refusing to be interrogated even by the one being in the world who belonged to him, to whom he was dear, his only child.

Seeing the look of doubt in her face, and anxious to get the disagreeable little scene over, he added, still jestingly :

‘Why, you must have learned in the nursery that gold-dust and elephants’ tusks come from the heart of Africa.’

‘So you traded in those things?’ she said wistfully, as one rather hoping than expecting to get at the truth, feeling all the while that she ought not to doubt her father’s word.

The statement, moreover, was in accordance with probabilities. There could hardly be any reasonable ground for questioning it, even had she here to do with an entire stranger. Yet she was conscious of a lurking uneasiness. Separated from him as she had been from early childhood, all that concerned his doings remained matter of mystery. He had superabundantly supplied her with money, he had done his best to have her well cared for and well educated, he had written and sent her presents from time to time. There the intimacy began and ended.

‘In these, and more besides,’ he replied, and again a little half-suppressed rasping laugh grated on her ears. Then he said sharply and decisively : ‘The question for you is not how my money was made, but how it is to be spent. Have you thought much about that, my girl?’

He looked at her keenly, as much as to say, ‘Am I understood or no? Must I put it still plainer to you, that I cannot be cross-questioned even by my daughter?’

Rapha, with her quick woman’s instinct, understood the look but too well. It indicated to her so many delusions to come, delusions and conflicts ! She saw in the future inevitable misunderstandings between her father and herself, a harshness in him that even his only child might call into play.

But she felt bound to hold her peace. The incident of

the little rose-coloured satin coat ought not, perhaps, to have disturbed her at all. She was fanciful to dwell upon it. Yet what could have induced him to propose such a thing as the purchase of the child? Under what conditions could his past life have been spent, so as to render the bare suggestion possible? These were questions she dared no longer dwell upon. Her present duty was to try to love her father and make his new life happy. As yet they had been only a few days together, and his anxiety to please her knew no bounds. The least she could do was to make a similar effort, and, Heaven help him, he had been lonely enough!

‘Look you,’ said Mr. Rapham, now taking a tone of almost artful insinuation, ‘I want you to do exactly as you like, and be happy as the day is long, Rapha. But to each his own concerns. Your business is to be a great lady, and some day or other to make a fine marriage.’

Again Rapha felt a little shock. Under the rough exterior of the trader she might discover the devoted father, the acute man of the world; hardly the educated gentleman, much less the sympathetic friend.

‘It seems to me that my business is to stay with you, papa,’ she said affectionately. She was trying hard to love him.

‘So you shall, till you are spirited away by a lover. You have already had hangers-on, I’ll be bound, although nobody knew you to be an heiress.’

She smiled and blushed.

Her dreams and ideals were her own. Could she confide these to the hard-featured, rough stranger, although he was her father? His speech brought her face to face with a new difficulty. Just as she had sought his confidences the moment before, so he sought her own now; but she

could not summon courage to speak of dreams and ideals to-day.

‘We must get our money’s worth, that is all,’ he said, evidently alluding to the suitors to come. Once more he scrutinized the sweet, candid face, thinking to himself, ‘I see how it is plain enough. Rapha has her admirations, like any other boarding-school miss. Some curate or other has been making love to the chit. But a round of gaieties will soon put bread-and-butter courtships out of her head.’ He was not quite easy in his mind nevertheless, in his turn beginning to foresee difficulties in their future intercourse. This fair, high-spirited daughter of his was no pliant creature to be bribed into acquiescence, but a strongly marked individuality, a will. Tenderness, devotion he felt he could count upon; blind compliance and abnegation of self, never. Rapha also was full of misgiving, almost inclined to regret the years whilst as yet they had been strangers to each other, father and daughter of dreams. In her present mood—perhaps, as she said to herself, to pass on the morrow—dreary possibilities already clouded the once radiant future. It was as if she gazed upon a sunlit landscape, in itself heavenly fair; but from the distant horizon seemed to issue a lurid streak, herald of storm-cloud to break over the sweet summer world.

CHAPTER III.

MR. RAPHAM'S VIEW OF POLITICAL ECONOMY.

NIGHTMARES, however, pass with the darkness that gives them birth. Next morning both father and daughter awoke to a cheerful aspect of things. There was the going home to begin with, the first real home of their lives; then the journey, with its thousand and one little incidents, amused these inexperienced travellers. Mr. Rapham, exiled for the better part of his existence from European civilization, showed as naïve an interest in everything as Rapha. Whilst the steamer glided gently from Ostend to Dover, he grew more and more talkative. What a good thing, he said to himself, that this daughter of his had a quick understanding! She saw the gist of a matter at once; no occasion for beating about the bush, or roundabout explanations. There would be little difficulties to get over at first; hardly likely that a delicately reared girl of twenty, and a man who had been knocking about in semi-savage countries as many years, should understand each other to begin with. But she had her wits about her; she was fully alive to the advantages of her position; she would see that it was to her own interest to humour him as he intended to humour her.

'I will tell you what it is,' he began, as they settled themselves in easy chairs on deck, 'we shall do things handsomely, of course. I have not come back to England to lead a beggarly life; but we will begin where we mean to

leave off—we will draw a line. Now there is one thing I want you to understand, Rapha: no charities.'

She looked rather diverted than shocked, this time. The incongruity of her father's speech tickled her fancy. Although so young she knew something of the world, and the thought at once struck her that it was no more possible to repudiate charities in England than rates and taxes! Indeed, just as Mr. Rapham looked down upon her from the height of his heterogeneous experiences, so in many respects this hard-featured father was a child in her eyes.

'No charities, I say. What else is the life of a rich man who spends his money but one unbroken series of charities?' continued Rapham, warming to his subject. 'Suppose, instead of spending a certain sum of money every year upon eating and drinking, servants, carriages, and so on, I keep my money in my pocket; suppose nobody else spends as much in my place, then it stands to reason there would be so many butchers, bakers, flunkeys, and the rest of 'em, wanting bread to eat. Depend on it, to give away money without getting something by way of return is neither common-sense nor benevolence.'

'Spending money on one's self is an agreeable kind of charity,' Rapha answered, still inclined to treat the disquisition as playful.

'Don't you see with your own eyes what charity and doing good, so-called, lead to?' he continued. 'They just fill the world with prigs and paupers, and that is all. The charitable man sets himself up for a Brummagem saint, and the good-for-nothing is well pleased to breed beggars for others to maintain. I don't pretend to be better than I am, my dear. I am not going to whitewash myself with two-

penny-halfpenny godliness to please the world. My own is my own to do with as I choose.'

Seeing the look of discomposure in her face, he added encouragingly :

'But if you like to fool away yours, that is no business of mine either. Your allowance the charity-mongers may worm out of you for aught I shall interfere. Women must always be doing good as they call it, or my belief is they would go clean mad.'

Could her father be really serious? She hardly knew. He went on, evidently anxious that she should know his view of things in general.

'Your case, you see, is quite different to my own. A young lady's pin-money, however handsome, does not bring about her ears a host of lickspittles, speculators, and philanthropists, who have ever the best of reasons for putting their hands into other people's pockets. I am not going to say that I shall refuse a trifle in the parish—subscription for Christmas coals, old women's flannel petticoats, and the like. We must keep on good terms with the parson. That is as regular a tax on civilization in England as ground-rents and water-rates. But you are not a business man; you have no idea of the way in which money draws—flies buzzing round a treacle-tub are nothing to it.'

With quick intuition, Rapha divined what her father was going to say next. She had, indeed, seen the drift of his discourse almost from the beginning.

'Before I have been at home a week, I shall be pestered with these gentry—up to my neck with them—people who want me to do this, and the other, for the public good, as they call it. Now I should like to know, what is the public good to me? Is not every man his own public good?

One day I shall be asked to build a church, as if there were not churches enough already; another, to help a man into Parliament—much good would that do me either; then I shall be expected to help in emigration schemes, as if it were my fault that folks can't earn their living at home. And so on, for ever and ever, amen. I can deal single-handed with the whole lot; I am not such an addlepate as to let others make ducks and drakes with the money I have been slaving all these years for. But do you, like a girl with a head on her shoulders, hold aloof from these schemers. Don't let them think they can get in the thin end of the wedge by talking you over. We should be beggared in no time if we once began to listen to these busybodies.'

'Of course I will do as you wish, papa,' she replied, with heightened colour and an ill-concealed look of vexation. To all generous causes then, pleaded in her hearing, she must turn a deaf ear. All kinds of delightful dreams were dispelled by her father's blunt explanation. Already this vast fortune ceased to wear its first bright look of enchantment. She was prohibited for once and for all from wooing life in a shower of gold. Nothing further on the subject was said at the time, and the next day they arrived home.

How fortunate for the millionaire sprung from the ground like a grasshopper, no more able to arrange his new mode of existence than Sancho Panza to govern an island, that the nineteenth-century Ariel—in other words, the universal agent—is at his beck and call! A man may have only just scholarship enough to write his name; his literary accomplishments may be said to begin and end with the signing of a cheque. Provided he can do that to good purpose, the rest is easy. Ariel not only sways material things to his will; he moves the human springs also—provides, as well as

the mansion and the mahogany dining-table, guests to partake of the feast; after making ready the lawn-tennis court and the ball-room, supplies beauty and fashion to lend the necessary animation. We are even ready to aver that your name can be thus magically put down on the best visiting-lists of the neighbourhood, and your daughter presented at Court. But let us not too closely inquire into these mysteries of civilization. Suffice it to acknowledge that this most astounding phenomenon in the modern world, the agent universal—the modern Ariel—can supply mortal man with everything he can possibly stand in need of. He has worked in aristocratic England the changes brought about in France by the storming of the Bastile. Give me my million, and my Ariel to show me how to spend it, and though I have sold farthing dips all my days, I shall henceforth take my place with the first chop of county society!

The world, too, is so much more charitable and good-natured than we commonly give it credit for, the half of humanity so much more ready to take the other half upon trust! Show me the contents of your purse, my good sir; but as to your qualities of head and heart, these are mere private matters, for your own concernment only. A man and a brother requires but one credential with his new-found neighbour—the bank-book, and that, all things considered, is about the easiest to be had.

When Mr. Rapham and his daughter arrived in their new home they found everything made ready for them—a really fine country-house, several hundred acres of richly wooded pleasure-ground, sumptuous furniture, handsome equipages, horses to ride and drive, to say nothing of a well-trained staff of servants. All things were in spick and

span order, the finishing-touch given, no fault to be found. The only drawback in Rapha's eyes was the situation.

Their home was handsomeness itself, and its immediate surroundings were beautiful; but close by might be seen downright squalor and unmitigated ugliness. Nothing could be prettier than the country, with characteristic scenery, characteristic cloudland of the Midlands. All rural England seemed here in miniature—park, corn-field and meadow making up the landscape.

The chief town of this pleasant shire, on the contrary, was as destitute of beauty as any well could be. How, in Heaven's name, had any place come to be so unsightly?

'You will, of course, do most of your shopping in London?' Ariel said, half apologetically. 'The town is not much to boast of, certainly.'

'It is well enough,' was the trader's answer. 'We are not going to live there.'

'You see,' Ariel went on, still apologetic, 'we are obliged to suit our customers in the most important particular, and let many minor points go. You wanted, first of all, a good house and park. So far, you are exactly suited. Another wants a churchy place—plenty of Ritualistic bustle, High Church hobnobbing, and so on. I always know where to suit *him* in the nicest of details, too. Then we have clients in the picturesque way. The Lakes are the very thing for them. But I am sorry the town is not more to look at.'

'We need not look at it,' was the laconic reply.

Rapha, however, was not so easily reconciled to the dismal aspect of the place.

It lay in a hollow to begin with, and, excepting in the lightest and brightest time of the year, a depressing mist

hung over it from end to end. There was no attractiveness or variety about its streets, formal lines of small red houses or gloomy warehouses; hardly a flower in a window here and there, to relieve the monotony. A few dwellings of the better order, with well-kept gardens, stood on the outskirts; these only made the melancholy hideousness but more apparent. The fine old parish church, too, was far from the centre of the town, as if the builders thought that a little sunshine and greenery might tempt the people to worship. What a contrast to these dreary, monotonous streets was the home of the millionaire! About the house itself there was little enough either to particularize or describe; alike within and without, so much outlay was apparent; a conventional standard of comfort and elegance, nothing more. Yet by force of contrast, every feature became emphasized and exaggerated. On the one hand, sordidness and toil; on the other, lavish wealth and the leisure to enjoy it.

The townsfolk could get more than a distant view of Mr. Rapham's splendour, a right of way from time immemorial permitting pedestrians to cross the park at an angle. That little traverse, with its slight-looking yet firm guarantee against the intruder, might be taken as an emblem of the work-a-day world in these parts. Occasional glimpses of beauty out of doors, stolen perceptions of brightness within, such was the portion of most, the remainder of life being surrendered to penury and unloveliness.

CHAPTER IV.

'AND ONE OTHER!'

HAD Mr. Rapham come hither in the guise of the angel Gabriel, goodness immaculate written on his front, divine pity and love of mankind irradiating his whole being, words of fellowship dropping honey-sweet from his lips, he could not have been more thrillingly welcomed.

The wealth of the gold-dust and ivory merchant was sufficiently indicated by his purchase of such a property as Strawton Park. Scant need have we to inquire into the circumstances of a man who can buy a place fit for a prince, and set up horses and carriages compatible with any fortune. Then the furniture, the household staff, the green-houses: these things were all of a piece, and spoke for themselves. It was evident that here at least was an individual who must have more money than he well knew what to do with, who would not only be willing but thankful to put out some of his superfluous cash at good interest. Nothing could be more opportune for the community at large than such an arrival.

The town of Strawton was just now in one of those positions which seem the inevitable result of civilization. It was for the time being the victim of over-production. A very wave of ruin had swept over it, and nobody could give any better explanation of the crisis than that the warehouses were full, instead of being empty. As certain painters over-

stock the picture-market, and have numerous canvases thrown back upon their hands, so the manufacturers here had produced more goods than they could possibly get rid of. Money not coming in, hands must be reduced to a minimum, claims allowed to accumulate, new enterprises be given up, business stand still. In fact, the aspect of affairs for months past had been desperate.

The unfortunate heads of factories were in the position of soldiers called into action, who every moment see some comrade drop by their side. Hardly a week, a day, but their ranks were thinned by bankruptcy; and each, as he glanced ruefully at his fellow, said to himself, 'Whose turn will it be to fall next, yours or mine?'

But the general feeling was one of hopefulness, all the same. Just as the destitute artisan who pawns his Sunday coat on the Monday morning, hoping rather than believing that he shall be able to redeem it for the next chapel-going, so these business men, one and all, would not give up the game. Things must mend. It was all nonsense to say that they would go on in this way for ever. A little spirit, a little capital, and not a house in the place, large or small, but could tide over the evil day.

When, therefore, Mr. Rapham made his appearance, no one put the thought into words, but everyone fondly believed that, in his especial case, good might come of it. The poor, large numbers of whom here, as elsewhere, barely contrived to get their bread out of weekly wages, the thin scraping of butter being invariably matter of charity, did not more confidently count on extra meat-tickets from the rich man, than these anxious, often apparently well-to-do merchants upon his financial aid. How this aid was to be got at, in what way the affair was to be contrived, remained

as yet dark. Nobody as yet knew how the new-comer would be received, or the social position he would choose for himself. Recognition from the neighbouring gentry he was pretty sure of—few nowadays can afford to ignore a millionaire; but being accustomed to business and business men, might not the rich trader prefer the society of the wealthier manufacturers and leading residents of the town? On account of his young daughter he could but welcome the best society to be had; for himself he must want a little stir and bustle, a fillip to daily life in the shape of speculation.

With regard to Rapha, conjecture was equally busy. This young lady, heiress to a splendid fortune, had her part to choose also. Each section of Strawton society was already dying to have her: the clerical, the philanthropical, the æsthetic, the showy. Which was to be lucky enough to carry off the prize?

Rapha herself, happily unconscious of all these surmisings, was thinking not at all of the outer world, but of her father, herself, and one other! She received such visitors as found her at home with girlish interest and graciousness; she looked over the visiting-cards left in her absence with naïve interest. To the gratification of many and the astonishment of some, she returned these calls, one and all, with equal promptitude and cordiality, thus disclaiming any intention to be exclusive. Having done this, and having promised her father to turn her mind to social entertainments by-and-by, she might have been in the heart of Africa, as far as Strawton society was concerned. Her mind, her heart, her daily life were too full of other things. That one other, that friend! Of course she knew he would be among the first to welcome her to her new home, and

to seek her father's acquaintance. She had felt all along that it must be so. Although far away, he would come. Why then this quick beating of the heart, this over-joy as at some great surprise, when she received a little note from him, announcing his coming? It was one of those apparently careless little notes that any well-bred man may write to a lady with whom he is fairly acquainted.

'DEAR MISS RAPHAM,

'On my way here from the north, I learn of your father's arrival and your installation at Strawton Park. Pray allow me to call and welcome you to your new home, also to give you news of common friends.

'Yours sincerely,

'GERALD SILVERTHORN.'

'Who is this fellow, this Silverthorn?' asked Mr. Rapham, conning the missive, eye-glass in hand.

'One of the lecturers I wrote to you of, and a frequent visitor at Professor Upton's whilst I stayed in his house,' Rapha replied. 'Don't you remember, papa, you let me go to London last year for the sake of attending some lectures?'

'He wants to get something out of us, depend on it,' growled the trader. 'Either to make love to you, or to borrow money of me. However, as these people—the Uptons, I mean—were very kind to you, and took you in cheap, I suppose we must be civil to him. Well, I am off to London to buy a sulky; you do as you please.'

Mr. Rapham had quitted the room, when he suddenly came back.

'I say, Rapha, what is the good of having a carriage

if it is not used? Just drive somewhere—oblige me by driving somewhere. I cannot keep horses and carriages for nothing.'

Rapha promised to drive somewhere; and then he went away, leaving her to her dreams. She smiled at her father's notion of buying a sulky, and again at the incubus his horses and carriages were already to him; most of all she smiled at his interpretation of Gerald Silverthorn's visit. After all, there was some truth in it. He was most probably coming to make love to her, and very likely wanted much more money than he possessed. Men of science who give their minds to speculation always do. All these thoughts caused her some inner merriment; her father's way of looking at everything was so diametrically opposed to her own. By force of this contrast, a dozen incidents a day wore a humorous aspect, which he failed to perceive.

But there was the business of driving somewhere. She would get that over at once, in order to be free for the rest of the day. Here, also, her sense of humour came into play. Was there not something preposterous in the notion of having to drive so many miles a day, just because you happen to have horses in the stable? With all its drawbacks, however, there is this advantage about keeping a vehicle, from a family coach to a wheelbarrow—it will carry our parcels for us. Rapha, being ever a young lady of many parcels, decided to carry to-day's accumulation to Strawton, making a long round thither, but returning straight home. She would thus most likely overtake the Professor on his way, and that would save him a stretch of muddy road. So she exchanged one set of packages for another, despatched her books to Mudie's, left her unbound music at the binder's, selected various articles of feminine merchandise here,

deposited invalid doles there, and was just outside the town when she recognised him.

That gaily swung stick, that careless dress, that airy gait, could belong to no other but her grown-up playfellow, comrade, fellow-student, friend, teacher—for he was all these.

She signalled to the coachman, and the shining equipage pulled up beside the somewhat astonished pedestrian. She called him by name, smilingly, and made room for him beside her; but there he stood, speechless and agape.

'Can I believe my own eyes?' he said at last.

Rapha laughed merrily then, for she divined exactly what was in his mind.

They had known each other intimately; now for the first time she saw him under wholly new conditions. This landau, these prancing horses, those obsequious lackeys, must strike him with a sense of incongruousness! Dozens and dozens of times they had returned with other students from the lecture by omnibus, aye, after many a refection of buns and tea in cook-shops!

'Do, please, get in,' Rapha said.

'With these muddy boots? No,' he said teasingly; 'and you cannot get out, either, to walk in silk stockings and satin shoes. So we had better bid the horses be patient, and carry on a conversation remaining stockstill where we are.'

'Nonsense!' Rapha exclaimed, still with her hand on the open door of the carriage. 'It is a very long walk home. If I leave you here, you will not arrive till all the luncheon is eaten up.'

The Professor did consent to take a seat then. He had,

indeed, been walking about since an early breakfast, and was hungry.

‘How do you like being a fine lady?’ he began, as they drove on; ‘or, rather, how shall you like it, think you, for you can hardly know the feeling yet?’

‘Oh!’ cried Rapha, ‘I shall never be in the least bit a genuine fine lady; only a little on the outside, to please papa.’

‘And how do you get on with papa?’ asked Silverthorn, kind, but irreverent.

‘He is kindness itself,’ Rapha answered, with the evident intention to say no more on that subject.

‘Well, he has set you up handsomely in the matter of a trap, horseflesh, and Jeameses,’ he went on. ‘Only to match them, and be able to comport yourself becomingly, you should wear a front, be seventy at least, weigh fifteen stone, and have a poodle under each arm. As it is, you are an anomaly of the first water—a preposterous incongruity!’

‘You will say the same of the house,’ Rapha said. ‘Such a houseful of servants, too; and only two people to be waited on!’

‘You have only each of you to give as much trouble as half a dozen,’ laughed the Professor. ‘Ring the bell twenty times in a quarter of an hour, have an elegant little repast served up ten times a day, then—but no! on my word now, do you mean to tell me you really live here?’

This expression of surprise was elicited by the opening of the lodge-gates, and the first glimpse of Strawton Park amid the trees.

CHAPTER V.

A DEPARTURE IN HOUSEKEEPING.

THE gay, boyish Professor, whose ebullient spirits, irrepressible mirth and light-hearted ways might have made him pass muster for a Frenchman, was in reality a hard-working, speculative man of science, already verging on middle life. Youthful as he seemed, he was approaching his thirty-fifth year, and for the last twenty years of his life had worked harder than most men. He possessed, however, that enviable gift of always feeling young, which is almost the same thing as never growing old. His pursuits led him into some of the more recondite and painful paths of science ; his bread mainly depended on the salary of professor, yet he appeared as young, careless and playful as the bright, untried girl of twenty who was his dearest friend. Nor did he in their intercourse show one side only of his character—the trivial, the commonplace—to her ; he did not confine his more serious self to the study or the classroom, keeping a holiday self for the boudoir. His friend must be his friend indeed ; he had chosen one who could sympathize with him, and was morally, if not intellectually, on his own level. Rapha certainly was ignorant of vast numbers of facts he had at his fingers' ends, but if mere knowledge of facts in itself constitutes mental superiority, who can call himself wiser than his neighbour? A ship's cook in one sense is a better man than a senior wrangler, and a pointsman could teach Bismarck himself something.

What a merry, merry meal they had!

How good it was to recall those happy student-days! She had, indeed, been his pupil, but upon other occasions they had sat side by side below the professorial chair, listening, learning together.

‘I must make one remark,’ said Silverthorn, with a sudden air of great gravity.

Rapha looked up, expecting some scientific enunciation or moral aphorism. The Professor merely transferred something from the dish nearest to him to his own plate, adding:

‘I wish I had as good a lunch as this every day.’

Rapha smiled, and next moment blushed.

Was he inwardly blaming all this display, calling it materialism?

‘It seems so much easier to provide good things than to feel hungry enough to eat them,’ she said regretfully. ‘Poor papa’s want of appetite is really distressing; that is why he has just bought a pleasure-farm and a sulky. He says if he does not occupy himself out of doors a good deal, he shall never be able to get beyond mutton-chops and gruel.’

‘True Gospel charity that,’ laughed Silverthorn, ‘to keep a man-cook for the delectation of your friends, and eat only gruel yourself. I compliment you on your cuisine, although I could do so with better grace had you so much as cooked the potatoes. I suppose you have mounted so many rungs of the social ladder that you are now too lofty a personage to order your meals, much less cook them.’

Again Rapha showed signs of vexation. Her friend’s raillery jarred.

‘Papa has the housekeeping carried on according to a

new system ; I have really nothing whatever to do with it,' she replied.

'But seriously'—here he moved sideways from the table, and laying his napkin across his knee, confronted her with kind, even affectionate insinuation—'seriously, I do honestly hope that you will be happy here ; I came here to-day on purpose to say so.'

'I ought to be happy,' she replied, looking down. She would not let him read any misgivings.

'I know nothing of the place or the people,' he went on. 'In summer it should be pleasant enough, and I dare say we could find rare flowers if we looked for them. Among your neighbours, too, you are sure to find some to your mind. But don't forget old ways and old friends.'

'As if I should do that !'

'We hardly know what we shall do when we are suddenly made to walk on our heads.' Ever shy in the matter of personalities, he went on rather abruptly : 'I have been thinking of something that would be very pleasant for both of us. Suppose—suppose now——'

In the midst of this confidential talk there was a tramping of heavy boots in the hall, and Mr. Rapham entered. No greater contrast to his visitor could be presented. This small spare man with keen eyes and complexion the colour of parchment, in form neatness and compactness itself, might have been fifty or an octogenarian ; at ninety, he could hardly look any older, and the question arose in the mind of the observer, had he ever looked really young ? Physiognomy, gait, gestures, were all those of one whose energies had been bent upon a single object, and whose past experiences were at variance with his present life. This sense of contrast gave him a kind of restless uneasiness. He

seemed perpetually on the look-out, as if to make quite sure he were not transgressing in minor matters. The educated Londoner, on the contrary, although not lofty of stature, looked large by comparison, and was the very personification of that easy collectedness due to constant attrition with the world. Perfectly natural, ever letting his boyish animation have full play, he yet remained strictly within the limits of good taste and good breeding, and this comes, too, of the habit as well as character, depending much on daily intercourse with the polished and the amiable.

‘Pray be seated, sir—glad to see you,’ was the host’s curt salutation.

Rapha introduced the pair. Then Mr. Rapham said :

‘If you have lunched, Rapha, I wish you would come with Mr. Silverthorn to look at my sulky. I had it put on the train, and here it is.’

‘Will you not first eat something, papa?’

‘Why should I eat, child, just because food happens to stand on the table? I’ll take a crust of bread and drop of wine to please you. I hope my daughter has given you all that you wish for, sir?’ he said, turning to his visitor with old-fashioned hospitality.

‘Can human wishes soar beyond a Perigord pie?’ Silverthorn replied laughingly, glancing at the table.

Mr. Rapham said, glancing in the same direction :

‘I am no authority in such matters. That is why I have set up housekeeping on the new system.’

‘And what is that?’

‘You a Cockney, and ask me such a question? Well, I will soon enlighten you,’ added Mr. Rapham, drawing a chair to the table, and helping himself gingerly to a morsel of the Perigord pie. ‘A mighty convenient system it is, I assure

you. Only fancy, this day twelve months, and that without the least trouble to myself, I can tell exactly what meal you partook of here, and what it cost to a farthing !

‘Papa dear !’ remonstrated Rapha.

‘I see nothing to be ashamed of,’ laughed the trader. ‘But let me explain to your friend how the thing is worked. Well, here am I, and I’ll be bound there are scores in my plight—men come back to the old country to spend their money—no more able to hold my own with butchers, and bakers, and cooks, and butlers than the man in the moon. I’ve got the money—that is all. Now, I go to a house like Allchere’s. Allchere is one of the great agents, you know ; and he just puts my establishment in order, and keeps it wound up like a clock.’

‘Very convenient, I am sure,’ said the Professor.

‘It is more than convenient—it is confoundedly economical,’ Mr. Rapham said, growing quite enthusiastic. ‘I have, then, to begin with, no trouble with my establishment whatever, beyond the fact of paying for it. Everything is done by contract. A competent man comes down once a week to see that all is going on well ; and if there is a hitch, I have only to complain to headquarters. The matter is rectified at once. And mark the saving ! I have nothing to do with feeding a number of dainty, wasteful servants. They receive board wages, and my own table is strictly under control. Every item of expenditure is jotted down in the day-book ; so that, as I said just now, by referring to it a year hence, I can find out what company I had this very day, and what was the cost. There is a tariff for everything.’

‘And, as far as your experience goes, does the plan work well ?’

‘Admirably. Just think now! What could I do—what could an inexperienced girl like Rapha do with a concern like this? There would be cheating, high-flying, and pilfering everywhere. We should be half ruined in no time. As it is, one round sum covers everything—absolutely everything. I have my agent to pay, and nobody else.’

‘Provided the agent is up to the mark, the existence of people who keep twenty servants may henceforth become endurable,’ said the Professor.

‘Oh! I’ve a hold on him, the rascal! I look into his items, of course,’ chuckled the trader; ‘and not only that, every quarter his bill goes to my accountant. Besides, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. I assure you, this Allchere does a rattling trade. He has—that I can vouch for—half a dozen establishments on this side of London alone; but his best custom is in the manufacturing districts, he tells me.’

‘And miscellaneous indulgences and commodities—lessons on the violin, a new set of teeth, vaccination—can these wants be similarly provided for?’

‘Without the slightest difficulty. In fact, Allchere has promised to find me a yacht and crew next summer; and when we give a ball, as we intend to do at Christmas, he contracts not only for the decorations, band, and supper, but for a certain number of dancers if our supply falls short.’

‘You are surely joking now, papa!’

‘I will eat my head if I am,’ retorted Mr. Rapham. ‘And not only young ladies and gentlemen are despatched to country-houses to help in a jig—when folks like myself give dinner-parties they send down a professional talker to make the thing go off.’

Rapha glanced at Silverthorn. Would his overweening

love of fun be able to withstand this? But the Professor looked gravity itself. Like his informant, he took the matter in all seriousness.

‘For instance, our first dinner-party is fixed for the third of November, isn’t it, Rapha? Well, Allchere furnishes the conversation; and all I have to pay for a first-rate man in that line is ten guineas, and a trifle for boots.’

Rapha laughed merrily; but Silverthorn asked, in the most matter-of-fact way:

‘Does the secret of a fluent tongue lie in any especial shoe-leather? If so, I would indulge in a similar pair, without loss of time, and regardless of expense.’

‘You see,’ Mr. Rapham continued, ‘a man who sits down with fine folks must be well dressed. One client is charged something for his pumps; another for his swallow-tails; a third for his silk waistcoat, and so on. But just think what a relief it is to be able to count upon such a person! I can’t converse myself—can’t pretend to. We hardly know the names of the people we have invited. Most of ’em, I’ll warrant, are as dull as ditch-water. Allchere guarantees that the dinner shall be lively from the first moment to the last.’

‘I wish amateur talkers could aspire to such proficiency,’ Silverthorn said.

‘It’s custom that does it,’ Mr. Rapham went on. ‘You can bring people to anything by daily habit. Well, as I see you have both finished, take a turn with me in the drawing room and the library. I should like to hear what you think of the pictures and books.’

He marshalled them first to the well-appointed, spacious library, and, pointing to the shelves, added:

‘I gave a thousand pounds for the lot. I doubt if all

the books ever written are worth half the money. But one must have something of the kind nowadays for appearance' sake.'

Silverthorn took up a neatly printed, elegantly bound catalogue, and, making the round of the room, verified entries and examined volumes here and there. Yes, all was above-board, *bonâ fide*, beyond suspicion. Authors, editions, bindings, of first-rate quality.

Mr. Rapham seemed much pleased with the nature of his visitor's verdict.

'Then there are the pictures,' he went on, passing into the sumptuously furnished drawing-room. 'I can only judge of the frames, which are certainly worth looking at. Rapha says they are all right. Tell me what you think.'

The critic glanced at canvas after canvas approvingly. Here, too, he could find absolutely no fault. The Allchere system came out in no unfavourable light when on artistic ground—that is to say, the pictures were marketable, worth a good deal of money.

'These men seem to know what they are about,' was his brief commentary.

'It is to their interest to do the thing in first-rate style when they have the chance. My house is such an advertisement for them, you see,' the host replied, feeling more and more satisfied with his bargain. 'And now let us have a look at something I have chosen for myself. Come and see my sulky.'

CHAPTER VI.

LAUGHTER AKIN TO TEARS.

‘So that is a sulky! What could have induced you to buy such a thing, papa?’ cried Rapha. ‘You must always drive in it alone.’

‘What else was a sulky invented for?’ Mr. Rapham said, surveying his new purchase with growing admiration. The contents of his library, the pictures on his walls, said nothing to him; the sulky, on the contrary, seemed full of delightful suggestions. His eyes brightened; his entire physiognomy grew radiant as he gazed and expatiated.

‘Now I should like to know,’ he went on, addressing himself chiefly to Silverthorn, ‘I should like to know if anything was ever invented more useful than that?’

‘A horse would say so if he could speak, without doubt,’ replied Silverthorn, still gravity itself. His merriment at the strange ways of Rapha’s father was checked by a pathetic feeling. Had Mr. Rapham been a stranger, he could not have resisted a hearty laugh then and there. But the fact that he belonged to her made his personality almost a sacred one in his eyes. Diversion seemed untimely and almost cruel. The only way to avoid giving Rapha pain, was to take everything as seriously as Mr. Rapham himself.

‘Its lightness is to be taken into account, certainly,’ the other went on; ‘but I was not thinking of that just then. There are other traps that hardly weigh more. The first

advantage of a sulky is that it precludes the possibility of taking anyone up. Now, if there is one thing I object to when I drive out, it is to be asked for a lift.'

'Highwaymen have certainly robbed and murdered in return for such accommodation,' said Silverthorn.

'Talk of cut-throats and pickpockets! I would much sooner a man made for my windpipe or my purse than my secrets,' laughed Mr. Rapham. 'Depend on it, when a fellow asks to let him get up with you, it is to find out what you are about.'

'There is a good deal of truth in that, too,' Silverthorn said. He did not wish to be acquiescent for acquiescence's sake; but his host's way of putting things was hardly controvertible.

'And another thing—a sulky speaks for itself. Drive a sulky, and never fear that folks will come pestering you for money. They know you are a close-fisted chap before you open your mouth. Of course, it isn't all pleasure to be rich. People's mouths are watering for my money in these parts already; that I can vouch for. When they see me in my sulky, they will understand I am not their man, and I shall be left in peace.'

'An agreeable method of shaking off the importunate,' laughed the Professor. 'Being a poor man, however, I can indulge in a more sociable vehicle.'

'And nothing so good for business as a sulky,' added Mr. Rapham. 'Why do so many go to the dogs, or end their days no richer than they began? Just because they are not close enough. Mark my word, sir, if you wish to get on, to make money, be close. Button up your coat. Let no one know what you are thinking of. It is a nice little trap, isn't it?'

‘Charming, my only objection being that it is not a gig,’ replied Silverthorn. ‘At the same time, I see the force of your arguments.’

‘Would you like to look at the stables?’ asked Mr. Rapham.

‘Immensely,’ was the reply, although Silverthorn knew as much about horseflesh as his host did of art.

For Rapha’s sake he wished to reciprocate her father’s cordiality. He flattered himself, too, that he had created a favourable impression.

‘Well, now for a turn in my new sulky,’ said his host, after a round out of doors. ‘But pray, if it suits you, Mr. Silverthorn, stay to dinner. We have not half work enough for the servants, and, you see, whether we have twenty folks to dine, or sit down by ourselves, they are paid all the same. Besides, you can, I dare say, give Rapha some hints as to the proper people to be civil to hereabouts.’

The offer was gratefully accepted, and after watching Mr. Rapham drive off in his sulky, Rapha and her visitor returned to the drawing-room.

‘Is there nothing I can do for you?’ he asked; ‘hang pictures, arrange china, paint a wainscot—all these things, you know, are in my way.’

She made no reply, and he saw that, as her glance followed her father from a distance, her eyes filled with tears. He understood all—the disenchantment of a generous nature amid such scenes, the emptiness of this splendour, the want of heart, reality, inspiration, that she felt in her new life.

Silverthorn was one of those men who can fall in love, remain perpetually in love, but are quite unable to make love. He could be all kindness and devotion to a woman;

he was wholly at a loss to put these feelings into words. Hardly any other circumstances, for instance, could have made him really shy and awkward as he was now. Out came his words of protectiveness and comfort, blunt as a schoolboy's.

'Don't lose heart, dear. Don't be downcast,' he said, his own eyes moistening as he spoke. 'Your father will never let you marry me, I see that well enough. But I promise you I will never marry anyone else.'

There was something serio-comic in the speech—a medley of philosophy, sentiment, and honest passion; all the more was Rapha touched by it because she knew his character so well. Hitherto delicacy had restrained him from speaking out. As a man of honour, he felt bound to be silent during her father's absence. Now that Mr. Rapham was in England, silence ceased to be obligatory. Words might avail nothing, yet, for her own sake as well as his, he must speak.

Sad as she was at heart, she smiled then. His secret had been hers long ago; none the less did this openness comfort her in her hour of disillusion, almost of despair. Silverthorn was her dearest friend. They seemed to understand each other's thoughts without a word; but this kind—this too kind father of hers, could she ever love him as a daughter should? Would not Silverthorn's devotion—everything else she most valued, help to divide her from him, and make them more like strangers to each other?

'We won't use the word "never,"' he went on, blunt, boyish, encouraging as before. 'Who knows what may or may not happen——' He looked at her shyly, penetratingly, moved a step forward as if to venture upon a lover-like kiss, suddenly drew back, red as a poppy, and blurted out the

rest of his sentence : 'That is to say, if you care so much as a couple of straws for me.'

Perhaps the naïvest love-making most nearly approaches the irresistible, but Rapha was not in the mood for maidenly yea or nay, much less explanations, just then. Silverthorn could not venture to exact a promise—how could she give any? And both were agitated, overjoyed, distracted. For the moment the sense of nearness to each other, of entire understanding, no matter what circumstances might arise, sufficed.

She merely wiped away her tears, cast a long, resigned glance at her spick-and-span, costly surroundings, and answered, smiling ruefully :

'I wish I could care a couple of straws for all this—for the luxury papa has given me.'

'After all, a trifle too much of outside show, a touch of vulgarity even, in life does no real harm—many other things are so much worse,' the comforter went on. 'You will soon take this display as a matter of course, and find that it is as well to be rich as not. This I am sure of—your father adores you.'

'Poor papa !' sighed Rapha.

'Let him be happy in his own way ; you cannot expect a man who has been buying and selling for the best part of his life to settle down a finished æsthete—a bandbox Ruskin ! But now, why should we not be doing something? Suppose you show me your room—the room I am to advise you about.'

The proposal was joyfully welcomed, and in a few minutes both were highly busy. Rapha's boudoir had been in the first instance furnished by contract, like the rest ; she contrived, however, to find room for the elegant but character-

less furniture and fittings-up elsewhere, replacing them with the artless souvenirs of her girlhood. Here was the little piano, for which Silverthorn had painted her a panel as a birthday present, the bookcase, plainness itself in the eyes of a professional decorator, which held the books she had read into shabbiness; the old-fashioned mahogany work-table that had belonged to her unknown mother; the insignificant yet, to her affectionate nature, priceless gifts of schoolfellows and friends; the quaint Oriental treasures her father had sent her from time to time. Simple although these surroundings, they were in her eyes more precious than anything else the house contained. Each object recalled what money could not buy: hopes, dreams, affections, the whole making up an epitome of her young life, a calendar to be conned over lovingly and alone.

‘The room is very pretty in itself. You can do so much with a carol-window,’ Silverthorn said. ‘But the cornices and brackets savour somewhat of high art by contract.’

‘They shall come down. I will ring for the steps,’ Rapha replied, touching the bell.

‘Then the curtains, and the carpet; the colour is well enough, but the patterns are too geometrical. Do let us choose something better together when next you are in London. Brown and gold, bumble-bee colours, sunflower colours, nothing prettier in the world. That is what we will have.’

The steps were brought; Silverthorn was busy taking down a bracket, Rapha holding hammer and nails, when a visitor was announced.

‘Mr. Morrow!’ Rapha said, glancing at the card. ‘Yes, show him up. He is the only person here I have seen as yet that I take the faintest interest in,’ she added.

'I wish I had come into the world with that man's name,' Silverthorn said. 'Certain names are a fortune in themselves, despite the saying of the great Shakespeare to the contrary. Think, for instance, of being handicapped with such a cognomen as Timmins, or worse still, Toppins; enough to drive anyone into suicide. Now——'

But his speech was cut short by the entrance of Rapha's visitor.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. MORROW.

A WELL-DRESSED man, but for the air of being in his Sunday clothes; a handsome man, but for a touch of indecision, as if he did not feel quite sure whether his nose, eyes, and mouth really belonged to him; a well-bred man, but for a nervousness that indicated his own doubts on the subject—such was Mr. Merton Morrow, late Mayor of Strawton, and one of the leading manufacturers of the place.

'I fear I interrupt. You are busy, I see,' Mr. Morrow said, standing uneasily in the doorway. Had he suspected dynamite alike before and behind, he could hardly have looked more uneasy. 'I will call some other time.'

'Indeed you have come opportunely,' Rapha said, offering a chair. 'My friend Mr. Silverthorn—Professor Silverthorn, Mr. Morrow—has been helping me to rearrange my little room; but we have done now, and you can be of the utmost possible use to me.'

‘I am delighted to hear you say so, though I think you are too kind, overstating the case,’ the visitor said, accepting the proffered seat gingerly; the most rickety concern out of a broker’s shop would hardly have been inspected with more caution. And once seated, he looked about restively as if for some excuse to get up again.

‘What I want you to do for me is this,’ Rapha said, whilst she poured out tea for her guests. ‘Papa wishes to give one or two dinner-parties by way of knowing our neighbours. The difficulty is to know exactly the right persons to invite to meet each other.’

‘I propose to Miss Rapham to jumble up her visiting-cards in a bag, and then pick out a score blindfold,’ Silverthorn said; ‘or another plan equally simple would be to invite all those whose names begin with a vowel one day, and those beginning with a consonant the next.’

Mr. Morrow looked hopelessly perplexed. He did not in the least know as yet the kind of society the millionaire and his beautiful daughter wished for. Did they intend to fraternize only with the grand folks who held aloof from trade as from contamination; who regarded a pedigree as the next best thing to be sure of after a place in Abraham’s bosom? If so, then where was he? What business had he in the heiress’s boudoir?

Rapha’s speech set his mind at ease.

‘You will come, I hope?’ she asked naturally and cordially.

‘Of course, if you wish it; with the greatest possible pleasure,’ was the elate reply.

‘And I suppose we should begin by asking the Lowfunds. Have you any objection to meeting them?’ she asked in the same straightforward manner. She was a tyro in the

mysteries of county society ; it never occurred to her that anyone could object to meet anyone so kindly and pleasant as Mr. Morrow.

‘Objection? oh dear no! On the contrary, I shall feel honoured,’ Mr. Morrow said eagerly. The invitation, a bagatelle as it might seem to others, was in reality very important in Mr. Morrow’s eyes. It changed, indeed, the entire aspect of the future.

Hitherto business—that is to say, the atmosphere of buying and selling—had kept the worthy manufacturer out of what is called good society. He was, socially speaking, debarred from sunshine by a thick environment of fog. But one thing was certain, Mr. Rapham’s entertainments were sure to be universally accepted. Whatever people might think of the rich man himself, they would not despise his venison and champagne. Here at last, then, Mr. Morrow saw the realization of his fondest wishes. At the table of this charming young hostess he should meet not only men after the pattern of Silverthorn, representing science and letters, but what he equally aspired to, that legendary ease and elegance, that inherited breeding, in his eyes the finishing touch, the salt, the acme of existence.

Now Mr. Morrow was not in the very least a snob, in spite of these longings and illusions. Like many another, he only needed to see himself as others saw him, to be perfectly satisfied alike with his own individuality and his condition in life. Everyone liked and respected him at Strawton. There was no earthly reason why he should wish to exchange his position for the Will-o’-the-wisp called fashionable society. The people he knew and visited were every whit as intelligent, as interesting, as estimable, as those he wished to be intimate with. He could freely indulge in his favourite tastes

and pursuits; having virtually, although not in the letter, retired from business, he was no longer compelled to buy or sell, occupy himself with sordid details, mix with those less instructed and less well-bred than himself. A bachelor of fifty, in easy circumstances, no ill-favoured son of Adam, he could still aspire to fireside joys and graces; or, if he preferred to retain his freedom, he could do as the envied do: visit art galleries in foreign capitals—see something of the historic worlds, Eastern and Western—lead a dilettante life.

But, like the rest of us, Mr. Morrow must torment himself for a toy not worth having, a thing chiefly valuable in his eyes because it had seemed hitherto unattainable. He had never met a single member of the aristocratic Lowfunds family, except at Corporation dinners and other public entertainments. And, as far as the feminine portion was concerned, if on friendly terms with him at the county ball to-day, they would be strangers to-morrow.

Lady Letitia Lowfunds and her numerous family of grown-up daughters were not particularly fascinating, but they went everywhere, they met royalty here and there. Mr. Morrow regarded them with a feeling akin to veneration.

When Rapha, therefore, produced her card-basket, and turning out the contents, begged him to arrange her two dinner-parties, he grew positively radiant. Shyness vanished altogether. He became so happy that he was within an inch of forgetting the errand on which he had come.

Rapha, however, reminded him of it.

‘Mr. Morrow,’ she said, when Silverthorn had left them to amuse himself by rearranging her pictures, ‘papa does not wish me on any account to take any active part in

philanthropic work here, but I should like to contribute to deserving objects out of my allowance. Will you advise me?’

‘I came here to-day to talk to you on that very subject,’ he said. ‘But pleasure invariably drives business out of my head. Miss Rapham’—here he suddenly warmed into eloquence—‘your arrival here is inopportune for yourselves, but most fortunate, I may say providential, for others. It seems ungracious, perhaps, to come to you for money, before you have fairly taken possession of your new home? Yet with ruin staring us in the face, with want at our very doors, under such circumstances men scruple at nothing.’

Poor Rapa’s heart sank within her. She divined his errand before he had told it.

‘What should a young lady like yourself know of depression in trade, commercial crises, foreign competition, over-supply, and so forth?’ continued the speaker. ‘To make a long story short, then, this unfortunate town, once prosperous, is going through a cruel ordeal, being tried in the fire. One manufacturer after another has been obliged to put up his shutters, and I suppose you know the meaning of that. Ruin and disgrace for the man, sorrow and trouble for wife and children. Of course the evil day will be tided over. Such ups and downs are common to all branches of trade. But meantime we cannot let our townfolk starve.’

‘You want papa to help. I am sorry to say he has set his face against indiscriminate giving, much less lending——’

Mr. Morrow thought she must have misunderstood the drift of his speech.

‘I did not come to borrow,’ he said quickly. ‘It would require more than such a fortune as your father’s is said to be, to prop up the tottering credit of this poor place. The wave of ruin must sweep over it. I, for one, should be the last person in the world to ask a stranger to risk anything in so desperate a cause. To alleviate cases of individual distress, however, is a wholly different matter. Most of us can do that.’

His face said that Rapha’s father would surely make common cause with Strawton folk here.

‘You had better not ask papa for anything, at least at present,’ Rapha replied, looking quite distressed. She had begun to read her father’s character so well. ‘Papa is unused to European life,’ she went on explanatorily. ‘He cannot understand this constant necessity of giving in England. He thinks men who have worked hard to make money should be allowed to enjoy it in peace.’

Still Mr. Morrow looked incredulous.

‘If you wish it, I will of course say nothing,’ he replied, with a crestfallen look. ‘But the matter I came about to-day is of the utmost urgency, and the help we ask for is really trifling—I mean to a wealthy man. I do really believe that Mr. Rapham could not say no. The fact is, we are getting off a ruined manufacturer, an excellent fellow with a promising young family, to the colonies. A subscription list has been opened for them, and I came to beg ten pounds, only ten pounds!’

Without a word Rapha unlocked her old-fashioned little desk, and taking out two five-pound notes, placed them in her visitor’s hands.

‘Accept them from me instead of going to papa,’ she said, colouring with vexation.

‘Indeed, you are too generous. I ought not to accept so much from you,’ Mr. Morrow replied, quite overcome. ‘Young ladies, too, are such expensive beings nowadays, with the constant change of fashions. And balls coming on! No, give me five pounds. I will take one note with pleasure.’

But Rapha insisted, and the too happy Mr. Morrow, having overcome his scruples, carefully placed the notes in his pocket-book.

‘These cases are very trying,’ he said with tears in his eyes. ‘They come home to one. This poor fellow I speak of is a gentleman in tastes and feeling, who knows the misery behind forced cheerfulness, the heart perhaps slowly breaking under a well-buttoned frock-coat! You see, ruin spoils everything. A man never feels quite the same! I assure you, what with these and kindred cases, everyone in the place is out of spirits just now.’

‘We must try to cheer them up, then,’ Rapha said, ‘and papa is quite willing to do that. He is determined to entertain handsomely.’

Mr. Morrow also brightened up.

‘Your coming, I repeat, is quite a windfall to us just now. Giving entertainments is not charity, certainly, but it often answers the same purpose—gives employment, circulates money, and so on.’

‘That is what papa says,’ Rapha replied. ‘He is of opinion——’ but the remainder of the sentence was cut short by the announcement of another visitor. ‘Mr. Ville-dieu——’ she said, laying down the card. ‘Why should you hurry away?’

But with instinctive politeness, partly actuated also by another feeling, the well-bred manufacturer refused to be the

over-lapping guest. The Honourable Frederick Villedieu belonged to the charmed circle of society from which Mr. Morrow, as a business man, had been hitherto shut out. There was shyness as well as a certain sense of triumph in this rencontre under Rapha's roof. Mr. Morrow glanced at the new-comer, not quite sure if he should do the right thing in offering his hand. The cordial greeting of the man of the world reassured him. At any rate, there were to be no fine gradations, no nice social distinctions observed in a lady's drawing-room. Mr. Morrow walked home soliloquizing thus: 'Villedieu loses no time in paying court to the rich man and his pretty daughter! An agreeable fellow, though, according to my old-fashioned Tory notions, holding the most abominable doctrines. But he is sure to get into the next Parliament; he is as clever as a man can well be, and the son of one lord, heir perhaps of another! Old Rapham would like the sound of that, I should say.

'Then there is that pleasant man from London. He and Miss Rapham seem to understand each other uncommonly well, eh? Are they engaged? No—yes—well, what on earth can it matter to me?'

CHAPTER VIII.

INITIATORS.

'My good neighbour, Mr. Morrow, has been getting money out of you!' said Rapha's visitor, accepting a chair, evidently intending to have his say out also. 'A kinder-hearted man never lived; and there are too many like him, alas!'

‘Should you not say instead, “Amen”?’ Rapha asked.

She had only seen Mr. Villedieu once before; but he had straightway set her at her ease. Although hardly middle-aged, he seemed much more than that in Rapha’s eyes. He was conversant with the world, familiar with thousands of subjects mere enigmas to herself. And he adopted, perhaps for expediency’s sake, a protective, admonishing, almost paternal air. This young girl appeared to him very solitary; and whilst such a position undoubtedly had its charms in the eyes of his sex, he saw its perils also. What would become of this fair, hopeful, promising young life? Would it fall into worthy or ignoble hands? Would she, for once and for all, sacrifice everything to worldly ambition, make a fashionable marriage, and sink into feminine nonentity? or choose the better part—throw in her lot with the thinkers, initiators, doers, of the new era dawning upon society?

In appearance, Mr. Villedieu afforded a striking contrast alike to the sunny-tempered, sturdy Professor, and the shy, self-questioning, self-criticising manufacturer. He had little of the traditional Englishman about him; it was in his case as if, with the mental idiosyncrasy of a former period, the physical characteristics tended to disappear or undergo modification also. English he undoubtedly was; but foreign bringing up, travel, cosmopolitan habits of life and intercourse, had removed that indescribable something, hitherto looked upon as the stamp of nationality. May it not, indeed, so come about that international communication will have such effect—will in time assimilate nations by gradual degrees, not only affecting modes of thought, but changing, little by little, physical traits also?

Rapha having thrown down the gauntlet, he picked it up readily.

‘Amen?’ he cried. ‘Viciousness is the ugly reptile that any addlepate knows by sight; kindness of heart how often the mere bloom of the rotten apple! Just look around you, and see what brainless benevolence has done for this unhappy town! Half the inhabitants live on the charity of the other half, and none feel any shame. Now, if the head spoke instead of the heart, if people listened to reason instead of sentiment, to offer or accept broken victuals and left-off clothes would be reckoned as disgraceful as the wearing of a convict’s badge. But I don’t want to preach to you on political economy; that you will learn here in the best possible way—namely, by experience. I only offer a word of caution. You will, of course, be pressed to fraternize with this and that league of professional pauperizers; to join the ladies who lend out funeral bonnets and pantaloons; to become a patrol-woman, delivering tracts on eternal burning for the consolation of the sick and aged poor. Hold aloof from them all.’

‘That is what papa is always saying; but he comes to the same conclusion by a different way,’ Rapha said. ‘His maxim is, “Every man should suffice for himself.”’

‘A very good maxim too, with the rider, “and be allowed so to do.” Modern philanthropy handicaps the moral nature of the British people. ’Tis all very well to quote Burns, “A man’s a man for a’ that.” Charity is bondage, and bondage is serfdom. But now talk to me of your father. What is he going to do for us all?’

Rapha felt the same sense of humiliation as when catechized by the timid, apologetic manufacturer just before. Here, however, she had to deal with a more exacting inquirer; she saw clearly enough that Mr. Villedieu would not be satisfied with half-explanations.

‘In the first place,’ continued the speaker, ‘what are Mr. Rapham’s political and social creeds? Which side does he adhere to—that of the rear or van guard, of retrogression tugging us by the heel into the limbo of the Middle Ages, or of advance, plunging forward as boldly as Phaeton driving the sun?’

‘Papa says that he is wholly indifferent to politics,’ Rapha said. ‘He has lived so long out of England, that he seems to have lost all interest in such questions. He rarely so much as glances at a newspaper.’

Mr. Villedieu paused reflectively.

‘Perhaps,’ she went on, endeavouring for her own sake to look forward hopefully—‘perhaps in time papa will become more interested in public affairs.’

‘Would he attend a public meeting, think you?’ asked the other.

‘He might possibly do so to please me,’ Rapha said; ‘not for his own satisfaction, I am sure.’

‘There is another point I wished to consult you about,’ Villedieu went on, looking, as Mr. Morrow had done just before, slightly disconcerted. ‘It is a delicate one; yet I feel sure you will excuse me for putting it. You say that your father cares nothing about politics or social questions. Is he determined to hold aloof from one and all indiscriminately in the matter of money—to carry indifferentism to the pitch of closing his purse altogether? If so, I shall indeed be sorry, alike on his account and your own.’

What could Rapha say? There was nothing to do but emphasize her former negation.

No good would come of asking papa to subscribe to anything at present, I am sure,’ she said. ‘The bare suggestion irritates him extremely.’

She coloured with vexation as she thought of her own fast-vanishing allowance, and added :

‘I fear, too, that all I have to give at present is already gone to the professional pauperizers, as you call them.’

‘Oh, I wanted nothing just now!’ he laughed reassuringly. ‘And we progressists do not carry the hat round for half-sovereigns. We want blank cheques signed in our favour when we are about it. There will be plenty of opportunity for giving later on. I merely came to-day, hoping to enlist yourself and Mr. Rapham in our ranks.’

He studied her face for a moment, then went on very slowly and deliberately, evidently at great pains to be understood.

‘The season is opportune. Now is the very nick of time for a man in your father’s position to take the foremost place in a town like this. For yourself also the opportunity is equally splendid, equally alluring. Anyone who thinks for himself in these days must recognise the fact that the old prestige of wealth is all but obsolete, fast vanishing. Money, except in the ultimate, inevitable sense, has ceased to be a social force of the first importance. The mere money-bag, as our German neighbours call the new-made millionaire, the moneyed man, is no longer a first power in the world. But wealth allied to ideas, wealth allied to character, to imagination, to courage, ah! there you have a lever indeed.’

Rapha was beginning to understand his meaning quite well. Every word, every syllable, made the future seem a more hopeless problem to her.

‘We have come to a crisis in human history, when new influences alone can save society,’ he went on. ‘What we want is first of all disinterestedness, and a sense of abstract

justice, then nobility of motive and feeling. And if men are needed as pioneers of the new creed, the new democracy, how much greater is the need of your own sex! Women too'—here he smiled as he glanced at his fair listener—'women too, like the money-bags I spoke of just now, will come to be otherwise appraised. Sir Walter Scott—may Heaven forgive his heresies!—declared it to be his opinion—he could not really help it, he said, but it made all the difference in the world to him whether a woman was handsome or no. Had not other men been equally weak on the subject, France would hardly have been ruined to please Madame de Maintenon! But the Great Revolution, our teacher in all things, cut off the heads alike of the pretty and ugly; and granted that heads may be cut off at all, the principle was undoubtedly a right one. Is it not more rational to appreciate a woman for her wit, which will improve as she grows older, than for her beauty, which will wear out like her gowns? We social reformers, of course, want to enlist in our cause the wit, the beauty, the pretty gowns, and all! Now, what is needed at Strawton is a rallying-point, a centre—in fact, a salon. Why should not you hold a salon?'

He suddenly laughed at the audacity of such a proposal coming from himself. 'Pray excuse me for the undue forwardness with which I speak out,' he said. 'But you are a stranger in this place, and I know its necessities so well! Besides, the matter being wholly of an impersonal nature, I need no more blush than our Vicar soliciting contributions towards a new organ; I plead in reality the public cause. As it is, our forces here are too scattered, too inchoate to effect much. But a woman of spirit and enlightenment at the head of society would make all the difference in the

world. You have spacious rooms; and never fear, people will come as soon as you ask them.'

'I will hear what papa says,' Rapha replied. The prospect was certainly very attractive, and his manner too serious to be suspected of flattery. If indeed she could do as he proposed, how much more agreeable and profitable such reunions than the formal dinner-parties to be contracted for at so much per head, and got through by help of a professional talker!

'Think the matter over,' he said, rising to go. 'Try to reconcile your father to the notion. He could surely refuse you nothing?'

Rapha smiled, though less doubtfully. She was thinking that a salon would at least have one prepossessing feature in her father's eyes: it would cost nothing, or next to nothing. Perhaps, too, the sight of a number of people assembled together might amuse him.

'What society should be,' the speaker went on, 'is a stimulus to conversation, the opened weir letting loose the flood-gates of talk. But the fact is, people are over-amused in our drawing-rooms. The art of interchanging ideas has been almost lost by this pernicious habit of hiring experts to entertain our friends. We treat them, forsooth, as if they were deaf mutes, or visitors collected from remote nations to whom each other's tongue was sheer gibberish! Do not, for heaven's sake, follow this plan! Take for granted that your guests have at least wit enough for the whiling away of a couple of hours.'

'Your suggestion will be most useful to me,' Rapha replied gaily. 'I feel that something must be done with this big house.'

'If you feel that, you are a power in the place already,'

said Mr. Villedieu. 'But again and again I ask pardon for my freedom of speech.'

He stood for a moment on the hearth-rug, as if hesitating to say one word more before he went away.

'I wish I had a mother or sister to be of use to you,' he said. 'There are, however, plenty of amiable women here, as you will discover, and fortunately the chaperon is no longer obligatory.'

'Papa will accompany me everywhere,' Rapha said quickly.

Mr. Villedieu then took his leave, smiling to himself as he thought of the strange contrast the pair would present in society—the withered, fox-eyed trader, dry of speech, furtive of glance, uncouth of manner, apparently suspicious of everybody; and the fresh, fair young daughter, candour, grace, generosity incarnate.

'Your visitors are uncommonly slow to go away,' Silverthorn growled, as he joined Rapha in the drawing-room. 'I see plainly enough what is looming in the distance.'

Having uttered that enigmatical speech, he shook his head, looking for the moment the very semblance of woe. Rapha's lively report of the two visits gradually reassured him, and, to her great satisfaction, there was no leadenness or formality at the dinner-table. Mr. Rapham could talk of nothing but his farm, and Silverthorn entered into the subjects of ensilage and superphosphates. The old trader was evidently much impressed in his favour.

'I shall be pleased to see you at any time, sir,' were the host's parting words. 'I should like to take you over my little place, and one thing I assure you—if nobody else can make farming pay nowadays, I will.'

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT IMAGINATION WILL DO.

MR. RAPHAM, of course, had his study—what country gentleman is without, if an oftentimes bookless room can be so designated? There was a ready-reckoner, also an almanac, price-lists of everything purchasable under the sun, and a vast array of ledgers, all clasped with lock and key. Anything to read you might as well look for in a sentry-box, a balloon, or by the helmsman's wheel.

Rapha was free to beautify the rest of the house at pleasure, but he would brook no interference here. Business is business, he said; when a man is up to his ears in figures, he does not want a room choke-full of trinkums and kick-shaws. Rapha did not like her father to sit too much in that bare room. Every day his inordinate love of money was becoming plainer to her, and the atmosphere of his so called study seemed to intensify it; he would emerge crabbed, careworn, and waspish, as if some dark genius or evil spirit held communion with him in his solitude. When his seclusion was broken, as it would often be by unwelcome intruders, people who came to him for money or to ask other favours, his voice would rise to an angry key, and expressions drop from his lips that made her blush and flee out of hearing.

She was crossing the hall next morning, after the interviews with her new neighbours, when the sound of a woman's

voice reached her from that hated closet—firm, clear, passionate tones pleading some cause to the rich man, evidently a matter, to the speaker, of life or death.

Again and again Mr. Rapham's sharp negations interrupted the stream of calm, womanly eloquence; but she would be heard to the end, returning to her point in spite of his harsh, unmannerly, almost brutal efforts to put a stop to the scene.

At last the interview was brought to a sudden close. In the midst of those earnest utterances, music itself and tremulous with passion, came a hurried imprecation, a loud, vulgar oath, and Mr. Rapham strode out of the room. His sulky awaited him at the front-door, and, too angry to notice Rapha's presence, he mounted the seat, and in furious haste drove away.

It was a minute or two before Rapha could sufficiently recover herself to move a step. Tears of shame filled her eyes, deep painful blushes dyed her cheeks; then hastening towards the pale, trembling suppliant, she did her best to apologize.

'I am sorry papa is unable to do anything for you,' she said very sympathetically. 'Will you come and tell me what it is you want?'

The intruder was a pale, slender, naturally beautiful girl; but in her case, as in that of so many imaginative women, beauty had been neglected for impersonal things. She could hardly have been twenty-five, yet allowed, rather encouraged, herself to look ten years older. Dressed very plainly in black, free from coquetry as a nun, but for a certain indescribable girlishness and timidity, she might at the first glance have been taken for some wistful, much-tried widow or anxious young mother. Not a vestige of maidenly

self-consciousness was here, although nothing could be neater than her appearance and dress, and look and behaviour both bespoke one of nature's gentlewomen.

Wiping away her tears—for Mr. Rapham's violent dismissal had made her weep also—she gratefully followed Rapha to her own pretty room; the pair sat down amid the flowers, books and pictures.

'It is foolish of me to be cast down; I had no right to expect encouragement from an entire stranger,' began the visitor; 'and I am not really out of heart, only a trifle depressed for the moment.'

She smiled, a smile wonderfully embellishing the too thoughtful face.

'By this time, too, I ought to be hardened to rebuffs, I have had so many; but what will not a mother endure for her children—her children of the brain?'

'You are, then, an author, or maybe an artist?' asked Rapha.

'I am an inventress,' was the proud reply. 'Let me introduce myself. My name is Bee—Norrice Bee. I teach arithmetic and mathematics in schools, and live with my widowed mother at Strawton. We are in poor circumstances, but I did not go to Mr. Rapham for charity. What I wanted was to interest him in my invention.'

'I fear papa is the very last person in the world to take up anything new. I should much like to hear about it myself, and to be of use to you if I can.'

Poor Rapha! she was ever hoping against hope to be able to help everybody!

'If you would indeed pay us a visit,' the girl said eagerly, 'it would give my mother new faith in my invention; though she is like myself—nothing really damps her ardour.'

‘I will drive you home now,’ Rapha said, enchanted at the notion of using that terrible carriage; and the inventress, confessing that her four-mile walk had somewhat tired her, accepted with gratitude.

‘Miss Rapham, this is Miss Rapham! and, dear me, how kind of her to bring you! It is always such a gratification to me to see a carriage and pair at the door!’ cried Mrs. Bee, who had witnessed their arrival from the window. ‘And how good of you to visit us in this humble lodging,’ she added, offering her visitor a chair; ‘though,’ she went on in the same cheerful, birdlike strain, ‘with a little imagination, what does it matter in the least where or how we live? I have only to fancy that cabbage-garden opposite, with clothes hanging out to dry, a palm-grove or orangery, and it is just as good as if I saw them instead.’

‘Mamma has a very happy organization,’ Norrice said with a sigh. ‘These two small rooms, with an attic above for my workshop, form our home. The look-out is not very cheerful, yet she is every bit as contented as if she lived in Windsor Castle.’

‘Why people should be discontented with their circumstances I cannot conceive,’ Mrs. Bee continued. ‘I firmly believe the habit arises from obtuseness of intellect. Now, there are dozens of events happening every day most people would give their ears to see—royal weddings, regattas, opening of exhibitions, and so on. I just sit down quietly with my needle-work and imagine them all, so that I am as well off and better than those who spend heaps of money, and tire themselves to death into the bargain, by running after such sights. It is the same with eating and drinking. Some people wonder how Norrice and I can be so contented with the humblest fare, whereas if you are at all of an

inventive turn, whenever you are dining off pork and cabbage, you have only to fancy that venison or pheasant or any other delicacy is before you, and it amounts to the same thing as eating them in the end.'

'I fear few of us have imaginations so vivid as that,' Rapha said, smiling.

'Depend on it, a vivid imagination is the greatest blessing Heaven can bestow upon us,' Mrs. Bee went on. 'It makes us resigned to all the disappointments and calamities of life. Norrice's inventions, for instance—I sit down and fancy them all splendid successes, and it is for the time as if they really were so.'

'Unfortunately, disillusionments are not so easy to imagine away,' Norrice said, quietly satirical. 'When the tax-gatherer gives his dreaded knock, we can hardly imagine him to be some benefactor: the very person, above all others in the world, we are dying to see.'

'But we can think of the scores of people who would be a thousand times more unwelcome than the tax-gatherer!' Mrs. Bee exclaimed with great vivacity. 'A detective, say, supposing we had committed forgery; or the policeman to drag us to prison if we had murdered anyone in an unguarded moment, as so many poor misguided creatures do. Or, to come to things a shade less dreadful, we can imagine him to be a bad husband or son come back from Australia to eat us out of house and home. Whichever way I look at it, I see as plain as daylight that there is nothing like a lively imagination to lighten the troubles of life.'

'Imagination consoles me in a wholly different way,' Norrice said. 'I see things as if they were real, but am conscious all the while that they are no more tangible than the hues of sunset. Cabbage-beds and clothes-lines—'

no, I don't see palms and orange-groves in their place. But I love to read of them, and see them afar off with the mind's eye. Now, mamma, I will take Miss Rapham to my workshop.'

'And I will stay here and watch the carriage drive up and down,' Mrs. Bee said, going to the window. 'Nothing, I do honestly believe, pleases me so much as to see a carriage and pair driving up and down before my windows—an open carriage, of course, with servants in livery and fur-rugs lying on the seat—no one can suppose it to be the doctor then! And I assure you, Miss Rapham, such is the world, though I do not think so badly of it as some people do—such is the world, that a carriage and pair with livery servants driving up and down before your door, when you live in humble lodgings, is every bit as good as paying a quarter's rent in advance. It impresses the vulgar mind so much.'

The two girls climbed a couple of narrow staircases; then Norrice, with quiet pride, threw open the door of her workshop. It was a bare whitewashed room under the roof, with one small dormer-window, fortunately too high to show anything but a bit of sky. Only small gardens lay on this side of the house, and they were suggestive of anything but flowers and sunshine; instead were to be seen amorphous pumpkins, smoke-begrimed stunted cabbages, with here and there a worm-eaten rose-tree or blighted chrysanthemum. A veritable hospital of sick and distorted plants was each garden-plot, or penitentiary in which certain scapegoats of the vegetable world did penance for the shortcomings of their kind. Here also were clothes-lines with linen hanging out to dry, as if anything ever did dry in that damp, fog-laden atmosphere.

But no sooner was Norrice in her beloved workroom than

she exuberated with felicity. The incomparable Cellini himself, prince of geniuses, prince of braggadocios, could hardly have testified more rapture at sight of his favourite chef-d'œuvre, the Perseus, than this meek-spirited girl when she found herself amid her inventions. For the room was almost full of them. Models, small, great, and middling-sized, occupied every available corner, leaving hardly space for a turning-lathe, an electric machine, and various mechanical appliances. The pair could but just find standing-room.

'You can have no idea how happy I am here,' Norrice said, as she closed the door after them. 'I have entered into a compact with mamma and the people of the house, that, when once shut up in my workroom, nobody is to disturb me on any account whatever. It is therefore a sanctuary, a frith-stool or seat of peace, like those found in ancient churches. All the worries and vexations of life—and we have our share—are locked out for a brief moment. I am free to dream my dreams, and live my own life undisturbed and alone.'

A fine glow suffused her pale cheek, and her voice trembled with eagerness as she glanced round the chaotic room.

'Inventors are like scientific discoverers—they must be satisfied with one result for a thousand failures, and regard their labours as a series of stepping-stones, oftentimes leading others to the goal. Was not the great Kepler about to abandon an inquiry of seventeen years, when he lighted upon the true laws of planetary motion? And Newton? How many patient hours and anxious nights must be set against his discovery of the algorithm! I have, of course, failed in many of my inventions—have come within an inch,

as it seemed to me, of the true principle ; but that principle has eluded my grasp. Now—at least in a signal instance—I have overcome every difficulty ; I believe I am victorious !

‘Would it cost so very much to bring out your invention ?’ asked Rapha innocently.

‘An inventor should always be a millionaire, to begin with. Remember poor Palissy !’ retorted Norrice, with quiet scorn. ‘Here am I, for instance, a woman, a needy governess, only able, by dint of the utmost economy, to purchase such tools and appliances as I need, to say nothing of patents and blue-books ! If my invention is worth anything at all, it is worth wealth untold ! Yet the utmost I can hope for—and I think the joy of such good fortune would kill me outright—is to find some mercenary speculator willing to rob me of it : the profit, even the repute of my work, to remain his—my very name to be ignored.’

‘That seems very cruel,’ Rapha said, wondering if for once—for once only—her father could not be induced to lend a helping hand.

‘The cruel part of it would never affect my mother ; and for myself, I am almost insensible to such checks. What I really care about is to see my ideas made to live ; my creations—that is to say, the best part of myself—embodied in the daily existence, the thoughts of others. The hard, unenviable lot, it seems to me, is simply to be born, live and die, for one’s own poor joys, sorrows, and weakness. Of course the glory of a discoverer’s name would be very sweet : that is too much to hope for. So now let me explain to you my last, my crowning invention !’

CHAPTER X.

A GIRL PHILOSOPHER.

‘THE great Pascal,’ began Norrice, ‘invented the wheelbarrow ; and had not the mystics of Port Royal succeeded in making him believe science altogether abominable, he would most likely have gone a step farther——’ She smiled at the audacity of her comparison, as she added : ‘And anticipated me—and invented a method of annihilating weight. Surely a genius who at twelve years of age discovered for himself the principles of Euclid, might have found out how to carry weights without loss of nerve-power—contrived a buffer, in fact, to stave off the effects upon the bearer.’ She put her hand upon a carefully covered model ; and before lifting the veil, said, in a low, earnest voice : ‘I must tell you that for the present this invention of mine must be kept a profound secret.’ Here a painful blush rose to her pale, thin cheeks. ‘I have not yet found means to protect myself by patent. Were the idea to be filched from me now, I should have no redress. You, I know, I can thoroughly trust.’

Rapha smiled assent ; she felt that there was no need to say a word on her own behalf.

‘To your father, also, I tried to explain the principle of my invention. Rich as he is, he can be under no temptation of robbing other people’s brains. Now, look and listen with undivided attention.’ She uncovered the model, tenderly, proudly, as some late-made mother her first-born

—the passionately desired offspring that has come long after the bloom of youth is past. ‘I talked to you just now,’ she said, ‘of apparently annihilating weight—that is to say, of enabling people to carry heavy burdens without fatigue or exhaustion. Think what a blessing any invention effecting that would be to the poor! It was the spectacle of poor, half-starved children, staggering under loads much too heavy for them, that first set me thinking. One especial case—a lad in my Sunday-school, crippled for life in this way—I could never get out of my mind. I said to myself there must be some principle by which the effect of weight could be diminished, even done away with, if we could only discover it. I pondered on the subject night and day. I could hardly eat or sleep. I sold the few trinkets I possessed, in order to take lessons in geometry and mechanics. I sat up till midnight studying; and at last, when I had almost begun to despair, light dawned upon me. I accidentally hit upon the very principle I had sought so long and so painfully. Now for the proof.’ She bustled about, and the verification began. ‘Fancy yourself for the moment a washer-woman, and having to carry this basket of linen for a couple of miles. How burdensome it is! How it strains the arms! I adjust it by means of my invention! But where is the weight? You are no longer conscious of it!’

‘Wonderful!’ Rapha cried, overcome with girlish enthusiasm. ‘There is no mistake about it. The most sceptical could but be convinced.’

‘Next you are to suppose yourself a little nurse-girl, and this bundle is a baby you have to carry about for hours at a time. No wonder nurse-girls grow up with weak spines and round shoulders. But, my appliance called into play, the baby readjusted thus, a six-year-old child could dandle it now.

‘Quite marvellous!’ again exclaimed the enthusiastic Rapha. ‘You are indeed a genius! I could not have believed these things without the evidence of my own eyes.’

The inventress, enraptured beyond measure, must try another and yet another experiment. ‘This time you are a soldier, and here is your knapsack. It is the exact weight carried on march, for I have taken pains to ascertain. What fatigue even for the strongest to walk thus loaded! I readjust the knapsack with the aid of my invention. Behold, the man’s shoulders are free! If a war were to break out—which heaven forbid!—the soldiers thus relieved would be sure of victory.’

‘You are certain to make your fortune! You will be richer than papa with all his trading in gold-dust and ivory,’ Rapha said.

Norrice shook her head, though the glow of rapture had not faded from her face.

‘Yet a final proof. Not only little nursemaids, apprentice-boys, soldiers, and washer-women would reap the benefit of my invention. What opulent house could afford to be without it? Rich people pay parlourmaids and housemaids to carry their tea-trays and coal-scuttles up and down stairs, but how can they compensate for the strength worn out in their service? Here is a tray, or what will do duty for a tray, laden for five o’clock tea. Imagine yourself having to carry it from an underground kitchen to a drawing-room floor, first with, then without, my invention.’

Rapha, more enchanted than before, insisted on retrying each experiment, finally kissing the inventress with reiterated words of conviction and encouragement.

‘It is just such simple discoveries as these that help to

make life easy,' said Norrice, quietly triumphant. 'Yes, if ever my invention comes into everyday use all the world over, I may not be the richer for it, people may ignore my very name, but the unknown discoverer would be blessed by all who have to toil for daily bread. I desire no higher reward.'

She wiped away a tear or two, whether of joyful looking forward or mere consciousness of power, she could hardly have said herself. But Rapha's uncompromising praises had certainly heartened her. She looked fresh, youthful, gay, as they descended to the little parlour.

'You have kept Miss Rapham a very long time in that cold attic,' cried Mrs. Bee; 'though, to be sure, as far as I am concerned, I should be well pleased to see those beautiful horses prancing up and down the street all day long. Pretty dears, they really seem to know what pleasure they give! And what do you think of Norrice's last invention?—though it matters little what one thinks. An invention, like a baby, is always praised to its mother's face.'

'I say she ought, she must make a fortune,' Rapha said heartily.

'Oh yes,' Mrs. Bee replied. 'My firm conviction is that some day or other, in the dim, mysterious future, Norrie and I shall keep our carriage and pair too. But I know nothing whatever of the discovery itself; I begged Norrie not to tell me. You see, do what I would, I could not help talking about it to everybody. But will you not condescend to lunch with us?'

'I fear Miss Rapham's imagination might not be able to transform our Barmecide's feast into a tolerable meal, Norrice said.

'Barmecide's feast indeed!' retorted Mrs. Bee, with a

scornful toss of the head. 'I am sure Miss Rapham is no epicure. Extras, of course, she would not expect at our table.'

'Mamma has a wonderful knack at knocking impossibilities on the head,' Norrice rejoined. 'She just pounds away at them as Nelson at the enemy's broadsides. I never yet knew her to go to the larder and own it to be empty.'

'Was ever a larder quite empty?' retorted Mrs. Bee with spirit. 'All things go by comparison. I turn to ours, for instance, when I want to make a dinner out of nothing, and the thing is always done. I don't find a cold leg of mutton here, or a turkey ready to spit; but I always find a bone of some kind—it may have been boiled down before, and that makes little or no difference. You never can boil all the goodness out of a bone. There is always—unless a dog had its turn—some for the last-comer. Then you look about, and in the most denuded larder you are sure to find something to pop into the saucepan with your bone—an onion, a carrot, or something. Next you take a handful of flour and a pinch of salt, and there, with toasted bread, is your dinner! No one in robust health wants a better. As for extras, in eating and drinking as well as other matters, they are all pernicious in the extreme—so many tickets by express train to the grave.'

'Then you and I, mamma, ought to live to be a hundred at least. If immunity from extras ensures longevity, we are sure to become patriarchal,' Norrice rejoined, still satirical and sportive.

'Ah! if I could wield the pen I would write a book upon extras, and show all the harm they have done in the world,' Mrs. Bee said. 'Eve's apple—was not that an extra she had no business with? and so on throughout the history of

civilized man. The craving for extras has wrought our perdition. I am fond of reading, and I always read the chronicles of past epochs with that fatal proclivity to extras in my mind. Helen of Troy was nothing but an extra; had Paris been content with his proper portion of love and matrimony, those bloodthirsty deeds we read of in Homer might have been avoided, and poor Andromache not made a broken-hearted widow. Then Louis XIV.—his whole career, I am sure, is little else but a homily on extras. What with Madame de Montespan, her gilded boat, her carriage and six, and her forty-five attendants, and his indulgences in other extras of a similar kind, the country was almost ruined. But even these did not satisfy him. He must needs want everybody to think like himself about religion; and if that is not craving after an extra, what is? as if we ought not to rest satisfied with having our own souls to look after—quite enough of a business, I am sure. Well, dear Miss Rapham, to quit the Edict of Nantes for minor subjects, won't you really send away the horses, and join our modest table? No extras, you know.'

'Thank you, indeed I cannot stay; papa expects me at home,' Rapha said, rising.

'I am sure it is very good of you to come at all, and you don't look as if extras would spoil you, though they certainly have a very undesirable effect on most people. They are bad for the mind, bad for the health, bad for the temper,' Mrs. Bee got in.

'The difficulty is where to draw the line,' Norrice added, demurely sarcastic. 'Once admit that truffles, point-lace, and hothouse flowers are extras, and we may soon force ourselves to regard Diogenes in his tub as the only standard for a rational being to follow. But, mamma, you have yet

to learn the good news—Miss Rapham has promised to do what lies in her power for my invention. We two may be demoralized by extras, after all.’

‘I don’t think, somehow, that extras would demoralize me, either, although one can never fathom one’s own weakness,’ Mrs. Bee replied. ‘And I won’t say—I can’t honestly declare,’ she added, looking gratefully at Rapha, ‘that on account of my daughter I should regret to be in easy circumstances; though, of course, things would balance themselves in the end—they invariably do in life. Suppose now that this invention brings us in, say, a hundred thousand pounds, I feel positive in my own mind some calamity would happen to us to counteract such a piece of good fortune—a railway accident, a sunstroke, our house burnt to the ground, or something.’

‘Then we will bargain for half the sum, and more of a trifle in the shape of a calamity. Fifty thousand pounds and a broken leg. Ten thousand and the ceiling tumbling in when we are in bed,’ laughed Norrice gaily.

‘After all that may be said and done,’ Mrs. Bee replied, ‘there is nothing for a girl like steady-going, old-fashioned matrimony. Now if only Norrie would give up thinking from morning till night about her inventions, and be just ordinarily civil to the suitable men round about, I am sure she would soon have a handsome home to call her own. There is Mr. Merton Morrow now; why a girl in Norrie’s position should turn up her nose at such a man as that passes my comprehension.’

Norrice laughed merrily. Nothing diverted her more than her mother’s happy-go-lucky way of counting her suitors on her fingers’-end. Norrice knew, and all Strawton womankind knew by this time, that Mr. Morrow was a

confirmed old bachelor ; as least, as far as his townswomen were concerned. But although Mrs. Bee's possible sons-in-law were as remote as the man in the moon, she thought of them and prattled of them as if Norrice had but to smile to see one and all on their knees. As for the inventress herself, she was one of those girls who had attained her twenty-fifth year without the remotest desire to fall in love or be fallen in love with. Her heart was in her inventions, and what affection she had to give was bestowed upon her mother.

'Then if Mr. Merton Morrow is not good enough, with his nice detached house, three servants, garden, and pony-carriage,' continued Mrs. Bee, 'there is Mr. Venn, senior curate of Christ Church. I could not desire a more gentlemanly son-in-law ; a little stiff, perhaps, but a wife would soon cure him of that. It is inconceivable to me that Norrie should teach in his Sunday-school and never take any trouble to please him—nephew of a bishop, too—sure to be a rector ere long.'

Again a sportive laugh from Norrice, Mr. Venn, everybody in Strawton was aware of the fact, was a marrying man, but was looking after position and a large fortune. If Mr. Merton Morrow as a son-in-law was remote from Mrs. Bee as the man in the moon, the Reverend Mr. Venn was as far off as the sun.

'Mr. Venn is charming in the pulpit ! If one could spend one's entire existence with him up there, I should desire nothing better,' she said.

'Ah ! girls think nobody good enough for them nowadays,' Mrs. Bee said ruefully ; 'and never was a greater mistake. Then there is the Vicar himself, a widower with grown-up sons, and elderly, to be sure, but so kind and

benevolent ; no need to be afraid of *him* out of the pulpit. And what a house to live in—that delightful old vicarage, with the cedars in front ! Any right-minded girl must be happy there.’

Mrs. Bee’s suitor was as far off as the planet Jupiter now ! All Strawton realized that their worthy Vicar would never marry again. He was sixty. He loved comfort ; he had orphan grandchildren to provide for ; and last, but not least, the matrimonial net had been spread again and again before his eyes to no purpose.

But it was all one to the imaginative Mrs. Bee. Norrice could marry anybody she chose. Only her own indifference obstructed the matrimonial path. These visionary marriages and illusory sons-in-law made her maternal heart far happier than the reality would probably have done. Who could wish her a clearer vision ? Were we never able to believe that the fond hope of the hour is quite certain to be fulfilled, no matter what hindrances are in the way, life would be dreary indeed. Are not some of its most blissful moments consecrated to dreams and illusions compared with which Mrs. Bee’s aërial matrimony is sober prose ?

CHAPTER XI.

NORRICE'S EXTRA.

'You will be lifted up to the skies now, and no mistake!' cried Mrs. Bee, after watching Rapha drive off. 'Such praises of your invention, and an invitation to dinner for us both into the bargain! What a mercy that the very things in the way of dress we have not got happen to be out of date!'

Mrs. Bee had more ways than one of making things comfortable all round. If she could not witness a royal wedding, why, what easier than to sit by one's fireside and imagine it? If her larder were next door to empty, she could prove by unanswerable logic that every absent comestible was an extra, not in the faintest degree necessary either to nutrition or gastronomic enjoyment; and what was neither to be conjured up by the fancy nor made to appear absolutely superfluous, was straightway set down as out of date, obsolete, mummified, like the Pharaohs of old.

'Gold bracelets, diamond hair-pins, pearl necklaces, such as used to be worn in my young time, nobody sees them nowadays. They are all completely out of date, fortunately for us,' she went on. 'We shall look as well as the rest in our old black silks.'

'Shabbiness is never out of date. That should be balm in Gilead,' Norrice answered, blithe but sarcastic.

‘One never need look shabby with a little management,’ Mrs. Bee said, slightly nettled. She was vexed at what she called Norrice’s light-mindedness. ‘The thing is at a party never to stand too much in the light; keep in dark corners and in the thick of the crowd, then you are perfectly safe from minute observation. And never to throw off your lace shawl—well, we have no lace shawls, certainly, but so long as it is something light worn over the shoulders, no one is a bit the wiser. Then with regard to gloves: nothing so absurd as to worry about gloves! Left-hand gloves never wear out; I have a whole stock of them. The expedient—I have resorted to it dozens of times—is to keep the left hand gloved throughout the entire evening; then what with fanning one’s self, partaking of refreshment, turning over engravings and so on, you really never want a right-hand glove at all. It is a mere superfluity.’

‘It is so long since I went to a party, you must put me well through my paces before the event, mamma. Well, I wish quarter-day were out of date as well as right-hand gloves,’ Norrice said. ‘What shall we do?’

‘What have we done scores of times before?’ Mrs. Bee replied testily. ‘But don’t you distress yourself; just you leave our landlady to me. Nothing is more ridiculous than to harass yourself about bills you cannot pay. They will be paid some day—it is to be hoped so, at least—but whilst you can’t, you can’t, and not the Sultan and all his Bashaws could make you. Any addlepate must see that.’

Meantime the dinner, made out of nothing, had been served and eaten. Norrice, ready for fun even in anxious moments, retied her bonnet-strings and kissed her mother gaily.

‘You work accustomed miracles, then, mammy dear,

whilst I get another walk. I feel as if I wanted to be out of doors all day when a fine Saturday comes.'

Mrs. Bee acquiesced with a look of serene superiority, and the delighted girl hastened downstairs. Out of the door, along the narrow street, towards the open country, she sped as if wings were adjusted to her feet. Norrice never really lost hope, or doubted in herself. No rebuffs could shake her faith in her own inventive faculty; she would go on as she had begun to the end. For all that, life would sometimes wear a dreary look. Such words of sweet encouragement as Rapha had just given her were very welcome. Uncongenial tasks and the consciousness of being generally doubted, even ridiculed, were not her hardest trials, though trials they were to so sensitive a nature. What oppressed her most was the atmosphere of ugliness in which she had to live, the scant portion of beauty to be attained in daily life.

Loveliness was the extra she hungered and thirsted for, unable to check her cravings; loveliness, alike visible and spiritual, of the outer as of the inner world.

Not only as a town was Strawton monotony and ugliness itself; that would have been sufficiently hard to bear. Here, as in other manufacturing centres, excessive sedentary toil engendered moral deformity. Want of gaiety and grace in the everyday, work-a-day world brought about a craving for stimulus of less wholesome kind. Religious revivalism was rampant, yet self-indulgence followed in its wake.

Many of the pallid girls—'hands,' as they were called hereabouts—who paraded the streets in fine clothes on Sundays, and wanted bread in slack seasons, Norrice could only acknowledge her sisters by virtue of sex. Poverty had

degraded them. She must pity them, lift them from the mire if she could ; she could not love them.

And when winter came, the place seemed a veritable purgatory, or scene of mortal expiation. Even Norrice and her mother would be beset by those more indigent than themselves, whilst morning and night two gloomy processions might be seen parading the dark, frost-nipped, windy streets—ragged, reckless vagrants betaking themselves for shelter to the poor-house towards evening ; tidy yet hollow-eyed women and children hastening to the pawnshop at dawn, eagerly waiting till the grim yet welcome doors should open.

These things oppressed her spirits ; but even at this season of the year, with winter at hand, she could obtain a snatch of peace, joy and loveliness, amply compensating for the gloom left behind. Just outside the smoke-begrimed, low-spirited-looking town, the road curved between wide cornfields, now ploughed for autumn sowing ; and following an inner path under the tall hedges, she could find solitude. A bare unsuggestive landscape enough, some would say ; except for the undergrowth and the hedgerows, no greenery in the succession of fallow, no break, only a waving line of distant woods, and the wide, wide heavens above.

But when the October sun shone out, what pageantry was here ! clouds and skies of the Midlands—none more poetic or pictorial in England ! There is, indeed, a subtle charm in these aërial landscapes, not perhaps found in more romantic regions. The skies above the vast sweep of undulating chalk have a peculiar depth and tenderness of blue ; the clouds, a marvellous brilliance, transparence, and variety of form. So beautiful, indeed, are the cloud-pictures here that we need hardly look for beauty below.

And even when the skies are dull and overcast, no golden gates thrown open afar, disclosing another and yet another firmament—heaven within heaven of rosy gold and pale azure—the skylarks kept Norrice company. They seemed, indeed, to soar and sing with double zest on a gloomy day, as if conscious of a ministry to perform, aware that they were the Ariels of a dull world!

Norrice sought these fallow fields as much for the sake of the sky-larks as the clouds. She would pause and listen to them with a rapture she could hardly have put into words. They cheered and inspirited her more even than her favourite poets could do. The dreary town and the unblessed lot of so many of her townfolk were for the moment forgotten; her own little sordid troubles, too. With the sky-lark's note her spirit seemed to take wing, and, in such elate company, reach a loftier, lovelier abiding-place. She was for the moment as exultant, as little of a care-laden mortal, as the songster itself.

How the heavens rang that October afternoon! The day was like most human lives, neither altogether brilliant nor made up of unbroken murkiness. Gleams of sunshine shot aslant over the distant fields and woods, breaks of blue appeared overhead; the wide landscape, monotonous and sober as it was in tone, looked clear and bright; and meantime, one after another, up rose the skylarks from the fallow and pierced the infinite, carolling as they went. Higher and higher they soared, deeper, more fervent the volume of song poured forth from their little throats, till the cup of rapture was full. Then came the last, long, lingering cadence, so dim as to be hardly heard, so sweet and passionate as to sink into the heart and stay there, a perfect memory wrung from days of mingled hope and despondency!

‘The very person I wanted to see!’ cried a pleasant voice, and Mr. Villedieu, springing from his horse as she re-entered the road, begged permission to accompany her a little way.

Norrice acquiesced coldly. Mr. Villedieu was all friendliness and courtesy; hoping, as he did, to represent Strawton in the next Parliament, it was evidently his business to be agreeable to everybody. Moreover, he took a prominent part in many social questions that interested her keenly. They had met in public places on terms of perfect equality. But by virtue of family and position, he belonged to a sphere quite apart from her own. She was a working woman, he an aristocrat. She had never been introduced to him in a drawing-room.

For these reasons—foolish ones enough she acknowledged them to be—she drew back from, all but resented, any sign of interest on his part.

She could see that she interested him, and, strange girl that she was, the fact repelled instead of flattering her!

‘I hear that you have an inventive turn—have even brought to perfection some valuable mechanical contrivances,’ he went on, leading his horse by her side. ‘Can I be of any use to you in the matter?’

Norrice’s pale cheeks flushed. She ought to feel pleased and grateful; she knew that there was nothing in his speech that could possibly be misinterpreted to his disadvantage. It was well-meant, straightforward, kindly. For all that, she made curt, ungracious reply:

‘I think not, thank you.’

He turned round sharply and scanned the girl’s clever, suggestive face, almost the only woman’s face that had ever magnetized him. He could hardly explain why, but there

was something about this slender, shabby, sarcastic little mathematical teacher he found singularly attractive. She had marvellously beautiful eyes, a forehead betokening intellectual power far above the average; and, to crown all, the acme, the quintessence of charm in his eyes—she was unreadable, mysterious, Sphinx-like. He felt that she was very difficult to understand, and for that very reason wanted to understand her.

‘You think not—you think not? Be quite sure about it,’ he replied laughingly.

‘Will you try my flying-machine in Strawton market-place, then?’ Norrice said with a mischievous smile. ‘But no; our future member must not risk life or limb. I shall have to find humbler devotees of science.’

‘Is there no medium—no more modest service to be rendered?’ he asked, not ill-pleased with her raillery; it made intercourse all the easier.

‘Yes. There is a step between not obliging me at all, and hazarding your neck on my behalf. I want someone to buy my last invention blindfold for twenty thousand pounds.’

‘I assure you I will—that is to say, the very moment I have twenty thousand pounds to spare. But, joking apart, do be careful. If you have really hit upon a marketable idea, there are scores of unscrupulous people ready to filch it from you. There is that rich old man yonder, for instance, Mr. Rapham. We have yet to learn how he came by his money; and I fancy that he is a speculator still—much more likely, in fact, to get something out of us than we anything out of him.’

Again Norrice coloured with vexation. The morning’s interview came back—her own pitiful, pathetic pleadings;

Mr. Rapham's brutal rebuff. And to set against the remembrance was another—spring coming after winter; Rapha's sweet sisterly kindness atoning for her father's acerbity. She could forgive, almost love, that stern host on his child's account. With Rapha's image before her mind's eye, it was very painful to hear Mr. Rapham spoken ill of; yet no words of apology rose to her willing lips—Mr. Villedieu said what he had to say.

'Pray exercise caution in dealing with strangers—Mr. Rapham, for instance. If I had invented anything, he is the very last person I should confide in.'

How could he know that she had been to Strawton Park that very morning? Too proud to ask, she merely replied:

'If you had invented anything, you would most likely do as other inventors do—trust and mistrust at haphazard; no more seeing straight before you than the crab walking backwards.'

Then, by way of apologizing for the sarcasm, she thanked him for his good advice, pleaded haste, and, quitting the main road, took a side-street leading home.

CHAPTER XII.

CHARON AND MENIPPUS.

IN the meantime, placid as if awaiting the most delightful visitant in the world, with a serene brow and a smile on her lips, Mrs. Bee expected that knock so terrible to others—the knock of the landlady she could not pay.

Her knitting lay on her knees; but she had long neglected

it for something much more engrossing. Spectacles adjusted, and sitting near the window so as to have the full benefit of the light, she was reading and annotating an ancient book. It was a yellow-paged, dilapidated, much-thumbed volume in leather binding: one of those antiquated treasures occasionally to be picked up with old clothes, second-hand iron-ware, and other valuables at the Saturday market. Mrs. Bee had lately paid sixpence for an odd lot of books, of which this was one, and, as she justly observed, alone worth three times the money.

‘Come in,’ she said blandly, as, true enough, soon came that determined, asserting, I’ll-stand-no-nonsense rat-tat-tat, that would have made many a bolder heart sink. ‘Pray come in, dear Mrs. Apjohn. Pray be seated. I was so much interested in my book, that I had very nearly forgotten all about you.’

Mrs. Apjohn was very likely an admirable person in other relations of life, but she was a landlady—a landlady, moreover, of shabby-genteel, impecunious tenants. The mother, the neighbour, the church-goer seemed as hopelessly and irretrievably lost sight of under that exterior as the original writing of a palimpsest—some Sunday chronicle, perhaps—scrawled over with a notary’s bills! Straight and square she stood, eyeing Mrs. Bee with a look of suspicion, command, and severe inquiry. She would have her money, whether Mrs. Bee had got it or no—that was what her face said.

‘Pray sit down,’ repeated Mrs. Bee, handing her visitor a chair, and never loosing hold of her book. ‘For five minutes—just for five minutes!’ she urged.

Mrs. Apjohn’s ponderous figure dropped sulkily into a chair, whilst never for a moment did she take that fixed, freezing gaze off her creditor’s unclouded countenance.

‘Dear me!’ Mrs. Bee cried, with happy unconcern, as, just pushing her spectacles on her forehead, she eyed her visitor curiously. ‘Dear me! how interesting it would be to take your portrait when you can’t get your rent and when you can, then to compare the two! I have often wished it could be done. You have no idea how different you look!’

‘You would look different too, ma’am, I’ll be bound, if you had money owing to you in every direction, and couldn’t get a penny to pay your own way. But put off any longer I can’t and won’t be. If your rent is not paid to-day, I shall find another tenant for these rooms before this day week, as true as my name is Sarah Apjohn.’

‘Just wait a minute; just leave the rent one moment,’ Mrs. Bee said, placid as before, and readjusting her spectacles. ‘I told you when you came in I had forgotten all about you, and no wonder. Books make me forget everything.’

‘Books are all very well for those who can pay their way,’ Mrs. Apjohn said waspishly, rising from her chair. She began to fear that her worst misgivings were true, and that not a penny should she extract from her tenant that day. Her face was a veritable thunder-cloud.

‘Pray sit down,’ Mrs. Bee said; ‘it will only delay you a few minutes. We can settle business matters afterwards; but I do want you to listen to what I was reading just now. It is so very amusing. It will make you feel as cheerful as if every one of your tenants had just paid their rent.’

Mrs. Apjohn’s expression now was of extreme scorn; but she was not wholly without education; she appreciated it in others. She had no intention, therefore, of using violent, much less coarse, language to this shabby-genteel gentlewoman; the weapons in reserve were of keener edge. Mrs.

Bee might have her turn. Her own would come next. She sat eyeing the antiquated volume viciously.

‘It is odd how very *à propos* things sometimes happen in this world,’ Mrs. Bee went on. ‘Now, I firmly believe that had I searched the country through, I should not have lighted upon anything in the shape of literature so appropriate to the occasion as this. I must tell you it is a translation from an old Greek author, and it is a story of somebody who ought to have paid a debt, and couldn’t. Now, how strange it is that such a condition of things existed from earliest times!’

Mrs. Apjohn remained the embodiment of rigidity and iciness. She felt that she had no longer a straw left to cling to. Mrs. Bee was penniless. Nevertheless, she sat and listened for the very best of reasons. Mrs. Bee would not let her stir an inch, or edge in so much as a syllable.

‘Of course you learned heathen mythology out of Mangnall’s Questions at school,’ she went on. ‘You know who Charon was—the ferryman who conveyed the dead across the river Styx into the shades below; for the ancients did not know what we do about heaven or hell, poor things! How should they? They had a notion that this Charon took people as soon as the breath was out of their bodies into his boat, and, as I said just now, rowed them across a black river called the Styx, to their future abode, where he landed them; but before doing so, every passenger had to pay him a penny—no, let me see, three-halfpence—yes, that is it, three-halfpence.’

The landlady still looked every inch the landlady. Her sternness was not in the faintest degree relaxed. She should carry out her threat. But, like the rest of us, she was glad to get anything for nothing, instruction into the bargain;

and this story of Charon and his boat and the black river struck her imagination. She had a mischievous, almost incorrigible, grandson on her hands, a juvenile Tony Lumpkin. The next time he teased her cat, set the beer running, robbed her jam cupboard, and otherwise misconducted himself, he should be frightened out of his wits by that fable of Charon and his boat. So she wanted to grasp it well—the beginning, the middle, and the end.

‘Of course everybody, even the poorest, might be expected to pay three-halfpence,’ Mrs. Bee went on, ‘and for such a service too, for who else would have ferried people’s ghosts across the Styx? But one day—this is the story I am reading—one day comes a philosopher named Menippus, and when Charon has got him safely over, declares he hasn’t a farthing. “I’ll have my three-halfpence,” says Charon, “or you won’t land, that’s it.” “You can’t get blood from a stone. If I haven’t got it, I haven’t,” replies Menippus.’

Mrs. Bee for a moment laid down her book, and looked from under her spectacles.

‘This Menippus must have been a very facetious character as well as a wise man, you see, for of course, had he not enjoyed a joke, he would have borrowed the money from somebody or other before starting. But to go on. “You haven’t?” growled Charon. “Do you think you can make me believe there is a human being without as much as three-halfpence?” “What others have or have not, I know nothing about,” replied Menippus. “This I know, you won’t get three-halfpence out of me!” “Oh, you are to be ferried across for nothing, are you?” cries Charon. “We’ll see about that.” So they wrangle and brangle; is it not amusing? “I’ll wring your neck if you do not out with my

three-halfpence," says Charon. "And I'll break your skull with your own oar if you don't leave me alone," replies Menippus.'

Once more Mrs. Bee lowered her book, and glanced from under her spectacles.

'Dear me,' she said, with as much relish and nonchalance as if quarter-days did not exist, 'how wonderfully some books, like some people, can amuse us, whilst others do nothing but make us yawn and twirl our thumbs! This clever Menippus, how I should have liked to know him in real life! Well, on they go again. "You shan't set foot on land, then," quoth Charon. "What nonsense!" says Menippus. "What a precious storm in a tea-cup! You know as well as I do that if I haven't three-halfpence, you may keep me here a thousand years and won't be any the nearer." "Right is right, and justice is justice!" thunders Charon. "Three-halfpence is my fee, and three-halfpence I shall get by fair means or foul." "Then you must ferry me back to life again," replies Menippus.' Mrs. Bee here put in a word of explanation. 'Of course Charon couldn't do that, and Menippus was well aware of it. Therein lay the gist of the joke. The Greeks, poor things, had no Moses and the prophets to guide them in theological matters, but one thing they knew as well as we do—when a man dies, he does not return to life again. So Menippus thought he had silenced Charon then. But not a bit of it. "Show me what you have carefully tied up in your bag," he shouts. "With the greatest possible pleasure," retorts Menippus, and opening his bag, shows him——what can you imagine?—a quantity of broad-beans!'

Even Mrs. Apjohn could not resist the cynic's broad-beans; she drew forth her pocket-handkerchief, and pre-

tended to be seized with a coughing fit. She was not an educated woman, but she had quick perceptions, and had picked up scraps of knowledge here and there. The irony of the fable came home to her, and its humour also.

‘It seems that philosophers ate a good many broad-beans in those days,’ Mrs. Bee continued. ‘I suppose it was a very inexpensive kind of food, but the sight of those beans, as you may imagine, only made Charon more furious than before. He can’t kill him, because he is dead already; and he can’t go on jangling for ever, because so many others are waiting for him on the other side of the ferry. “What am I to do with this fellow?” he cries out to Mercury (you learned who he was in Mangnall’s, of course?). “All the while I was ferrying him across, he has done nothing but jeer and make fun of me, and won’t pay me my three-half-pence.” “Oh, let him be,” says Mercury. “He’s Menippus, the philosopher. You’ll get nothing out of him!” “If ever I take you across again, I’ll be——” shouts Charon to Menippus, as he nimbly jumps out of the boat. “Never fear,” is the philosopher’s parting joke. “I’ve got over for nothing, but you won’t have a second job from me!” Now, who could help being amused over such a fable?’ asked Mrs. Bee, laying aside book and spectacles, and looking at her visitor as unconcernedly as if she were the penniless philosopher bamboozling the Stygian ferryman. ‘And I don’t know how you feel about such things, but I always find as many morals in them as there are flavours in a mince-pie. Do we not see here, for instance—for of course we must consider it real, something that has actually happened; no story is worth the paper it is printed on, unless it makes us feel that—that hundreds and thousands of years ago, there were people situated just as we two are, debtors and

creditors, whether for three-halfpence, or three pounds, or thirty times as much? And of course, in a certain sense, Menippus was right. No matter how small the sum, even if it is under Charon's fee, if only a farthing—well, if you haven't got it, nobody can get it out of you. That seems as clear as daylight to me.'

'There are other things as clear, ma'am,' put in Mrs. Apjohn, with an injured look. 'What folks can't pay for, they must go without.'

'Just wait a moment—pray sit down again for five minutes,' Mrs. Bee went on, not in the least agitated, only argumentative and emphatic. 'You know, everybody knows, there are certain things people can't go without. Menippus in the fable, he had to be ferried across the Styx; it couldn't be otherwise—the paying of Charon's fee was a secondary consideration. Then again, everybody knows that whilst human beings are alive, they must live somewhere and on something—wait just five seconds, and you will see what I am driving at. Of course, my daughter and I could have had the money ready, even paid you in advance, had we gone without bare necessaries. You would never have wished us to do that—seen us starving before your very eyes? Your heart would, I am sure, have been wrung by such a spectacle.'

'My business is not with my lodgers' circumstances,' Mrs. Apjohn said, stiff as starch. She was rather alarmed at the numerous morals to be drawn from the fable of Charon and Menippus. Mrs. Bee having proved by inexorable logic that she could not pay her rent, might she not go a step farther and, like the philosopher in the story, equally prove that her creditor was bound to go without? She rose and made for the door.

‘I have nothing more to say, ma’am,’ she rejoined, rigidly obsequious. ‘You’ll please not forget.’

‘But I have not told you the great news yet,’ Mrs. Bee said briskly. ‘Our circumstances—our prospects, I should say—have wholly changed within the last few hours. What a trifling incident may sometimes prove the turning-point in life! My dear mother’s fortunes were made by picking up the muff of an earl’s daughter. Was it not curious? The muff, a very valuable one, was dropped in a muddy road, and my mother, then a young girl, ran a quarter of a mile to restore it to the owner. The picking up of the muff led to her engagement as governess in a titled family, and she married the parish curate three years after; not a fine match certainly, but better than none at all. My poor father brought up eleven children on a hundred and ten pounds a year, and life was a perpetual struggle; but marriage is marriage, and women’s heads are always set on it, the wise as well as the foolish. With regard to ourselves. Do you know who was here just now? No one else but Miss Rapham, of Strawton Park! We are to dine there next week. I feel sure our fortunes are as good as made.’

‘I hope so; I always wish well to a neighbour,’ Mrs. Apjohn said grimly, although this piece of information did give her a gleam of hope.

‘It is nothing short of providential,’ Mrs. Bee went on. ‘Everything is providential in life. I am more fully convinced of it than ever. Who could have supposed, for instance, that at this critical moment in our affairs, just when our fortunes are at the very lowest ebb, a perfect stranger should step in to the rescue? We are to go to her dinner-party; that is the first move. Then Miss Rapham has promised to help my daughter about her inventions, which

means buying them, of course. In fact, I do firmly believe that ere long we shall drive our carriage.'

'And meantime, what about my rent?' asked Mrs. Apjohn.

'Meantime, you cannot refuse to wait another week or two to see the turn affairs take. You see, under the circumstances, we cannot in the least tell what a week, a day, an hour, may bring forth,' Mrs. Bee said. 'One thing I promise you. If the next post brings a cheque for a hundred pounds, you shall be paid that very moment.'

Mrs. Apjohn sighed, fairly overcome by Mrs. Bee's arguments and last startling items of news. The visit from the millionaire's daughter, the invitation to dinner at his house, did not pay her rent certainly, but they were facts suggesting payment. She seemed to hear the chink of gold in the distance. She consented to withdraw the notice to quit, and the same evening, Dickie the incorrigible, who had made away with the lodgers' milk, and committed other depredations in the larder, was dosed with the history of Charon and the black river, across which all the wicked are ferried, never, never more to behold daylight again! Mrs. Apjohn had not obtained her money, but something perhaps as valuable—a perpetual nightmare with which to terrify into submission that dreadful boy!

CHAPTER XIII.

HOME LIFE BY CONTRACT.

HOUSEKEEPING by contract has one incontestable advantage over the ordinary system. The personal element, so annoying to people of Mr. Rapham's way of thinking, is here put an end to. We are under no obligation to inquire after our butler's cold, or to affect sympathy at the loss of his grandmother. On the other hand, we are free from that mild espionage which is apt to come into play even in the best-regulated households. Do what we will, we cannot hinder our Jeamses from unduly interesting themselves in our affairs. A certain amount of eavesdropping is not regarded as an offence by the best-trained footman or parlour-maid. Now, in an establishment conducted on the modern, the improved method, these little inconveniences are eliminated. Its very basis is impersonality. Our domestic staff is bound to remain strictly automatic, shorn of individuality, a conglomerate body. As far as each official is concerned, idiosyncrasies are studiously kept in the background, whilst to our own concerns they are as indifferent as railway stokers to the family matters of the stationmasters all along the line. The way in which so happy a result is effected is this: no one stays in the same place for more than six months at a time. Here to-day, gone to-morrow, veritable wandering Jews of civilization, these subalterns of a vast pacific army may, and doubtless do, enjoy a private life

of their own; it no more comes to the surface than if they were the marble caryatides supporting the chimney-piece.

This sumptuary arrangement exactly suited Mr. Rapham, for he had no sympathy to spare, and was particularly suspicious of paid subordinates. Were the thing possible, he would certainly have preferred real to fictitious automata, cunningly devised machines in human shape, like Vulcan's golden handmaids and cup-bearers read of in Homeric story.

The Allchere plan, however, was an undoubted step in the right direction, an enormous improvement on the old. The economic machine was kept going without any trouble or wrong to himself. He had only to supply the oil, and it was the business of others to look after the springs. His contract included not only assurance against fire, but burglary, housebreaking, and even assassination. Allchere and Company were under tremendously heavy obligations, first to prevent careless housemaids from dropping about lighted lucifer-matches, next to keep out nightly marauders with felonious intent. Mr. Rapham could therefore lay his head on his pillow without a care. Were his plate stolen, or his life attempted by housebreakers, the world-wide prestige of the universal contractor would be forfeited for ever. The great house of Allchere would be ruined past retrieval.

What pleased him as much as any point about these internal arrangements was the feeling of not being listened to at dinner. By way of doubly insuring himself against impertinent curiosity, he had insisted on a slight divergence of the Allchere rules. The servants at Strawton Park were to be regularly changed once in three months, not twice a

year as in other households managed by contract. He had made a further and apparently whimsical stipulation. One and all of the men employed indoors were to be slightly hard of hearing. As it is always easy, alas! to find people afflicted with this calamity, Mr. Rapham's wish was, of course, readily gratified. The Allchere rule, however, being to refuse a customer nothing, had he demanded a staff of servants gifted with such supernatural auricular powers that they could distinctly catch orders uttered a mile off, doubtless his desire would have been as readily complied with. Mr. Rapham was of opinion—and perhaps others do not dissent from him—that the charm of a *tête-à-tête* talk consists in the fact of not being overheard.

‘I see that all the fine folks are looking us up,’ he said, glancing towards Rapha with evident satisfaction. ‘The invitation to Lady Letitia’s dance of course you will accept?’

Rapha did not seem very enthusiastic.

‘I can’t sit up late. That is the worst of it,’ added Mr. Rapham. ‘Don’t you think, with so many evening parties in prospect, I had better get Allchere to send us a chaperon?’

‘Lady Letitia says that chaperons are no longer necessary,’ Rapha replied; ‘especially in my case, that of a girl who is mistress of her father’s house.’

‘Oh, that is all right; Lady Letitia is sure to know,’ Mr. Rapham replied with a look of relief. ‘And I will accompany you to her dance, anyhow; just give a look round, you know, and then drive home again. It will answer the same purpose as if I stayed altogether. I have been thinking, Rapha, Lady Letitia is just the good-natured kind of person to present you at Court next year, if we ask her.’

That proposition struck Rapha as so preposterous that she could not control a hearty laugh.

‘What you can find to laugh at, I don’t know,’ her father said, somewhat nettled. ‘Of course you must go to the Drawing-room. Allchere says it is obligatory. But if you prefer it, when the time comes, we will go to him for a chaperon instead of asking Lady Letitia. He supplies such things. And there is another matter. I promised you a hundred pounds as a birthday present. But I’ve changed my mind. I am going to buy you some diamonds instead. You know I am a judge of such matters, whereas if you took your hundred pounds to a jeweller, you are sure to be bamboozled.’

‘Oh, papa!’ Rapha said, with a burst of girlish enthusiasm and sincerity. ‘Do give me the hundred pounds to spend as I like! I have plenty of ornaments already.’

‘What on earth do you want a hundred pounds for?’ asked Mr. Rapham, impatient, yet ever full of paternal pride and curiosity.

This frank, joyous, spirited maiden, his own child, though sometimes he could hardly believe it, was as a book, each page revealing something new to him.

‘I want to help that poor young lady who came to you this morning with her invention.’

‘Confound the young lady!’ Mr. Rapham’s oaths were ever swallowed in Rapha’s presence. ‘Now, Rapha, as if women’s inventions were worth an empty beer-bottle! They can invent readily enough with their tongue, I admit that. But what else—what else, pray?’

‘We can’t tell,’ Rapha said quickly. ‘Half the great inventions of the world set down to men are very likely due to their wives.’

‘On my word, you have an answer for everything. There is no getting over you,’ Mr. Rapham said, more delighted by her ready wit than he had been put out of countenance by her request. ‘But I can’t let you fool away your money in that way. You want to go without jewels to-day to help some poor deluded creature who thinks she has set the Thames afire. To-morrow you will want to live on bread and water to help somebody else who has found a short-cut to the moon. No, my dear; charity begins and ends at home.’ Rapha looked crestfallen and unconvinced. ‘I will tell you what I will do to please you,’ Mr. Rapham said, after a pause. ‘I will look in at Miss—what’s her name?—Wasp, wasn’t it?’

‘No, Bee, papa.’

‘Well, Wasp is near enough, I am sure. I will, I say, just drop in and see what she has to show; there can be no harm in that. And if any money is to be made out of her invention, I am as ready to make it as anyone else.’

‘To help her to make it, you mean, papa,’ Rapha said.

‘Put it as you please, my dear. Suit yourself,’ Mr. Rapham replied, cracking one walnut after another with great enjoyment. The most temperate man in the world as far as eating and drinking went, there were yet a few things for which he had an immoderate liking, walnuts among these. ‘Excellent nuts!’ he said. ‘On my word, Allchere tables his customers in first-rate style; there is no mistake about that. But I wish we could contract for a few items more—opinions, for instance. I would willingly pay fifty pounds a year to be voted for all round—at Parliamentary Elections, Town Councils, School Boards, and all.’

‘It would be convenient, certainly,’ Rapha said, with forced gravity.

‘It would be damned convenient—it would be mighty convenient, I meant to say,’ resumed Mr. Rapham. ‘Just think: I don’t care a straw who represents Strawton in Parliament or who doesn’t. Why should I? I have to pay my taxes, support the Royal Family, keep the country agoing all the same. A Radical or Tory Ministry is all one to me. I don’t care a halfpenny who sits on the School Board, either. How in the world should I? We’re saddled with the School Board, and must pay for the School Board; whether Churchmen or Methodists, Jews or Atheists, squabble over it, and spend their days in prating over it, is one and the same to me. Then there is the Town Council. I don’t feel a particle of interest in the Town Council. Why anyone should, I can’t conceive. Taking men in a lump, shaking them up in a sack, one makes as good an alderman as another. The difference between them is too slight to be worth mentioning. Now, if I could contract for the whole concern, the having to vote for this, that, and the other, say for fifty pounds a year, I should consider myself a gainer by the bargain.’

‘What a pity I can’t do your voting for you!’ Rapha said. ‘I should enjoy the excitement.’

‘Well, you can do my church-going for me,’ continued her father, complacently cracking another walnut. ‘That is one comfort. I don’t think after fifty anyone should be expected to go to church under any pretext whatever. It stops the circulation in winter, and sends blood to the head in summer. I don’t mean to be stingy to the Church. It’s about the genteelest thing we have; but I can’t be preached to at my time of life by a young whipper-snapper of a curate,

with nothing but a little book-learning in his noddle. By the way, I have seen several of our acquaintances to-day. Mr. Villedieu, for one. He wants me, of course, to back him up in the forthcoming election. Not I.' Mr. Rapham here gave Rapha a knowing look, and added, 'Unless you have taken a fancy to him? He will succeed to his uncle's title, they say. He may be Lord Alvanley some day. That is the kind of man I should like you to marry, my dear.'

Rapha coloured, and smiled.

'Now,' Mr. Rapham went on, still with that keen, fox-eyed eagerness of glance, 'as I have just said, I don't care a fig for politics. Were all the public men in the kingdom sent to Siberia, it would be one and the same thing to me; and I dare say the country would fare no worse. Half a dozen fellows paid moderately well for the work would make as good laws as those passed in the House of Commons. The thing could be done by contract—by Allchere and Company, for instance; I am sure they would govern the country well enough! But if you like the look of Mr. Villedieu, I would put my hand in my pocket. I would help him through.'

Deeper and deeper grew Rapha's blushes. Her father's openness seemed a rebuke. She felt conscience-smitten at her own reticence concerning Silverthorn. Yes; she must—she ought to speak out. The servants had now left the room. Moving to her father's side, she put one hand caressingly within his arm.

'Why should I want to leave you—to marry anyone, papa?' she said, looking up at him with appealing fondness. 'My proper place is here.'

He seemed pleased, even touched by this show of affection, yet would have his say out.

‘I am an old man, my dear. Sixty is old, when a man has spent the best part of his days in the Tropics. Besides, a husband—a son-in-law of the right sort—need not separate us. We could all remain under one roof—at least, for a time. The thing is to see you settled; to find someone to take care of you and of your money when I am gone. Now, suppose—suppose that Villedieu should make advances! He is mighty civil; I think there is something in the wind. Suppose, I say——’

‘Papa,’ Rapha said, laying her cheek against his arm, ‘I do not want to marry at all—that is to say, for years to come. But——’

‘Oh! of course, there are “buts.” I expected that,’ he replied, fondling her in a rough, shy way. ‘Mr. Villedieu should be younger, or his hair is not of the right colour. We won’t quarrel about him before we’ve got him. And we won’t spend money about him before we have got him, either; trust me to throw my good money after bad. We will look around us awhile—see which way the wind blows. Then there is Silverthorn. I met him in town, also, to-day. Uncommonly civil, he was. Would like well enough to have you himself, I dare say. There is no accounting for some people’s impudence. Why he is so—so vastly civil, passes my comprehension.’

Rapha had chosen that fond, playful attitude with the full intention of confiding in her father. She would, for once and for all, tell him of the understanding that existed between her and her old science-master. Mr. Rapham’s blunt utterances checked the growing confidence. Every word that now fell from her father’s lips seemed an insult to one who was single-mindedness itself.

‘I suppose, like others, he does not object to a good

dinner whenever he can get it for nothing?' Mr. Rapham went on. 'He is very welcome. I have nothing to say against him, so long as he does not begin to pay court to my daughter. He had better not try that game, I can tell him. And another acquaintance, too, I met to-day—Mr. Day; no, Mr. Morrow. What queer names people have in these parts, to be sure! This Mr. Day—I mean Mr. Morrow—doesn't want you, I dare say; he's old enough to be your father. But he wants me—that is to say, my money. I can see that well enough, although he asked me for nothing point-blank. He was harping all the time upon the distress in the town, as if I had caused the distress! What is other people's distress to me? Each man must look out for himself nowadays. And if he keeps his own head above water, that is the best thing he can do, both for the Queen and the country. You see,' he went on, evidently seeming to think that Rapha stood in need of a little enlightenment as to political economy, 'the wiseacres who preach about giving away, and the addlepates who listen to them, only see an inch beyond their own noses. Look at the immense deal of good I do by the money I keep in circulation, simply by minding my own business, and spending on my own necessities! If ever there was a benefactor of his kind, a philanthropist to the backbone, it is myself. Don't I give away several thousands a year, or do what amounts to the same thing, when I keep going such an establishment as this? Give away as much as you like, say I; but never fail to get your money's worth in return. I pay a score of men and women servants, say; well, as there are thousands who cannot get work, it is just as good as almsgiving—the same thing precisely. Your friend Mr. Day—I mean Mr. Morrow—may come to me with his face

a yard long. I am not going to pauperize the country with money I have worked hard for ; and were everyone to know what he is about, and the rights and the wrongs of the matter, and act accordingly, there isn't a tatterdemalion in the country who wouldn't be comfortably cracking walnuts as I am doing now.'

CHAPTER XIV.

ESAU'S MESS AND ROBIN GRAY.

A DAY or two after this conversation Mr. Rapham drove in his sulky to Strawton, and putting up at the market inn, set out in search of Norrice Bee. He found the town unusually alert and hilarious. All the inhabitants seemed abroad ; alike the well-befurred and the out-at-elbow were wending their way to the public hall, much as if some stump-orator or wild-beast show had just arrived for their diversion.

Bitter as was the weather, and November had set in with iron frost and cutting winds, people looked gay, animated, even jovial. The general aspect of the streets was one of unmitigated cheerfulness. The fact was, the winter charities for which Strawton was famous were to be inaugurated to-day by the first of those free dinners provided several times a week from November till March.

When Mr. Rapham, curious to see what was going on, made his way through the crowd and peeped inside the hall and glanced round, a strange sight met his eyes.

A denizen dropped from a neighbouring planet must

have supposed that the good townfolk were preparing for the passage of an army of defence, so tremendous the preparations, so patriotic the zeal displayed. Well-dressed ladies and gentlemen were scurrying to and fro, all wearing white aprons, whilst stretching from end to end of the vast hall were deal tables and benches for the accommodation of the guests. A visitor, however, from the planet Jupiter, or any globe better managed than our own, must have felt some pangs of humiliation mixed with his pity and admiration at the sight that followed. Delightful as it was, certes, to see the benevolent spirit actuating those amateur cooks and waitresses, as stream after stream of the famished took their seats, yet how painful to reflect that after six thousand years of civilization, the half of humanity in a highly advanced state like our own should be brought to such a pass—to be dependent on cheap victuals, the gift of charity, for just keeping body and soul together!

To the philosophic observer of life, the moral of such a spectacle can but be mortifying in the extreme.

Mr. Rapham's feelings were of sheer amusement as he watched the scene.

There was Lady Letitia Lowfunds and her daughters, shabbily dressed, amiable, unwooed girls of all ages, delighted to be busy. There was Mr. Morrow, just now too happy to be shy, as, in white cap and apron, he ladled out the soup to the bevy of smiling damsels around him—a very engaging chef indeed, thought Lady Letitia; and, oh dear me, what a comfortable son-in-law, were he not a manufacturer! Then there were vicars and curates, Nonconformist ministers and their ladies, one and all fraternizing together in a manner gratifying to witness.

Even the stellar critic above-mentioned, descended, we

will suppose, from a planet on which starvation is unknown, might find consolation here. We may go to the length of conceiving some kindly Mother Earth that nourishes all her children. But who can imagine a world in which everyone thinks alike?

To-day, not only were theological and political, but even social, distinctions kept out of sight. Lady Letitia's daughters flirted mildly with Mr. Morrow. The Vicar chatted amicably with his Methodist rival. The Radical linen-draper was hail-fellow-well-met with the Tory tailor; as to the curates, a veritable vertigo seemed to possess them. They were hobnobbing with everyone, cracking jokes with their rectors, quite flippant in their exhilaration.

Mr. Rapham was perhaps the only bystander present who had not subscribed a farthing to the fraternal banquet. He had so ostentatiously declared it his intention not to give from the beginning, that in consequence nobody had asked him to do so now. But as he surveyed the curious scene he determined to send in a subscription, and for an oddly inconsequent reason.

'All this would divert Rapha mightily,' he said, as he turned away. 'And bring her into good company, too. I had no idea that giving away was so genteel. Yes, I'll send 'em a trifle; a pound or so.'

Just then Mr. Villedieu caught sight of him; and came up with a frank, engaging smile. The rich trader amused him, but he ever contrived to keep his amusement in the background.

'Come, Mr. Rapham,' he said, 'do sit down with me and taste the soup. I never give a penny till I test a thing, and I have promised five shillings down if the soup is fit for human beings to eat.'

Now, although Frederick Villedieu was a poor man, he had promised to give five pounds. That mention of the five shillings was made by way of a joke.

Mr. Rapham, however, took it in all seriousness. If another man could give five shillings, so could he. The offer of the soup was accepted willingly. He was feeling hungry, and it would be a saving. Allchere and Company did everything in first-rate style, but their luncheons per head were somewhat expensive. He never took luncheon at home, even when feeling hungry, if he could help it.

The two men retired to a side-table, and Villedieu himself fetched the two basins of soup. They broke their bread into it, and began to eat.

‘On my word, very good soup indeed!’ Villedieu said. ‘I wish I knew where to get as good in town for a penny a help. What an economy it would be!’

Mr. Rapham, who was rather in a hurry, emptied his plate before replying.

‘I can tell you of a place where you can lunch as well as any man wants to do for sixpence,’ he said. ‘Ah, I have the address on a card somewhere.’

He brought out his note-case, and produced the card; then opening his purse, laid down five shillings.

‘You are on the committee, I dare say; anyhow, will you give this donation for me?’ he said. ‘I should like to send my daughter to assist at the next distribution. I think it would divert her.’

‘Pray do. We shall all welcome Miss Rapham; and thank you much for your handsome subscription,’ Villedieu replied, picking up the money with the utmost gravity.

‘I am not for giving away my shirt, much less my skin,’ Mr. Rapham said. ‘But I don’t object to bestow a trifle

when it is a duty owed to society. Good-day to you, sir.'

'Not at all bad, that soup, and I was feeling really hungry,' he said to himself as he walked away. 'I have done a good stroke of business! Quit of my charities for less than the cost of one of Allchere's tip-top luncheons, and my meal got into the bargain.'

'Mr. Rapham, Mr. Rapham!' chirped Mrs. Bee, 'how condescending of you to come; and what a mercy my daughter and I were not helping with the free dinners!'

'Free dinners indeed, ma'am!' ejaculated Mr. Rapham, glancing round the poorly-furnished room. 'Leave free dinners to those who are half killed with repletion at home. That's a piece of advice I give you for nothing.'

'And good advice too,' Mrs. Bee said, with the old-fashioned feeling that a millionaire ought not to be contradicted. 'Giving away when you can really afford it must thrill the mind with the most delightful sensation of which it is capable.'

Mr. Rapham made an odd grimace. The utterance of such sentiments as these affected him much as the sight of some foolhardy exploit affects others. 'What idiots folks are for their pains!' we say, when we see them set off on a walking tour round the world, try to cross Niagara in a tub, or to live without bite or sup, like the show-fasters, for thirty-four days!

'I have come to see your daughter. Ah, here she is!'

He did not feel called upon to apologize for his former roughness. A man always up to his ears in business cannot be expected to stand too much upon ceremony.

'Now, young lady,' he began, 'we won't waste any time. You know as well as I do that inventions seldom or never

pay. I don't mean to say that yours may not be the most wonderful in the world. No doubt you think so, and it is quite right that you should. What I mean to say is this: you have ninety-nine hundred to a thousand chances against you. Now you've heard, I dare say, of the story of the Jew—in the Old Testament, isn't it?—who lost the pound of creditor's flesh he had bargained for, because he had made no mention of the drop of blood. Well, an inventor is in the case of that Jew. When he makes his bargain—that is to say, when he describes it for his patent—he is sure to leave out the most important point, the drop of blood, and so forfeit his pound of flesh. There is always some quibble for the wary to lay hold of, some flaw in his blue-book which makes it not worth the paper it is printed on. Then, again, suppose all is right so far. How can he ever feel sure that he has not been forestalled? He may fancy himself perfectly safe, when, on a sudden, someone who wants to set up in the same concern ferrets out a patent for the selfsame thing—brought out maybe at St. Petersburg, maybe at New York, 'tis all one to him. He may go to the poor-house for all anybody cares.'

'That is what I am always saying to my daughter,' Mrs. Bee put in. 'We are really certain of nothing but what we have in our mouths, and not sure that that is what it pretends to be. But with regard to Shylock the Jew, you mentioned just now—excuse me for observing—is it not in Shakespeare instead of the Bible?'

'Where you please, ma'am. I am up in neither. I am not a bookish man. Where you please,' was his answer.

Norrice's pale, thoughtful face had flushed with vexation during the trader's speech. She could not find it in her heart to behave uncourteously to Rapha's father; but this

ruthless scattering of her dreams, and crushing of her brightest hopes, was almost more than she could bear.

'Now,' Mr. Rapham began again, 'I don't for a moment believe that there is a penny to be made by your invention. You have there my honest opinion; but to gratify my daughter, who has taken a great fancy to you, I have just stepped in to see what you have got; and if it is anything worth mentioning, I will do the thing handsomely. I will buy it outright for a hundred pounds in hard cash.'

While Norrice's sensitive features expressed very mixed feelings, Mrs. Bee could hardly find words in which to pour out her joy.

A hundred pounds! They would not be enabled to set up a carriage on the strength of it, certainly, but the landlady could be paid, all other claims cleared off, and the new year begun without a farthing of debt. She looked even more cheerful than when expounding the fable of Charon and Menippus.

'Of course, Norrie, you will accept. I should think so, indeed! and I am sure it is very kind and Christian-like of Mr. Rapham to come to our relief,' Mrs. Bee continued. 'People can, of course, live upon next to nothing with a little management. I always insist upon that; but there is all the difference in the world between nothing and something. And this hundred pounds will be a fortune—superabundant wealth to us; as good as ten thousand pounds—a million, if you come to that. When you only need ten pounds, why cry your eyes out because you have not twenty? But now, Norrie, do take Mr. Rapham to your workshop, and settle the business then and there.'

Poor Norrice's irresolute, hesitating mood contrasted more and more with her mother's exhilaration; but how

could she refuse? Her mind was painfully torn by conflicting desires. She wanted to appear courteous, even grateful, to Rapha's father; she wanted to lighten her mother's cares. But could she part with her beloved invention on such terms as these?—sell her birthright as Esau had done for a mess of pottage?—sacrifice her own existence to sordid needs of the hour, as did the Scotch girl who wedded Robin Gray, whilst her Jamie was at sea? Pale, unable to utter a word in self-defence, she conducted her visitor upstairs, and showed him her invention.

But with what different feelings to those of a few days back! She had displayed her treasure to Rapha proudly and ecstatically as Benvenuto Cellini unveiled his Perseus before ducal patrons. The glow of creative triumph vanished now. She looked more like some poor, heart-broken mother who is parting with her child to foster-parents for its own worldly advancement, to share her own humble future, even to bear her own name, no more.

'Good,' said Mr. Rapham, with an air of visible satisfaction. 'We will waste no words. Your invention, like every other, of course, promises to turn the world upside down; whether, commercially speaking, it is worth a three-penny-piece is a wholly different matter. That is neither here nor there. As I said before, to please my daughter, I will give you a hundred pounds for it.'

Norrice did then summon courage to say.

'Would you give me a smaller sum, say the half, and let me remain in part the owner of my invention?'

'Look you, young lady,' Mr. Rapham replied sharply, 'I'm too busy and too old to enter into such bargains now. Were I a young man, the case would be altered. If you accept my offer I shall just put the matter into the right

hands, and there will be an end of it, as far as I am concerned. Suppose—we might as well suppose that the world will come to an end to-morrow; it may, for aught we know, but it is not very likely. Suppose, I say, that your machine does turn out a trump-card—well, you must trust to my generosity.'

Now, for Mr. Rapham to bid anyone trust to his generosity was the cruelest irony. Those but slightly acquainted with him must feel that the chance of winning a lottery-ticket must be set down as a mathematical certainty by comparison. Norrice, however, felt passive, resistless, out of heart. Had she been alone in the world, she would sooner have faced direst need and privation than make the sacrifice. But she knew well what a hundred pounds would be to her mother, and how sorely that poor mother had been tried. There, conspicuous, was Mr. Rapham's cheque magnetizing her in one direction; there was her invention—her very life, her all in all. She did not hold out her hand to take the missive, but felt powerless to struggle against temptation any longer.

'I don't want to take advantage of any man, or woman either,' Mr. Rapham said. 'Talk the matter over with your mother, and I'll call again.' He was about to replace the draft in his pocket, then thrust it in her hand instead. 'No—just take this piece of paper, anyhow. There is no harm in that; and if you decide to pocket it, then meet me to-morrow at noon in the City—here is the address—and bring your invention and description with you.'

He then hurried downstairs and out into the street, hardly giving himself time to reply to Mrs. Bee's exuberant expressions of delight and gratitude.

CHAPTER XV.

A GOOSE FOR A FORTUNE.

‘REALLY,’ Mrs. Bee replied, as she watched the neat, wiry little figure in brown disappear—‘really, a charming man; how could you find fault with him, Norrie? But then nothing in the male way ever does satisfy you. What you expect men to be, I am at a loss to imagine. Archangels at the very least, I suppose. And so open-handed too, so trusting, to give a hundred pounds in hard cash for a thing that may never bring him a farthing! But now, listen. I have not been idle whilst you were upstairs. I have been pencilling down what we owe and what we absolutely want; and I find that when all is paid, we shall have exactly fourteen pounds, four shillings, and fourpence halfpenny, we shall not know what to do with.’

Norris glanced at her mother’s strip of paper as indifferently as she had just before glanced at the rich man’s cheque. Mr. Rapham’s missive she now laid—rather let it fall—on the table, where it lay, as tempting to Mrs. Bee as the apple to Eve.

‘We can, of course, put the remainder in the bank,’ Mrs. Bee resumed, ‘or, what I am more disposed to do, we can put by ten pounds, and with the odd money buy you a red silk dress. It would exactly suit you; and with these grand parties coming on, you must have something of the kind.’

Once more her vision was attracted by the cheque.

‘Well, we need not trouble our heads about the fourteen pounds, fourteen shillings, and fourpence halfpenny. We can let that rest for the present. The main thing is to pay the rent—I have reckoned half a year’s in advance—the other little bills, and purchase the coals. And don’t you think I had better trot off to the bank at once? it closes at three, you know——’

So saying, she took out her purse, and moving towards the table, just touched the tiny piece of paper barred with red. She was on the point of putting it in her purse when Norrice interposed, flushed and trembling with agitation.

‘Mamma!’ she cried, ‘do give me a little time to reflect. If I accept Mr. Rapham’s offer, my invention belongs to him and not to me. I will get money for the rent and the coals somehow, only give me time.’

‘Of course you must do as you like,’ Mrs. Bee said, not in the least ruffled, not in the least reproachful, but, Norrice could see that well enough, for once out of heart. Had her mother insisted, had she showed temper, had she tried to exercise maternal authority, the girl’s spirit would have risen. That pathetic ‘Of course you must do as you like,’ that patient letting go of the cheque, and the look of care suddenly overspreading the placid, gentle face, Norrice could not bear. She knew, too, that in spite of Mrs. Bee’s cheerful theories about imagining everything you cannot get, and setting down unattainable necessaries as out of date and extras, prolonged struggle and privation were telling upon her elastic constitution and contented mind. Her mother often looked wan and pinched; yes, she really suffered from bodily deprivation; she needed more warmth, more nourishment, more comfort generally.

This conviction so wrought upon Norrice's mind that she had now no more power of resistance left. With swelling heart and painfully concealed tears, she thrust the fatal piece of paper, as she regarded it, into Mrs. Bee's hand, and ejaculated in a voice of feigned hilarity, 'You are right, ever right, mammy. So trot off to the bank, and buy the red silk dress on your way home;' she added, with a further effort to conceal her despair, 'and a pair of silk stockings to match, with gold clocks—don't forget.'

Then, not trusting herself to say a single word more, she put on bonnet and shawl, and sought the fallow fields and the skylarks. To-day, alas! all seemed changed. There were the same wide horizons, the same sweep of open country around, and clear heavens above; as will, however, sometimes happen in life, not only with regard to human affections, but natural objects, the familiar, the ever trusted, the hitherto unfailing, for once betrays us. We are met face to face with a desertion all the more unbearable because it is so unexpected; the very grass and blue heavens will surely fail us next.

To-day, Norrice gazed on no dimpled hills, brown in shadow, golden under the sun-rays—no windy sweep, over which drive the swift, changeful, buoyant clouds; instead, she saw a bare, dull, dispiriting landscape, unsuggestive and ugly as the town itself. Sullen and birdless the leaden canopy above, dreary and monotonous the dull gray world below. Could spring ever waken it, summer beautify it? And as full of despair seemed her own life.

Norrice continued her walk, nevertheless; for the exercise invigorated her, and the solitude was very soothing. Except for a shepherd driving his flock home, she had skies and fields all to herself.

And as she strolled along, the passion of grief passed, and the fortitude born of despair took possession of the young inventress's soul. She said to herself that she was not the first to be tried thus ; how many others, how many worthier than herself, had seen the first-fruits of their endeavours, the handsel of their intellects, wrested from them, their harvests reaped by alien hands, themselves left in oblivion, and oft-times want ! Could she expect to escape the ills that in some shape or other afflict humanity ? Would she exchange her own lot, hard although it might be, for that of so many others far more fortunate in worldly things ? She had, at least, her work to do in the world, and already had accomplished a part of it. Was not that something, nay, everything, when you go a little deeper than the primitive, unremunerative necessities of human life ?

She turned her face homeward, not comforted, not cheered, yet soothed and braced up for the supreme sacrifice. She would at once get the worst over, pack up her invention, and see that there was no flaw in her specification. Then she would try to think no more of the matter. With lagging steps and downcast face, she re-entered the house, and ascended the little staircase—hitherto, a ladder to airiest hope and joyful upbuoyance ; to-day, to gloom, as of some death-chamber of a beloved one.

Again and again, in spite of the severe schooling she had just given herself, bitter tears rushed to her eyes ; again and again she put back her treasure, saying she could not do this thing. But daughterly affection and stoical resolve prevailed. With a pale face and compressed lips, she now set to work—for her tears hardly being able to take a last look at it—and deftly packed her invention, the nursling of her thoughts, the child of her hopes.

When once this part of her sacrifice was accomplished, the rest seemed easy. She now went carefully over her specification to assure herself that all was right; then, for once having had her fill of solitude, went downstairs. An extraordinary atmosphere of bustle and acquisition reigned in the little parlour. To poor Norrice, it was as if a legacy had befallen the household; and no one had a tear for the bequeather but herself. The room was literally piled with purchases; but in the gloaming only one object met her eyes. This was an enormous goose, ready for spitting, that shone out conspicuous from a variety of objects, darker of hue and less accentuated as to form.

The sight of that goose, and the suggestions it called forth, appealed to Norrice's sense of humour. Wrung to the heart as she had been by the events of the last few hours, a new mood of reckless, fitful gaiety took possession of her. She felt that the only way not to cry was to laugh. Putting her arm round her mother's waist, she made her waltz round the room, singing gaily:

‘There's a good time coming, boys—
A good time coming.’

‘I don't wonder you feel in such spirits,’ Mrs. Bee said. ‘I should have done so at your age; but now I take things as they come. A hundred thousand pounds would not make me feel in the least bit different. But how slow the people are to send my purchases! Ah! you are looking at the goose! I don't care in the least about eating and drinking; but if there is one thing I have in the faintest degree a partiality for, it is a fat goose. There is no nonsense, no mistake about it. The splendid savour, too, it sends through the house, and up and down the street!

Everybody knows as well as if you had told them that you are having a goose for dinner ; and if that doesn't testify to your means and respectability in life, what does—what does, I should very much like to know ?' She looked round with a complacent air, and proceeded with her enumeration : ' Then there is the coal-scuttle ! If there is one thing you really cannot imagine, it is a coal-scuttle ; and our old one has, I am sure, done its duty, with its pasteboard bottom, these two years, and the coals always tumbling through from the top of the stairs to the bottom, making everyone jump. And the new boiler—look at that ! You remember, we lost the top in our last moving ! It is tiresome how useless things are without tops and bottoms ; but so it is. Then there is the blotting-paper, and the mustard, and the blankets—all luxuries, certainly, but very convenient. And—but here comes the draper's boy with your gown-piece. Is it not a bargain?—real Lyons silk, and the colour of a ripe tomato—nothing so becoming to your complexion by candle-light. But you are wanting your tea, I dare say ; and the cake and the muffins haven't come yet. Ah ! here comes the boy, sure enough ; and another ring—that must be the coals. Just run down with the key and a light—ah ! no ; it is the shoes. After all that may be said and done, there is no comfort in the world like being well shod. It doesn't matter a straw what you wear on your head ; but whatever the Darwinites may say to the contrary, it is shoe-leather that precludes the possibility of monkey-descent, shoe-leather that proclaims the moral being. How can anyone hold up his head, as an intellectual creature should, unless he is well shod ? You see, it is the brain that directs, but the foot that conducts ; and that is, I am sure, why the French are so clever in many ways—so superior a people—their shoes

always fit so beautifully, and are one of the first considerations in life. Another ring! Well, really, I thought we had got everything by this time! Ah! I had forgotten the patent medicines and the wadding. I have been so long without any medicines in the house, that it will be the greatest possible comfort to have them to go to; I shall be fancying all kinds of aches and pains for the pleasure of doctoring myself. And then the wadding—you may smile at seeing that enormous pile of wadding; but I am always in terror lest anybody in the house should be burnt or scalded without any wadding to wrap the poor thing in at once! Well, now really I think we have all; so we will toast the muffins, and sit down to tea comfortably.'

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. RAPHAM'S DÉBUT IN SOCIETY.

MR. RAPHAM'S appearance in polite society was by no means vulgar, rather a piquant singularity, an engaging phenomenon in the eyes of fashionable lookers-on. The half-savage Muscovite sovereign, Peter the Great, at the elegant French Court of Louis XV., hardly wore a more outlandish look. Even the stereotyped evening dress of the English gentleman, which he condescended to wear, did not in the least detract from the oddity of his appearance. Shrunken, beardless, without an ounce of superfluous flesh on his body, his small, spare, active form recalled the portraits of African explorers—men whose lives have been for the

most part hidden from civilization, who have been exposed to all kinds of perils, scorched by the fiery sun of the desert, at last unearthed and brought back to a new world, themselves more astonishing than their mirific adventures.

He had that keen, intensely alive look of one accustomed to mistrust everybody and everything about him, and to feel that snares may await him at every step. His bright, vivacious eyes—all that the observer noticed, all that one seemed to see of the small withered face—with furtive glance evidently took in not only what was passing immediately within their focus, but around, behind as well as before, and on either side.

Mr. Rapham never tried to put the slightest gloss on his personal appearance, or in any degree to fall into the ways of genteel society. The sole sacrifice he made to conventionalism was to refrain from unseemly jokes or the ejaculation of an oath. For the rest, he remained perfectly natural, priding himself indeed upon being a rough man, but every bit as good as his neighbours.

‘Tis all very well for folks to boast of their fine manners when they have nothing else to bless themselves with,’ he said to Rapha; ‘but, bless your soul! when a man is known to be a moneyed man, the world isn’t so dirty particular as to his behaviour. And manners—well, who would give a five-pound note for the finest bow in the world?’

The professional talker had not been engaged for the first dinner-party, after all. Rapha urged that with two such talkers to be depended on as Villedieu and Silverthorn, such an addition was unnecessary. A master of ceremonies had been sent down for the occasion, that was all. As Allchere and Company wrote, if any little hitch occurred in the proceedings, their client had only to apply to him. Suppose,

for instance, that an awkward pause ensued during the dinner, this functionary had an infinite number of resources at command, happy little expedients sure to loosen tongues and awaken geniality. He would suddenly turn off the gas, for instance. That was an unfailing remedy for stiffness and silence. The ladies would become alarmed, the gentlemen try to reassure them; by the time the gas was turned on again, everybody would be in the happiest spirits, and the most timid have some story to tell of a similar mishap.

Another device, equally diverting, was also an effectual remedy for constraint and lagging talk. This was for the master of the ceremonies, who stood behind the host's chair, to drop suddenly down in a feigned fit. Etiquette, of course, would be forgotten under such circumstances; there would be a general rush from the table with smelling-bottles and tumblers of cold water. When the patient had been restored and led away by the other attendants, reserve was sure to be banished for the rest of the evening. Each guest would have a good story to tell of some festivity disturbed in much the same way. However, no such dilemma transpired, and from the beginning of the dinner to the end, all was sparkle and spontaneity.

'I wish,' Mr. Rapham said to Lady Letitia, as he complacently surveyed the dazzling table and gay company—'I wish dinner-parties cost nothing. I would give one every day.'

'And I am sure, dear Mr. Rapham,' Lady Letitia replied blandly, 'your friends would be only too happy to come.'

'Oh, there is no doubt about that! They would come for my dinner if they would not come to see me,' was the blunt reply.

'But why should they not come to see *you*?' Lady

Letitia put in with another charming smile. 'We do not meet with such a traveller as yourself, having so many interesting stories to tell, very often, I assure you.'

Mr. Rapham made an odd grimace, and cracked another walnut. Gratified although he was to have this fine lady sitting by his side, a guest at his own table, and amusing as he found the entertainment altogether, the talk, the dresses, and the table, he was not accessible to feminine flattery.

'My notion is,' he said, 'that the people in London who arrange my dinner-parties for me might improve upon it. Who can talk at his ease when he has to be using a knife and fork? Everybody ought to have someone standing behind his chair to feed him as if he were a baby. There would be time for good stories then.'

Lady Letitia laughed heartily.

'Oh, dear Mr. Rapham, how original you are!'

'Original or not,' was the blunt reply, 'a professional feeder would be mighty convenient. These walnuts now—how can I talk to you and peel them at the same time? With somebody at hand to peel them and pop them into my mouth, I should be able to enjoy my dessert and your company at the same time.'

'Oh, do let my daughter prepare some walnuts for you!' Lady Letitia exclaimed, glancing towards her eldest daughter, who sat a little lower down on the same side of the table. 'Gracie has really a gift that way. Machines could doubtless be invented for the purpose, but the most ingeniously contrived machine, I am sure, could not excel her fingers. The walnuts are rid of their peel as if by magic.'

'What an accomplishment to noise to the world!' Gracie said good-humouredly, yet not without a touch of vexation.

‘In these days, too, when every girl but myself is expected to be either a Senior Optime or a First-class Classic.’

‘Humph!’ said Mr. Rapham. ‘A woman who knows how to use her hands, in my humble opinion, is worth ten who have nothing to boast of but a head full of book-learning.’

Whereupon Lady Letitia coaxed Gracie into showing her skill, and whilst the process of walnut-peeling went on, mother and daughter fell into different trains of thought. Lady Letitia was thinking—what will not a mother of six portionless maidens think?—how pleasant it would be to have this rich eccentricity for a son-in-law! His pretty vivacious daughter was sure to marry ere long, and Mr. Rapham’s fortune was reputed colossal. There seemed really no earthly reason why he should not marry again, nor why a girl like Gracie, of unromantic temperament and unselfish disposition, should not accept him. He was odd, certainly, and elderly and illiterate. But he had out-of-door tastes; he would be sure to leave his wife pretty much to follow her own devices. He did not seem a domestic tyrant. He appealed to his young daughter in everything, reflected Lady Letitia; yes, she should put no obstacles in the way; she should show as much civility to the Raphams as circumstances permitted.

Gracie, for her part, whilst obligingly peeling the walnuts and chatting to Mr. Morrow, had such thoughts as these in her mind: Why, oh, why must a girl in fashionable society be despaired of, regarded as a failure, if she is not married by her thirtieth birthday! I am quite contented to be as I am; at least, I should be, had I a little more liberty, a little more money, a few more openings for individuality. I should never dream, myself, of flattering a man for the sake of per-

suading him to propose to me. Other things interest me as much as marriage. Why, then, not let me be? Why must I involuntarily minister to the small vanities of men, whom if I were asked to marry, if I did marry, it would not in the least be on their own account, for their own sakes, simply because they have money and I have not, because I am a superfluous girl to be got rid of?

In the meantime, at the other end of the table, and in another feminine mind, a quite opposite train of thought had been awakened. It is wonderful what difference a beautiful gown may make in the life of a woman! How may exterior circumstances, indeed, arouse that feminine consciousness which is the key-note to so many women's lives!

For the first time in her life, the very first time, although she had reached the age of twenty-five, Norrice Bee was realizing that aspect of existence to which she was indebted solely by virtue of sex. Hitherto coquetry had been as foreign to her as to those austere maidens we read of in history, self-devoted martyrs of patriotism or religion. She had never felt the faintest interest in any fellow-creature from the mere fact that he accidentally belonged to one sex and she to another. She had never asked herself whether she was beautiful or not. That poor, familiar face of hers! Whenever she glanced at it in a mirror, it was most often with a pang of self-compassion; she pitied herself for those wan looks, due to excessive intellectual work—those premature lines of care called forth by daily, sordid needs. Now, however, at least for a brief space, she had cast off all her burdens, alike material and spiritual. The supreme sacrifice consummated, her invention bartered for daily bread, there was nothing to do but to forget and begin to

live anew, to find out what else life had to give. The pale, meditative, shabbily dressed girl of yesterday was hardly recognisable in the sumptuous, sparkling woman now sitting by Villedieu's side. She wore crimson roses in her dark hair, and well did the rich tomato-coloured dress set off her pure, pearly complexion and magnificent eyes; but it was far less mere beauty than wit and spirit that fascinated her dinner-table companion. As one humorous suggestion or brilliant repartee after another dropped from her lips, he said to himself—Is it possible that a woman like this should be condemned to the struggling life of a bread-winner, the aging need of supporting herself and another by ill-remunerated toil?

‘Sphinx that you are,’ he said, ‘how long do you intend to withhold your weighty secrets? what is the meaning of thus suddenly mystifying us in the guise of a ball-room queen? When are we to learn in what form Newtonian revelation has descended upon an inhabitant of this benighted town, redeeming it from insignificance for ever?’

‘Is not the transformation you speak of a sign that I have exchanged rôles?’ she replied with sparkling gaiety. ‘Life cannot be resolved into an algorithm. The delights of millinery may well be accepted by a woman as a reward for discoveries, no matter how marvellous. ’Tis better anyhow than being burned alive for them, as would have happened to her two hundred years ago.’

‘I am enchanted to hear you talk of rewards. Then,’ he continued tentatively, with the evident design of drawing her out, ‘we may soon expect to be enlightened on the subject of your invention?’

‘Enlightened is not the word—say astounded, made breathless, taken by storm,’ she said gaily. ‘But my own

part is done. I leave the rest to a grateful and admiring world.'

'You really excite my curiosity in the highest degree. I hope you will let me be one of the first to congratulate you and take part in your triumph?'

'By all means,' she said, in the same strain of light playful banter. 'And supposing that triumph takes place in some remote part of the globe, say at St. Petersburg, or the Antipodes, what an additional one to have brought you thither!'

He was growing more puzzled than ever.

'Your invention, I presume, has found a foreign purchaser?'

'Wait and see,' she said, still evasive and enigmatical.

'All I can say then is, I heartily rejoice in your success,' he replied with a little sigh of regret. 'I only wish I could have been of use to you myself! Alas, as you know, as everybody knows, if I do get into Parliament I shall be the poorest man there!'

'Then what you want in money you must make up in ideas or in principles,' she said mischievously.

'Which? That is the question. Provided I possess the two, which am I to sacrifice to the other? To utilize both in public life is to try the impossible feat of the monkey in the fable, who wanted to squeeze his paw full of nuts out of a narrow-necked bottle.'

'The monkey should have broken the bottle. Sacrifice yourself, then!'

He looked a little crestfallen.

'That is not so easy when a man's politics is his all. I am in the position of the milkmaid of the rustic song, whose face was her fortune; or of the juggler whose sole accom-

plishment is to eat fire. Without my face, without my fire-eating, I should really have no place on the human stage.'

'What we cannot find we must invent,' Norrice said, 'be it an automatic paper-cutter or a career.'

Then the dinner-table *tête-à-tête* ended. There was a rustle of silk skirts towards the door; the bright train of ladies in gala dresses vanished. Lady Letitia at once went up to Norrice with a kindly patronizing air. She was not one of those mothers who dislike every handsome girl on account of her own less well-favoured daughters. She, moreover, acted on the excellent social rule of being civil to everybody; and although this was their first meeting in a salon, she knew Norrice very well as a teacher. The thought immediately struck her, that the inventions everybody in Strawton had heard of, and most railed at, must have brought the originator money after all. Otherwise would she appear in a brilliant company, herself as brilliant as any?

'It is a pleasant surprise to find you here,' Lady Letitia began, 'and I am sure you must need a little distraction after your hard day's work. I hope you will come to my little dance with Miss Rapham; as she has no companion, it will be agreeable for both.'

'Thank you,' Norrice said, quite overcome by this piece of condescension. 'I never learned to dance, but I shall like to look on.'

'Where is your good mother? I understood that she was to be here,' Lady Letitia added. She had made up her mind by this time that under Mr. Rapham's roof she must be prepared to meet anybody.

'Dinner-parties are among the things my mother prefers to imagine at home,' Norrice replied laughingly. 'Miss

Rapham wanted her to come, and so did I, but she persisted in remaining behind. She says that it is much better to imagine such events than to take part in them, because no dinner-party is ever quite perfect, whereas imagination can make it so. And all the fatigue is spared into the bargain.'

'All chaperons at balls would agree with Mrs. Bee, I am sure,' Lady Letitia replied, yawning behind her fan. 'I have accompanied my daughters to three within the last fortnight, and I would much rather have enjoyed them after your mother's plan. How delightful to hear that one's carriage is waiting! Though,' she added, waking up to the exigencies of society, 'here we must all admit there is no room for ennui. The evening has passed like a moment. What a charming man is Mr. Rapham, so piquant, so original!'

Norrice did not respond to that ebullition of feeling. Mr. Rapham, no matter how things might turn out, would ever appear to her the very reverse of charming.

'And Miss Rapham, so fresh and unspoiled by all the flattery she receives—for of course she is much flattered, all heiresses are—I am glad to be of use to her; she is in a trying position for so young a girl. Don't you think——' here Lady Letitia glanced round to see that nobody was near, then she added behind her fan—'don't you think she must be engaged to Mr. Silverthorn? The two seem to understand each other so very well.'

Norrice looked unsuggestive, and Lady Letitia turned to another subject.

'My dear Miss Bee, you really must give my girls some lessons in mathematics, Euclid, algebra, and that sort of thing. All the fashion, isn't it, now? and in my young days

never so much as thought of for young ladies. I wonder what will be the next accomplishment. You will really come then, shall we say, on Monday mornings?' Here she again dropped her voice behind her fan. 'You make, of course, a reduction of terms on three. And I should really like to sit by myself. One ought to know what are the fashionable amusements of the day. And a very little, a mere smattering, enables one to talk about anything. I dare say you can lend the girls the necessary books. We can't afford books.'

Meantime, during the dinner, Silverthorn and Rapha had been as merry as any; but there came a moment, later in the evening, when the lovers interchanged a serious word.

'Have you spoken to your father about me?' Silverthorn asked, laying a desperate stress on the words 'Have you;' 'or do let me speak to him.'

'Pray let things be for the present,' Rapha replied.

He looked at her fondly and whimsically.

'Take care,' he added. 'Already, for aught we know, I may be forestalled, supplanted by contract. A proper alliance is perhaps in course of arrangement for you by Allchere and Company.'

But Rapha smiled away his fears, and, indeed, he felt that he had no right to complain. The largest share of the hostess's society had fallen to himself.

On the whole, Norrice admitted to her mother that perhaps the evening was as great a success as if purely conjured up by the imagination. They compared notes. She related each feature of the entertainment. Mrs. Bee next gave her imaginary version, the climax of which consisted in a proposal of marriage from Mr. Morrow, accepted by Norrice, of course.

‘And of course, so much being settled, every other contingency followed. I assure you, I have just seen you dressed as a bride and married to Mr. Morrow in the parish church, exactly as if the thing had really happened.’

‘I am glad it has not,’ Norrice said, and fain would have gone to sleep; but her mother had much more to ask and to relate.

Day was dawning ere they fell into that sound slumber from which neither the chimney-sweep’s cry, nor the cat’s-meat woman, nor the milkman’s horn, nor any other of the street harmonies for which Strawton was remarkable, could awaken them.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE VANISHING-POINT.

‘I SAY, Rapha,’ Mr. Rapham said, when the last guest had taken his departure, ‘is it not a good joke? I shall make money out of that little governess’s invention.’

This was just one of those speeches which made Rapha feel as if, in spite of her father’s generosity to herself, in spite of his affection, they remained perpetually strangers to each other. How could she make him realize the effect such words had upon her without overstepping the boundary-marks of filial respect? Even to express mild disapproval was to set herself up as a critic of one to whom she was bound to show deference. She tried to conceal her discomfiture, and to treat his way of looking at the matter as a joke, too.

‘I am very glad, for of course, if the invention proves a success, she will benefit also.’

‘You don’t know the kind of bargain we made, then? And a bargain is a bargain, you know. I bought the concern out and out for a hundred pounds down, and mighty glad they were to get it—mother and daughter, I mean. They seem half starved.’

‘But, dear papa——’ began Rapha.

‘But, dear daughter,’ mimicked Mr. Rapham. The most temperate man in the world, never indulging to excess, however seductive the drink and dishes placed in his way, the dinner-party had nevertheless excited him; he was garrulous, expansive, in high good-humour. ‘But, dear daughter,’ he went on, ‘when you sell a thing—what you get for it is another matter—when you sell a thing, it belongs to the buyer—you surely know that?’

‘You would, of course, give her something? If you make money by her invention you would not keep it all, as she is so poor?’ Rapha urged.

It seemed hopeless to try to make her father see the affair from any other point of view but his own. Nevertheless, she must make an effort on Norrice Bee’s behalf.

‘I can’t say whether I would or whether I wouldn’t. That is neither here nor there. But I believe there is more in that little girl’s head than in all the rest of the Strawton folks’ skulls put together. Humph! That ever I should say that of a woman!’

He seemed in such genial spirits that Rapha felt emboldened to plead Norrice’s cause once more.

‘After all,’ she said, ‘we do not want the money, papa, and Mrs. Bee and her daughter do. That seems to me the

best of reasons for handing over to Norrice any profits you get out of her invention.'

'My dear child, if everyone who had money gave it away to those who had none, the world would soon be a beggars' warren, and there would not be a solvent man left in Christendom.'

'But there is a limit,' urged Rapha. 'You possess a large fortune already. Why want more?'

'There is no limit when you come to money,' was the sharp reply. 'The more a man has, the more he wants—the more he is bound to want.'

'I do not think I shall ever care for money in that way myself, papa.'

'Then you must marry a husband who will care for you. You don't seem to understand these matters any more than a child in the nursery,' Mr. Rapham continued, fond always, but argumentative and a little impatient. 'You don't seem to realize what money stands for, what it represents.'

Rapha looked unconvinced.

'It seems to me to represent quite as much harm as good,' she said; she had in her mind Silverthorn's honest, single-minded, manly affection, and the barrier that money already placed between them.

'Twiddle-dum-dee!' Mr. Rapham said, growing more and more loquacious. 'I suppose your head is full of school-girls' nonsense about love in a cottage and so forth. Now let me explain to you what money is. Money, then, is just the difference between what lasts and what does not last. That is one proper common-sense definition of money. All the high-flown notions and fine talk in the world, for instance, won't fill a ship with cargo, build a city like

London. The folks who talked big, and who held grand notions about this, that and the other, are dead and buried, but the hard cash of those who had it in their pockets remains to this day. Then money is the difference between being bullied by others and being able to bully them when they deserve it. Not that I want to bully anyone, I am sure; it is not in my nature. But it makes a man comfortable to feel that he has it in his power; at any rate, that no soul on earth can bully him. You are a mere chit as yet; it is not likely that you should see things as they really are, or look beyond your nose. But I do. And I am not going to have you bullied, I can tell you.'

'After all, the first thing in life is to be happy,' Rapha said; 'I shall never, I think, feel as you do about these matters, papa.'

Mr. Rapham put his hands in his pockets, and looked at her with an expression of unfeigned astonishment.

'As if money did not make people happy! happy in their lives, happy in their graves. I shall rest peacefully beneath the sod, feeling that I have done my duty by my own, made the fortunes of my family, come what come may.'

'And suppose, papa,' Rapha began timidly—'suppose I marry someone who cares no more about money than I do. Why then be at such pains to add to your fortune by inventions or anything else?'

'Never trouble your head about that,' he replied. 'I shall tie down your money pretty tight to you and your children, of course. No scatter-brain of a son-in-law making ducks and drakes of his wife's fortune, thank you!'

Rapha had brought him to a point, not, however, to the vanishing-point she had in her mind. She tried once more to make him see things from her own point of view.

‘But who can tell what may happen? Supposing I never marry at all—of what good is so much money to me?’

‘Not marry!’ Mr. Rapham said. ‘You are just as likely to die single as I am to have as many wives as the Sultan of Turkey.’

‘And again, all women who marry do not have children, and children die,’ Rapha persisted. ‘It seems to me that to accumulate a large fortune for those to come after us is like building on sand.’

Mr. Rapham saw her meaning clearly enough now. But he had thought out that problem over and over again before.

‘Look you, Rapha,’ he said; ‘of course no man is such a jolter-head as to make money and not care a straw where it goes to. Is it likely I have left Death out of my reckoning? Even we moneyed men can’t bully *him*. Everybody’s life is uncertain, I know; does that make any difference? My money won’t melt away. Say you don’t marry, or you marry and remain childless, or you have children and they die: the fortune I have made for you will remain compact as a nugget. I have left instructions as to what is to be done with it; we will talk about that another time. It is not going into flitters and tatters, I’ll warrant you.’

It seemed quite hopeless for Rapha to say another word. She began to realize her father’s views on the subject of wealth more clearly than ever.

‘Everything will be as straight as possible whenever anything happens to me,’ Mr. Rapham went on, glad of an opportunity of introducing a delicate topic. ‘That is one comfort. And not a penny will be wasted,’ he added with a chuckle. ‘I have insured against the rapacity of the whole set—doctors, lawyers, and undertakers, I mean, bother take them! The whole thing is contracted for; what idiots men

are not to adopt this system generally! No expensive servants' mourning—Allchere and Company keep mourning liveries on hire. And only think of that, Rapha; not only a genteel funeral, but a funeral sermon is in the bargain. They say it is quite the right thing, although I don't see the use of it myself.'

Rapha could not resist a smile, in spite of the gruesome turn conversation had taken.

'I suppose one can't contract for one's salvation,' she said; 'that would be very convenient for some people.'

'Humph!' Mr. Rapham said, cynical, but ever in good humour with her; 'I suppose you mean me, my dear. What we have to see to first, I take it, is our business here, and that takes up pretty much of a man's time. And after all, why worry ourselves so much about what will come after, when very likely, as soon as the breath is out of our bodies, we shall no more know what is going on than a rotten potato. Well, there goes twelve of the clock. Our business now is to go to bed; I have to be up early to-morrow.'

'Why up so early? why take so much trouble about that farm of yours?'

'Oh, you think I bought a farm in order to lose money by it, do you, goosey! Not I.'

He had reached the door, when he turned back to add a further remark.

'A first-rate dinner, don't you think? and not dear. Twelve and ninepence per head, and wine charged for per glass according to what was drunk. Mind and ask Mr. Villedieu to the next. I have my eyes upon that man.'

Then he went to bed, and was soon fast asleep, not in

the least disturbed by those gloomy allusions that had just taken place. No priestly assurance as to his felicity in another world could have comforted him so much as this conviction: not a soul would be unfairly enriched to the extent of a penny at his death. Could he have contracted for his salvation—at a reasonable price—he would have done it as a business matter, and as a reasonable investment. This not being practicable, he seldom thought of the subject at all, and certainly not with uneasiness. Beyond the grave his thoughts did not penetrate. Life to him seemed very simple, man's destiny straightforward enough—no need for theology to throw any light upon either. Such, at least, was his succinct philosophy, although he seldom alluded to it in any way.

Rapha, dismissing the pretty automatic maiden contracted for, sat in her luxurious bedroom pensive enough.

Strange that all the subtlety of introspection, all the self-questioning and far-reaching thoughts should be with this young girl; all the light-mindedness, want of conscience, and flippancy with her father. Whilst Mr. Rapham slumbered like some little cabin-boy, not recking the lightning-flash, herald of storm and peril, Rapha—all her senses keenly alert as those of the captain anxiously at his post—kept painful vigil.

Every suggestion that had fallen from her father's lips filled her with vague apprehension and alarm. There was Norrice Bee's invention, for instance. Was it possible that he could for a moment contemplate making money after such ignoble fashion? Take advantage of a woman's poverty, inveigle her into a ruinous contract, enrich himself by the ingenuity of a penniless, helpless girl! The bare possibility filled her mind with shrinking and dismay. Then

came another thought, equally disturbing. It was plain that he regarded Mr. Villedieu in the light of an eligible son-in-law; had, in fact, determined to pay court to him as a likely suitor for his daughter's hand. Setting aside her affection for Silverthorn, the notion of such advances was hateful. She must, she would summon courage to declare the truth at once. It was a duty she owed to her father, her lover, herself. Rapha was by no means romantic, in the ordinary acceptation of the word. Hers was a nature too robust, too thoughtful, too inquiring for mere sentiment. Like her friend Norrice, she found other things as yet more interesting than love. But she had given Silverthorn the pure, single-minded, straightforward affection of her woman's nature. She not only felt a confidence in him that was quite sisterly, but between the two existed a comradeship, a frank, outspoken attachment, by far the strongest feeling each as yet knew. What wonder then that, in the midst of her splendour and social triumphs, she should feel sorrowful and lonely! What wonder that this, as it seemed, too happy evening should end in tears and desolation! The magnificence with which she was surrounded, the very fairness of her future, seemed to shut her out from all she most loved and valued. Her love for Silverthorn, her friendship for Norrice, must not these be sacrificed to the god of her father's idolatry—the wealth that already was growing burdensome, almost odious to her?

CHAPTER XVIII.

VEERING ROUND.

MANY men, for reasons best known to themselves, make up their minds never to marry ; yet, for reasons equally cogent, are led to change their minds. They let the age of romance glide by. They never expect, or particularly desire, to fall in love. They nevertheless deliberately, and with the utmost circumspection, contemplate a change in their mode of existence—a fireside partnership which is to answer manifold ends.

Mr. Morrow and Mr. Villedieu were in this case. Both had long held the opinion that delightful as wedlock may be, and commendable as it certainly is on social and moral grounds, they were hardly prepared to sacrifice personal liberty in exchange. They liked the society of the other sex ; if not adorers, they were respecters, even upholders, of women. Their allegiance and chivalrous feeling had hitherto ended. They stopped short at the tie irrevocable ; the wedding-ring had certain terrors for them. By a strange concatenation of events, each had now reasoned himself into the opposite way of thinking. They were suddenly bent upon marriage, but this alteration of purpose was due to very different causes.

Mr. Morrow craved rank, a rise in the social scale—the status of a country gentleman. Villedieu had reached a crisis in his career when wealth was absolutely necessary to success. Money formed the pivot on which his fortunes

actually turned, and how could a man in his position become suddenly rich, except by means of marriage? He could not betake himself to trade—he possessed no aptitude for invention, still less was he a speculator. Surely, under such circumstances, he might well be excused for seeking a wealthy wife!

It almost invariably happens that opportunity, when it does come, wears a twofold aspect. We may, perhaps, have waited years to accomplish our object, and suddenly discover that there are two ways of bringing it about; we have reached a parting of the ways, and each leads to the goal we would fain win.

Mr. Merton Morrow, after longing half a lifetime to shake off the atmosphere of trade, and be admitted, for once and for all, into fashionable society, found himself unexpectedly in the possession of a double passport. No sooner was the young heiress's drawing-room thrown open to him than Lady Letitia smiled a welcome. The dinner-party at Strawton Park was followed by an invitation to the great lady's ball, and that invitation decided Mr. Morrow. He would be assiduous in his attention to the Lowfunds ladies. He would ask the hand of one of the elder girls in marriage. All were very pleasant. Of the three, he slightly preferred Grace, but he was really not at all particular. The others, like their eldest sister, were tall, aristocratic, quite good-looking enough for the most fastidious, and they were amiable. Yes; any man might consider himself fortunate thus mated.

Villedieu found himself much more perplexed. If Mr. Merton Morrow was not apt at falling in love, still less was Mr. Frederick Villedieu. A man of the world, much travelled, of varied experience, he had never known what it

was to feel timid in the presence of the other sex. He knew much more of the feminine world than Mr. Morrow; and, truth to tell, was not without contempt of certain types. But he had just made the acquaintance of two women who agreeably interested, one of whom delightfully perplexed him. And both were heiresses!

It might seem premature, certainly, to put Norrice Bee in the same category with Rapha Rapham—to throw the possibilities of scientific discovery into one scale and the trader's solid million into the other!

But Villedieu believed in science, in ideas, above all, in individual endowment whenever he chanced to light upon it. In his eyes, Norrice Bee, by virtue of extraordinary mental gifts, was already a capitalist. And the world is ripe for wonderful discoveries, he said. We cannot have too many of them. We need more and more every day.

If Norrice were really in a fair way of making her fortune by her invention, and her own suggestions pointed to this, his mind was made up. He would ask her to be his wife. He could not marry a penniless girl, otherwise he would take the same step irrespective of worldly considerations. But women are generous towards men, if not towards each other. She would understand his motives; she would condone them. He did not crave money for money's sake, or selfish, personal ends. The richer he became, the more effective might be his services in the army of progress.

Then there was Rapha. Had she not once occupied his thoughts as a possible bride? Sweet and engaging as he found her, attractive as was her very artlessness in his eyes, he felt that he ought not so much as to think of her for a moment now. An easy task, certes, for any man to woo

such a maiden! Her father paid unmistakable court to him. Nothing could be plainer than that Mr. Rapham loved a fine name. But enticing as were these reflections, Villedieu felt that if Nature had destined any special woman to be his wife, that woman was Norrice Bee. There was more than inventive faculty here. Rare intellectual gifts do not go alone. This shabby governess, whose very existence had hitherto been ignored by her fellow-townfolk, had wit, and Villedieu adored wit as his own soul. He could live without the sight of rosy lips ever parting with a smile, languishing eyes and airy, bewildering movements. He wanted the sparkle that is not wholly of the surface, the effervescence that bespeaks the real juice of the sun-ripened grape, no mere chemical compound affording deceptive froth and bubble.

He decided to look in at the Patent Office and study Norrice Bee's blue-book next day, also to gain, if possible, a little information about her invention. In the present stage of their acquaintance he could not without indelicacy put questions on the subject to herself. But they were to meet a week hence at Lady Letitia's ball, a few days later again at Strawton Park. He wanted, in the meantime, to learn all that he could.

Men have an odd way of meeting acquaintances at haphazard in the City. At first sight it would seem—it always, indeed, does seem so to women—that one needle might as easily light upon another in a stack of hay. But so it is after some fashion, mysterious to the other sex, a man has only to visit the most crowded part of London in the busiest hour of the day, and he is sure to find the very person he is looking for.

So it happened to Mr. Rapham on the morning after his

dinner-party by contract. He wished to meet Villedieu, and, of course, as he wished to meet him, the very moment he set foot within the precincts familiar to business men, there he was!

‘Good-day to you, sir,’ Mr. Rapham said cordially. ‘I suppose you are interested in stocks?’

‘No more than in stones, I assure you,’ was the cheery reply. ‘Why should I be, since I have none? I assure you, and it is no empty vaunt, I am the most disinterested man who ever passes the Bank of England, and that is saying a good deal.’

Mr. Rapham seemed highly appreciative of the joke. Villedieu’s openness set him at ease. He grew friendly and confidential.

‘You happen to be the very person I wanted to see,’ he said engagingly.

‘I am delighted to hear you say so. Nobody ever wants to see me in the City—but duns,’ Villedieu replied, light-hearted as before.

‘Will you, then, come to my office for ten minutes? Well, I cannot say that I have an office exactly, but one must have a place to see business men in, you know; and mine is in the contract, costs next to nothing, is thrown into the bargain.’

Villedieu willingly consented, and the pair, after walking a few minutes, entered a cosy room on the second floor of a many-storied house in the heart of the City. A cheerful fire burned in the grate; they took off hats and great-coats and warmed themselves. Then Mr. Rapham plunged abruptly into the heart of his subject.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘Mr. Villedieu, I am not going to beat about the bush, and to spend an hour of your time and my

own over what may be said in a few minutes. They say you are going to stand for the next Parliament.'

'Such is my intention. But whether I shall sit in it, that appears highly problematic !'

'They say also that you are a great Radical,' Mr. Rapham continued catechetically.

'Nor have they belied me there. What else should I be but a Radical, Mr. Rapham? What else, I should like to know? A man without a sixpence to call his own, and obliged to keep up a respectable appearance ; a poor curate with nine children is wealth incarnate to me.'

Villedieu, for the life of him, could not take a serious turn with this queer father of Rapha's.

'But you have a fine name. You belong to the aristocracy. I am not afraid of such Radicals as *you*,' Mr. Rapham said waggishly. 'However, that is neither here nor there. I have told you before, I don't care a straw for politics. But you and I are neighbours, and I wish to be neighbourly.'

'Then you will vote for me, my dear sir?' Villedieu exclaimed delightedly. 'That is indeed a pleasant surprise.'

'As I say, I wish to be neighbourly,' continued the trader, with an odd twinkle in his bright eyes, 'neighbourly in politics as in other things ; and, like everything else, politics cost money. I will come down with something handsome, say a thousand pounds, towards your electioneering expenses. That is the long and the short of it.'

'On my word, you are too generous !' Villedieu replied, quite taken aback. 'How these expenses were to be defrayed, I had not till this moment any more notion than the man in the moon. You have lifted an enormous load

off my mind, put away notions of bankruptcy, suicide, and Heaven knows what! I feel rich already.'

'This little business is squared, then,' Mr. Rapham said, evidently much gratified by the way in which his offer had been received. 'I am glad you are not one of those high and mighty fellows who think nobody's money good enough for them. Some of us have one thing and some another; and the best plan, I take it, is to make an exchange.'

'Pray tell me what I can do for you. I shall henceforth place myself entirely at your disposal,' Villedieu said, growing quite enthusiastic.

'We'll see about that another time,' Mr. Rapham answered with a meaning look. 'Of course, as you know well enough, Mr. Villedieu, I'm no gentleman.'

'Indeed, how should I know it?' Villedieu said. 'If to lend a man a thousand pounds is not a gentlemanly action, I don't know what constitutes one.'

'I'm no gentleman born and bred, and I'm not ashamed to own it,' Mr. Rapham continued, regarding Mr. Villedieu with more and more favour. 'But, for my daughter's sake, I wish to stand well with the world, to get among fine folks, to be tarred with the same stick, as farmers say. You can give us a hand here, Mr. Villedieu, and I count upon you to do it.'

'Certainly. With all the pleasure in the world. Pray command me.'

'I want some fine lady to present Rapha at Court when the time comes, for one thing. But we will talk of that at home. We haven't half company enough, Mr. Villedieu. There will be a cover for you whenever you will favour us with your company.'

‘Indeed, I shall be most happy to avail myself of your hospitality pretty often, I assure you. You will see me besiege your doors as the holder of a soup-ticket at the town-hall on distribution-days.’

‘All the better. The servants have not half enough to do. I shall be obliged to reduce my contract or entertain more, I see that.’

‘Entertain more then, my dear sir, by all means. To give a substantial meal to your aristocratic neighbours just now is, I honestly declare to you, a positive act of charity. You see, land brings in nothing, and they are in as wretched a plight as snowed-up rabbits.’

‘Well, we give another dinner-party next week, and Rapha is getting up a ball. Do what you can for us in the way of getting people to come,’ Mr. Rapham said, rising in the best possible humour. ‘I won’t detain you any longer, sir. Time is money.’

‘I wish mine were—gold, silver or halfpence,’ was the laughing reply. ‘However, I suppose the author of that proverb had the pick of humanity in his mind, not the scum.’

‘There is scum and scum,’ Mr. Rapham said, apparently appreciating the joke, as he surveyed the well-made, well-dressed nonchalant figure beside him. ‘However, a man may call himself what he pleases, and, I take it, you are not fishing for compliments from me, sir.’

They shook hands after friendliest fashion, and Villedieu set out on his errand.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DEPARTURE IN FLIRTATION.

IF men invariably contrive to light upon their friends in that mysterious world to outsiders, the City, women, whenever they chance to find themselves there, are pretty sure also to encounter some acquaintance of the other sex.

Thus it happened to Norrice Bee now. As she emerged from the Patent Office, the first person she met was Villedieu. Both looked as airy and cheerful as possible, in spite of the depressing atmosphere. Can any be more so? Who can enter this mausoleum of blasted hopes, this burial-ground of disappointed ambition, without a feeling of profound melancholy? The precincts of a cemetery are enlivening by comparison. At least we feel that peace and rest, never again to be disturbed, are there, whilst these countless folios, in their innocent-looking blue covers, record breaking hearts, and hopes eked out day by day as the last stores of shipwrecked men. Even the interior of a prison is less dreary, for in the Patent Office there is no warfare with good and evil, no inevitable conflict between will and law. The humblest subaltern in the army of inventors is a hero, most likely a martyr, doomed to the sorrows, if not the glory, of his immortal forerunners.

‘Have you, too, invented something?’ Norrice said with a jaunty air. The bustle of the City ever exhilarated her. And, she hardly knew why, in spite of the terrible

strain she had gone through a week ago, she felt full of hope, upbuoyed by a dim sense of the richness and promise of life.

‘Cruellest of sarcasms! A hare might as well invite a crab to have a race with him. No, indeed; I came here to inform myself as to your own.’

‘To buy it, I suppose?’ Norrice said with an expression of mock dismay. ‘But you are forestalled—did I not tell you so? However, instead of poring over dry blue-books, come with me and you shall see the invention itself. The place is not far off.’

He gave her his arm, and the pair threaded the busy thoroughfare, Villedieu thinking he never wished to see any woman look otherwise than Norrice Bee looked now. First of all, the shabbiness had vanished altogether, Mrs. Bee’s maternal vanity having overcome Norrice’s almost total indifference to fine clothes. Her dress, still the plainest of the plain, was appropriateness itself, and strikingly becoming. So at least thought Villedieu, though his notions on the subject were very vague. All he could have said about it was that her shoes fitted, that her skirts nicely cleared the mud, and that, although well dressed enough to be seen anywhere, she would not mind being caught in a downpour of rain.

‘My invention is not yet on exhibition, but as it is patented I can admit my friends,’ she said, as she stopped at the office of a patent agent near Holborn. ‘I begin to feel quite at home here now.’

The clerks smiled a welcome—the patentees are ruined, the patentees die broken-hearted, but the patentees pay!—and the pair were conducted to a back room, warm and cheerful as Mr. Rapham’s office. Norrice invited her visitor

to take an armchair in front of the fire, and put the *Times* in his hands.

‘Just amuse yourself for a few minutes, whilst I prepare my little exhibition,’ she said, proceeding to take off her gloves. ‘Read the last murder, and leave me to my own behests.’

Villedieu unsuspectingly enough did as he was told, and began to read. He glanced through the columns of the centre page, found something that really interested him, and was soon quite absorbed. The fire glowed, the armchair was very comfortable, the sense of a woman’s presence agreeable: a newspaper was just the thing under the circumstances.

Meanwhile Norrice bustled about. She now unlocked a cupboard, and very deftly and quietly—all the time glancing round to see that Villedieu paid no attention to her movements—took out some pieces of slight machinery, adjusted first one, then another; finally, unobserved by her companion, approached him from behind, and fastened something to each arm of his chair.

‘How much do you think you weigh?’ she asked coolly, as she now stood over him, much in the attitude of a dentist or barber about to begin operations.

He was deeply interested in his leader, and replied without looking up:

‘How much do I weigh! why, in Heaven’s name, do you ask? Fourteen stone at the last weighing, I believe. Excuse me, one minute more, and I shall have finished.’

The words were hardly out of his lips when the paper dropped from his hands, and an exclamation of astonishment passed his lips. Norrice had put in motion her weight-annihilating machine, and was now carrying him round the

room, heavy armchair and all, as easily as if he were a doll in its cradle. Effortless, smiling, triumphant, this slender, delicate girl made no more ado of her ponderous burden than of a basket of cut flowers. He sprang to the floor, but she begged, nay, commanded him to be seated, and let her invention have a fair trial. Once, twice, thrice, he allowed her to repeat the experiment, fairly overcome with delight and amazement. Then he insisted on working the machine himself, Norrice laughingly consenting. She sat down in the chair just vacated by him; he manipulated according to instructions, and found that there was no trickery or deception. He could have carried such a load from one end of London to the other without fatigue.

‘You have discovered a new law in mechanics. Your invention is of almost universal applicability,’ he said, his quick mind rapidly taking in the full significance of her discovery. ‘You do not, indeed, know the import of your achievement. You have no idea how great you are!’

Norrice made ironic reply, although there was no bitterness in her irony. She was too exultant, too full of the proud consciousness of power just then to feel animosity—even towards Mr. Rapham.

‘Call me comfortable on my tombstone, and I will envy no one’s epigraph in Westminster Abbey! But I am enchanted at your faith. I fancied that every man was an unbelieving St. Thomas where the wit of women was concerned.’

‘Fling sarcasms at my sex as you please. Your turn has come,’ he said. ‘We are at last dumbfounded, depreciated, put out of countenance.’ Then with a change of voice—‘You are not pressed for time, I hope? You will allow me to examine your invention leisurely?’

‘Pray take your time,’ Norrice said ; ‘you are at liberty to scrutinize as much as you please. There is my blue-book ; you will see that I am amply protected.’

‘I fervently hope so,’ he replied ; ‘you have a vast, an untellable, a glorious future before you. Such an invention is a mine of gold.’

Norrice smiled assentingly. His enthusiasm in itself was so welcome ; the new turn her life had taken was so agreeable, that she hardly felt the mockery of his praise. There were many reasons why she forbore to disclose the nature of her transaction with Mr. Rapham. In the first place, womanly pique said no. She was loth to expose her own unbusiness-like conduct in thus selling her birthright for a mess of pottage ; pride, too, prevailed. She could not bear to let a mere acquaintance into the secret of her straitened circumstances. Then there was a feeling of delicacy towards Rapha. It was repugnant, nay, impossible to her to show Rapha’s father in so odious a light. Lastly, she said to herself, why should I take Mr. Villedieu into my confidence ? Is a pleasant dinner-table companion necessarily a friend ? an agreeable neighbour perforce a trusty ally ? What is this engaging intercourse but a mere accident, or series of accidents ?

So she let him study her blue-book and investigate her machinery, not in the least disposed to reveal the truth, namely, that its success henceforth no more concerned herself from a material point of view than the crossing-sweeper outside.

Meantime a very different train of thought was passing through Villedieu’s mind. With the rapidity of an alert and versatile, rather than a vigorous intellect, he now took in all the potentialities of such a discovery as this, its bearings

not only upon everyday life generally, but upon science, art and industry.

As with knit brows and close-shut lips he turned from blue-book to machinery, and machinery to blue-book, he saw before him clearly one application after another of Norrice Bee's new-found mechanical law. Being a man, his thoughts naturally reverted to warfare. Memory brought back a spectacle witnessed years ago—a column of brave Englishmen marching to the relief of fellow-countrymen under a tropic heaven, bowed down by the weight of kit, haversack, and arms, parched by the burning sun, footsore, yet undaunted and uncomplaining; many a poor fellow falling from the ranks, unable to take a step more. Then his fancy conjured up another picture. He saw before his mind's eye the same soldiers making forced marches in sultry lands, carrying the same accoutrements, but unconscious of their burdens, stepping forth by means of this invention jauntily as athletes for the race.

This girl might be instrumental not only in altering the economic conditions of daily life, but in saving countless lives; perhaps even, in some as yet undreamed-of crisis, an empire! Was not France rescued from destruction by the maiden of Champagne? But not martyrdom awaited Norrice Bee; instead, the applause of the world and material wealth absolutely incalculable.

Another thought flashed across his mind. If, indeed, it were so, if Norrice were really the heiress of her own ideas, the architect of her own fortunes, what need divide them? He rose suddenly, and took up hat and stick.

'You have positively given me too much to think about,' he said. 'I am quite bewildered. Suppose we take a turn? Suppose we have some luncheon?'

He hastened to correct himself, and put the proposition in befitting form.

‘That is to say, if you intend to lunch somewhere, may I be permitted to accompany you? unless, millionaire that you are, you now indulge in choice little repasts beyond my means?’

‘Old habits are sweet. I cling to my bun in a cookshop,’ she replied. ‘By all means let us eat buns in company.’

Then she put away her treasures, handed the key to the clerk, and they quitted the office; not, however, to betake themselves to a cookshop. Villedieu said that they could get far better money’s worth elsewhere. Accordingly he conducted her to a handsome restaurant where they had a little table to themselves.

Each ordered something, and chatted over the repast as if they were comrades of old standing. Villedieu found this kind of intercourse new, piquant, and satisfactory. Norrice Bee was a well-bred lady. He would no more have dreamed of being impertinent to her than to Lady Letitia or her daughters. But Norrice’s position made acquaintance much easier, friendship much more attainable and seductive in his eyes. There was no reason why he should object to being seen in her company, certainly none why Norrice should mind eating at the same public table with him. Coupled with this freedom from restraint was the fact that she had not a particle of coquetry about her. She liked his society because they were in sympathy with each other, and found each other mutually suggestive. The fact, too, of belonging to different social sets lent added charm. He was rather tired of boudoir belles and stereotyped beauties. Here he found a fresher, more vigorous, more

enlivening feminine atmosphere. Norrice's utterances were as unconstrained and free from any shackles of conventionalism as those of a five-year-old child, whilst for his part he could talk freely and earnestly as if discussing grave topics with one of his own sex. It was certainly a departure in flirtation, and a welcome departure too. One point was clear to him. Norrice was as far from divining his secret thoughts about herself as if she were blind, deaf, dumb. She accepted his kindly interest and cordiality as quite natural. He was friendly and he delighted in cleverness, that was all.

'You must let me see you to the railway-station,' he said, when they rose to go. Something he had still to say to her ere they separated, something he hardly knew how to put into words.

'Thank you,' she replied carelessly. 'But I am not going home just yet; I shall just take the first omnibus I see. That is my notion of enjoyment—to be going somewhere. I always envy people I see getting into a train, steamboat, or even tramcar. They are going somewhere.'

He smiled, although the pathos of the speech did not escape him. He saw through it all. Daily life had been hard to this fragile bread-winner. Compelled to live in an unbeautiful place, and toil from morning to night, no wonder that she envied others the privilege of locomotion, and yearned for a little freedom and joyousness.

'Mind what you are about, and you will be able to go where you please—charter a yacht for a pleasure-trip round the world, or a dahabeah for a Nile voyage. Only that minding what you are about! Are you quite sure you understand the necessity of it under your present circumstances?' he said.

She was afraid of a direct interrogation as to her patent, and answered sportively :

‘Should I take my pleasure after such reckless fashion unless my fortune were made? You seem to think that lunching in restaurants and driving up and down London in omnibuses is a matter of course—no luxury of the first water to some people. However, on second thoughts I think I shall pay a visit to the Patent Museum at South Kensington, so I will accept your escort to the nearest Metropolitan station.’

And when they reached the booking-office, Villedieu suddenly discovered that he had an errand at South Kensington too. And when the train stopped, he said—well, really, it was very odd, but he had never visited the Patent Museum in his life. It must be deeply interesting. Might he accompany her? So they spent the afternoon together, and it was growing dusk when at last Norrice did set out for Strawton, Villedieu seeing her off. Every circumstance of the day’s adventure was delightful to him, but there came the misgiving—was she minding what she was about? Had she secured her invention?

CHAPTER XX.

HALCYON DAYS.

BUT although her golden argosies had fallen into the hands of buccaneers, from this date the fortunes of the young inventress began to mend. Mr. Rapham’s draft for a hundred pounds proved the turning-point. The sum of daily care was diminished. The fable of Charon and Menippus lost

its bitter irony. Truth to tell, Rapha's girlish, impulsive generosity was at the bottom of the change. She resorted not to one, but to a score of devices on her friend's behalf; she must really have some lessons in mathematics, and as these brought her into contact with Lady Letitia's daughters, Mr. Rapham readily assented. Rapha went twice a week to the great lady's house for the purpose, an arrangement that suited everybody, her lessons being paid for so handsomely that the others might be regarded as thrown into the bargain.

Then, a far more important matter in Mr. Rapham's eyes, Rapha wanted to learn how to keep accounts. Norrice understood book-keeping thoroughly; so highly did she rise in Mr. Rapham's opinion that he engaged her to look over his own books, in order to check the columns of Allchere and Company. 'You can never be too particular where pounds, shillings, and pence are concerned,' he would say, 'and nobody is really to be depended on. If a man is honest, ten to one he makes mistakes; and if he never makes mistakes, ten to one he is dishonest.' On the whole, therefore, and quite suddenly, their circumstances had improved, so much so that they moved into sunnier, airier lodgings on the outskirts of the town. Instead of looking upon patched clothes hanging out to dry, and broken flowerpots, they had before them hedgerows and fields; no picturesque outlook, certainly, but for all that a glimpse of God's world. They gave little tea-parties in the afternoon. They were no longer pinched for bare necessities. Norrice even projected a trip to Brighton and Folkestone in the summer.

'Now, Norrice,' exclaimed Mrs. Bee impatiently, 'as if anybody ever wanted sea-air, except after measles or whoop

ing-cough ! And if we have not just had these complaints, and go to the seaside safe and sound, we are pretty sure to catch them, or something worse. Let well alone, I say. After all, what is the sea to look at ? Just nothing when you think of it. You have only to magnify a pond in sufficient proportions in your own imagination, and where is the difference, I should like to know ? You can see a ship on a sign-post any day ; and as to walking on the rocks and finding sea-anemones and drying seaweeds, I assure you it is quite out of date. Nobody does that sort of thing nowadays.'

'Well, mother dear, let us scrape and screw, and take cheap return-tickets up the Rhine,' Norrice said, feeling quite rich. 'I should like to see a foreign country once in my life.'

'The Rhine was all very well when I was young,' Mrs. Bee rejoined. 'But Byron—with his "castled crag of Drachenfels," and "Hugo is gone to his lonely bed, to covet there another's bride"—although he is my favourite poet, is quite out of date. No one can deny that. Why anyone in his own senses should want to go up the Rhine, passes my comprehension. We know exactly what it is like beforehand.'

Norrice sighed.

'Have it all your own way, mamma. When holiday-time comes round, however, you shall set off for Timbuctoo in imagination, and I will steam down the Thames to Boulogne. We shall see which journey answers the best.'

'Mine will have cost nothing, anyhow,' Mrs. Bee said, as capricious and aggressive in prosperity as she had been even and acquiescent in the hour of direst need. 'It seems to me an ungrateful return for the favour of Providence to

begin a gadding, kicksy-wicksy life, the moment you have a little money in your pocket, as much as to say how wretched you had been before! I am sure you and I have always been happy enough without travel and adventure. Why should we want them now? I only hope, Norrie, you won't get still better off: you would start for the North Pole, or on some equally foolhardy expedition. There is no telling what you would not do, with your mad craving for excitement.'

Norrice held her peace meekly. It did not seem to her that the suggestion of a trip to Brighton, even a journey by steamboat to Coblenz, savoured of mad craving for excitement. But she recalled her mother's serenity under bitter trial, her uncomplaining acceptance of hardest fortune, and bore with such unreasonableness now. She felt, too, that her own longing for beauty, hitherto a positive drawback to existence, was no longer to be wholly unsatisfied. Improved circumstances permitted a little intellectual distraction from time to time—the visit to a picture-gallery, a concert, or the purchase of a new book. Everyday life had brightened also. She went into society, and although society may not always mean brilliant talk, effervescing and sympathetic humour, it may mean much more to people living on small incomes in lodgings. The mere drinking tea out of somebody else's china cup under such circumstances may afford a change of ideas, the sight of an unfamiliar wall-paper often divert from hypochondriac thoughts.

On the supreme sacrifice of her life, the selling of her birthright for a mess of pottage, Norrice would not now allow her mind to dwell. By-and-by, so she said to herself, she would turn her mind once more to invention. For the present she preferred simply to live, as she put it, to enjoy. She never so much as mentioned her discovery except to Ville-

dieu. Having once been admitted to her confidence, he could hardly be shut out of it henceforth; but to him she said very little. He only gathered that, unlike most inventors, she had drawn a prize in the lottery.

Mr. Rapham had his own reasons for keeping the matter quiet.

‘Before we lift a finger in any matter,’ he said, ‘it is well to have an eye in the back of our heads. *You* are safe, anyhow,’ and he would chuckle as he repeated this. ‘You have got your hundred pounds—more, I’ll be bound, than any woman ever made by an invention before. My business now is to make sure of mine. And don’t be afraid. If the thing turns up a trump, you shall not be the worse. A five-pound note now and then, eh? nothing like that to make the mouth curl upwards, and things comfortable all round. And just listen to me. I can put you in the way of earning some ready money at once.’

Norrice listened, all attention.

‘The long and the short of the matter is this. There is a knack in putting your machinery together, and working it for the first time. Strangers, buyers, if it were blundered over, might suppose there was something wrong about the whole thing unless they saw it properly managed. What I want you to do is to show your invention for a day or two to some men who mean business. They will most likely ask you no questions not pat to the matter; if they do, mum’s the word. You see,’ he went on, hesitating how best to explain himself, ‘we don’t want all the world to know our business. You made a bargain with your eyes wide open, so did I. The £ s. d. question concerns nobody else. So we won’t satisfy the curiosity of idle folks who come on the pry. That is what I mean.’

Norrice understood the drift of his discourse perfectly. He felt in his secret heart a little compunction at his share in the transaction, or rather he shunned public comment.

‘Certainly,’ was all she replied.

‘Remember, nobody who comes has any right whatever to ask questions of the kind. Their errand is to look into your invention, not to find out what you have pocketed by it. The credit of all your fine discoveries you may keep, and welcome. It is not everybody who would give you that.’

‘No, indeed,’ Norrice answered quite seriously, her love of fun asserting itself above the bitter irony of the situation. ‘Thank you much for the handsome present.’

Mr. Rapham, not in the least conscious of the sarcasm, only a trifle disconcerted by the turn given to his own words, now pulled out his purse and handed her a sovereign.

‘To-morrow morning then, at ten o’clock sharp, be at my office. You can’t earn a pound a day by teaching school-misses, I’ll warrant.’

Norrice thanked him, and the sovereign, handed over to Mrs. Bee, evoked, first of all, a warm panegyric of their benefactor.

‘It isn’t at all likely that you will say a word in his favour, he being a man,’ Mrs. Bee said almost snappishly; ‘for my part, I consider Mr. Rapham the soul of honour and the very pink of delicacy. Of course he will lose money by your invention, that is only to be expected. Yet under some pretext or other he is always encouraging you, just as if the thing were as much of a success as the Thames Tunnel. That was not a success in every way, certainly; it was a nine days’ wonder, and everybody talked of it at the time from morning till night. But what are we to do with

this sovereign? I should just like to know, what on earth are we to do with it?’

Here she tossed the piece of money on the table, and her voice took a plaintive, nay, an injured tone. Thus consistent is human nature in its inconsistency! Whilst she had been all cheerfulness and resignation amid grinding care and perpetual worry, each additional sign of prosperity developed a carping spirit.

‘The bills are all paid,’ she continued pettishly. ‘We have put a little money in the Savings’ Bank. The cupboard is cram-full of groceries. In fact, the truth of it is, Norrice, only you don’t seem to realize it a bit, we are over-eating from morning till night. I have not uttered a complaint, but I have suffered frightfully from repletion of late. If this sort of thing goes on, you won’t have me to think of much longer. I shall soon be in my grave.’

‘We did talk of buying a sofa, mamma,’ Norrice put in meekly.

The tables were wholly turned now. She felt that she had perhaps borne hardships and privation as ungraciously as her mother bore bettered fortune. She was conscious of many a sarcasm, many a cynical mood, ever smoothed down, ever softened by that gentle maternal patience. She could not but be amiable and conciliating now.

‘Who wants a sofa?’ Mrs. Bee cried, with as much contempt and irritation as if Norrice had proposed the purchase of a gorilla. ‘Who, not afflicted with spinal disease or dropsy, I mean? A sofa is all very well in Cowper’s poetry, but quite out of date in real life, a mere superfluity. If we had one we should always be sitting on it, and grow so lazy and self-complacent that the very magpies would jeer at us! I do think, Norrice,’ she added reproachfully, ‘I must be-

lieve that you are losing your judgment. Excessive good fortune has quite turned your head.'

Norrice smiled ruefully as she thought of Esau's mess of pottage and of Robin Gray.

'Then we used to say a pair of warm curtains would be very comfortable,' she suggested, again in the same mild tone.

'Really, Norrice, I begin to think that a crick in the neck is about the very best thing that could happen to both of us. It might cure our overweening self-sufficiency. The next thing you will be wanting, to a dead certainty, is a pair of flunkeys with powdered wigs and stuffed calves! If we do feel a little draught at the back of our heads at night, we ought to think of the poor souls who have not so much as a rag to cover their nakedness. And one piece of extravagance invariably leads to another. Warm curtains to-day, gilt chandeliers to-morrow, a carriage and pair the next—that is how the world walks headlong to ruin! I do wish we could decently, and without ingratitude to Mr. Rapham, rid ourselves of the sovereign. I think the best possible way to get out of the dilemma is to take it straight to the poor-box. You see, I have not the nerve of former days. And the newspapers are so full of horrors, I shall never sleep o' nights if we once take to hoarding money in the house. It is positively wicked, too, thus to tempt the needy. Only last week two poor burglars were hanged for house-breaking and murder, innocent as lambs, I dare say, had no temptation been put in their way.'

Norrice, keeping back her mirth, now picked up the discarded coin and began to play pitch-and-toss with it. Then, acting a part, she thrust it aside with a well-feigned look of disgust.

‘You are right, mammy,’ she replied. ‘There cannot be two opinions about it. This sovereign is a positive incumbrance. If we only kept a donkey and could gild its oats with it, as did Caligula! Gold, money, coin! How odious, how abominable, how diabolic they are! Who, possessed of a particle of conscience or reason, can harbour them for a moment? Every piece of money we touch is a symbol of vileness and corruption. This very pound has most likely, not once, but many times, been paid as the price of some detestable crime, some atrocious piece of villainy. Perhaps for the loss of this identical sovereign some broken-hearted gamester hanged himself, or on its account some honest creature was murdered in his bed! and if no sponsor of such tragedies as these, does it not stand for gin-drinking, Sabbath-breaking, wife-beating, and all manner of evil? Hand me the tongs, mother, I would not touch it with bare fingers for anything.’

She seized the tongs, and making a grimace, much as if she beheld something loathsome, whipped up the gold piece.

‘Let me pitch it into the fire; no, it shall be consigned to a baser element. You know that slimy pond in Mr. Smith’s farm—I have always likened it to the Slough of Despond; a horrible green ooze perpetually covers it, and it is never cleared out from one year’s end to another. There we will bury this and as much more of the same filthy lucre as we can lay hands on, quite certain that it will never come to light again.’

Suiting the action to the word, she very gravely dropped the sovereign on to a piece of paper, made a packet of it, then, equally deliberate, put on bonnet and cloak, as if to seek Mr. Smith’s slimy pond.

‘How you jump at conclusions!’ Mrs. Bee exclaimed,

beginning to feel really alarmed as to the fate of her sovereign. 'Things may be most repulsive in themselves, yet we are glad enough to make use of them—asafœtida, castor-oil, leeches, and the like. But you never seem to understand a figure of speech, Norrice. Hyperboles seem incomprehensible to you. When I said just now, "What are we to do with this sovereign?" I did not, of course, mean to convey that there was positively nothing we could do with it. We may not want it, and I can't say we do; at the same time, when we take another view of the matter, there are good uses to which we can put it if we once set our heads to work. We ought not to want more money, of course; but if we come to that, we ought to want nothing, or next to nothing, and give our worldly goods to the poor, after the fashion of the primitive Christians. It just happened before you came in—but sit down a moment.'

Norrice did as she was bidden, evidently to Mrs. Bee's inexpressible relief.

'It just happened, as I say, that I was thinking how handy an odd pound, a windfall in the shape of a sovereign, would be at this moment. You see, there are so many things one feels justified in doing with a sort of godsend like dear Mr. Rapham's last gift. Well, let me see what I had thought of. Oh! to begin with, I should dearly like to have two teeth out—the two that have worried me for years, I mean. Then, what is far more important, we ought, we really ought, to pay for a sitting at church. Everybody in decent circumstances does it. But what am I dreaming of? As if having a couple of teeth out that are always grumbling, or being obliged to wait for seats in church till the pew-opener accommodates us, were of half so much consequence as dozens of other things! When I think of them all, I

don't really know where to begin. A sovereign would just buy me a new pair of spectacles; mine have been cracked for the last two years. And although there is this advantage about cracked spectacles, that it prevents me from reading too much when I should be attending to domestic duties, still everyone likes to have things as they should be, and spectacles should certainly be whole. And, ah, I should have mentioned this first—our watches! It is very obliging of them to go at all, poor things! for when they were last cleaned and regulated, I have not the remotest conception.'

'Then the sovereign shall not go to the bottom of the slimy pond, after all,' Norrice said, brimming over with frolic. 'Dear, engaging, sweet, pretty, seductive thing!'

She now took the glittering coin from its envelope, and fondled it as she spoke:

'How had we the heart to abuse you, guardian angel that you are, messenger from Heaven, purveyor of bliss to mortals! Here, mamma, take the darling treasure, and mind that no harm comes to it. I should eat it, out of sheer fondness, if left with me much longer. So now I will take a walk by way of changing ideas.'

When Norrice was gone, Mrs. Bee cogitated the matter for at least half an hour; then, putting on bonnet and cloak, quitted the house briskly. She had discovered that, like Byron's Corsair with his countless crimes and single virtue, she owned but one sovereign, whilst her wants were legion. A process of sifting was then resorted to; the thousands were reduced to a score, the score to ten, five; finally a decision was arrived at, and the pound was spent. But it went neither to tooth-drawing, nor sitting at church, nor to optician, nor watch-maker.

As might naturally be expected, it went to a woman's

vanity, sometimes as sweet a characteristic as any human nature can boast of. Her daughter possessed a single ornament, namely, a gold necklet of beautiful antique filigree-work. As chance would have it, Mrs. Bee had lately seen at a bric-a-brac shop a pair of ear-rings similar in style and pattern—indeed, an admirable match—nothing could be better. And gold ornaments are just what best set off a tomato-coloured silk. Yes, the ear-rings were absolutely necessary now that Norrice went into society; to-morrow's daily loaf not more so. She was not going to have her girl, the handsomest in the place, looked down upon.

When Norrice returned, the ornaments were produced with so much meekness and apology that it seemed as if a very reverse transaction must have taken place. Mrs. Bee now looked the very personification of guilt and contrition, much as if she had squandered the money in tarts! She made such pathetic apologies that Norrice's heart was too full. There remained only one refuge from tears. She must pretend to scold.

'I won't wear your ear-rings, mammy,' she cried, feigning indignation. 'You know the proverb, "Vain is the snare laid in sight of any bird." I see through your machinations. You want me to lay myself out to please all the marriageable bores in Strawton. But you seem to forget that marriage is wholly out of date nowadays. Girls look higher than that. I, for my part, aspire to being a second Newton at least; and had you bought me an electric battery, or the last new treatise on Kinetics, I would have said thank you. But the sovereign is disposed of—that is an immense comfort; and though you have bought a gross of green spectacles with it, a gross of green spectacles is better than nothing, as said the Vicar of Wakefield.'

After that little episode, all was mirth and light-heartedness ; but Mrs. Bee did not venture to allude to the earrings again for some days to come.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CRUCIAL TEST.

IF marriage is not yet out of date, the continuation of the race being brought about by contrivances as yet in the clouds, nevertheless, the denizen of another planet or member of a primeval state suddenly thrown into London must believe in some such revolution. Wherever we go, we find woman as much absorbed in all kinds of business, from the weightiest to the most trivial, as if already freed from the shackles of the nursery and the fireside. There they are, associated with the other sex in matters not only of national, but world-wide importance, forming a phalanx in the army of commerce, a veritable force recognised and acknowledged in the walks of art, journalism, and science. Threading the living stream that flows without a break from Charing Cross to the heart of the City, or indeed any other artery of the great breathing, living corporate body called the capital, we find women, alike the young, the middle-aged and the old, bent on engrossing behests ; coquetry—supposed to be their element, as necessary, indeed, to them as water to fish—wholly absent, at least hidden from view.

Of course this change presupposes many another. A girl who has been expounding Aristotle's ethics from the professorial chair, or holding her own against antagonists of

the other sex on a public board, will hardly, when made love to, hang her head like Sophy Western, with 'Indeed, Mr. Jones, I must leave you to name the day.' Nor will she comport herself like foolish little Amelia in 'Vanity Fair,' or, indeed, any other obsolete heroine. Whether courtship will become less interesting, or Cupid take wings and fly away altogether, put out of countenance for ever by the sight of a woman in doctor's gown—or holding a seat in the House of Commons—remains to be seen.

Norrice Bee, exhibiting her invention next day, affords an admirable illustration in point; perhaps the entire city of four millions, the 'nation of London,' could give no better.

Here, then, was a mere girl, a woman barely twenty-five, holding spell-bound, by force of sheer intellect, not only financiers whose daily business is the manipulation of millions, negotiators of State loans that may decide the fate of nations, but the representatives of Government themselves, grave statesmen, the real sovereigns of our so-called Monarchy. Truth to tell, the universal contractors, Allchere and Company, to whom Mr. Rapham had entrusted the invention, had got the ear of the War Office. War was in the air. When, alas! is it not? Anything new conducive to the expeditiousness of troops on the march, or advantageous to the soldier individually, considered as the soldier, not the man, was just now inquired into with the greater alacrity in consequence of recent events. One and all of the late wars—if, indeed, they can be so called—waged against uncivilized people, had proved disastrous in the extreme. The heavily-clothed, heavily-burdened English soldier ever proved to be handicapped in the struggle with naked savages and Orientals, generally under their own

burning sun. Could the conditions be made more equal, could these drawbacks be lessened, then British forces, whether fighting on African deserts or in Asiatic defiles, might settle 'scientific frontiers' as easily and comfortably as the Brighton Review is got through on Easter Monday.

But was there a particle of truth in the reports that had reached the ears of these high functionaries? Had anyone, much less a woman, discovered the means of not only lightening but, in certain cases and within certain limits, annihilating weight? The whole thing savoured of romance, trickery and delusion—was most likely a mere juggle—if no intentional imposture, at least a piece of gross self-beguilement. However, there was no harm in looking at an invention; the thing had to be done every day. The sponsorship of the great contractors, too, stood for something. Allchere and Company might, in a certain sense, dupe others; they were hardly likely to be duped themselves. And lastly, as the homely proverb runs, 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating.' An invention, like a man, must speak for itself.

Norrice's appearance and behaviour were calculated to inspire faith. Instead of blushing or trembling as she explained and exhibited her invention, she remained as cool, business-like and impersonal as a shopman unfolding the mysteries of a new Christmas toy to wide-mouthed children.

Again and again her machinery was taken to pieces and put together; now this experiment was tried, now that. She did not certainly carry these august lookers-on round the room in their chairs, as she had carried Villedieu a few days before. But her demonstrations were none the less convincing.

‘Good,’ said the most distinguished of her appraisers. ‘Now for the crucial test. Is Captain Lascelles, with his men, ready?’ he asked of his secretary. Immediately an officer was introduced, with two soldiers, each fully accoutred, but belonging to different regiments.

‘Now,’ said the first speaker, ‘my notion is, supposing these good fellows have no objection, to let them be blindfolded whilst testing the invention for our benefit. We shall then be certain that imagination has nothing to do with their evidence.’

‘We are not experimenting with explosives, my men. Be under no anxiety, therefore, for your skins,’ he added.

The soldiers, with rough good-humour, submitted to the process of eye-bandaging; they were then very noiselessly relieved of kit and haversack, all as noiselessly being immediately afterwards readjusted by means of Norrice’s invention.

Captain Lascelles, taking an arm of each, now began to walk briskly up and down the room, making the walk as near like a march as space permitted. Up and down, backwards and forwards, they tramped for several minutes, till the Captain, making a sign to Norrice, bade them halt.

A second time their burdens were removed, and Norrice’s machinery was now laid aside. Having their kits strapped to their shoulders in the usual way, they began to march again. A third, even a fourth time, the experiment was tried, the weight-annihilating appliance being used alternately.

All the time not a word was spoken. Everybody’s interest was centred in the invention.

‘That will do,’ said the first speaker, at the end of a quarter of an hour. ‘I am much obliged to you, Captain

Lascelles ; and I thank you heartily, my men. When the bandages are removed, we will hear what each has got to say for himself.'

The pair were set free from their eye-coverings, and the officer began his interrogations.

'Now, Barber, your story first ; Murray's afterwards. What, to the best of your ability, is the nature of the experiment just tried upon you ?'

Barber looked at Murray, Murray scratched his head and looked at Barber. The faces of both were blank.

'Experiment, sir ? Experiment ?' the first got out with a mystified air.

'Experiment,' replied the Captain, beginning to be impatient. 'You don't suppose you were blindfolded and marched backwards and forwards for nothing, do you ? Use your wits.'

Barber, although by no means an unintelligent man, looked hopelessly witless just then. He was evidently racking his brains for something to say, some kind of explanation, and could find nothing, absolutely nothing. The face of one looker-on at least began to show incipient doubt. Was the palmary proof, the crucial test of Norrice's invention about to break down altogether ?

'What was done to you ? What were your sensations ? What happened to you, in fact, whilst I was marching you backwards and forwards ? Don't keep these gentlemen waiting till Doomsday.'

Still the man remained as irresponsive as a lamp-post. Obeying orders was one thing ; defining sensations another. The Captain turned impatiently to his companion.

'You answer for both then, Murray. Look sharp ! What have we been at whilst you were both blindfolded ?'

But Murray seemed in as hopeless a state of puzzlement as Barber ; only, whilst Barber was naturally self-depreciatory and a man of few words, Murray was a bit of a wag, and had a character for cleverness to keep up. His case was very different. There was little or nothing in it all. He felt convinced of that, but he was bound to find something. A poor reason is better than none, he said to himself.

‘Well, sir,’ he said, looking and doubtless feeling as wise as Solomon, ‘wonders will never cease, they may well say ; and I suppose we soldiers shall soon be made, as well as rigged out and unrigged again, by machinery. That is, I reckon, what you have been about. And I must say,’ he added, gathering from the expectant looks of his audience that he might hold forth as much as he pleased—‘I must say, no small invention that, whether done by electricity or otherwise—a whole regiment accoutred as one man before you could spell powder.’

None present could forbear a smile at the ingenuity of the observation, although a slightly crestfallen look might be seen on every face but Norrice’s. The young inventress looked every bit as calm and unmoved as if she were a disinterested spectator.

‘And once rigged out, what then?’ asked the Captain.

‘It don’t much matter how a load gets on to the donkey’s back, he has to carry it all the same,’ replied the man, with a sly look. ‘Now if anyone could invent something that would make the donkey feel that the load of hay wasn’t there, all the time that it was—well, I’d say electricity wasn’t thought of for nothing.’

Yet further disenchantment was discernible on the countenances of the little conclave. The weight-annihilating theory seemed on the point of breaking down

‘Listen,’ the officer said, anxious to bring the man to a point without at the same time giving him a clue. ‘We were taking off and putting on your baggage, you say, by machinery. Is it your impression that anything else took place?’

Again Murray looked sapience incarnate, and the admiring gaze of his comrade was quite touching to behold. Had he been Wellington himself, Barber could not have testified more respect. What a difference it makes, he was thinking, when the Almighty has given a man a tongue that seems able to wag of itself! Murray, in the meantime, feeling sure that he had much more in his own head than these gentlemen in their invention, made answer:

‘Of course, sir, when one thing takes place, a dozen are always there to keep it company. We were first rigged out and unrigged again by machinery, as I take it; then marched backwards and forwards to see, I suppose, if nothing dropped off—if when you clap a knapsack to a man’s shoulder by electricity or what not, it will stick there as fast as if buckled and strapped by hand.’

There was a general smile, but a smile followed by depression.

‘Then you perceived nothing else, absolutely nothing. Come,’ Lascelles said, feeling that he must really bring matters to an end. Precious time could not be wasted thus. ‘Thin... for a moment, both of you. We halted exactly six times, and between each interval paced the room, say, for five or six minutes. Now, the first bit of walking was not performed under the same conditions as the second, nor the second as the third, and so on. Wherein consisted the difference?’

Murray, thus driven to a corner, felt compelled to let

imagination run loose as before. His ingenuity was worthy of a Jesuit.

‘Well, sir, we didn’t keep the same pace. Blindfolded men, you see, don’t trust their feet. And now we went faster, now we went slower, to see, I suppose, if the things would stick on all the same.’

‘But you had not——’ began the Captain, fairly losing patience; then correcting himself, he said: ‘But there is surely another feature of the experiment you have omitted to mention. We want every little detail, please.’

Whilst Murray the wit was cogitating some subtle reply, Barber ventured upon a remark he felt that anyhow could not be held up to ridicule.

‘The Captain means, perhaps, the turns we took without our baggage at all,’ he said modestly.

‘That will do,’ exclaimed the chairman of the little committee, the distinguished civilian before mentioned. ‘Here is half a sovereign between you, my men, and good-day. You have rendered us real service, and have our best thanks.’

The men withdrew, and Norrice had now to receive encomiums and congratulations that might well have turned a less cool head. Not only fame but fortune was hers, said these grave umpires, one and all naturally unacquainted with the nature of her transfer to Mr. Rapham. And in the pleasure of recognition, Norrice forgot the irony of these compliments. She was too happy—she only knew that.

But her triumphs were not yet over. As the little group was breaking up, one of the men took up with hat and great-coat a couple of bulky volumes and several periodicals fastened together with a strap.

‘Blessed, thrice blessed, the mortals whose wives can neither read nor write!’ he said good-naturedly. ‘I was

obliged to fetch these books from Mudie's for my wife, just because they are sure to be talked about at a literary party she is going to to-morrow. They weigh almost as much as a leg of mutton.'

In a moment Norrice was by his side, and smilingly and gracefully she now relieved him of his bundle. A moment more, and by means of her machinery, in this case of very delicate kind, the packet, as heavy as a leg of mutton, was certainly there still, but the weight was gone.

This charming little episode was the signal for another round of applause.

'My dear young lady,' said the foremost speaker, taking her by the hand, 'I hope you are in love with Fortune, for, there is no doubt of the matter, you are her darling at this moment. Go home and dream of Haroun-el-Raschid. All the splendours of his court may be yours.'

And to this, as to all the flattering speeches that followed, Norrice made smiling, triumphant reply. Not the closest observer, the most skilful physiognomist could have discerned a sign of mortification or disappointment in that candid face. Even when the excitement of the trial was over, and she found herself bending her steps homewards, her expression was of pure exultant joy. For the true artist, the real creator, ever remains in a certain high sense impersonal. The master-spirits look far ahead.

Praise, so sweet to most; opulence, the golden key to ease; fame in one's own day—all these seem intangible, remote, hardly matters of individual concern.

But the glorious conviction of having enriched his era, identified himself with all that stamps his age, uplifted, soothed or braced humanity, ah, here is subject for self-congratulation indeed!

CHAPTER XXII.

WHAT ROBESPIERRE IS ANSWERABLE FOR.

As chance would have it, the very first person to hear of these splendid successes was Villedieu himself.

He was awaiting afternoon tea at his club—that luxurious little tray sent up from the still-room on tiny lift to lazy bachelors—when his old acquaintance, Captain Lascelles, joined him. A second little tea-tray was ordered through the speaking-trumpet, and, in the easiest of armchairs, the pair began to chat.

‘You know something of Strawton, don’t you—the place you are going to stand for?’ asked the Captain.

‘Yes,’ was Villedieu’s indifferent answer, as he stirred his tea; ‘a villainously ugly place it is, and the poorest in England since Chinese competition ruined the straw trade.’

‘The sweet spot you describe will be as much talked of one of these days as if suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake. Do you happen to know of the existence of a certain Miss Norrice Bee?’

Villedieu, discreetly reining in his curiosity, replied with well-affected carelessness:

‘Certainly. I have met her in society.’

‘A girl no older than my sister Lucy? The very same,’ the Captain went on. ‘Well, she has invented something as wonderful as perpetual motion and a flying machine; outdone those Indian jugglers who sit upon nothing and make balls solid as apples disappear in the air, close under

your eye. Well, the War Office has taken her up—don't I wish it *were* Lucy!—and she is worth a hundred thousand pounds if a penny; I have that on the best possible authority.'

The other, still lazily stirring his tea, made apparently indifferent answer:

'I had heard of her clever inventions.'

'An uncommon kind of girl she must be,' his companion went on. 'She gives lessons, I hear. I wish she would teach me how to invent something. But my notion is that these things are all passing into the hands of the women. It makes me wretched to think of it.'

'Clever mothers make clever sons, they say. We must follow the advice of the Frenchman, and select our parents with the greatest possible judgment. That is all.'

'I'm afraid I exercised very little judgment in selecting mine,' replied the Captain. 'I am so terribly idle. I stroll here, take up a novel, and although one is exactly like another, as far as I can discover, I just read on, and on, and thus the time goes. No wonder I have never invented anything. As the invention I speak of is patented, I may give you some notion of it. Watch my diagram. Point A you are to suppose a weight—no matter what kind of weight. Point B is the weight supporting weight A—but there goes Vincent; I have business with him. Will finish this to-morrow.'

Left alone, Villedieu found his reverie pleasant enough. He was charmed to hear of Norrice's good fortune on her own account; liking and interest had reached that point of disinterestedness long ago. He was always glad, moreover, to hear of good luck and successes. They came as so many reassurances that, in spite of the pessimists, the world is not going all wrong. Coupled with these kindly sentiments of

universal application, came the feeling of a triumph that seemed absolutely personal.

Norrice's future assured, Norrice possessed of the wealth he was without, Norrice a social power, what now stood in the way of his wishes? That she liked him he had good reason to hope. They had been frequently thrown together of late. The more they saw of each other the more sympathetic they became. Yes, all things considered, he could speak out at once, that very evening at Lady Letitia's ball. Delay, hesitation, diffidence would only complicate matters. And there was no telling what might happen. Norrice might take it into her head to travel, suddenly set off for Nice, Rome, the Nile. There was yet another consideration. In love he owned himself to be; but men change their minds even when in love, or at least they come to see things in a wholly different light.

Yet a final motive. He should soon be immersed in the turmoil of electioneering. It was highly undesirable to have other and, as he felt now, far more absorbing interests at stake than. He must be free. Whether freedom meant the realization of his wishes or profound disenchantment, that evening should decide. One ball is very much like another as far as outward circumstances go; but if we look below the surface, we shall generally find a radical difference. The secret reasons, the little plots, the anxious hopes and ingenious devices, domestic intrigues and machinations at the bottom of these apparently innocent entertainments, stamp each with a character of its own.

Lady Letitia, whose maternal instinct, or rather maternal arithmetic, was ever called into play upon these occasions, now expounded to her two elder daughters the teachings of Voltaire and the French Revolution.

‘Pray,’ she said, as the trio sorted out the best of their thrice-cleaned gloves in company—‘pray be civil to Mr. Rapham and Mr. Morrow. We can’t help the tendencies of the age. We have lived a hundred years too late. Had it not been for those dreadful people who stormed the Bastille and Robespierre, I should never, of course, have dreamed of a daughter of mine marrying a shopkeeper.’

‘Is a manufacturer really to be called that?’ Gracie asked, with an expression of mild horror. In her secret heart she rather liked Mr. Morrow, and for the best possible reason. He was the first of the other sex who had ever showed anything like a decided preference for herself.

‘Not exactly ; but it really does not matter what he is—Mr. Morrow, I mean. Things have come to that pass, we must not inquire, we must not seem even to know what men are,’ Lady Letitia said. ‘Society has been turned upside down, thanks to that bloodthirsty Robespierre and his set. The farms, as you know, don’t let ; or, if they let, the farmers won’t pay any rent, so that we who drive our carriage and pair are pauperized, and the only rich people are the people who buy and sell. Our greengrocer is wealthy by comparison, I dare say, if we could look into his affairs.’

Lady Letitia next added, glancing from one to the other :

‘Then there is Mr. Rapham. Now, I cannot conceive any girl in her senses refusing Mr. Rapham. What is sixty in a man ? Men are comparatively young at that age, and in these days women must be satisfied with getting their love-making in novels, and accept an establishment and a good home instead. I repeat, pray be civil to Mr. Rapham. His appearance is peculiar, certainly, but peculiarity is all the fashion nowadays. And his little singularities do not

in the least unfit him for society. On the contrary, you will see, wherever he goes he will be made much of. If he married again, his wife would enjoy quite a unique and enviable position.'

The two girls could not resist a gentle laugh. There seemed such delicious incongruity in the picture maternal imagination thus conjured up.

'Such men are made peers,' Lady Letitia went on. 'He has only to put himself forward to be made a peer. And though people laugh at these peerages for the moment, as time wears on they are accepted, and nobody says anything disagreeable. You see, it is not of the slightest use saying anything disagreeable or otherwise. The Bastille was pulled down and Robespierre had it all his own way, and we cannot help ourselves.'

Certainly the pulling down of the Bastille and Robespierre made things pleasant that night for the rich trader and the retired manufacturer. Had the former been some renowned traveller—even the great Livingstone himself—had the other been an ambassador, they could not have been more sweetly smiled upon, more gracefully compassed round with sweet observances. And in the eyes of the assembled guests there was a reason, nay, a necessity for such extra attention and affability. Both were strangers in this social sphere; having invited them, their hostess was bound to make them feel at home. Mr. Morrow could dance; as the first Napoleon is said to have done before his marriage with Marie Louise, he had taken lessons in the sublime art of waltzing before attending Lady Letitia's ball. He could, therefore, be safely left to her daughters; but in the case of the millionaire it was wholly otherwise. Lady Letitia hardly quitted his arm throughout the entire evening.

He was introduced with Rapha to one fashionable guest after another, each introduction being accompanied by an ingratiating little speech.

Mr. Rapham was enchanted, but his expressions of delight, naïve as those of a Zulu king, called forth no tell-tale smile from his hostess. It was a whimsical sight to see the pair together, a mirth-moving commentary on the storming of the Bastille and Robespierre. Lady Letitia was the personification of the stereotyped Vere de Vere. Mrs. Browning, in one of her poems, speaks of the shadow of a monarch's crown being softened in a maiden's hair. Every one of Lady Letitia's accessories seemed to cling to her as she moved about: the Hall with its tenants' ball and Sunday-school treats, the park, the plate, the heraldic devices, the hair-powder. If the shadow of all these was somewhat attenuated in consequence of the storming of the Bastille and Robespierre, it was there nevertheless. Her brocade was a trifle shabby, everything she wore savoured of the traditional; no vulgarity of newness betrayed itself even in her gloves. And of course she possessed the suavity of manner, the survival of condescension, so easy to those who have inherited a habit of fancying themselves among their inferiors. Mr. Rapham looked legendary also, but in a wholly different manner. He, too, had something of a survival about him, a survival that had nothing to do with armorial bearings or plush knee-breeches. His wizened face, with its furtive, fox-eyed glances, recalled untaught yet civilized man brought into contact with childlike savagedom or uncontrolled forces of nature, the primitive hunter, the filibuster, the buccaneer.

Ever on the alert even now, losing sight of nothing that passed around him, he seemed to fancy himself rather amid

beasts of prey in a jungle, or antagonists wily as himself, than in a ballroom. If Lady Letitia carried with her a certain air of inherited superiority, so did Mr. Rapham, but of quite different origin.

As he now looked around him there was visible satisfaction on his countenance. These fine ladies and gentlemen were all very well, but poor creatures when you came to think of it. Was there a single soul present now who could have done what he had done—begun life with hawking shoes and stockings in the streets, and end it a millionaire? Lady Letitia's complaisance pleased him mightily; at the same time he took it for just as much as it was worth, no more. He knew as well as anyone could tell him that but for his money he should not be there at all. There he was, what mattered how? People were civil to him, what mattered why?

'I'm sure I am much obliged to you for your kindness to my daughter,' he said, as Lady Letitia introduced partner after partner to Rapha. 'Tit for tat, I say, and one good turn deserves another, in high life as well as low.'

Lady Letitia laughed gently. She found Mr. Rapham's naïveté simply irresistible—worth any money, to use a homely expression; but, so she said to herself, there was nothing shocking about it, nothing in the least bit shocking. Then the singularity of his appearance made people expect some little oddness of manner. A self-made millionaire affronts nobody by being an original. Who expects him to be a finished gentleman?

'Oh, dear Mr. Rapham, you know nothing of low life, I am sure!' she said. 'And Miss Rapham is so charming! Who could help being kind to her?'

Now evolution has hardly reached the stage Lady Letitia's

speech would warrant. A mother of marriageable daughters cannot be expected to find other girls charming. But to apply Mr. Rapham's test, so long as they seem to regard them in that light, what matters? Mr. Rapham with proud glances watched Rapha, as in rose-coloured dress and garniture of pearls she walked through a quadrille with Villedieu. His hostess's compliments pleased him mightily.

'Yes,' he said, 'I think my girl would look as well at Court as any. I'm no Queen's man myself. I had as lief see the country governed as I keep house, by contract, as not. But as there is a Court, I've set my heart on Rapha being seen there with her betters.'

'Nothing easier,' Lady Letitia replied; 'I will present her myself. But now, Mr. Rapham, will you not walk through a quadrille with Gracie? Just one, to show that you do not despise our frivolities.'

'Ask me to stand on my head, and I'll try to oblige you,' was the answer, Lady Letitia's proposal having come as double flattery. It showed Mr. Rapham, firstly, that he was not set down in the category of the superannuated; and, secondly, that he was not looked upon as likely to want the aptitudes and accomplishments of a gentleman.

Lady Letitia, for her part, would not have been put out of countenance had her strange guest really stood on his head. Everyone present was acquainted with Mr. Rapham's history so far. He was known to be a self-made man, a rich parvenu, a mushroom millionaire. People were prepared for a certain number of little shocks in his presence, and perhaps some mild diversion. As for herself, Lady Letitia's conduct was deliberate and all of a piece. She wished to please him, to make him feel at his ease; above all, to interest him in Gracie and Charlotte.

‘Bless my soul,’ he ejaculated, as he stood by his tall, dignified, and smiling partner, having for vis-à-vis her sister Charlotte and Mr. Morrow, ‘I know about as much of dancing as an elephant of the Catechism! However, in for a penny, in for a pound. I dare say if I go sprawling on the floor, my good neighbour there will pick me up.’

It really seemed at first as if such office might fall to Mr. Morrow, so much energy did Mr. Rapham put into his performance. He forgot that times have altered, and that the quadrille of to-day has nothing in common with the country-dance of forty years ago. His antics would have been laughable, but for his gravity and the infinite pains he was at to put as much animation as possible into the business. Whilst, then, the other three walked through the figures with automatic sobriety and precision, Mr. Rapham frisked, bounded, took little leaps in the air; in fine, dispensed so much force and agility that he was finally out of breath, and, as he said to Mr. Morrow, ‘had given himself a sweat worth a five-pound note; nothing like a good sweat once in a way to keep a man in prime health.’

To Gracie, however, he gave a less homely version of the affair, as they sipped coffee in a snug corner of the refreshment-room. The young lady had proposed a walk in the conservatory, which was bluntly refused.

‘None of your cold, draughty glass-houses for me—unless you wish to see me dead and buried this day week,’ he said. ‘Now, the very place to suit my taste at this moment would be by the kitchen fire.’

‘Oh dear!’ Gracie replied, much embarrassed. The kitchen was, of course, to her a wholly unknown and inaccessible region, the stable-boy’s rooms not more so.

‘Oh dear,’ she repeated, ‘but to get to the kitchen!’

What a cold walk you would have! The refreshment-room is quite warm, heated by hot-water pipes. Do come and see.'

Yes, the temperature of the refreshment-room was fairly high. Mr. Rapham, nevertheless, coolly took up a lady's shawl lying near and threw it over his own shoulders.

'I don't want to lose the benefit of my warming,' he said, deeming the word 'sweat' unsuited to a lady's ears. 'We old folk can't stand a chill.'

'Do not put yourself in that category yet,' Gracie said.

'Sixty is sixty. Call it young or old, as you please,' Mr. Rapham replied, evidently doing his best to be agreeable. 'You ladies may call black white; I am not going to contradict you. I hope I am not such an ill-mannered fellow as that. There is my daughter, now. She says a hundred things a day I don't hold with in the least, but I let her say her say. What harm does it do?'

'It is pleasant to be able to say what one pleases, if one cannot always do as one likes,' put in the young lady, beginning to think Rapha an enviable person.

'Oh, she does as she likes, too. Just ask her. She hasn't got a rich old father for nothing, I warrant you. Look at her dress; you would never believe me if I told you what it cost! She wanted to wear one she had worn before, and I said, No. When we are invited to grand folks' houses, said I, we'll put on the best toggery money can buy. It's our bounden duty. We can't do less.'

'It is very kind of you,' Gracie replied.

'Then look at my suit!' Mr. Rapham said with some vanity. 'It only came home from the tailor's last night, and what it cost would astonish you. But fine company,

like everything else, must be paid for. I don't grudge the money, not I.'

'I am delighted to hear you say so,' Gracie said, for the life of her not knowing how to frame an answer.

'You see,' Mr. Rapham went on, feeling entirely at his ease, 'what one person hasn't got in this world, another has; and no matter by what other name we call it, we are all of us, the highest as well as the lowest, buying and selling from morning till night. Nobody parts with his own for nothing—why should he? The worth of everything, even a hop like this, is calculated to a penny.'

That word 'hop' for a moment puzzled Gracie. Could it have anything to do with the coffee? surely hops were not used in the preparation of coffee? Her companion speedily enlightened her.

'Even a ball like this is as much of an £ s. d. question as the buying of a pound of tallow candles. Ask her ladyship yonder, your mamma. She gives her dances, I'll be bound, as I do my dinner-parties, with an object; and we pay our so much per head, hoping we shall get our money's worth.'

Poor Gracie! She made smiling reply, but the words struck home. Every word of Mr. Rapham's rough satire was Gospel truth. We are all buying and selling from morning till night, and a feeling of mortification came over her as she thought of the strange wares sometimes brought to market.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MODERN LOVE-MAKING.

MEANTIME a very different conversation was taking place in another part of the refreshment-room. Admire as we will the storming of the Bastille and the doings of Robespierre, there is no doubt much to say for aristocratic châteaux and the feudal system generally. They favoured secrecy, they were useful auxiliaries in love-making. What more fatal to privacy than to live in a small or even a moderate-sized house full of people? Not a syllable can be whispered in any corner without being heard by somebody, whilst all the conversation that goes on might as well be published in the newspapers as far as concealment is concerned. Very shocking it was of the Vendean seigneurs to make the peasants sit up all night scaring away the frogs, no doubt; but this privilege of never being listened to, never being pried upon, was worth fighting for, and quite enough to make people forget what they owed to their fellow-creatures. Rich folks can still enjoy a confidential *tête-à-tête*, if not in one part of the house, in another; but to the rest of the world the privilege is not attainable within four walls. Love-making, or any other confabulation of a private nature, must take place out of doors. And when the world gets a little fuller, a trifle more crowded, the only way to insure this coveted luxury will be an aërial voyage. Lovers will have to engage a private balloon in order to say what they want to say to each other, without all the neighbours being the wiser.

Frederick Villedieu, however, was in no dilemma of this kind. He had desperate confidences to pour into a lady's ear, yet was as secure from eavesdroppers and observation as if really sailing with her amid the clouds.

He had found a pleasant corner of the conservatory, behind dwarf palms and camellias. Guests came and went; there was a perpetual ripple of ballroom laughter and chit-chat; the place was never deserted for a moment. But nobody paid any attention to the pair talking so quietly, and apparently on such matter-of-fact topics, behind the ferns. Villedieu had moreover, and of set purpose, avoided anything like marked attention to Norrice throughout the evening. He had only danced with her once, and at the close of a dance, surely a little talk with one's partner is natural, even obligatory? He began his confidences quietly and playfully, as if he were about to talk of matters wholly impersonal.

'I suppose you have heard of a French king who once upon a time took a perilous leap?'

'Let me see. Let me ransack my brain,' Norrice said, playful also. 'Did not Louis Quatorze very nearly break his leg one day when jumping out of a window to escape a severe lecture from Madame de Maintenon? Or stay—how stupid I am, how ill-versed in history! Surely it was the last Louis, heavy as he was, who nimbly leapt from one window of the Tuileries into a costermonger's cart, as Napoleon, returned from Elba, jumped in at another?'

'Your historic parallels are near enough. I had in my mind, however, the gay Gascon forced to swallow the Pope and the Inquisition or forfeit a crown. What am I about?—imitating him! Adopting new principles, fathering new political creeds, for the sake of a seat in Parliament?'

‘Fortunately the world wants but one enthusiast for thousands of votes,’ Norrice said drily.

‘These perilous leaps are irrevocable, that is the worst of it. Poor Henri Quatre wept as he gave up his old religion. He knew what he had of that was sincere; as far as the other went, he was on the high road to being an impostor. And I must say, I can sympathize with him. I feel afraid of becoming an impostor myself.’

Was this the eloquent advocate of forlorn causes, the fiery humanitarian, the would-be redresser of crying evils? Norrice could not conceal a look of disappointment, although his sincerity commanded respect.

‘After all,’ she said, still sportive and satirical, ‘we must be interested in something. Why not in reforms as well as in what we are to have for dinner?’

‘The getting interested is easy enough, but to remain so, to keep perpetually alert, ever on the *qui vive*, to be possessed by a demon of earnestness from day to day—there is the rub.’

‘Surely a happy medium is possible,’ Norrice said. ‘I never thought of the House of Commons as a Sinai a man must be a second Moses to reach. The voting in the lobby, too. Must you be worked up to Bacchanalian frenzy beforehand?’

‘You evidently hold your legislators to be poor creatures,’ he went on, amused at her sallies, but anxious that she should take the matter quite seriously. ‘I must tell you that I set out on this road not intending to be a poor creature at all; but convictions deliberately arrived at, enthusiasms taken by storm, are very difficult to hold. We were talking of the French king just now who swallowed his powder for the sake of the jam—in other words, took up a

new religion for the sake of a throne; the parable will serve us more than once. I feel that I am doing the same thing. The jam may taste passing sweet—but the powder! I dread the nauseous flavour. Were only the crown of France to be had for the asking, the seat at St. Stephen's without conditions! Here you have parable the first. Now for number two. Are women, think you, ready for these perilous leaps, too?'

He hastened to explain himself. 'Well, your sex are not as yet asked to throw up domesticities for public life certainly, but there are other sacrifices ready to hand. Put this case before you.'

He now went on speaking rapidly and with great animation. 'A man about to embark on the sea of politics, as he hopes to be useful to his fellows, wants and knows where to find the perpetual stimulus and inspiration without which he must inevitably prove a failure. In the society of one woman, one woman only, he feels himself lifted out of vacuity, soul-killing indifference, the clodship of inanition. Might not that woman prefer such homage, such a plea to the stereotyped—"my all adorable, I cannot live without you"?'

'As if I could answer such a question,' Norrice said, still sportive and teasing.

'Then, if you must needs have plainer speaking still, here it is. Put the question to yourself. Put it from me, and make answer.'

A look, a glance, will oftentimes do duty for many words, and as he turned towards Norrice, now she saw what was in his mind.

There could be no mistaking the truth. Frederick Ville-dieu had asked her to be his wife. His voice dropped almost to a whisper as he added:

‘You are really heart-deep, soul-immersed in these questions I have taken up so cautiously ; you are the only person in the world who can interest me in anything—from a radish to a revolution. What can I say further in order to convince you ? Just this, I do not feel able to take my perilous leap alone. Unless backed by you, I am capable of playing the ignominious part of deserter.’

Norrice listened in growing bewilderment. She liked and respected Villedieu all the more for putting the plain truth before her, not speaking out as lover to maiden, rather as one human being very much in earnest to another. Had he poured forth vapid sentimentalities and threadbare platitudes, she would most likely have smiled away his request and adjourned the hearing of his suit indefinitely. But this manly, straightforward outspokenness appealed to her sympathies ; his words, moreover, had aroused a sense of deep, almost passionate exultation. Next to her own individuality, all that made up her own life, its wide hopefulness, airiness and joy, she cared most for the causes of which he had made himself the champion. Whilst the inventive faculty slumbered within, nothing interested her so much as certain social and political problems. To be able to further such movements, to breathe the very air of progress, seemed indeed consolation for her supreme sacrifice, the selling of her birthright for a mess of pottage. In spite of outward gaiety and sparkle, she, too, had felt of late that she must take a perilous leap of some kind. Young as she was, she owned at times to a feeling of intense loneliness and depression. This offer of marriage, then, came to Norrice as similar proposals to quite commonplace, purposeless women. It opened wide the door of existence. It showed new horizons. Whilst at the bottom of her assenting

mood was real liking for Villedieu, her feelings as yet did not go beyond. Most girls in her position would have indulged in feminine triumph and worldly congratulation. Such notions never entered her head. She recognised the flattery conveyed in his proposal to be of finer quality.

They had quitted their settee behind the ferns, and were now strolling in the outer corridor.

‘The perilous leap, then? It shall be made in company?’ he said, as he saw acquaintances coming up. ‘From this moment you hold yourself at the beck and call of your country.’

‘Have I anything better to do?’ Norrice made answer, not without a vein of sadness underlying the playful words.

‘Now, Norrice, what happened at the ball?’ Mrs. Bee asked almost testily. ‘Something, no matter what, but something, I do hope. I am quite tired of these fine doings from day to day, and nothing coming of them all.’

Mrs. Bee made these gaieties little occasions of festivity for herself. She indulged in Welsh rabbit, or some other delicacy, for supper, got out a piece of choice reading, piled the coals high in the grate, and sat up, the longer the better, for her gad-about, as she persisted in putting it. Norrice could not gad about too much to please her, but Mrs. Bee must fling little sarcasms and feign little grievances. Nothing delighted her more than the necessity of sitting up till past midnight, yet she had ever her string of reproaches.

‘I really shall go to bed the next time you are invited to a late party,’ she continued. ‘Think of the consumption of coals and candles, to say nothing of the fatigue to one of

my age. But you never seem to think of anything of the kind since you came into that unlucky fortune.'

Norrice munched a slice of bread and butter in the highest possible spirits. Her mother's humours never in the least vexed her. She knew that Mrs. Bee enjoyed the welcoming her home from a ball above all things.

'What happened at the ball, mother?' she began gaily. 'You will never guess: Mr. Villedieu has asked me to marry him.'

'Humph!' Mrs. Bee exclaimed scornfully; 'you had nothing to say to *him*, I hope, Norrice. These fine folks turned Radicals—one never knows what machinations they are up to! Then his prospects are miserable in the extreme. No woman in her senses would marry him. A more wretched outlook for a wife could not be imagined.'

'I thought you would be out of your wits with joy,' Norrice said coolly.

'Now, Norrice,' Mrs. Bee said, flaming up, although really in the best possible humour, 'you always set me down for a piece of quite abnormal vanity and selfishness. As if I could possibly be pleased to see my only child married to a man of that stamp! What do we know of his morals, I should very much like to know?'

'We have no reason for supposing them to be worse than other people's,' Norrice replied in the same tone. 'He has, then, neither prospects nor morals. What else does he want?'

'Everything,' Mrs. Bee said with emphasis. 'There is Mr. Morrow, he is worth looking at. Who would ever dream of calling Mr. Villedieu handsome, or, for the matter of that, ugly either? His looks are not worth a moment's thought. Then he has no manners.'

‘I had made sure of his manners,’ Norrice said, affecting a crestfallen air. ‘I am sorry I have deceived myself, mammy dear.’

‘As to brains,’ Mrs. Bee went on quite viciously, ‘people call him clever, I know. I have no faith myself in men everybody runs after and calls clever. Something is sure to be wrong, and they turn out to be all froth and show on a sudden. I never heard him speak in public, certainly, nor do I remember ever having had five minutes’ conversation with him in my life. But I am sure he is a poor creature.’

‘Oh dear!’ Norrice exclaimed, still gay and ironic. ‘Without brains, morals, manners, or even good looks! What a terrible list of negatives! You will surely admit that he has a kind heart, and kindness of heart makes up for everything.’

‘I know nothing about his heart,’ was the peevish reply. ‘I have always heard that if you want to find skinflints, nip-cheeses, and money-grubbers, you must go to the poor gentry. I have not the slightest doubt he is a hard landlord and grinds down his tenants—that is to say, if he has any land.’

‘Alas! Why did not your paragon, Mr. Morrow, ask me instead? But you have always impressed upon me, mamma, that the whole duty of woman is to accept the first man who asks her. Had Mr. Brown, our grocer, proposed, I should not have ventured to say no.’

‘Do be serious for a moment, Norrice. I have been sitting up on purpose to hear what you had to tell me about Mr. Morrow. How many times did he ask you to dance with him?’

‘What does it signify how many times I danced with

Mr. Morrow, since I am going to marry Mr. Villedieu?' Norrice replied laughingly. 'So now, mamma dear, as it is nearly four o'clock in the morning, let us go to bed.'

Mrs. Bee would fain have heard about the dresses and the supper, but Norrice said the rest of her news must really wait till to-morrow. She had related the one important event of the evening, all minor details could wait.

Next morning when she went down to breakfast she found Mrs. Bee busy as usual. Norrice could never be sufficiently petted after these festivities; she must have hot buttered toast, all kinds of little extras, much as if the ball had been a kind of ordeal now to be compensated for.

'Is the tea strong enough?' Mrs. Bee asked. 'I put in a little more, and I took some extra milk last night in order that you should have some cream. I don't care for such things myself; but there is no doubt of it, one prerogative of royalty is to have plenty of cream. And the toast, I do hope it is hot.'

'Excellent, mamma,' Norrice said, smiling as she thought of her mother's testiness a few hours before. These maternal caprices amused her beyond measure. They made the life of the fireside a perpetual comedy.

'What could have induced you to invent that story of Mr. Villedieu proposing to you?' Mrs. Bee began, in a reproachful voice; 'I dreamed of it all night, and it is disappointing to find you were only joking. If there is one man I covet as a son-in-law, it is Mr. Villedieu—only, of course, I might as well covet an heir-apparent! Such a finished gentleman—we may say what we will, but there is something in one's family having come in with the Con-

queror; I can see high birth even in Mr. Villedieu's boots. Then no matter the fine talk nowadays about social equality and the upheaval of the masses. A lord's son—well, he's an earl's nephew; that is near enough—an earl's nephew will never look or behave like a retired tallow-chandler. I always particularly liked Mr. Villedieu. He treats everybody with so much consideration; a kinder-hearted man, I am sure, does not breathe. And so clever, so gifted! People may well say he will rise to the top of the tree. I shall not live, I dare say, to see it myself, but depend on it he will be Prime Minister some day. Think of my daughter being married to a Prime Minister! Of course, Mr. Morrow is all very well. He has taken great pains with himself, and you would never know, unless you were told, that he had been in trade. But when you come to compare the two, Mr. Villedieu and Mr. Morrow, what a difference, what a falling off! Hyperion to a satyr, as Shakespeare says.'

'Ah!' Norrice said, brimming over with fun and mischief. 'Last night the grapes were sour; that was it. Well, mamma, I will bear in mind what you say; I won't stick at trifles if the chance is ever put in my way of becoming the wife of a Prime Minister.'

She decided not to undeceive her mother for the present. The grapes should remain sour a little while longer.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RUMBLING OF THE TEMPEST.

A FEW days later vast crowds filled the public hall of Strawton. It seemed, indeed, as if the entire population had turned out to hear Frederick Villedieu hold forth on the eve of the election. Whilst the platform was closely packed with richly-dressed ladies and gentlemen in evening dress, every part of the enormous building was as full as it could well be. Perhaps such multitudes evinced rather the growing interest of all classes and both sexes in political and social movements than any extraordinary curiosity concerning the speaker. One might indeed suppose, from the spectacle of these wives, mothers, and daughters of working men who had thus quitted their firesides in order to attend a public meeting, that the questions to be mooted affected them vitally; it was, indeed, as if some such problem as the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in France, or Home Rule in Ireland, were to be discussed before an Alsatian or Hibernian audience. The truth of the matter is that the interest taken in the commonwealth as such, and progress in the wide sense of the word, is often—it might almost be affirmed generally—keener among working women than those of better education and in easier circumstances. And with good reason! The intensely democratic tendencies of the age affect them much more nearly than their more favoured sisters. They are, moreover, much less unprogressive, less hampered by social tradition and theological prejudices.

Why should a working woman cling to the past? What time has she to give to religious observances?

On the platform, in honour of the orator, was a brilliant assemblage. All the magnates of the place and the neighbourhood were there, irrespective of political bearings. The Church, the squirearchy, civic dignity, were all well represented, whilst a goodly number of ladies testified to an interest, if not in his subjects, at least in the speaker. There was Lady Letitia with her elder daughters, doubtless attributing the necessity of their presence upon such an occasion to the storming of the Bastille and Robespierre.

‘Of course you will go with me to the meeting,’ she had said to Gracie and Charlotte; ‘and, however much you may be bored, pray look interested. You see, girls go everywhere nowadays, and are supposed to know something of everything. In my young days a well-bred woman no more thought of possessing a political opinion than an umbrella. I never had an umbrella when I was young, much less anything to say on politics. But now, no matter what you are, you must read the newspapers; and as to umbrellas, you may carry them as big as a house. By the way, Gracie, talk to that clever Miss Bee about Home Rule, the Land Question, and so on, just to get an idea or two beforehand.’

Rapha, of course, was there, looking fresher and prettier than ever, in her pink draperies; and by her side, proud enough, sat her father.

‘Mr. Villedieu will like to see me on the platform to-night, I suppose,’ Mr. Rapham had said at breakfast. ‘I can’t speak in public, never could; but when a man can button-up a hundred thousand pounds in each waistcoat-pocket, he can leave the preaching to others.’

‘Do go, papa dear,’ Rapha said. ‘Mr. Villedieu would, I am sure, feel disappointed not to see you. It is to be the finest public meeting that has taken place at Strawton for years, so it is said.’

‘I may as well go as not. It won’t cost me anything,’ Mr. Rapham answered, with extreme good-nature. ‘And mind, Rapha, I like your aristocrat. If he wants you, he shall have you, as far as I am concerned.’

‘I prefer to stay with you,’ Rapha answered. Of what use to pour out her girlish confidences and plead for Silverthorn’s disinterested affection? There was nothing to do but be happy and wait.

Then Mr. Morrow was there—the too happy Mr. Morrow, for the first time permitted to join Lady Letitia’s party in public. He had, indeed, dined at the Hall with one or two clericals that evening, and in their company now escorted the ladies.

Mrs. Bee was absent.

‘I thank you very much, dear Miss Rapham, for offering to call for me and bring me home,’ she had said to Rapha. ‘This is exactly the kind of thing I prefer to imagine. Public meetings work upon my feelings too much. I always agree with everybody who speaks either for or against a question, and the wear and tear of nerve are dreadful. Besides, as I never can help feeling exactly as much on one side as on another when I come away, I don’t know where I am, usually speaking, any more than a traveller benighted on Salisbury Plain. If Norrice comes back from London she will be delighted to accept your offer, I am sure. But she has been staying with friends there since Monday. I don’t know how it is. When I was young, girls never thought of leaving home; now they are never happy unless

they are running hither and thither. It is true Norrice has not spent a week out of the house for five years or more. But she would have done, had she but had the chance, so it is the same thing.'

Norrice was there, however, and alone. At the last moment, in bonnet and cloak, having a platform ticket in her hand, she stole to a reserved seat near Rapha and Lady Letitia's party. There was hardly time for the interchange of a whispered word with her friends. Punctually to the moment, Mr. Villedieu appeared, accompanied by the Mayor and other leading men of the town. The proceedings began at once.

Just as the first essential of a well-dressed woman is that she should look perfectly at home in her clothes, not as if she were dressed out for high-days and holidays, so the primary qualification of a public speaker is entire ease. He must be able to marshal his thoughts and command his words with the assurance and aplomb of an officer in charge of a well-drilled battalion. And this is exactly what Villedieu could do. He did not, perhaps, possess the siren-tongued art of oratory. He was no passionate declaimer, able to carry others away, and, what is more important, carry himself away by impetuous, stormy periods, and feats of oratory. He was hardly argumentative, much less fierily antagonistic. But he could treat his audience just as the skilled novelist treats his readers. He could give his speech a beginning, a middle, and an end; not leaving out the climax, without which the best speech, like the best novel, is a failure, or at least falls flat, and seems to have no *raison d'être*. In pleasant crisp tones, without the slightest straining after effect, he touched upon one social and political topic after another, bringing out in clear yet not over-accentuated relief

his own views upon each. He was evidently leading up to a climax—so much was apparent to all who followed his utterances, and were sufficiently in sympathy with him to understand not only the suggestions thrown out by the way, but the undercurrent of ideas.

He had spoken for upwards of an hour, leaving no important question of the day, as it affects politicians, untouched, when he suddenly took a more impressive tone, and surveyed his audience with an air of earnest, almost solemn scrutiny and appeal. His looks seemed to say—now for the crucial test, now for the palmary proof, not of your intelligence—were it called into question, the matter in hand is transparent as daylight—but of your disinterestedness, your fellowship with the sympathetic or unsympathetic part of humanity!—what of that? This was in Villedieu's face, were any present physiognomist enough to see. In a quicker, more animated key, he began :

‘ We have, as I take it, arrived at an epoch of civilization when it behoves every man and every woman to be Protestant in the wider, non-theological, I would say the Goethean, sense of the word. Everybody, of course, knows the famous aphorism of the great German poet : We must protest. In former days even inhabitants of civilized climates had enough to do to keep a whole skin. Scant time had the most good-natured—philanthropy was not as yet invented—to look after his neighbour's welfare. But in these times we can, at least, call our souls—whatever our souls may be!—our own. We are bound, I say, to protest, on behalf of those unhappy beings who cannot, no matter to what race, to what zone of the globe they belong, and what appears worse still, whose very bodies do not belong to them ; who, whilst human beings by virtue of conscious wrong, are

treated like so much cattle—flesh, bone, and muscle estimated at so much a pound ! It is easy enough, when we think of it, to understand how naturally even civilized and polite nations in the past have countenanced and upheld slavery. If evolution has taught us nothing else, it has taught us this. Feeling, justice, disinterestedness, all the higher sentiments that animate the mind, are of slow growth, as much the fruit of development as decency, morality, truth-speaking, and other arbitrary virtues. For any nation to have arrived at an abhorrence of slavery, to have made up its mind that to tolerate it in any part of its dominions was wickedness incarnate, the most horrible injustice that can make a hell upon earth, and work awful retribution ; for any nation to have done this, I say, is an immense stride forward, its title of honour for all time ! But now that Ariel's prophecy is fulfilled, and the entire globe is brought under the microscopic eye of public opinion, our initiation, our responsibilities, do not, ought not to stop here. Wherever the Englishman or the free man plants his foot, wherever he pitches his tent, there, in his person, ought to be the slave's advocate, the slave's protector ! Before his presence, humble Messiah of the oppressed, the helpless, and the unhappy, the eyes of the vile slave-dealer, the accursed trafficker in human flesh, should quail as before a Heaven-sent avenger, as Belshazzar trembled when he saw " Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin " written on the wall !

There was a tremendous burst of applause. The vast building rang from end to end with such cheers as only some humanitarian appeal can evoke. It was some minutes before the speaker could go on.

' But what is the truth ? ' he said, as if putting the query to each individual present. ' What is the shameful, humiliating,

conscience-smiting truth? Who can help blushing to own it? With the teachings of history before us, inheritors as we are of the Wilberforces, the Clarksons, of all the great makers of liberty, boastful as we are of our noble legacy, we have not yet shaken off this accursed taint of slavery. There are still Englishmen in remote regions of the globe who fatten upon this unnatural barter of men, women, and children for money, to whom human beings are so much merchandize to be paid for in gold. And this gold, stained as it is with the blood of their fellows, they pocket smugly! Conscience permits them, lenient society also permits them, to carry on their nefarious trade unmolested; whereas they should be tracked down as they track the unhappy runaways from their own tyranny, branded with shame and infamy, visited by the obloquy and detestation of every right-minded fellow-citizen. For let no one now bring forward sophisms that served the anti-abolitionists before the great war of secession, let no one persuade himself that slavery can be so softened as to come within the pale of morality. If the slave-owner is not inherently cruel, he perforce becomes so; if he originally possessed even elementary notions of right and wrong, he loses them; if he set out furnished, perhaps unconsciously to himself, with notions of pity and benevolence borrowed from Christianity, he soon forfeits these also. The whip, the chain, the branding-iron, are not to be used in one sense, that the highest, with impunity. The illegal owner of another human being—for the State certainly takes possession of the lawless body and soul out of consideration for the general safety—the slave-owner, I say, by the mere unnaturalness of the right thus arrogated to himself, becomes himself a slave, is unhumanized, degraded, brutified!

Once more there was a thunder of applause. Then the speaker quietly and swiftly brought his speech to a close.

‘I purpose, therefore, if I have the honour to represent you in the next Parliament, to propose the following motion : “That an inquiry be made into the action of Englishmen implicated in the slave-trade now actively and with impunity carried on at Khartoum and other stations of the Soudan, with a view to stopping a system so disgraceful to humanity, and so blackening to the nationality we are proud to call our own.”’

Yet a third outburst of cheering, which, however, the orator deprecated, adding, in brief, business-like tones :

‘In view of any possible action I may be obliged to take in this matter, and having now said all I had to say to you, I propose to call upon my excellent friend and neighbour to give us the benefit of his experience. Mr. Rapham, the new-comer we have lately had the pleasure to welcome among us, has spent many years in Central Africa ; I ask him, therefore, now to say a few words, and throw any light that he can upon this dark, this impious, this odious business.’

All eyes were now turned to the odd, spare figure in evening dress, seated between Lady Letitia and his pretty daughter. Mr. Rapham was no popular favourite at Strawton. He had done nothing to make himself so. Yet it was only natural, only becoming, he should receive an ovation now. His presence, anyhow, indicated sympathy with his fellow-townsmen, interest in local affairs. And the more good you get out of a man, the more you are likely to get. Compliments, moreover, cost nothing. So hats were waved, sticks drummed on the floor, hands clapped, and ‘Mr. Rapham ! Mr. Rapham !’ shouted by a thousand

throats. Villedieu, meantime, had turned with a pleasant smile to his supporter, and retired a step or two in order to make way for him. Lady Letitia and her daughters smiled encouragingly. Rapha's face beamed with satisfaction. The mayor and other dignitaries of the place showed respectful curiosity. Everybody was on the *qui vive* as Mr. Rapham rose from his chair, apparently to obey the call. But on a sudden a totally different expression might be seen on all the thousands of upturned faces in that vast and closely-packed hall. A wave of dismay, a thrill of horror, seemed to pass over the dense masses as though one man. You might have heard the dropping of a handkerchief, so intense, so painful was the silence.

Mr. Rapham now staggered forward with the livid face of a man at bay. His eyes, abnormally bright with ill-suppressed fury, fastened upon Villedieu as upon his deadliest enemy. Lifting an arm, as if by some superhuman effort, to fell him to the ground, or perhaps to emphasize the imprecations all should hear, he seemed about to spring upon him.

'You——'

The curse, whatever it might be, failed to reach the ears of the crowd; perhaps, indeed, it hardly escaped the speaker's white lips. The next moment he dropped down apparently lifeless on the platform, and, amid a scene of the greatest confusion, was borne out of the hall.

'Is he dead? Is he dead?' asked one anxious inquirer after another. The general feeling was of intense sympathy for Rapha. Everybody in Strawton had by this time made the acquaintance of the rich man's pretty, generous daughter.

Villedieu having retired for a few minutes, came forward and endeavoured to reassure the public mind. A couple o

doctors were already in attendance. The case was most probably one of syncope ; a bulletin should be issued early next morning. Under the circumstances, however, it was advisable to terminate a meeting begun under such favourable auspices, interrupted so disastrously.

CHAPTER XXV.

DISILLUSION.

NEXT day an engaging little breakfast for two was set out in Frederick Villedieu's bachelor quarters near Piccadilly. Freshly cut hot-house flowers lay on the table, and abundance of chrysanthemums filled the window-sill. Such magically-coloured flowers, for out of Japan indeed they seem so, the ruddy tints of carpets and curtains, the bright fire blazing in the pretty porcelain stove, the glittering plate of the breakfast service—these things really have power to dispel London fog and outer gloom. They force upon us the conclusion that, after all to be said on the other side, London is the most cheerful place in the world even in November. We get blue skies and violets in Algeria, it is true, but at what a sacrifice ! If the ozone of the London atmosphere is exhausted, we breathe at least an ozonized intellectual atmosphere, which is more than compensation to naturally inquisitive, emotion-loving beings. To what good to feed the lungs and starve the brains ?

The first thing Villedieu did on entering the room was to select a rose from the *épergne*, carefully trim off the thorns with his penknife, then place it on the plate awaiting his visitor. He next glanced at the outside of his letters, and

opened a telegram, which he read and re-read attentively. Finally, he stood with his back to the fire, glancing impatiently towards the door.

A minute or two later it was opened gaily, and Norrice came in—rather, it seemed to his eyes, some apparition of spirit, love, and beauty that had taken up its abode with him. He folded her in his arms, much as if they had been separated for hours or days, rather than just thirty minutes, and kissed her on brow, cheek, and lips, then presented his rose, and very deftly fastened it to her dress.

‘Do tell me the news from Strawton,’ were her first words, as she took her place before the tea-urn. ‘Mr. Rapham, what has happened to him?’

‘I have a telegram from Miss Rapham,’ he replied, his face clouding over; ‘she says that her father’s attack is not serious, and that he particularly wishes to see me.’

‘Do you really, really think it can be as you say?’ asked Norrice; ‘that he has made his large fortune as a slave-trader?’

‘I have no doubt of it. It is a very awkward dilemma for me. Under the circumstances I must apologize, you see,’ he added, transferring a delicate morsel to her plate; ‘had I had so much as an inkling of the truth, I should never have opened my lips on the subject at Strawton. What I might say elsewhere would be a wholly different matter.’

‘How sorry I am for Rapha! Think of living in such splendour, and knowing the origin of it! Were I that man’s daughter, I should feel ready to run away.’

‘She knows where to run to. That is one comfort,’ Villedieu said, complacently munching his toast. ‘Silverthorn is over head and ears in love with her if ever any man was.’

‘Supposing what you say is true, and the truth comes out, Rapha will feel her position acutely.’

‘Other people won’t; she may find balm of Gilead in that fact. You see, my dear child, the world doesn’t care two straws how a man has come by his money. The great thing is to have got it. Society ignores antecedents, and if it did not, where would society be? I am sorry to say so, but, one and all, we must occasionally shut an eye to the cloven foot.’

‘You would never countenance such a man yourself?’
Norrice said.

Villedieu made a wry face.

‘I can’t say what I should do with regard to generals. When we come to particulars, I have no choice. As I say, this business is a very embarrassing one. Rapham was the very last person I ought to have affronted just now. He has behaved very handsomely to me.’

Norrice smiled at the bare notion of Mr. Rapham having behaved handsomely to anyone.

Villedieu went on:

‘I must run down to Strawton, it seems, but I shall come back at once. We will have lunch here, and I can take you with me wherever I have to go afterwards.’

They chatted on about the day’s programme, Villedieu’s high spirits, Norrice could see that, alternating with an anxious mood. The Strawton telegram was evidently something more than a vexation, the occurrence of the evening before no mere unlucky imbroglio. All a bridegroom’s joy, love, and exhilaration were there still, but the light-hearted carelessness so habitual to him at all times now seemed fitful.

Nevertheless, that little breakfast was full of witchery to

both. They found themselves in that stage when affection takes the shape of overweening admiration for each other. Norrice was thinking how wonderful it was that, after their matter-of-fact courtship and unceremonious marriage, the very notion of being in love hardly occurring to her, she should now feel in the closest, tenderest sense of the word to belong to him, entirely at ease with him alike in matters of gravest import as well as the merest trifle, all barriers of timidity broken down, the husband and wife of three days only, now comrades, friends, familiars, without a secret!

She was thinking, too, how little she had understood this generous, manly, warm-hearted nature till now. Here was a man courted by society, having the fairest prospects, himself endowed with some of Nature's choicest gifts, married to an obscure woman-teacher without fortune, without rank, without a single worldly advantage! The sacrifice was all on his side, and he had made it because he loved her! She took comfort in the thought that, at least, she could be useful to him in many ways, and that this new existence, a duality to be understood by the wife only, not the maiden, would be, from his point of view as well as her own, a sweet, a delicious dependence. Villedieu, in turn, took the matter quite as enthusiastically, although after wholly different fashion. Mysterious it was, yet so it was, that marriage, if it did nothing else, made the breakfast-table more interesting. To say nothing of feelings too deep to be lightly touched upon, it was delightful to him to see this handsome, sparkling creature at the head of his table, to find out every day some new charm, some new magnetic attraction, and be able to say, 'She is my own !'

Yes, herein lay the paramount joy and self-congratulation of this man of the world, this hitherto easy-going bachelor, suddenly waked up to the fact that he was caught in the toils of matrimony. The only woman I ever found interesting, the woman I held superior to all others, she is my own!

Breakfast over, Norrice sat down at his escritoire to write an apologetic word to her mother. Her holiday must last a few days longer, she said, and that was all.

Meantime, Villedieu, smoking his matutinal cigar: 'What a comfort to have a wife who did not object to the fumes of tobacco!' he reflected, as he carelessly opened one letter after another; finally, once more, he took up Rapha's telegram.

'Norrice,' he said, when he had read and re-read it, 'come here.'

She put down her pen, and sat down on the arm of his chair, steadying herself by one hand laid on his shoulder.

'What is it?' she asked playfully; 'addresses to draw up, lists to make out, accounts to look over? I am anxious to enter upon my secretaryship.'

'I want to have a business talk with you,' he said; 'but before entering upon it, just one word.'

He took her in his arms, and once more kissed her once, twice, thrice—kisses that made tears of joy rise to her eyes.

'One little word. We are all in all to each other, are we not, and the rest doesn't matter a straw?'

For answer she caught his disengaged hand—the other clasped her own—and held it to her cheek. It was a moment of unspeakable, delicious understanding and emotion to both.

‘Well,’ he said, when they had recovered themselves, ‘I must be off in a quarter of an hour, so let us lose no time. Just tell me one thing. What have you done with the money you made by your invention?’

She broke into a merry laugh, not in the least divining his thoughts.

‘What should I do but spend it? We wanted so many things, mamma and I. That red dress you admire so much, these shoes you have noticed also, I bought them, and much more besides.’

‘Of course,’ he said, with just a show of impatience. ‘I know well enough you would buy what you wanted, and quite right too. But the surplus?’

Still much amused, Norrice answered gaily:

‘There was a little over, it is true. That we put in the bank. Twenty pounds, I think.’

‘You don’t understand me in the least, dearest,’ Villedieu said, himself puzzled by her light-minded mood. ‘Just listen a moment: I am in a most awkward position with regard to Mr. Rapham. He made over to me—did I not tell you?—a thousand pounds towards the expenses of my election. A great part of the money has gone already. But I am compelled, under the circumstances, to reimburse it at once. Keep the money of a man I am supposed to have openly insulted! I would rather pawn my clothes.’

Norrice was silent. She did not as yet see the real drift of his discourse; but one thing was clear as day. Her husband wanted money immediately, and was casting about where to get it. Her thoughts recurred to her modest savings; Rapha’s generosities had lately somewhat enriched her; she had also been enabled to lay by other small sums,

the result of extra lessons. She could help him a little, she thought cheerfully.

‘Now,’ Villedieu went on, brief and business-like, ‘we need not stand on ceremony with each other, I am sure. You will give me the money I owe. That is why I ask what has become of your trump-card, the thousands of pounds—how much was it?—paid for your invention by the War Office?’

Norrice’s face sharpened with sudden anguish, the pang of keen, affectionate solicitude. She had not only forfeited her birthright for a mess of pottage, she had forfeited the power to help the one being she adored.

‘Oh!’ she cried; ‘I ought to have told you. Did you not know it? I sold my invention to Mr. Rapham for a hundred pounds!’

‘Sold—it—for—a—hundred pounds!’ was all Villedieu could stammer forth. He turned from crimson to white. Anger, dismay, bitterest consternation, were written on his working features.

‘Dear,’ Norrice said with tearful persuasion, ‘you do not know what pressure was put upon me. I had not had many pupils for the past year. My mother urged me to accept the money. It seemed a good deal to us.’

‘The scoundrel!’ Villedieu muttered between his teeth, and, as he sat pondering over the matter, his looks grew darker and darker. ‘The scoundrel! But why did you not take advice? What could induce you to act so rashly?’ he said, turning to Norrice with almost stern reproach in voice and look.

Norrice rose from her place beside him, and, standing by the window, wiped away her tears. She would be strong and calm.

Villedieu rose also, but he did not go up to her, or try to undo the effect of his stinging words. It was not that he felt unsympathetic, that Norrice's sorrow did not pain him deeply; but the practical, the worldly, the masculine common-sense view of the case was uppermost. The personal also! This confession meant ruin for him, or, at least, the shipwreck of his hopes and plans. He had counted on this money as a certainty. He had married not only the woman he loved, but, as he supposed, an heiress—the heiress of her own rare genius, one whose self-earned wealth would suffice for both. Coupled with these feelings was the humiliating sense of being check-mated, befooled, cheated, so he put it, by a man like Rapham.

Not satisfied with making chattels of human flesh, forsooth, the old miscreant must fatten on the brains of women, still further enrich himself at the cost of a girl's genius! The more and more he thought of these things, the more indignant he became. Not that he was angry with Norrice. At bottom his feeling for her was as tender as ever. But he did feel that she had disappointed him so far. He had expected more discretion, more judgment! Intellectually, for the moment, she had lowered herself in his eyes.

'The old villain!' he said, as he stood thus with his back to the fire, and a veritable thundercloud upon his brow; 'and I must go and be civil to a Shylock like that, simply because I haven't a thousand pounds! But I won't, I'll be—I'll be—hanged first!'

'Dearest,' Norrice said, now going up to him collectedness itself—she accepted her position with proud resignation—'dearest, do be persuaded by me, and put off that journey

to Strawton for a day or two. No good can come of it in the humour in which you now are.'

She put one arm within his, and looked up at him pleadingly.

• Villedieu gave a scornful laugh.

'And what humour would you have me in? Answer me that. No, Norrice, Rapham ought not to be spared; and he won't be spared by me, whether I meet him to-day or a year hence.'

'After all,' she urged, 'Mr. Rapham is less to blame than you seem to think, with regard to my invention. He was the first person to offer me any money for it at all. And Rapha has been very generous; she has tried to make up for what might seem undue advantage taken of me. For Rapha's sake let the matter drop.'

But Villedieu's wrath was not to be appeased. He hardly seemed sensible of her caresses.

'The inevitable woman's argument!' he said. 'Murderers are not to feel the rope, rascality is to be condoned, all kinds of wickedness passed over—for somebody's sake!—to save somebody's feelings! Nice legislators you will make when you get seats beside us in the House. I'm a man, and I feel differently. I see things as they are. And I punish a rascal whenever I can get hold of him with the greatest pleasure alive. But my hands are tied in the accursed business. I can't kick a man downstairs so long as I owe him a thousand pounds!'

'I have a little laid by,' Norrice said soothingly, 'and we must see how we can make up the rest. Do not waste another thought about the money Mr. Rapham made by my invention,' she added with fond insinuation. 'We can live upon very little; we shall not be less happy.'

‘Once more woman’s logic!’ Villedieu cried, no nearer his old self yet. ‘Listen, Norrice; you have common-sense as well as genius; you are, you know that well enough, the only woman I would ever have married on any account whatever, and I married you simply and solely because I loved you. But I have hinted my circumstances. Would any man be so reckless, so insane, as to marry in such a position, unless his wife had something? That is the naked, the unvarnished, the detestable truth. We are penniless adventurers, and the best thing we can do is to give up this election, start for Monte Carlo, and try our luck at the gambling table—unless you can solve the nice little problem more satisfactorily? But don’t worry. Worrying won’t undo your mad bargain and our miserable plight! I’ll be back, as I said, as quickly as I can.’

He dropped a hasty kiss on her passive cheek, and hurried downstairs.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THUNDER-CLOUDS.

MR. RAPHAM had not been attacked by apoplexy or paralysis. So far the good Strawton folks were reassured next day. His sudden illness was a mere syncope or fainting-fit, brought on by some cause unknown. The heat of the crowded hall, over-exertion beforehand, the excitement of being unexpectedly called upon to speak in public, were one and all circumstances, the doctors said, sufficient to account for such a seizure. A few days’ rest and quiet, and all would be well. Thus ran the popular version, and everybody rejoiced, for his daughter’s sake, that the old man was hardly the worse for his swoon.

Rapha, however, saw matters in a wholly different and truer light. The whole affair, indeed, was to her a terrible, an appalling revelation. Up till the last moment she had heard Villedieu unsuspectingly, his disclosures awakening no personal feeling, only the indignation of a generous and humane nature. She had even smiled with pride and pleasure at hearing her father called upon to speak, and at his apparent willingness to take part in a movement so honourable to mankind. But no sooner did she catch that look of his directed towards the speaker, that fixed expression of mingled shame, hatred, and vindictiveness, than she realized the truth.

In asking her father to stand by him, and add his testimony to the damning facts just adduced, Villedieu asked him to become his own accuser, blacken himself in the eyes of all, cover his name with perpetual ignominy.

She now recalled not one, but a thousand circumstances that strengthened this conviction. There was the incident at the German fair, the little negro boy he had offered to purchase for her as a matter of course; she remembered well how the proposal shocked her at the time, and the uneasy surmise awakened, to be afterwards set at rest, if not wholly forgotten. Then his abrupt refusal to speak of the past, or the origin of his swiftly amassed wealth—was this the natural behaviour of a father in dealing with his only child? Must there not be some strong reason for such concealment?

She went downstairs next morning with a careworn face, to find, to her surprise, the doctors dismissed and the patient up and dressed, drinking his coffee as usual.

‘I’m not ill,’ he said, seeing her look of surprise. ‘Can’t a man turn giddy, and lose his feet in a room like an oven,

without having to pay half a score of doctors? I'm as well as you are.'

The only indication of past disturbance was an unnatural pallor, but the pallor of suppressed rage, not of sickness; the whiteness so much more shocking to the beholder than that caused by bodily weakness.

'But I am not going to be bullied by Mr. Villedieu nor anybody else. And so I shall let him know. You sent my telegram the first thing this morning, you say?'

Rapha murmured a word of assent, and listened for what was coming, sick with apprehension. Her father seemed quite disposed for confidences now.

'What concern is it of that fellow Villedieu, or of any man living, how I made my money, I should very much like to know? I spend it handsomely enough: as I am always saying, the more a man spends, the more he gives away. It is the same thing as charity.'

'Oh, papa!' Rapha said, in a voice of anguish. 'It is not true—tell me it is not true? You did not become so rich by buying and selling slaves?'

All her composure was gone now; she made no further pretence of breakfasting. With head bowed down and resting her cheek on one hand, she looked steadily into her plate; she dared not confront his eye just then.

Mr. Rapham pretended not to see her agitation. He took refuge in brief business-like tones.

'Now, Rapha, you are no infant in arms. You must know that this fine talk about the niggers is all hocuspocus and fiddle-de-dee. I am not going to say that I ever went into the slave-trade or that I didn't. But don't you let anyone make you believe that black people are like white. I've seen enough of 'em, I am sure, and I can tell you one thing.

Lucky enough are they when they are sold, as it is called, when they do get someone to feed, house, and look after them. Then as to a flogging some of them get now and then, the lazy loons, do you suppose they would do a good day's work without? They haven't the feelings we have; their skins are tougher. Providence designed them for slavery, just as horses are designed to drag beer-drays.'

Rapha listened with growing horror and repulsion, unable to get out a word. To have listened to such sentiments under any circumstances would have been a painful task, but when the speaker was her own father!

Hot tears, which he did not see, ran down her burning cheeks; she still sat with head resting on her hand and eyes bent down.

'Then as to the cant about husbands and wives being separated,' Mr. Rapham went on, speaking in a deeply injured voice, 'black folks have no morals; how should they, naked savages as they are? One woman is as good to a man as another. And the children! Would you leave the poor little imps to fathers and mothers unable to take care of themselves? They are a thousand times better off with a good master.'

'Then you did make your money that way?' Rapha asked, in a faint voice.

'I am not going to be cross-questioned,' Mr. Rapham said curtly. 'Your business is to spend my money, not to trouble your head how it was come by; fairly it was, that I can tell you. I have never put a finger into another man's pocket, as some men are constantly doing, and yet pass for respectable. What on earth are you crying for?'

It was in spite of herself that Rapha gave way to emotion now. She saw that her father had not recovered from the

occurrence of the night before. He was haggard, feverish, irritable; not at all himself, either mentally or physically. No moment this for unburdening herself to him, speaking the inmost thought of her mind.

But the shock had been too great. The awful revelation of the last few hours seemed to pull up her happy, careless life of yesterday by the roots. These abhorred doctrines were upheld by her own father; the most odious practices by which money can be amassed were tacitly avowed by him. It seemed to her on a sudden that this wealth, making existence so sumptuous and easy, no longer belonged to her—that the very pieces of gold in her purse were stained with human blood!

‘What the deuce are you crying for?’ Mr. Rapham repeated. His was not the kind of nature to be softened by a woman’s tears; feminine influence must be exercised in a wholly different way. It displeased rather than grieved him to see her weeping. And, as was only natural, he attributed her tears to the wrong cause. ‘Don’t you suppose for a moment that Mr. Villedieu or anyone else is going to do us any harm. Whether he meant to insult me or not——’

‘Oh! he would not have spoken had he known——’
Rapha got out.

‘He would not, you think?’ Mr. Rapham said, with a tone of evident relief. ‘Well, I have a hold upon him, anyhow. I can shut his mouth fast enough. There is nothing to cry about, I tell you. Who is to know what my business was in the Soudan? And I was not the only one there on the same errand,’ he chuckled; ‘I was kept in countenance. But wherever I am, I keep my affairs close. I take care to be on the right side. So just finish your breakfast, and leave crying to babies.’

He went away and shut himself in his room awaiting Villedieu, impatiently and aggressively enough. Rapha's tears had made him feel positively morose. He was, moreover, if not ill, at least ill at ease; his limbs would be seized with sudden tremblings, he was a prey to uncontrollable restlessness and irritation.

True enough, Villedieu made his appearance; he, too, in no enviable frame of mind. But he was in the flower of life, on the threshold of a brilliant career, a happy bridegroom; hateful although this errand, he could be easy, collected, even cheerful. He was, moreover, a man of the world, and the first canon of worldly wisdom is to avoid exasperation. During that short railway journey he had made up his mind under no circumstances to quarrel with the old trader. Diplomacy would serve him better. And who could tell? diplomacy might not only extricate him from his present dilemma, but cancel, or at least modify, his wife's rash bargain. He was not going to sell his conscience for filthy lucre. Having put his hand to the plough, he was not going to turn back; in other words, to falsify that promise about the slave-trade. But State-directed inquiry would hardly touch a man in Mr. Rapham's position.

'Good-morning, Mr. Rapham,' he began, offering his hand with easy aplomb; in such encounters it is ever the best-bred man who gets the advantage. 'I hope, sir, you have recovered from your indisposition of last evening.'

'I am well enough,' Mr. Rapham replied with some embarrassment, and, as he spoke, he turned his back on his visitor, ostensibly to draw down the blind, in reality to hide a blush he felt conscious of. 'I am subject to such things—dizziness in the head, I mean, the effect, I take it, of living in a country as hot as—a baker's oven,' omitting the

objectionable epithet all but on his lips. 'But now, I've a word to say to you, Mr. Villedieu. Had you, or had you not, Ralph Rapham in your mind when making those fine speeches last night?'

'I assure you, sir,' was the frank reply, as Villedieu met that close scrutiny uncowed, 'personalities were as far from my mind when alluding to the slave-trade in the Soudan as when speaking of Chinese competition in local industries the moment before.'

'I don't see how you could serve yourself by throwing dirt at me,' Mr. Rapham went on, still looking fixedly at his visitor. 'What the slave-trade is and is not, we will talk of some other time. You just believe everything you see in the newspapers; that, however, is neither here nor there. You and I have something else to talk about just now. I have gone out of my way to oblige you, Mr. Villedieu.'

'I am fully sensible of my obligations to you, sir,' Villedieu answered. There was nothing else for him to do but compromise; his mind had been made up on that point beforehand.

'And one good turn deserves another,' Mr. Rapham began meaningly; 'I take it a gentleman like yourself would not accept a thousand pounds from a man one day, and spot him as a blackguard the next?'

'Certainly not.'

'Certainly not! certainly not! I must have something more to the purpose than that,' was the half-ironic reply. 'Your position is as clear as daylight, Mr. Villedieu. You must drop your high-flown nigger theories or drop me.'

'I quite understand you,' Villedieu made answer, with easy assurance; what would he not have given to have been able to hand out a draft for a thousand pounds at that

moment! 'Two courses are clearly open to me. I free myself from pecuniary obligations to you, or I leave questions that might possibly compromise your reputation to others.'

Mr. Rapham pondered: 'So far so good,' his face said.

'I don't care two straws about my own reputation,' he replied bluntly. 'I am safe enough. No man on earth can harm me. But there is my daughter to think of.'

Once more he scrutinized his visitor as if fain to read his inmost thoughts. This time the keenly inquisitorial look was carelessly ignored. Villedieu listened with polite attention, that was all.

'You see,' Mr. Rapham continued, 'I can't have anything come out that would create unpleasantness—damage my daughter's position in society. We must come to terms, you and I. You want money; I've got it. Throw the nigger question overboard when you get into Parliament, and I'll be—I'll be a father to you!' ejaculated the trader with effusion.

Villedieu now saw the trap that was being laid for him, but he had prepared for such an emergency beforehand. Nothing should induce him to compromise himself in the way Mr. Rapham proposed. His position, he owned, was about as awkward and harassing as a man's could be; the path before him bristled with difficulties, but he bribed into silence by this man he would not.

'Look you,' Mr. Rapham went on, fairly carried away by his subject, 'I'm ready to make any sacrifice for my girl. I want her to have the first chop of society, and make a fine marriage. She ought to do—she'll have one of the finest fortunes in the country.'

‘And without any fortune at all, Miss Rapham would not lack suitors,’ Villedieu replied; ‘so amiable, so charming.’

‘Yes, Rapha is well enough,’ said the other, a gleam of paternal pride in his small eyes. ‘So you think she is admired, do you?’

‘I am sure of it,’ Villedieu answered, having Silverthorn in his mind.

‘You think she has suitors, do you?’ again asked Mr. Rapham, his eyes once more twinkling with satisfaction.

‘There is no doubt of the fact whatever,’ Villedieu said emphatically. If his host gave him a chance, he determined to put in a good word for Silverthorn.

‘She could marry to-morrow if she chose, eh?’ once more asked the trader.

‘That also I can answer for,’ was Villedieu’s hearty reply.

‘Now, Mr. Villedieu, listen to me,’ Mr. Rapham began, in quick, conciliatory, almost caressing tones. ‘I know well enough what is in your mind, and I’ll tell you what is in mine. You are just the man I’ve been casting about for for a son-in-law——’

‘My dear sir,’ put in the startled Villedieu, but the other would be heard.

‘We are nobodies, but we’ve money; you are somebody, but you haven’t a sixpence—you say it yourself, so I only take you at your word. Tit for tat, a bargain, exchange no robbery, I say! Make my daughter the Honourable Mrs. Frederick Villedieu, leave the Soudan alone, and you shall have a hundred thousand pounds down, and all the rest when I am gone!’

Villedieu had started from his chair at the beginning of this speech, and more than once attempted to put in a deprecatory word; but Mr. Rapham would be heard unin-

terruptedly to the end. He looked positively exhilarated as he awaited the reply, evidently without any doubt as to its purport.

‘You do me too much honour——’ stammered the luckless Villedieu, for once his composure deserting him.

‘Nonsense, man!’ Mr. Rapham exclaimed, clapping him on the shoulder and growing quite familiar on the strength of the projected alliance. ‘You get a million of money; we get a fine name. ’Tis an honest give and take.’

‘I am indeed deeply sensible of your confidence in me,’ Villedieu got out; he had never found himself so discountenanced in his life. ‘But——’

‘Oh! we expect “buts” from fine gentlemen like you,’ laughed the old trader. ‘You are proud, of course, or, perhaps, you don’t like the look of me as a father-in-law. I shan’t meddle or make with your affairs, I promise you that.’

‘Pray understand me,’ Villedieu blurted forth; ‘under other circumstances I could but have been proud and happy. The truth is, I am no longer free—I am married already.’

‘The devil you are, are you!’ Mr. Rapham exclaimed, fairly beside himself. ‘Then why couldn’t you tell me so before? Why did you come here as a bachelor, making me think, of course, you wanted my daughter? I’m not such a fool as to oblige a man for nothing, whatever others may be; but since we’re not good enough for you, just settle that little business of the thousand pounds, will you? And the sooner the better.’

Thus saying, he opened the door wide, and bowed the discomfited Villedieu out.

CHAPTER XXVII.

STRAWTON EN FÊTE.

WE are universally set down as a nation of gloomy temperament ; pageantry, gala days, and jollity being, if not positively antagonistic to us, held to be at least of foreign growth, ours only by force of effort and imitation. But is it really so? In what quarter of the globe is the poorest occasion seized upon with more eagerness?

Strawton affords a striking instance in point. Never was any town in greater need of relaxation or outward display. Never any town so subject to periods of material depression ! At the present moment, for instance, one third of the entire population was subsisting on the charity of the rest ; half the factories stood still, the other half were just kept going for the look of the thing, a few hands employed at half-time, a little work being eked out among outsiders, a semblance of business affected ; that was all. A melancholy sight was the vast plait hall these raw winter mornings ; apart from the heaps of brightly-coloured straw-plait presided over by wholesale sellers, comparatively well-to-do merchants in broad-cloth, might here be seen thinly-clad ancient women, last representatives of the once flourishing straw-plaiters of Dunstable, offering for sale a tiny sheaf of plait with trembling hands. That tiny sheaf has a pathetic look in the eyes of all familiar with Strawton history. It is a survival, the gigantic nature of the competition that has crushed it being suggested by the enormous bales of braided straw from China and Japan. To keep a tidy English home

going, ay, to keep body and soul together nowadays, and hold his own against such formidable competitors, the plaiter must work night and day with his feet as well as his hands ! The lithe fingers of Oriental handicraftsmen indeed outdo machinery. If machinery cheapens labour, still more so does the machine wearing human shape. In spite of these untoward circumstances and an early visitation of truly Siberian winter, Strawton was as ready for carnival and carouse as any city of pleasure going. No matter under what guise opportunity presented itself, the barest pretext for keeping holiday was greedily seized upon, and holiday was kept with right goodwill, alike by the hungry and the well fed ; those whose scanty wardrobe lay half the week at the pawnbroker's, and those who were warmly clad. And surely the good people were right. A pageant is often all that is needed to keep off an epidemic of suicide. Ye philanthropists ! Instead of bestowing your loaves and blankets, instead of demolishing courts and trying to overcome vagabondage by means of sanitary tracts and teetotal drinks, give your poor neighbours a pageant now and then ! Teach them the meaning of some words in the dictionary they no more understand than if written in hieroglyphics or Aramaic. Make them comprehend what is meant by splendour, beauty, a symbol.

‘Do dine with us on Guy Fawkes’ Day, and see the fireworks with the girls afterwards,’ Lady Letitia had said to Rapha. ‘It is all very stupid. of course, but everything is stupid when you come to classification. The getting through the day—what else is it but a choice of stupidities if you once go to the bottom of things?’

‘I will certainly come if papa is pretty well,’ Rapha replied ; and Lady Letitia, who was not only amiability

itself, but a woman of the world, forbore to ask any questions. That mysterious little incident of the meeting was generally explained away as a mere fainting-fit. What Lady Letitia chose to think of it herself was another matter. But it was not a thing to be talked about.

Even such a distraction as Guy Fawkes' Day was welcome to Rapha in her present frame of mind.

Norrice was away ; Silverthorn she saw but seldom ; Lady Letitia, although kind and motherly, was not a person she felt able to confide in ; thus life, amid the dreary splendour of Strawton Park, seemed solitariness itself. Anything that took her from these dreary thoughts came as a blessed relief.

Guy Fawkes' Day, if a stupidity to grand folks who lived in mansions and were familiar with Court pageants, was the sole pictorial experience of their poorer neighbours. One celebration very nearly resembled another, very little change took place in the annual programme, yet every year might be seen some fresh attempt at splendour, a little more show and glitter, more picturesqueness of arrangement. Bad times and local distress never damped the public ardour. Whilst the well-to-do artisan bought a costume worthy of a calico ball, the ragged street urchin contrived to get a few pennyworths of coloured paper or tinsel with which to keep himself in countenance. Cheap and worthless from an artistic point of view as were these preparations, the effect of the whole was wonderful. The murky, monotonous, sunless streets of Strawton in November, for that one day, blazed with colour. Not Cairo with its gorgeous bazaars, not even Venice at Carnival time, offered a gayer spectacle than the motley procession, the reds, blues and yellows of the dresses vanquishing the gloom ; the gold and

silver tinsel sparkling despite the foggy atmosphere. From end to end of the long train, nothing reigned but colour and piquancy and effect; commonplaceness for the time was out of sight, the whole townsfolk fêting each other in rollicking spirits.

There are many reasons for this popularity. All who liked could take part in the show, and local as well as patriotic significance was attached to the allegories. Popular heroes or types of the day figured as well as James II. and his courtiers and ministers; and among the crowd of attendant mummers might be seen every mythical peerage with whom the unlettered are familiar, from Blue Beard down to the Devil, with his long tail dangling from under a swallow-tail coat the colour of red-hot coals. But the gist of the entertainment consisted in the burning in effigy that came last. The colossal Guy Fawkes in painted wood, towering above the procession from his car, was of course too precious to be thrust into the bonfire. Some bugbear in the political, social, or even theological world was instead consigned to the flames. If in great straits for a scarecrow, no notoriety happening to be particularly obnoxious when the glorious Fifth of November came round, the good Strawton folk just made an *auto da fê* of the first miscreant that came handy: some unusually brutal wife-beater, a molester of little children, or publican convicted of using defective measures. A fine moral sentiment ever dictated these vicarious sentences.

Mr. Morrow's balcony commanded an excellent view of St. George's Hill, and it was his happy fortune this year to entertain in honour of Guy Fawkes.

Scrupulously dressed, and in a pleasant flutter of expectation, he awaited his guests, for the first time such as he had

vainly sighed for. To-night Lady Letitia was to bring to 'The Laurels'—'was the name of the house quite the thing?' asked the nervous Mr. Morrow—that atmosphere of gentility, that aroma of refinement, hitherto a matter of dreams and aspirations only, quite unnerving him.

'What a charming room!' cried Lady Letitia, as she entered with her two elder daughters and Rapha. 'Really, Mr. Morrow,' she added, taking in at a glance the unpretending yet solid wealth of the owner, 'it is too bad of you not to have invited us before.'

'I could not have supposed you would have condescended to honour me with your presence,' Mr. Morrow replied, feeling that modesty became him in his own house.

'How absurd!' laughed his aristocratic visitor. 'Look, Charlotte, at Mr. Morrow's antimacassars. Could anyone have supposed that a bachelor would have so much taste in the matter of crewel-work?'

'Ah!' Mr. Morrow said, anxiously watching his maid-servants, to see that they were serving tea in proper fashion, 'Miss Lowfunds does such exquisite crewel-work herself, that I am sure she can find little to admire in mine.'

'After that pretty compliment, Charlotte will feel compelled to offer you some of her crewel-work,' Lady Letitia replied. 'Remember, Charlotte, after you have finished your preparations for the bazaar, to set to work on storks and sunflowers for Mr. Morrow.'

'You are too kind, too kind, really!' stammered Mr. Morrow, and he was so much overcome that he straightway overturned a noggin of cream over his new evening dress. But even the upsetting of a noggin of cream may prove an adventitious incident in the eyes of anxious mothers. With

the utmost good-nature Lady Letitia summoned her girls to their host's help; the pair seized the first antimacassars handy, and there they were, amid much merriment, rubbing down Mr. Morrow as zealously as grooms rub down an over-heated horse.

'Where is Mr. Villedieu—and Miss Norrice—what has become of our charming mathematical mistress?' asked Lady Letitia, as the room filled and these two failed to make their appearance.

'Report whispers that our future member is married,' she added in an undertone to her host; 'do you believe it?'

'I assure you, I believe everything I hear on good authority. Why should I not?' asked Mr. Morrow. 'Things passing belief, Lady Letitia, happen every moment.'

He had in his mind the phenomenon of her presence under his roof at that moment. Would not such an event, if predicted to him a few years before, have appeared not only impossible, but preposterous? But, of course, there were many auxiliary circumstances to be taken into account. A certain brass-plate bearing the inscription, 'Merton Morrow, Manufacturer,' had disappeared from the High Street; the consequences of the storming of the Bastille and Robespierre had not become so apparent; in other words, the value of land had not gone down to zero.

'How true that is! I say to my girls, "If you want a wise saying, you must go to Mr. Morrow for it,"' Lady Letitia answered; adding behind her fan, 'And that sweet girl's father, our original and hospitable neighbour, do you believe that his money has been made by chartering slave-dhows?'

'Really, I hesitate to give an opinion,' Mr. Morrow said, confidential in turn. 'You see, Lady Letitia, we are in an

awkward position with regard to Mr. Rapham. It is best for us not to inquire too closely into his antecedents.'

'That is what I feel,' Lady Letitia replied. 'Of course, the slave-trade is odious wherever practised, so we are bound to consider it now. But I can remember the time, and I dare say you can too, when slavery was upheld in English pulpits. There is a fashion in morality as in tea-spoons. Things held to be harmless in one age become criminal in another, and poor dear Mr. Rapham belongs altogether to a bygone epoch. We ought not, I think, to be too hard upon him.'

Mr. Morrow was about to reply, when there was a general exclamation, above which could be heard the noise of brass bands, and the dim, confused tumult of the vast multitude now taking possession of St. George's Hill. The proceedings would begin forthwith. The host, bustling about, accommodated his guests as best he could in his bay-windows. The more venturesome, in wraps and greatcoats, took up positions on the balcony outside, protected from the cold as far as was possible by a temporary awning. The lights were partly extinguished, in order that the fireworks and bonfire could be seen to best advantage.

All was tiptoe expectation.

If in our showery, capricious England we can never count upon propitious weather for picnics, star-gazers have little to complain of. Days of fog, drizzle, and gloom will often be succeeded by clear, starry nights, when the sight of the heavens' densest purple-black, set with myriads of dazzling cressets, is a magnificent spectacle; at least, so we should think if we had to pay for it!

Upon this occasion every circumstance favoured the celebrators of Guy Fawkes' Day; not a cloud obscured the

jet-black sky ; the air was dry and clear ; no sooner was a match put to the huge bonfire on the hill opposite than the flames spread, and a conflagration was witnessed of extraordinary magnitude and splendour.

So pitchy-black the background, so blinding the brightness, that it was impossible for even a careless spectator to gaze without awe. It seemed, as you looked, that such a sight could not be the mere pastime of a tatterdemalion populace, the sport of shop-lads and street-boys. There must be some meaning, some symbol, in a fire almost worthy to be compared to those beacon-lights that signalled the fall of Troy, or summoned England's defenders at the news of the Spanish Armada.

'Who can the poor people have thought of to burn in effigy to-night?' Lady Letitia said laughingly to Rapha. 'Mr. Gladstone is in high favour just now. No magistrate lately has sent old women to prison for stealing sticks out of the hedges ; I really can think of no one, unless it be that vicar who would not bury a Dissenter in his churchyard the other day.'

A deafening roar, made up of cheers and hisses, now filled the air, as a figure was raised aloft and held up for general execration before being pitchforked into the bonfire. Standing out in strong relief, the images on the white surface of a camera obscura not clearer or more sharply defined than this silhouette against the fiery background, Mr. Morrow's aghast guests recognised the effigy of Mr. Rapham.

The likeness attained by these unskilled handicraftsmen was quite startling. There he was—the small, wiry trader, dressed in the brown velveteen shooting-suit and gaiters, familiar by this time to every eye in Strawton ; his thin, parchment-coloured, beardless face imitated in painted wood

to a nicety, not a salient detail either of figure, dress, or physiognomy left out; the whole thing, but for Rapha's presence, would have been irresistibly comic and laughable. That fact caused a thrill of horror to run through Mr. Morrow's guests. Lady Letitia's natural kindness of heart, also the habit inseparable from good breeding, of trying to ward off disagreeable contingencies, now came to the general aid.

'Let us go inside, darling,' she exclaimed, as she drew, or rather pushed, Rapha into the deserted drawing-room, hoping that she had not identified the scarecrow. 'These vulgar displays, I have always felt so, are not for us; I will propose to Mr. Morrow to have some music.'

But Rapha had seen, had understood it all. Unable to control her agitation, having no one else to confide in, she burst into passionate tears, and threw herself into Lady Letitia's arms, as a child seeking shelter.

'Oh, it is cruel—cruel!' she murmured. 'What harm has papa done anyone here?'

Lady Letitia, half leading, half supporting the weeping girl, took her into a small inner room, arranged for the occasion as a cloak-room.

'Darling,' she repeated, folding her in her arms as if she were a child, 'you know poor people, much as we do for them, are very selfish. Your father has not subscribed to the coal-fund and the blanket-fund, perhaps? They would burn me in effigy if I withheld my subscriptions, though I really want coals and blankets as much as they do. Dry your eyes, and we will get Gracie and Charlotte to give us a duet.'

'Oh no, I had better go home!' Rapha cried, sobbing as if her heart would break. 'I know why everybody here

hates papa. It has nothing to do with coals or blankets. It is—it is——’ sobs choked her utterance, and she almost shrieked out the last words of her sentence—‘it is because he has made his money by buying and selling slaves!’

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AWAKENING.

RAPHA did not return home that night; she begged Lady Letitia to let her sleep under her roof, near Gracie or Charlotte; so the big carriage was sent back empty to Strawton Park with an explanatory message. The party was late; Miss Rapham was overtired; she had accepted a bed at her ladyship’s, the footman said when interrogated by Mr. Rapham next morning. And mightily pleased looked the old trader as he heard. Nothing delighted him more than this growing intimacy of Rapha with the Lowfunds family.

‘Now mind and go to sleep as if nothing had happened,’ Lady Letitia said, as she bade her young charge good-night. ‘If you cannot sleep, you have but to knock on the wall, and Gracie will come to you. Really there is nothing to fret about. What can you expect of the lower orders but vulgar jokes and personalities? They delight in them as much as we do in Joachim’s violin-playing, or Burne Jones’s pictures. And to be burnt in effigy, instead of being a disgrace, is quite an honour, I assure you. Disraeli, now, I wonder how many times he has been made a guy of! And Dr. Pusey, and the Pope; in fact, you can hardly mention a distinguished person who has not.’

She hoped to see Rapha smile through the tears that had begun afresh ; but instead, she covered her face with her hands as if to shut out some horrible picture.

‘Take my advice,’ continued the worldly monitor, ‘and on no account whatever mention the past to Mr. Rapham. He is your father ; a kinder one never existed, I am sure ; and we may be equally sure of another thing—he had his reasons for doing what he has done. We must never set up as judges of others ; if we once began, what a world of prigs it would be !’

And once more she tried to make Rapha smile.

‘You see,’ Lady Letitia went on, ‘no one can live without money. Civilization depends upon it as a watch upon the spring. If there were no men like your father, who set up money-making as the first object in life, society would soon come to a standstill. So we must not be too particular as to how these great fortunes are made.’

‘But to sell human lives!’ shuddered Rapha. ‘If papa had never been rich, I should not so much mind ; it is this show, this luxury, I cannot bear the thought of. My silk dress, these pearls, my watch set round with diamonds—oh, Lady Letitia, I seem to see blood upon them all ! For it is true, I have seen reports in the papers ; slaves are treated cruelly now as in former days. Children are separated from their parents ; women are beaten till they die ; life is made a curse to them.’

‘Nonsense, darling !’ Lady Letitia said soothingly. ‘Newspapers, of course, make the worst of everything. They would never pay unless they doled out horror upon horror from day to day. I assure you, your imagination is distorted to-night. There were plenty of slaves in Brazil till the other day, you know, and we have had such pleasant friends among

Brazilian slave-owners, such kind people; they would not harm a mouse, I am sure. Then the slaves in Egypt—their life is a perfect dream of idleness and enjoyment. When at Cairo with my husband, we visited an Egyptian princess who had fifty women-slaves. I do honestly believe, never were housemaids in England so spoiled and petted. Then think of Eva in "Uncle Tom's Cabin"! What a kind little thing she was to the poor blacks! No, my dear child; you can find worthier objects of sympathy in the slums of London. Do be reasonable, and do not break your heart about chimeras.'

Rapha listened unconvinced, gratefully accepted her hostess's kiss, then laid her aching head upon the pillow.

It was characteristic of this young girl, so inexperienced, so compliant in most matters, so ready to lean upon others, that when her moral sense was called into play, she was not to be shaken, firm as a rock, decision incarnate.

Lady Letitia's kindly-meant sophisms had no more effect upon her than the artless babblings of a child. Her mind did not dwell upon them for a moment. The solution of the question before her seemed arbitrary and incontestable as that of a problem in Euclid.

And the waking after a night of feverish sleep had no effect upon her resolution either. The world was going on as usual. Her own misery and its cause were nobody's concernment. Lady Letitia and her daughters were busy with a dozen matters, trivial enough in themselves, yet apparently of the first importance in their eyes: Julia's dress at the coming Artillery ball, Amy's visit to her aunt, Lady Mowbray, the matching of wools for fancy-work, the curling of feathers, the wording of invitations. The day seemed all too short for the immense amount of business everybody had to get through.

‘Then you won’t send back the carriage, and accompany Gracie to town to do the family shopping?’ Lady Letitia said, when Rapha descended to the morning-room in her furs to say good-bye. ‘Well, dear, come whenever you like—Julia, look out the Addelys’ address in the Blue-book—and after this business of getting Amy off to Powys Castle—Amy, love, ring for Bates—Gracie shall come and stay with you. Gracie, is there no more stamped paper in the house? Good-bye, then—good-bye. Don’t forget what a little bird whispered into your ear last night.’

The girls quitted their various occupations to take affectionate leave. ‘Do be kind to that poor girl,’ Lady Letitia had said; ‘she can do us so many good turns.’ Then Rapha, pale as a ghost, drove back to the horrible splendour of Strawton Park.

Never before had the place seemed so cold, so bare, so unlike a home to her; never did housekeeping by contract seem so painful a parody on the life of the affections and the fireside. The only little bit of domesticity was her own room, with its pet birds, its frisking kitten, and pet dog; but here she had hitherto spent only a small portion of the day. Mr. Rapham liked her to receive visitors in the drawing or music room. ‘What was the use of having them if unoccupied from morning to night?’ he would ask. Nothing delighted him more than to come home in the afternoon and find Rapha with a little crowd of visitors. The whole thing seemed to him quite complete. Rapha, in her charming winter dress; half a score of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen talking cheerful nothings; the well-trained footmen serving tea faultlessly; and perhaps a little music before the guests took leave.

To gratify her father, Rapha had encouraged visitors

indiscriminately, and had tried to like everybody, no difficult task when everybody's first business seemed to please her. As she now wandered through the lonely house, recalling the events of the last few months, she wondered how such a life could interest, much less satisfy her.

It seemed now to her overwrought imagination that there was positive blame in leading an existence given up wholly to self-gratification and pleasure. She reproached herself for having thus entered heart and soul into the distractions of society. Ought she not firmly to have resisted, made her father see that wealth meant more in her eyes than mere money-spending? These thoughts came as a secondary cause of pain and disenchantment. Just as in science a revelation in any field throws light upon countless subjects outside that field, so the light afforded by one mood of unflinching self-examination does not stop there. One sting of awakened conscience rarely comes alone. Rapha now began to incriminate herself for having enjoyed such luxury, almost as much as if she had known all along how it had been earned.

In the midst of her sombre reverie Mr. Rapham came up.

Rapha saw at a glance that he knew nothing of what had happened the night before. The fixed, ghastly pallor of the last few days was gone. He looked his old, brisk, cheerful self, perhaps even a trifle more cheerful than usual, for Rapha's reception by Lady Letitia pleased him greatly. He wore the black clothes usually put on for visits to London, and carried a small box in crimson morocco.

'So,' he said, 'her ladyship kept you last night? I must see what I can do to oblige her in return. Would she be affronted if I sent her a case of wine, do you think? Allchere gets it cheap from Bordeaux, and I have no doubt

the young ladies are teetotalers from economy. But now, look here !'

He sat down beside her, still having his hat on ; Mr. Rapham had an insuperable objection to uncovering his head. He would fain have breakfasted, lunched, and dined in his hat. He was no more of a Radical than Lady Letitia herself, but to have to remove his headgear seemed to him humiliating, or at least derogatory.

'Look here!' he repeated, his small eyes twinkling with pleasure. 'Did you ever see anything more perfect in your life?'

A jeweller, expatiating on wares to a customer, could not have been more eloquent or enthusiastic than Mr. Rapham, as he now displayed a lovely little set of pearls and rubies—such a set as would have made most maidens ready to weep for joy.

'It is a bargain bought out of the great jewellery sale at Christy's yesterday,' he went on, 'and it is for you to wear when you are presented ; I don't think, had I searched London through, I could have found anything prettier. As to the stones, there is no doubt about them.'

One by one he held pendant, brooch, and ear-rings up to the light.

'On my word,' he said, 'you are in luck's way, and no mistake about it ! This set is fit for a princess. We'll just try 'em on.'

No lover, wooing his mistress with choicest gifts, could handle the jewels more tenderly than Mr. Rapham did now ; and, as each ornament was adjusted, he stepped back admiringly. The rubies and pearls certainly became Rapha's girlish yet spiritual beauty admirably. Just such a touch of splendour was wanted to emphasize the deep, tender blue eyes, fair hair, and wild-rose complexion. Jewels could

hardly, perhaps, embellish one so young and lovely, but they lent state and dignity, changed the timid girl into the dazzling woman.

Triumphantly, endearingly, as a lover whose proudest possession was to be this beauty, Mr. Rapham adjusted brooch, pendant, ear-rings, hailing the effect produced by a rapturous cry as he stepped backward to gaze. No picture in the world could have delighted him so much; no girl in England, he thought, was fairer than his own child.

On a sudden his expression changed from exhilaration and joy to deep, vindictive concern.

‘What is the matter with you?’ he asked, in a wholly altered voice.

For Rapha, shrinking from him as maiden from temptations of false lover, tore off the jewels, and flung them from her with a gesture of abhorrence. A girl, seeing in such gauds the bribe of unholy passion and the forfeiture of her own soul, could not more vehemently resent the snare than did Rapha seem to do now.

She uttered no word of reproach, but outraged feeling and wounds too deep ever to be healed, the unspeakable retributive condemnation of a pure, strong nature, to whom evil is impossible—all these were written in her pale, down-cast, yet undaunted look.

Mr. Rapham now reiterated the question, knowing too well what the answer would be. An entire future seemed written on the wall before him. He saw himself arraigned before the awful tribunal of innocence, sentenced by the implacable justice of youth and purity. His conscience was touched vicariously only, a past of ignominy and wrongdoing appearing shameful, blush-worthy, just because his guileless young daughter found it so.

Crestfallen, baffled, as the lover whose impure offerings have won him no adorable mistress, only an angelic rebuke, he put back the jewels in their morocco case, and eyed his sweet, stern mistress with looks growing darker and darker.

‘You won’t have them?’ he said, with as much brutality as he could put into a speech addressed to her. ‘Then I will tell you what I shall do. If you set yourself up as a judge, if you bully and bait me about that business in the Soudan, I shall just marry again. You can go where you please.’

‘Oh, papa!’ Rapha said, daughterly affection, a sense of filial duty, impelling her to tenderness and humility. ‘I could be quite happy with you were we living simply, not keeping up this state. What right have we to enjoy money made by buying and selling human lives? These poor people, they are human like ourselves; they feel pain and sorrow and humiliation as we do; it is only because they are helpless that such advantage is taken of them. Let us live quite plainly in your little farmhouse, papa. I should be so very happy there. We would only keep one or two servants, and it would be a delight to me to occupy myself with the dairy and the poultry-yard. Then this great fortune—which is not really ours, no more ours than if it were stolen from murdered men—all this money we do not want, could be used for good purposes. We could make it a blessing instead of a curse.’

She had risen from her chair now, and was kneeling by him, her hands clasped about his arms, her face upturned to his own with an ineffable look of tenderness and appeal.

‘For it is a curse, it cannot be anything else,’ she added, in pleading, passionate tones. ‘We shall never be happy

here ; we can never really feel as if this splendid place were our home. And indeed we should lose no real friends. People who care for us would care a thousand times more when they knew the truth ; and if others held aloof, what would it matter ? Oh, papa ! my own dear, kind father—for you have ever been kindness itself to me—we could be all in all to each other but for this ill-gotten money ; it stands like a wall between us. Only let it go, and I would do anything you like ; never, never leave you, so long as you live.'

Hitherto she had spoken calmly, though with deep feeling ; now, however, the sweet, tear laden voice broke down. She could only press his hands to her lips, and cover them with tears and kisses.

But Mr. Rapham was no more moved than if he saw before him some suppliant slave-mother begging off punishment from an offending child. His present mood was of dark, fierce, concentrated anger only. Rapha's appeal humiliated, exasperated, it did not touch him in the least.

'Look you, Rapha !' he said, breaking away from her clasp, and standing before her, jewel-case in hand. 'Are you going to take these trinkets, or are you not ? Because, if you set yourself up as a law-giver in my house, the sooner you make way for somebody else, the better I shall like it.'

He stood before her still in the attitude of the tempter proffering the jewels ; but Rapha never moved. It seemed to her in that brief moment, hardly of indecision, but of pause, that if she lifted a finger to accept the hateful bribe now, she should forfeit the right to choose between good and evil. Her lips would be sealed on all weighty matters in her father's hearing for ever ; her conscience would be yielded up to his keeping.

On the other hand, filial duty prompted compromise, if not yielding. Her father was growing old, his life had been hard; but for herself, he was alone in the world. Could any circumstances justify a line of conduct that meant not merely sore feeling and painful conflict, but perpetual estrangement?

For she realized, as clearly as it is possible to realize anything by the mental faculty, that this decision must alter the whole tenor of her life. Her father's rough words could admit of no misinterpretation. No middle course was open to her. She must either consent to accept his moral canons and rules of conduct, or alienate, disinherit herself altogether. Worldly consideration did not weigh with her a single moment. Wealth wore the look more of a burden than anything else. She hesitated for the sake of that dead unknown mother whose child she was. She thought of the meeting three months before, of the kindnesses heaped upon her. Here lay the real source of her hesitation. It lasted a moment only.

Once more Mr. Rapham held forth the jewels. He almost, indeed, pushed them into her unwilling hands; but she turned away so abruptly that the case fell to the ground. Picking it up with a low-muttered oath, again wearing that awful pallor of inward rage, only lost the day before, he left her.

He, too, recognised that a crisis had come; they had reached the PARTING OF THE WAYS!

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

AT CROSS PURPOSES.

WHEN Norrice heard the front-door impatiently slammed by her husband, she gave way to bitter tears.

This, then, was the end of her bright dreams! Thus treacherous could be the promise of bridal love and hope and joy mutually shared! How much better the quiet, studious, impersonal life given up for Villedieu's sake, the peaceful existence in which feeling had played but a secondary part, never more, alas! to be her own. So long as she lived, she should remember that terrible morning. Already she felt old, gray, and indifferent.

She decided at once to go straight home. No one, not even her mother, knew as yet of this marriage. It might be kept secret for the present, for some time, perhaps indefinitely, perhaps always; meantime Villedieu would be free to resume his old existence, and the step he had taken so blindly would be to all intents and purposes cancelled. He had made a mistake. Instead of marrying a rich woman whose fortunes were to mend his own, he had wedded a penniless teacher, incurring fresh burdens and responsibilities. Any proud woman, Norrice reasoned, must feel as she did now. The notion of continuing to live under

his roof, sitting down to his table, receiving apologetic tenderness, seemed insupportable. He would be kind, and kindness under such circumstances might wear the look of an insult too. One consolation saved her from despair. If the life of feeling was indeed dead within, fruit and flower alike blasted, the plant withered to the root, that of intellect remained yet full of strong, vigorous life. She could not believe in Villedieu's love any longer. Her love for him was turned to sorrow and bitterness; but she could still believe in herself, at least that part of herself with which love had nothing to do. Is human capacity, she asked, limited to a single effort, capable of one manifestation only? In the serene domains of scientific inquiry, as in the sunnier, more flowery regions of art and poetry, may not the imagination be exercised if once successfully, a dozen, nay, a hundred times? The first-fruits of her genius had been sacrificed, it was true; but the inventive faculty remained. Might she not yet discover something, invent something, and so mend Villedieu's fortunes? Discoveries as valuable as those made yesterday might surely be looked for on the morrow; and if mental activity is unlimited, still less can we fix any boundary mark to its sphere. What can be called final when we deal with science and matters amenable to scientific investigation?

As she pondered this, there came into her mind that beautiful apostrophe of her favourite poet, Schiller, to her favourite hero, Columbus:

'Steer on, O great-hearted seaman, westward, and yet ever westward;
 Follow the spirit that guides thee, let scoffers jest as they may!
 Were the coast thou seekest not there, yet would it rise from the
 ocean,
 With Genius Nature is bound ever in union eternal;
 What the first regards as a promise, the last will fulfil, never failing!

'Yes,' Norrice argued, and the thought saved her from morbidness and despair, 'I have dreamed of a thousand achievements that may not after all be visionary. We must not, we dare not, apply the words "incredible," "impossible," to Nature or Nature's laws. I will go home to my mother. I will continue my lessons as usual, devoting all my spare time to study and research. Before many years, before twelve months even have elapsed, I may be able to hand over to my husband the wealth he had counted upon when making me his wife.'

Villedieu came back, as he had said, early, and with a dark frown of care on his brow. Like Norrice, he seemed to have made up his mind to put away sentimentality for the present, and look stern realities in the face. This brief, rapturous dream of love and closest sympathy was rudely interrupted. It was useless to ignore the fact that everyday life presented a dire problem.

There was this difference in the attitude of the pair, a difference that Norrice felt acutely. Whilst Villedieu's reproaches of a few hours back, hasty and ill-considered although they might be, opened to her thinking a very gulf between them, he appeared to think his own conduct perfectly natural, and impossible to be misunderstood. Circumstances of her own bringing about had made existence very uncomfortable; the very acme of embarrassment, indeed, seemed thereby incurred; but she was his wife, he was her husband. Love was still there to console them for such traverses of fortune. They should continue to be all in all to each other. A happier condition of worldly things would bring back the careless joy of yesterday. Thus, at least, he regarded the position, unable to see it in any other light.

There was no need to ask how the interview with Mr. Rapham had terminated; disagreeable news enough was written on Villedieu's face.

'Fred,' she began. How unlike her tone of voice to that of yesterday! Then the familiar name, so timidly yet so tenderly uttered, had seemed to her a joyous spell, a charm linking them together closer than words could say. Now she got out the name with an effort; the formal, unloverlike 'Mister' would have been far easier to pronounce. 'Let me go on with my teaching, as usual, for the present.' She was gathering courage to add, 'Let me go back to my mother.'

'Nonsense!' he replied. 'When you want money, come to me for it. We can't do much for your mother just yet; but you say she has a small annuity?'

'Oh, mamma needs no help,' Norrice answered proudly. 'I was thinking of myself.'

'I don't say that we shall not be put to straits now and then, till something turns up,' Villedieu went on. 'I may inherit property any day, or if I make a good figure in Parliament, I may get a place. All these things, however, are in Cloud Cuckoo Town. For the present we must live—upon nothing.'

'And that means getting into debt?' Norrice said sadly.

'That means getting into debt!' Villedieu answered with a reckless, even jaunty air. 'People are only too happy to trust me, which is one comfort.'

The thought evidently did not comfort Norrice. The cloud of doubt and sadness she had endeavoured to conceal from her husband's eyes was all too apparent.

'Why don't you take things as I do?' he went on. 'You missed the most splendid opportunity of making a fortune

ever perhaps put in the way of a woman ! But the mischief is done. All the lamenting in the world won't undo it ; and if I live to be as old as the patriarchs, I shall never open my lips on the subject again. What we have to do is to keep up our spirits, get out of our hobble as best we can, and look out for the next chance.'

His easy, reckless speech gave Norrice courage to speak out also.

'Would it not be better,' she began, in calm, persuasive tones, no trace of wounded feeling in either voice or look— 'would it not be really better and more prudent for us to keep our marriage secret for the present, for some time, perhaps indefinitely? Nobody as yet has an inkling of the truth. I am not obliged to give account of myself to my mother. And, meantime, I could go on teaching as usual. You would be free from responsibilities. I am sure this is the best thing to do,' she added.

'Do you take me for a monster of selfishness?' he asked. 'Having married a woman I supposed to be rich, am I going to throw her on the world because I find out that she has not a penny? I have never earned any money in my life, but that is no sort of reason why I never should. I shall put my shoulder to the wheel, get a secretaryship or something of the kind. We have taken each other for better for worse, and the better may still come some day.'

All this time Norrice was realizing the unnaturalness of the position in which Villedieu so unexpectedly found himself. Here was a man reared in indolence and irresponsibility, whose career till middle life had been one of careless ease, on a sudden brought face to face with the hard practical realities of life, forced into that struggle for existence which is the gruesome riddle of the many. She felt impelled,

may, bound to free him from such a position, and yield him back his forfeited liberty.

‘Then till the better comes, let me go home,’ she went on, still coldly persuasive. ‘Indeed, indeed, it would be better for both of us. Let me leave you for a time.’

‘You speak as if we had merely entered into a partnership, and there were no feelings or inclinations to be taken into account,’ he replied, here, indeed, describing Norrice’s state of mind to the letter. ‘Why in Heaven’s name should you leave me, I want to know?’

‘Life would be easier to you. You would have, as before, only yourself to think of,’ she said.

‘Really,’ he replied, not in the least mollified, rather more and more ruffled by every argument so gently adduced, ‘I cannot understand you to-day, Norrice. One would think this wretched affair of the invention, the selling your birthright for a mess of pottage, for so it is, could destroy every particle of confidence and affection between us. I feel towards you precisely as I did before. You have no reason for feeling otherwise with regard to me. As I say, let us forget the matter and make the best of things.’

But Norrice must still plead proudly for herself. Not a syllable he uttered but seemed to separate them farther and farther.

‘At any rate, I might return to my mother till your affairs are more settled,’ she said. ‘It would make me so much happier to be earning money. I cannot bear the notion of becoming a burden to you.’

‘You seem to forget one important fact,’ he made answer, and as he spoke his face wore an expression of real anger. ‘You are my wife. You must find some better excuse for getting rid of a bad bargain.’

Her unreasoning pride, so he called it, seemed as great an obstacle to an understanding as his own hard, matter-of-fact conclusions. Norrice, determined not to quarrel and not to appear to take his words literally, went up to him and offered him the cold kiss of peace.

But it was peace far more painful than open warfare. Burning tears, she knew, would have to be stayed, thoughts of anguish checked, strictest watch kept over look, word and deed, and what was hardest of all to bear, the kindness, nay, the tenderness accepted that to her wounded pride could only mean an apology, a make-believe of the love once relied upon as the very light of heaven.

‘Yes, don’t let us worry each other for nothing,’ Villedieu replied. ‘We have enough on our hands without that.’

The man-servant was just placing their cutlets on the table. When he had gone, Villedieu added, with a wry face :

‘I must swallow my luncheon as fast as I can and be off to the money-lenders. That old Shylock will have his thousand pounds or his pound of flesh. Now if you could discover a quibble in his bargain with either of us, you would be a Portia indeed!’

CHAPTER II.

THE JOYS OF WEDLOCK.

QUITE unexpectedly next morning Norrice walked into her mother’s little parlour, her unexplained holiday having lasted just ten days.

‘So you have come back at last, child, have you?’ Mrs. Bee said, with an air of ill-disguised satisfaction. ‘I do

hope you did not hurry home an hour sooner on my account. You know I am never dull, and though in my young days girls never wanted to leave their parents and be gadding about here, there, and everywhere, we must accept the pernicious tendencies of the age. Well, how have you enjoyed yourself all this while?’

Norrice took off bonnet and cloak, and turning her back to the questioner, answered in monosyllables.

‘Had she done this?’—‘Yes.’ ‘Had she seen so-and-so?’—‘Certainly.’ ‘Had she been there?’—‘Of course.’

This uncommunicativeness on the part of one naturally so vivacious struck Mrs. Bee as peculiar. Upon other occasions Norrice had made a day’s adventure in London as amusing as a chapter of ‘Humphrey Clinker.’ It was like reading ‘Pickwick’ to listen to her, Mrs. Bee always said. Never was such a girl for extracting diversion out of nothing. She would find more entertainment on the top of a tramway-car from the Nag’s Head to King’s Cross than some people in a yacht voyage to Norway.

‘I only hope you have got your money’s worth,’ Mrs. Bee said at last, her suspicions now fairly aroused. ‘One might suppose you had been to a funeral! Well, all sorts of things have happened here since you went away. They say Mr. Villedieu is married.’

Norrice still sat looking in the fire, silence incarnate. Mrs. Bee took up her knitting with an odd look, and sat down also, glancing curiously at her daughter from time to time.

‘I always liked that Mr. Villedieu uncommonly,’ she said, ‘and—everybody remarked it, Norrice—he seemed to admire you very much.’

Norrice remained dumb.

‘Though, of course, there was every likelihood that he would make up to the heiress, Miss Rapham.’

No word from Norrice.

‘I can’t help thinking when you told me he had proposed to you, that there was some truth in it all,’ Mrs. Bee went on. ‘Men do make such unexpected marriages, and Mr. Villedieu, folks say, was ever a bit of a harum-scarum. Have you seen anything of your admirer since you went away?’

‘Of course,’ murmured Norrice.

Mrs. Bee now laid down her knitting, and perused the pale, pensive girl unreservedly. The merest surmise had become, she knew not how, conviction. That inquisitorial maternal heart was not to be deceived. She knew it all now. Norrice was married to Mr. Villedieu.

‘Why you should conceal anything from your own mother, I cannot conceive,’ Mrs. Bee went on, fond, but querulous. ‘I see now why this visit to London has been protracted from day to day, and why you have come back as indifferent to what is going on as if the world had come to an end. It is wonderful the difference marriage makes in a girl at first. Everything but her own life becomes all on a sudden quite uninteresting to her. I dare say Eve felt the same. The apple would not have tempted her in the first days of the honeymoon, I’ll be bound. But why can’t you out with the truth, and say you are Mrs. Villedieu?’

‘Of what use, since you know it already?’ Norrice replied, unable either to cry or laugh. She felt, in truth, as her mother had said, strangely indifferent.

Mrs. Bee, on the contrary, became suddenly animated and loquacious. She made Norrice take off her glove and display her wedding-ring; she giggled, prattled, crowed.

Norrice, at last, smiled to see her mother's jubilant mood.

'I always said you would make a fine marriage,' Mrs. Bee went on; 'but I never, of course, thought of looking so high as Mr. Villedieu. A man of his rank and position, such a gentleman, with such prospects! And, of course, he must have been over head-and-ears in love with you, to marry you without a penny. That is the advantage we poor women have over rich ones. We are married for ourselves, and not for our money. You don't know how thankful I always felt that I was not an heiress.'

A bitter smile rose to Norrice's lips. The irony of her mother's speech cut deep.

'Then, again,' Mrs. Bee continued, 'a fond, indulgent husband delights in nothing so much as having his wife absolutely dependent on him. Your poor dear father, for instance, used to think of all kinds of little things I might want, and buy them for me—a pair of stays, or anything. I am sure Mr. Villedieu is just the kind of man to do the same.'

'Mamma,' Norrice broke in, anxious to give a fresh turn to the conversation, 'do not think me unkind or undutiful in stealing this march upon you. Mr. Villedieu would have it so. He hated the notion of people gossiping about us beforehand, of fuss and preparation. I should not have left you, of course, had I not hoped to help you all the same.'

'I want help, indeed!' Mrs. Bee said, with a contemptuous toss of the head. 'I have my annuity, and if a single woman can't live upon fifty pounds a year, she deserves to go to the workhouse.' Here she changed her tone to one of earnest persuasion. 'Mind, Norrice, what

your mother says. Never go to your husband for a penny on my account. One can never tell how men take things; even the best of them are apt to look upon mothers-in-law as next door to ogresses.'

'My dear, good mother,' Norrice said, fairly overcome, now at last shedding a few quiet tears; 'the best of men are not worth such mothers as you. How could I leave you, mammy dear!'

Mrs Bee took alike Norrice's tears and caresses very stolidly.

'Better to weep for joy than for grief,' she said. 'I am sure I used to cry every day when I was with your dear father on our honeymoon. He looked for it as regularly as for eggs and bacon at breakfast, and used to take me on his knee (whilst they were getting cold) and pet me like a baby. You may well cry! Married to Mr. Villedieu! The envy, I'll be bound, of every unmarried girl in the place! I should be ready to die of happiness were I in your shoes.'

This, again, was more than Norrice could bear. She jumped from her seat and proceeded to adjust bonnet and cloak.

'I am now off to see Rapha,' she said.

'Rapha! Miss Rapham!' Mrs. Bee exclaimed. 'You won't find her. Don't you know what has happened? Mr. Rapham has quarrelled with his daughter—no one knows about what—and he has turned her out of doors without a penny. So, at least, the story goes. I dare say Lady Letitia knows all about it.'

Norrice dropped into a chair with the look of one who hears fatal news. Ill-omened indeed it was to her. Not only she divined the truth and commiserated Rapha from the bottom of her heart—that thought was grief and per-

plexity enough ; but this rupture of Rapha with her rich father dashed all her hopes of helping Villedieu to the ground. Rapha was just and generous, Rapha loved her as a sister. Norrice had intended to go to her now, not, of course, to plead on her husband's behalf, or in any way to interfere with his affairs. Some time before Rapha had confided to her friend the fact of a small legacy, a few hundred pounds, lately left her by an aunt. 'Do accept this money as part payment for your invention,' she said ; but Norrice had strenuously resisted the generous pleading.

Now, however, she determined to accept the sum, a mere bagatelle to an heiress, but of great importance to herself. She would merely ask the loan of it, to be repaid out of her future earnings—earn money she must and would.

Her husband's affairs were terribly embarrassed ; all kinds of contretemps had happened. The use of Rapha's little legacy would prove a veritable godsend just now.

But this unexpected piece of news entirely changed the aspect of affairs. Rapha, of course, needed the money herself. No help could be looked for in that quarter.

She sat pale as a ghost.

'Let me give you a glass of wine,' Mrs. Bee said. 'Nothing like coming home after a honeymoon to upset the nerves. Everything seems to have turned topsy-turvy since we went away to get married.'

She poured out a glass of wine, and Norrice did not say nay. Her heart was sinking within her.

'And, Norrice,' Mrs. Bee added, going to her desk and taking out a little old-fashioned knitted purse with five sovereigns in it, 'this is the money I have saved out of the housekeeping lately ; just put it in your pocket. Don't go to your husband for a shilling before you have been married

a month. You have money owing you for lessons, you know. Get that in, too, so as to set you up a bit. I don't want it.'

Pale and resistless, Norrice let Mrs. Bee slip the five sovereigns into her pocket, but the wine revived her. She was soon her old, strong, spirited self again. She would be strong and vanquish evil fortune, she said to herself.

'There is one thing I wanted to say to you,' she began. 'Please, mother, leave my workshop as it is for the present. Mr. Villedieu will be often away from home, and whenever I have an opportunity I shall come here and work away at my inventions as before.'

Mrs. Bee had long accustomed herself never to be astonished at anything Norrice might say or do. She listened all the more respectfully now, as Norrice was no longer a girl living under her mother's roof, but a married woman; the wife, moreover, of a man almost a stranger to his mother-in-law, she felt bound not to pry too closely into her affairs.

'What on earth should I want with the room?' she asked pettishly. 'Though, I dare say, if I shut myself up there and gave my mind to nothing else, I could invent wonderful things as well as other people. I have often thought of trying. There are so many little things, easy enough to invent if one only hit upon the right principle, that would immensely add to one's daily comfort—pokers that would stir the fire of their own accord, for instance; self-acting window-cleaners; automatic ironers to do the work we get so heated over. If all the inventions I dream of were brought to perfection, life would be pure unmitigated enjoyment from morning till night.'

'Then you must certainly appropriate my workshop,' Norrice replied, with her old merry laugh.

Her mother chatted on, and she again fell into a reverie.

Mrs. Bee set down this dreaminess as a natural consequence of the honeymoon. Wedlock may not realize a girl's extravagant dreams of bliss, it may not mean cruellest disenchantment; but for the time it does set a girl 'a-thinking.' She is like a child who, after many promises, is at last taken to the fair, and whose mind is occupied with drawing comparisons between the vision and the reality.

'Does nobody know where Rapha is?' she asked.

'Of course somebody does; most likely Lady Letitia. And, after all, things may not be so bad as they say. One might fancy every word some people say was handsomely paid for, by the way they exaggerate. A pretty commotion will be raised when it comes out that Mr. Villedieu has married you.'

Mrs. Bee uttered this sentiment with as much vivacity and triumph as if the Strawton folks were to learn of Norrice's marriage to a prince.

Once more a bitterly ironic smile rose to the young wife's lips. So lonely, so heart-broken she felt just then, it was as much as she could do to refrain from falling with sobs on that motherly breast, but she mastered herself. Her mother's lot had been a hard one; she would not rudely crush her bright hopes now.

'I suppose we shall hear of you going to Court now, Norrice, dining with the Prime Minister—in fact, all sorts of grand doings! I shall sit at home and imagine it all. By far the plan that best suits me.'

'Ah! your imagination must be lively indeed,' Norrice said, obliged to be merry in order to hinder herself from weeping. 'We are going, of course, into the biggest house in Park Lane; the front door will be flung open by house-

porters in sky-blue plush and silk stockings; dinner will not be served before nine o'clock at earliest; and to each guest will be one flunkey and ten wineglasses. That is what I call the tip-top of enjoyment. That is why I married Mr. Villedieu. But now I must really set off for Lady Letitia's.'

She kissed her mother with affected gaiety.

'Good-bye, mammy dear, till dinner-time; one of your dear old dinners made out of nothing, you know! I'm home for a holiday. I'm not going back till night.'

Mrs. Bee watched the tall, slender figure disappear from the window, then sat down pondering deeply.

Simple as she was, no child more artless in many things, she yet possessed that unfailing motherly instinct, never at fault, and it flashed upon her the truth now. In spite of Norrice's gleams of vivacity, this bride of a few days was desperately unhappy.

CHAPTER III.

NEMESIS.

WHEN Mr. Rapham returned from his farm that afternoon, the great house kept going by contract seemed as dreary as the inside of a pyramid. A deathlike silence reigned over it. Hitherto the first thing he had heard on entering was the sound of Rapha's piano, the sweet treble of her young voice as she sang amid her flowers, or the talk and laughter of visitors around her tea-table. That girlish presence, that overflowing of youth, joy, innocence and happy surprises

seemed to fill the place, leaving no room for ennui, dulness, or monotony. Does not the very charm of youth consist in its absence of routine, its spontaneity? And when, as in Rapha's place, are added to the witchery of naïveté and impulse, deep generous affection and the faculty of realizing the unevident relations of things, then, ah! then, youth wields a wand indeed! For Mr. Rapham it was enough that Rapha captivated him. He did not care whether Rapha were gifted or no. He liked her to please and amuse others as she pleased and amused himself. Rare talents, exceptional gifts, insight, he did not ask for.

It was growing dusk when he drove home, fierce passions in his heart, once more the terrible pallor of suppressed rage in his face.

With a dim presentiment of what had happened, but without opening his lips to the automatic attendants, he walked straight to the drawing-room.

All was as usual. The fire burned brightly; the curtains were closely drawn; the candelabra gave cheerful light. A little tea-table, on which gleamed a tiny service in chased silver, was drawn close to the fire.

Such an interior would have been perfect but for one drawback, the unnatural trans-human silence and stillness reigning throughout the place. The silence, indeed, seemed audible, the beats of time to be counted, as to those who keep midnight vigils.

Mr. Rapham poured out a cup of tea, a second, a third, and drank feverishly. Then he went to Rapha's boudoir. There also reigned the same chilling, eerie quiet. Her little piano was closed, her work-basket no longer in its usual place; her old-fashioned desk he missed also.

The old trader had not a particle of sentiment in his com-

position, no latent softness in his nature ; but he was human, he shared one instinct with humbler creatures in the scale of life. Rapha was his own child, he was her father. When he realized the fact that she had left him, his feeling was of fierce anger rather than bitter sorrow. He never for a moment owned himself in the wrong, much less did he seek to condone her conduct.

All the pain, however, if not all the tenderness of sorrow, was his. Her departure hurt him as much as any calamity could do. Perhaps, had he seen her lying dead before him, he would not have felt more stricken, more lonely. That first evening of solitude in the big house seemed interminable. Hitherto each accessory of his superabundant wealth had gratified him for Rapha's sake—the glitter of plate and crystal, the elaborate dinner, the ceremonious service.

Rapha sitting opposite to him in her pretty evening dress was so easy, in the midst of all the splendour, so animated, so full of resources, that a *tête-à-tête* dinner ever seemed too short. The meal over, she would chat to him whilst plying her embroidery-frame, read scraps of news from the paper, amuse him with old-fashioned melodies on the piano ; then, quite regularly, when coffee had been served, they had their game of cribbage or *béziq*ue.

Mr. Rapham could not read to himself. No book ever written interested him in the very least ; even to glance at a newspaper bored him greatly.

So the first long evening of loneliness began and ended in brooding.

She had taken him at his word, then ? He sat pondering, not on the best means of bringing her to her senses, so he put the matter, but of punishing such undutifulness and

folly. As he pondered and pondered, he came to the conclusion there was only one way.

He must marry again.

The notion was far from pleasing to him. He had loved his own wife just as he loved Rapha, because she belonged to him, because she was his own. He had married, too, before embarking on that soul-deadening traffic in human lives. Soft memories still clung to the period of his short wedlock. Now marriage could only mean to him an encroachment upon his liberty. Suppose he married one of Lady Letitia's daughters, such an alliance must hamper him in many ways. The Lowfunds family, too, was poor and proud. In marrying one, he should marry the whole family. His purse would be regarded as common property, a poor return for the condescension shown in accepting his hand.

Marry again, however, he must, if only to punish Rapha. She should learn that this wealth she affected to despise was regarded by others with very different eyes. Experience would teach her that the world is only too glad to take people as it finds them, leaving their antecedents alone.

'Miss Rapham left word that she had to go to town for a few days, and would write to you,' said Rapha's maid, breaking in upon his reverie.

The girl was the only bit of personality in the house. She alone ventured to show a little interest in her employers, and to hazard guesses as to what was going on. She was hoping now for an explanatory word, but none came.

'Good,' was the master's frigid reply. Next day the pondering began afresh. Dreary as had been his dinner, breakfast was drearier still; no ripple of girlish laughter on the staircase, no kiss from sweet lips, no merry talk over the

morning's letters, no apparition of youth, love, and sprightliness at the opposite end of the table.

The more he missed her presence, the more resentful and vindictive he became. He was farther than ever from the mood that might have brought about a reconciliation. If a tear, a fond word of remonstrance, a kiss of peace, had been difficult to him before, now they seemed impossible. He sternly confronted the odious, the horrible conviction that out of self-defence he must go on steeling his heart against his own child.

All the while he was willing one thing and wishing another. In those first hours of his desolation he expected, rather than hoped, much less wished—so at least he said to himself—to see Rapha back again. She would repent of her folly, ask pardon, and all would be with them as before. If she came to him at once, he should not, of course, send her away. But he wanted no scenes—the reconciliation must be got over tacitly and quietly.

That morning's post did, indeed, bring a sign from Rapha, a little note blurred and blotted with tears.

'DEAREST PAPA,' she wrote,

'Pray forgive me if I seem ungrateful. I am very unhappy.

'Your affectionate

'RAPHA.'

Having read and re-read the missive, Mr. Rapham crushed it in his palm and threw it with an oath in the fire. He swallowed his coffee, munched a bit of toast, then walked to the window and looked out.

It was a brilliant winter morning, and never had the fine

old trees of Strawton Park showed to better advantage, each leafless bough delicately pencilled against the pale-blue sky ; whilst in striking contrast to these fairy silhouettes was the massy foliage of pine and ilex. Such pictures remind us that without our northern winters, bleak and biting as they are, we should lose some of the loveliest, most poetic aspects of Nature. These forests that are no forests—that spirit of the woods without the form summer gives them—may they not symbolize an existence without the fleshly envelope, the spirit-world the human mind is led to believe in and aspire to? If the material world can show so much beauty, bereft of all we are accustomed to associate with life, may it not be so with that other beyond the tomb, when our fleshly visible selves shall have passed away, crumbled to dust?

Mr. Rapham took no account of Nature. Scenery, atmosphere, weather, were alike indifferent to him. As he stood thus looking on a scene that was positive enchantment, he thought of Rapha and of the bitterness of her ingratitude to him.

‘Why did men marry and beget children?’ he thought. ‘Why had he not stayed in Africa and left Rapha to follow her own behests?’ He might have foreseen that no good could come of this settling down in England after so many years’ absence—this fireside life with a spoiled schoolgirl. No—a wife, a woman of experience and judgment, able to see things from his own point of view, would suit him infinitely better than a daughter. That was the kind of partnership he wanted.

As he stood thus, full of dark, vindictive thoughts, he heard the rustle of silk skirts outside, and his heart gave a great leap. She had come back !

The sound of a soft, engaging voice undeceived him.

‘Dear Mr. Rapham, pray excuse my early visit,’ Lady Letitia said; ‘I am obliged to take an early train to town and called here on my way.’

‘Pray take a chair, I am happy to see you,’ he said. ‘Indeed,’ he added, eyeing his visitor with an odd expression, ‘your ladyship is the very person I wanted to see. I was going to pay my respects to you this very morning.’

‘Then my visit is highly *à propos*,’ laughed Lady Letitia, somewhat nervously. She never felt sure of what her uncouth neighbour might or might not say. ‘I came—pray do not accuse me of interfering—I came on Rapha’s account; the dear child——’

Lady Letitia! broke in Mr. Rapham roughly, yet intending no disrespect; ‘you mean kindly both by myself and my daughter, I am sure. But no excuses for Rapha, if you please. You are a mother. If your girls set themselves up as judges, you would feel much as I do, I presume.’

‘I did not come here as Rapha’s apologist,’ Lady Letitia replied, anxious to show in the first place her sympathy for himself; in the second, her sympathy for Rapha. ‘I dare say at her age I might have felt as she does. You and I are no longer young, Mr. Rapham. With us, sentiment is relegated to a secondary place. We are compelled to accept realities, often hard ones, and take the world very much as we find it. At the same time, this difference between yourself and your sweet girl is so painful, any common friend must feel it so acutely, that I assure you I would do anything in order to bring about an understanding, anything in the world.’

Mr. Rapham looked wholly irresponsive. It became evident to Lady Letitia that she was pouring water into a

sieve. His hard, bitter look was not to be misconstrued, and it expressed the irrevocable verdict of his mind better than words could have done.

‘We may as well change the subject,’ he said drily. ‘What I wanted to say to you was this: I have made up my mind to marry again.’

‘Really!’ Lady Letitia exclaimed, with another nervous little laugh; as she afterwards confessed to Gracie, ‘There was no accounting for Mr. Rapham; she felt half afraid he was going to propose to herself!’

He continued, with the air of a man who is quite indifferent to criticism:

‘I am sixty-two. I have one of the handsomest fortunes in these parts, and I can’t carry it to the grave with me. My money must go somewhere, to somebody. Now, ma’am, I put it to you as a family matter, would one of your young ladies have me, do you think? I have nothing to say against any one of them. They seem to me just the thing!’

‘Indeed, you flatter my poor girls,’ Lady Letitia replied, blushing and smiling, wondering if Gracie would be heroic enough to sacrifice herself on the altar of sisterly affection.

‘I don’t intend flattery,’ was the blunt reply. ‘Your girls are not, perhaps, so handsome as some. They can’t help that; and you have told me yourself you have no fortune to give them. But they have fine figures, and fine manners, and seem to me able to put two and two together. Just have it out with them quietly, all between ourselves, you know, and if one of the young ladies has taken a fancy to me—to my money, you know, which is the same thing—I’ll marry her, as true as my name is Ralph Rapham.’

‘It is very good of you to say so, I am sure,’ Lady Letitia

replied, too much taken aback and diverted to feel the slightest affront. 'Girls are all capricious. They want one thing to-day and quite the opposite to-morrow. But I am sure my elder daughters will highly appreciate the compliment paid to them, anyhow.'

'Look you!' Mr. Rapham went on quite seductively; 'you are a woman of sense, my lady. You know the worth of money. Manage this little business for me, and I'll be the best friend you ever had.'

He added, with the air of a deeply-injured man: 'Things are now serious with me. I should not like to leave my money to charity. I have come honestly by it, whatever folks may say. I am not so old but that I might still live to see a son grown up; and I shall leave my wife pretty much to her own devices. Any woman might do worse than marry me.'

'Without doubt, dear Mr. Rapham,' Lady Letitia replied, secretly hoping that either Gracie or Charlotte might be induced to see the matter in a favourable light; 'and I wish you every happiness. But that dear child——'

'It is my daughter who has cast me off, not I who have cast off my daughter,' Mr. Rapham said sharply; then, wishing to have Lady Letitia's good opinion, he added: 'She shan't starve, of course; I am not an unnatural father.'

'As if I should set you down for that!' Lady Letitia said.

'And if you did—if you did! We are answerable to nobody but the police for our good behaviour,' laughed Mr. Rapham, and that plangent retort effectually silenced Lady Letitia. She went away musing on the strange concatenation of events that had brought golden Fortune—a vision of Haroun el Raschid—to her door.

CHAPTER IV.

TAKING COUNSEL.

WHAT refuge should Rapha seek in her anguish and desolation but Silverthorn's faithful love? After that terrible scene with her father she had gone straight to her old London home, the professor's roof, under which she had spent so many happy hours, and of course her little note to Silverthorn brought him at once.

'What ought I to do?' she asked of the monitor, having told him all, with sweet eyes brimful of love and sorrow.

Never, perhaps, was temptation more distractingly placed before the eyes of wistful lover. Silverthorn's first impulse was, of course, to say, 'Marry me!' This, under the circumstances, seemed the simplest course, the most satisfactory cutting of the Gordian knot; but he checked the impulse, and determined to be true to his best self, whether Rapha at first should misunderstand him or no.

'Listen,' he said, having smilingly kissed away her tears, 'you shall have no high-flown theories, but what appears to me the plain, simple, straightforward truth. I think, then, you should try to reconcile yourself with your father, and let things go on exactly as usual, for two reasons. In the first place, this enormous wealth will be yours one day; you can then do with it as you please. There will be no one to say you nay,' he went on significantly. 'You will be at liberty to devote the whole to good pur-

poses, thus setting conscience at rest. Secondly, in case—I do not think it in the least likely, but we must take such probabilities into consideration—in case, then, any facts come to light disparaging to your father's reputation—suppose that inquiries should be made concerning his transactions in the Soudan, suppose things turn out awkwardly for him—is it for his daughter, his only child, to hold aloof?’

‘Poor papa! oh! will it come to that?’ Rapha cried, all her anxieties, all her sympathies for the moment being with her father. ‘Yes, I see it now. I ought to bear everything, to put my own feelings quite out of the question. I will go back to him at once.’

‘Wait a little,’ Silverthorn said. ‘So far I have not given you my own opinion, but have only stated the case. The two conclusions I have placed before you are obvious: no one can deny them. Now let me tell you what I feel personally about the matter. Of course I am speaking against my own interest. Cast off your father, and what should hinder us from being married to-morrow? We should be as happy as possible on my income. I am no great lover of money myself. A thousand a year, which I may earn some day, is the utmost I aspire to. But would it be right for us to do that?—for us to marry, I mean, taking advantage, as it were, of this quarrel, still further exasperating Mr. Rapham by such an act of defiance? No, dear; we must wait yet a little longer.’

There was some sadness in that last little speech, but the next moment he was his old alert, frank, genial self.

‘Now for my own opinion. I don't think any of us ought to sit in judgment on Mr. Rapham, much less you, his own daughter. Slavery is odious, wherever it is prac-

tised—there is no doubt whatever of that; and slave-trading ought to be put down. But it is for States and Governments to take the initiative in punishing offenders, not for individuals; and what I say on the subject applies to many others. Private citizens must not act the part of lawgivers, much less judges, however much their feelings may be implicated.’

‘Then you think me in the wrong?’ Rapha asked sorrowfully.

‘I think your disapproval should be passive in the case of your own father,’ Silverthorn went on. ‘Moreover, the mischief is done. He has made his money, and, I presume, has now no more to do with slave-dhows than I have.’

Rapha listened in a painful frame of indecision. She longed for nothing so much as to be reconciled to her father; but Silverthorn evidently did not understand—she could not make him understand—the wall of separation that had risen between them.

‘And there is another thing to think of,’ urged the monitor; ‘Mr. Rapham is growing old. He has ever been the kindest father to you. You would not like him to be left in his old age to hirelings and strangers.’

‘I ought to love poor papa dearly, I know. I shall never forget his kindness to me—never, never! But can we love those who do wrong, whose lives have not been straight and good?’ Rapha said. ‘And, remember, we have seen very little of each other. Had I known him in my childhood, he must have seemed closer, dearer to me. I have tried hard to love him,’ she added, with passionate tenderness. ‘I wanted to love him more than anything in the world——’

She did not heed Silverthorn's disconcerted look as she got out the dreadful confession.

'That is the hardest of all to bear. He is my own father, and I cannot love him!'

'Don't think yourself alone there,' Silverthorn said. 'How many of us have to live with, even to cherish, those we ought to love, yet cannot! It is one of the curses of life; blessed, thrice blessed those who can honestly love their nearest and so-called dearest! But a habit of liking grows up and does duty for real affection. I am sure few daughters live on better terms with their father than you did with yours; whilst as to sons—the less said about them the better. Yes, dearest, what you have to do is to smooth matters down. We must plan a reconciliation.'

Whilst acknowledging Silverthorn's advice to be single-minded and sound, Rapha was yet conscious of a feeling of disenchantment. There was the same touch of worldly wisdom about his counsels that she had resented in Lady Letitia's. His conclusions were certainly inevitable, and she felt bound to accept them; but would not Norrice have taken a wholly different tone? There were fine shades of feeling, delicate, almost impalpable degrees of repugnance and long-suffering, that Silverthorn seemed to ignore altogether. Norrice would have realized the difficulty, rather impossibility, of two human beings living harmoniously together whose very notions of right and wrong were directly at variance. For not only did she shrink from her father's past career; no one knew—she had hitherto hardly dared to confess to herself—how often his daily words and deeds, even looks, had shocked and repelled her. There seemed in him to be lacking the

moral sense that, if it does not prevent the unscrupulous from acting shamelessly, at least puts them on their guard, and acts the part of sentinel in their dealings with others. To her, of late, his mind had been freely opened, and although filial duty kept criticism in check, the perpetual condition of disapproval was a heavy strain.

Could she re-embark on such an existence, quietly sit down by a fireside desecrated in her eyes for ever, let her lap be filled with roses, in every one of which a serpent lay coiled?

Evil is not final and restricted within certain limits. What Rapha dreaded was some new phase of her father's character being revealed to her—some revelation to come that must divide them still further.

Nevertheless, she allowed herself to be guided by Silverthorn.

She sat down and penned, under his dictation, a second and much more explicit note than the first. She was ready to go back to him, her note said, to forget and forgive all that had happened; be his own loving, dutiful daughter once more.

'You will now have nothing to reproach yourself with,' said the monitor, as he read her missive with satisfaction. 'Your father will delightedly meet you half-way. And if not—if not,' he added, with lover-like insinuation, 'there are plenty of churches handy. We will just go and get married.'

Two or three days passed, and Mr. Rapham gave no sign. The second note had shared the fate of the first—just been glanced at, crumpled in his palm, then thrust in the fire. Silverthorn's prognostics, so far, did not seem likely to come true.

Secretly rejoicing, although he felt that he ought to wish for a reconciliation between father and daughter, he proposed a third expedient.

‘Suppose I go and see Mr. Rapham?’ he said.

Accordingly, having fully prepared his palinode on Rapha’s behalf, and very carefully dressed—we can never be too careful of appearances when about to ask a favour—he set out for Strawton Park. But a glance at the face of the servant told him that his journey was made in vain. One and all of Rapha’s friends, it was now plain, were to be refused admittance

Then Silverthorn went on to Lady Letitia’s ; this mission being equally unproductive as the first.

Lady Letitia blushed, smiled, sighed, tittered, when Mr. Rapham’s name was mentioned. She deeply regretted the misunderstanding between father and daughter, she said ; no one could feel for both more acutely than herself ; but she could not really venture on the part of mediatrix again. She had pleaded for Rapha as a mother might have pleaded for her own child. Mr. Rapham was obdurate, implacable ; no good, only harm, could be gained by further interference at present.

And poor Lady Letitia, like Silverthorn, was willing one thing and wishing another. She half desired to see a reconciliation brought about, because it was her duty to do so, as a right-minded woman ; she would put no stumbling-block in the way of an understanding ; on the contrary, if lifting a finger could help matters, her finger should certainly be lifted. But our poverty, not our will, consents ! A mother of several portionless girls could hardly help wishing that this great fortune might be secured by one of them.

If Mr. Rapham married one of her daughters, he would in time be softened. She was far from wishing to see Rapha disinherited, but there was wealth enough and to spare for two.

Silverthorn returned home crestfallen, yet elate; disappointed, and at the same time in raptures. He had hoped to succeed in his mission, but failure meant the realization of his fondest hopes.

Rapha now belonged to himself. He could make her his wife without let or hindrance.

His look betrayed his disastrous, his too blissful tidings.

'I have done my best, my very best for you,' he began in a doleful voice, his eyes beaming with satisfaction. 'You are alone in the world,' he went on, not a vestige of hopefulness in his accent, yet ill-concealed rapture in his glance.

Rapha also listened with alternate hope and deprecation. She hardly knew which she was wishing for—the thorny path of filial duty, or freedom to love and be happy.

'You are turned out of house and home, my poor child!' he said, lugubrious, funereal as before, at the same time brightening every moment. 'You haven't a penny to call your own, you poor little thing!' he exclaimed, with the tone of one ready to cry, his looks more elate than ever. 'You haven't a creature left to care for you worth mentioning!'

Rapha never once opened her lips. Like her lover, she was ready to laugh and to cry at the same moment. A strange sense of desolation, a stranger sense still of enrichment, was taking possession of her.

'I am very, very sorry for you,' he added, fairly in tears.

She was weeping now tears of over-joy as well as sorrow.

'I will do all I can for you, and that is next to nothing. What will become of you, my poor little Rapha? . . . And

we shall be as happy as the day is long,' he added at last, fairly overcome.

Then he gathered her to his true heart, and they wept together.

'Now, Rapha,' Silverthorn said, when they had recovered themselves, 'I think you and I understand each other about most things without the necessity of long speeches. We are not, of course, going to make matters worse, but, if possible, better, with your father. We know well enough what he would have said had I asked you to marry me before. But he can't think it is your money I am after now.' He added with a wry face: 'I don't say that a handful or two of Mr. Rapham's guineas would not have been acceptable to us——'

'I have five hundred pounds Aunt Susan left me. It is my very own. I will give it to you to-morrow!' Rapha exclaimed.

'We will furnish a little house with it,' the happy lover went on; 'a very little one it must be. And a Tilly Slow-boy in the way of domestic. I fear our household staff must not go beyond that. Then as to housekeeping, do you know a leg of mutton from a calf's head—do you really, when you see it? But to return to your father. I will write him a very respectful letter, and say that we are to be married this day week—well, this day fortnight then, as that seems too soon for you—and perhaps he may come round.'

'Poor papa!' sighed Rapha; 'I feel as if I ought not to be so happy away from him; at the prospect, too, of leaving him for ever.'

'My dear child, had you regarded your father as perfec-

tion itself, a veritable angel in human shape, you would most likely have done the very same thing some day. If girls never quitted the paternal roof to get married, you see, no new houses would be built, for the excellent reason that nobody would want any; no upholstery would be bought from one year's end to the other, which means the universal stagnation of trade; half the Channel steamers would cease to run, and half the foreign hotels put up their shutters, because no happy couples would be going on their honeymoon; the milliner's trade would be ruined; the value of gold fall to zero—no wedding-rings being needed; in fact, national commerce would come to a standstill, and the British Empire, like Jack and Gill, go tumbling downhill at a galloping rate. So marry we ought and must.'

CHAPTER V.

BRIDE AND BRIDE ELECT.

TRUE enough, Silverthorn and Rapha were married, and, as Villedieu had done, Silverthorn took his bride home to bachelor quarters. It was a busy time of the year, no holiday could be expected, leisure for choosing and furnishing a house was wholly out of the question; so they were quietly married one Friday, spent the brief honeymoon at Dover, just to stare at the Channel they might, perhaps, cross some day, Silverthorn said; and on the following Monday returned to London.

How different Rapha's waking up from maiden dreams to Norrice's! No snake lay coiled among the roses now!

no skeleton lurked in the cupboard here ; the only sadness of this pair was one they could share in common. But for thoughts of her father she should be too happy, by far too happy, Rapha said.

Just as each new impression, be it the spectacle of romantic forest, mountain, or river, classic site or storied ruin, enriches the lover of beauty, and widens his power of æsthetic assimilation, so does each new expression of life, each fresh expansion, render a really fine nature more sympathetic.

Thus it was with Rapha : the new-made wife straightway became the tenderer, more wistful daughter. Her wifeness, instead of alienating still more from her father, drew her nearer to him. She felt that she *must* be reconciled now.

Her first visitor was Gracie Lowfunds. The young lady made her appearance one morning quite alone, and with an air of mystery, as if she had something important to communicate. The two girls—great friends always—having kissed each other, and Rapha having blushing accepted Gracie's congratulations, there followed a pause. At last Gracie took her friend's hands in her own, and, blushing in turn, began :

'Do you know—can you guess—what I have come to tell you?' she asked, looking in the other's candid blue eyes.

'Do try!'

'You are going to be married!' Rapha exclaimed.

There are certain facts feminine instinct divines at once, and this is one. A woman, no matter her age or character, be she young, middle-aged, grave or gay, can never conceal her approaching marriage from another.

'Yes,' Gracie replied, reddening ; 'I am going to be married. But to whom? That's the riddle.'

‘To Mr. Morrow, of course,’ Rapha said. ‘I am so happy, dear Gracie. Mr. Morrow has a heart of gold—everyone knows that.’

Gracie, still holding her friend’s hands, now behaved like the veriest giglet going. She blushed, laughed, tittered, looked this way and that; finally got out, with cheeks on fire:

‘I am going to marry your father!’

There was no disbelieving the preposterous statement. Rapha knew well enough that Gracie would have comported herself very differently had Mr. Morrow’s name been on her lips. She would have been calm, self-possessed, dignified, as became her mother’s daughter; no need to turn crimson and giggle at confession of such a bridegroom.

‘I hope you will be pleased,’ Gracie went on, having evidently learnt her part beforehand, and now speaking quietly; ‘your father will no longer be alone. I shall endeavour to fill your place, and, you may be sure of that, to bring you two together again. There is the difference of age to be got over, certainly; but I am twenty-nine; I don’t mind letting *you* know. I shall be thirty next birthday, and mamma says a woman of thirty can marry a man of any age. Do say you don’t disapprove, dear!’ she added caressingly.

Rapha had listened hitherto like one under a spell. She neither coloured nor started as she heard, but sat silent and conscience-smitten. She felt herself the author of this evil. But for her own flight and marriage, would her father have dreamed of taking a young wife?

‘I assure you, dearest,’ Gracie went on, now apologetic, feeling that she must make her motives clear, ‘I should not have accepted Mr. Rapnam but for family considerations

You see, there are so many of us, and mamma can give us no money. I feel that I ought not to refuse. It is a most humiliating position for a girl to be in. Mr. Rapham knows as well as you do that my feeling for him is of friendship only. He is quite ready to accept me upon those terms.'

'You cannot, you dare not marry my father—any man—merely for his money!' Rapha cried, now wifely feeling, womanly instinct having full play. 'I am not thinking of myself; could papa be made happier by marriage, I should rejoice. But have you thought, dear Gracie—have you for a moment looked into the future and realized what your life with him would be? For marriage is not like ordinary friendship. Husband and wife must be so much together, live in such close intimacy, whether they love each other or no. If they are in sympathy—all in all to each other—the intimacy does not shock. There is a sacredness about it which only those who are married can understand. But when there is no such sympathy, and only a show of friendship to begin with—for you know so little of my father, you cannot call him your friend—what is a home—what is marriage then?'

Gracie had in some degree prepared herself for such an outburst. She kissed Rapha's flushed cheek, and answered endearingly:

'All girls cannot marry as you have done, for love, dear. Some are compelled to regard marriage as a duty. And never fear, whatever happens, I shall do my duty as a wife.'

'It is not easy to do one's duty when one is unhappy,' Rapha broke in passionately. 'You could not be happy. You would feel conscience-stricken; for if my father does ill in marrying you, the greater evil is still yours: you wrong

yourself, you wrong him ; you wrong all women in thus perjuring yourself, selling your soul for money.'

The young wife dashed away her burning tears, and went on, determined to spare neither Gracie nor herself. Painful as it was to speak out, she would conceal nothing. Gracie should know the inmost thought of her heart.

'I must tell you the truth,' she said, 'although in doing so I seem to disparage my own father. If I found it hard to love him, would not you find it harder still? For a man shows his best self, only a part of his character, to his daughter, but from his wife he conceals nothing. You would find yourself shocked in little things, till a feeling of shrinking in time became aversion. How could you act a wifely part then? And the double perjury is the same. Be perpetually smooth and compliant to papa, apparently satisfied with your contract, you only act a part; rebel, break openly with your husband, he is still the victim. The evil can never be undone or atoned for. You will never really respect yourself again.' She added with more fire and impressiveness: 'We turn our backs upon the wretched women who sell their souls for a guinea. Are they worse than those who marry rich men for their money? They only do for bread what you do for show and splendour; and their temptation is the greater.'

Gracie listened, pale as a ghost. Conscience-smitten, silenced, she let Rapha say what she would.

'I should not have spoken so plainly to you,' she murmured, 'had you come with the news before my own marriage. But I seem to have learned so many things since leaving papa—since I was married, I mean—and I feel bolder to speak out. Gracie, do be advised by me! Do believe what I say! You can never remain a good woman

if you marry my father—any man double your age—merely for his money. I am a happy wife. We love each other dearly, Gerald and I. But I feel, I seem to understand, how horrible marriage must be without love—at least, without esteem and affection. You would in time grow worldly and hard; it would not much matter to you whether the people you associated with were good or no. If temptation came in your way, you would fall.’ Rapha clasped her friend close now, and laid her hot cheek to Gracie’s cold one. ‘For women cannot live without affection of some kind; and when they are unhappy, they excuse themselves for going wrong, and think allowance should be made for them. Have you thought of that? Oh! think of it before it is too late.’

‘You don’t know the pressure put upon me by mamma and my sisters,’ sobbed the unhappy girl, as she wept on Rapha’s shoulder. ‘We are so poor, and Mr. Rapham has promised to do so much for me, which means doing it for the whole family, you know. I feel as if I ought to sacrifice myself for my sisters. And my case is not like yours. No one has ever fallen in love with me; for Mr. Morrow’s liking is quite another thing. He likes Charlotte and Julia quite as well. And the whole matter is settled now. I don’t feel as if I had the courage to go against everybody’s wishes, and draw back now. Besides,’ she sobbed out, ‘it does not seem to me that my poor life is really worth much. I mean to do my duty, of course. I hope I shall never go wrong. But it is surely of little consequence what becomes of me, and scores, hundreds of women must feel as I do. There are so many of us, and so few seem to be born to anything like a destiny, at least, in our rank. If I had a little money of my own and could set up anything, say a little chicken-

farm on my own account, I should be as happy as the day is long. You see, I am not very ambitious,' said the poor girl, smiling through her tears; 'not nearly ambitious enough. Mamma thinks I ought not to hesitate for a moment when such a fortune as your father's is placed within my reach. I dare not accuse my own mother of heartlessness. I dare not go home and tell her I have changed my mind.'

Rapha let go her tender, appealing hold, and moved a little way off. She did not say a single word more; her strength to remonstrate was spent, but the expression of passive reproach, the look almost of despair, in her face now moved Gracie far more than any words could have done. It seemed to her in that moment of revelation—for revelation it was, the flashing of a new light upon her whole future—that she also stood at the Parting of the Ways; while her good and her evil genius beckoned her to follow for once and for all. With that keen instinct awakened in the most careless by an outburst of noble passion, she realized exactly Rapha's way of seeing things; the generous contagion of a loftier moral standard reached her. She realized the real loss, the real gain, now placed before her mind; on the one hand, forfeiture of all a woman should most dearly prize; on the other, mundane satisfactions and empty joys—the celestial crown exchanged for the muck-rake of Bunyan's pilgrim.

Throwing herself on her knees before her friend, she murmured through her tears:

'Do not cast me off, dear! I will try to be brave and resist—I promise you that.'

CHAPTER VI.

HELPED OUT OF A DILEMMA.

LIKE a timid child, afraid to give the real reason for being kept at school, Gracie cogitated on her way home how best to frame her excuse. Everybody, she knew well enough, would be against her: Lady Letitia, blandness itself; her sister Charlotte, the high-spirited imperious one of the family; and the younger girls, longing to be out of the schoolroom—all wanted Gracie to marry in order that she might make room for themselves. That was the plain, disagreeable truth of the matter. She was in everybody's way. Poor Gracie pondered and pondered. To take Rapha's high moral tone, she knew, would only make herself ridiculous in the eyes of her family. To carry things with a high hand—in other words, boldly to announce the truth, that she was an entity, not to be sold like a chattel, was quite out of the question also. She envied girls possessed of spirit enough to act thus, but owned that such an initiative was wholly beyond her power. What could she say? what could she do?

Rapha's words had impressed Gracie deeply. In her present frame of mind she could not set them at nought any more than the Ten Commandments. Oh! if that kind, gentle, affectionate Mr. Morrow had only proposed to her a week ago, and saved her from this odious, this fearful dilemma!

Gracie was in reality as much afraid to go back as the

naughty child just alluded to, who knows that the dunce's cap at school means the rod at home also. What she dreaded most was her mother's quiet, implacable insistence—the invaluable quality of inexhaustible perseverance. Drop by drop, inch by inch, fair and softly goes far in the day, were Lady Letitia's maxims of life; and very good maxims, too, when applied to recalcitrant daughters. And underlying this insistence was a vein of bitter, even cruel irony. Lady Letitia, with the serenest smile in the world, could utter words that hurt like the stab of a knife or the branding with a hot iron. And once more, when heart-sick and despairing, at the end of her mental resources, and no nearer a loophole of escape than before—once more the thought flashed across Gracie's mind, 'Had Mr. Morrow only proposed to me a week ago!'

The thought was hardly come and gone, when Mr. Morrow himself appeared at the door of the railway-carriage. Gracie was now permitted to travel by railway unaccompanied, and was starting for Strawton from the Midland Station.

Mr. Morrow stood bareheaded, quite unable, as usual, to know what to do. The young lady being alone, was it in accordance with the rules of propriety to enter the same carriage?

Fortunately the brusqueness of the guard decided him. Pushing in the dilatory traveller, he slammed the door to, blew his whistle, and the train steamed off.

Gracie recovered self-possession in a moment. She was not going to let Mr. Morrow into her little secret. A handshake, a courteous good-morning, and she was outwardly herself.

The agitation, indeed, seemed all on Mr. Morrow's side

now. He took off his hat and put it on again ; moved from one seat to another ; opened his paper as if he felt that he ought to read, re-folded it the moment after ; and finally jerked out with a smile and a blush :

‘I am so happy to find that you travel alone. I fancied——’

He seemed too timid, too overcome, to say what he fancied.

‘My sisters do not as yet do so,’ Gracie answered. ‘I am the oldest of the family,’ she added, with sad dignity.

That allusion to her age emboldened Mr. Morrow. It recalled the pleasing fact that she was not so young as to consider a man of fifty old. He grew more and more at his ease.

‘After all,’ he said, ‘on a line like this you are sure to be among neighbours. Everybody at Strawton is a season-ticket-holder. I came down with a dozen acquaintances this morning, for instance, Mr. Rapham among the number.’

That mention of Mr. Rapham made Gracie shiver. It brought back all the wretchedness and weight of care for a moment forgotten. She affected gaiety and recklessness in order to hide her desperate mood.

‘Oh!’ she laughed, ‘I have no fear. I would travel to the other end of the world alone, had I the chance.’

‘How delightful to find a young lady possessed of so much spirit,’ Mr. Morrow said, amazed at his own confidence. ‘I have often wished to make a journey round the world also.’

‘Why don’t you?’ asked Gracie, in her heart envying Mr. Morrow, envying every one of his sex. At least, a man is not compelled to yield to maternal pressure. He can go where he likes, marry whom he chooses, she thought.

Mr. Morrow coloured, and again became timidity incarnate. He replied, in a tone of extreme, almost painful hesitation :

‘Why don’t I? If you will permit me I will tell you why—because I do not like travelling by myself. I suppose it is a natural feeling.’

Then he sighed and looked pensive.

‘I don’t think it is,’ Gracie replied laughingly. ‘Women, of course, cannot make long journeys alone, but many men prefer to do so. My cousin Jack—you have met Jack Braden, I think?—would not be bored with a companion, he says, on any account whatever. As to taking his sister with him when he goes to Japan or the North Pole, he says he would lose his ears first.’

‘Mr. Braden is young,’ Mr. Morrow put in reflectively.

‘And very wild,’ Gracie said.

She hardly knew what she was saying ; she only knew that she must say something.

‘I should like nothing better than to travel with him, if he would only let me. He always has as many adventures as the heroes of Jules Verne’s stories,’ she added.

‘I did not know you were of an adventurous turn,’ Mr. Morrow said, looking at the flushed, excited girl, wondering what had happened to make her so easy, so confidential.

Gracie made no answer, but looked out of the window with a desperate thought in her mind.

‘Oh, why,’ she was asking herself, ‘when a woman is at bay, as I am, when all her own people are against her, as mine are—why may not a girl unburden herself to a good, honest, affectionate man like this, and say, “Take me! Only free me from my prison, make me your wife, and the debt of gratitude shall be amply paid”?’

Things had brought the daughter of a noble house to such a pass as this ! The train was speeding on ; in twenty minutes more the porters would shout 'Strawton !' and she would be driven home in the big carriage drawn by two horses, envied, perhaps, by the pale straw-plaiters as they glanced at her from the dull manufactory windows, in reality the unhappiest creature that wintry sun shone down upon.

And again and again she said to herself :

'Why, oh, why was an initiative never permitted to her sex ? Why were the doors of manly help, sympathy, affection, never to be opened save from within ?'

It was unfortunate for the timid lover that he could not read her thoughts. Counting the scant moments as they glided by, painfully reflecting that such an opportunity of speaking out might never occur again, Mr. Morrow nevertheless felt quite unable to go beyond common-places.

'Adventure is very alluring, certainly. I am not surprised that you are attracted by it. A certain neighbour of ours, I fancy, is an adventurer. Mr. Rapham——'

'Don't speak of Mr. Rapham !' Gracie cried, with an aghast look.

That look, and the changed expression of her face as she turned round quickly, confronting him, gave Mr. Morrow courage. He was not wholly in the dark as to Mr. Rapham's overtures to the Lowfunds ladies. Rumours had reached his ears that the rich trader, having cast off his daughter, was anxious to marry again. His frequent visits to Lady Letitia, and the attentions he showed to the family, all pointed to one conclusion.

Gracie's deprecatory words and glance told him much more. Hesitating and diffident, Mr. Morrow was not wanting in tact. Kindness of heart and delicacy of feeling stood

him in stead for the superior keenness of observation possessed by other men. Light flashed on him now. He understood Gracie's unnatural animation, her alternating flushes and pallor, the traces of tears on her cheeks. Mr. Rapham had asked her to marry him, and Lady Letitia pressed the suit. The poor girl, like some unhappy bird, was struggling in the toils of a snare, from which, if once drawn around her, she could never escape.

'I won't speak of Mr. Rapham, of course, since you do not wish it,' he said, in a wholly altered voice, the voice of a lover pleading his own cause.

Her agitation made him eloquent.

'I want, indeed, very much to speak of myself. I hope Mr. Rapham—pray forgive me, I intended on no account to mention a name so distasteful to you. What I wanted to say was, I am so happy that Mr. Rapham—a thousand pardons—that nobody has forestalled me; at least, I hope such is the case. We have so very little time left—the next station is Strawton. Dear Miss Lowfunds—dear Gracie! do tell me before the train stops that I am not forestalled.'

But Gracie found time to tell him much more. In the midst of her loneliness, in the midst of worldliness and artificiality from which a moment before she had seen no escape, the voice of true, honest affection had spoken.

What did it matter to her that Mr. Morrow was a retired manufacturer? Had he been a retired chimney-sweep, he would have, all the same, worn the garb of an angel just then.

She could not think of traditional family pride or dignity. Sincerity compelled sincerity, openness called for openness in turn.

So, in that brief interval, she poured out her story, the first woman's story ever confided to Mr. Morrow's ears. He had saved her from a life of shame and dishonour, perhaps from worse things still; and, as Gracie's candid eyes met those of her unromantic yet manly lover, she read there assurances of a very different future. Life might be prosaic by Mr. Morrow's side; certainly the lot awaiting her as his wife could be no brilliant one. But the path before her was straight and open; wayside flowers would border it, the broad heavens shine upon it, and no whispers of conscience spoil the daily sum of peace.

'Dear me!' Lady Letitia said, when Gracie, with smiles and tears, had told her strange story. 'What a mercy we did not begin to mark the linen with "G. R."! It must, of course, all go back now, and a much more inexpensive trousseau be bought—unless Charlotte will really accept Mr. Rapham. I will talk to her seriously about it.'

Gracie forbore to make any intercession for her sister. Charlotte, she knew, was well able to take care of herself. But for the rest of the day, and many days after, she was like a bird escaped from prison. She laughed, she danced, she sang; she behaved, Lady Letitia at last said, with a giddiness very unbecoming in the eldest of six sisters.

'And really, Gracie,' she said, 'one might suppose you were going to marry a duke instead of a retired manufacturer. Such is the pass things have come to in these days!'

CHAPTER VII.

THE DEMON OF WRATH.

WE are told that sparrows and French beans are never seen in Siberia ; otherwise, but for hedgerow chirpers and vegetation in wayside gardens, many a winter day at home might remind us of Russia's purgatory. At Strawton, for instance, when once winter set in, cold gray days, accompanied by a nipping blast, would succeed each other with terrible monotony ; so bare the landscape, so uniform the leaden cloudage, that sparrows and cabbage-beds seemed the only advantage over the frozen-up Steppes. In more cheerful and picturesque spots the cold is felt less, and winter seems supportable.

Certainly there were days at Strawton when earth wore the aspect of an awful prison, and rose-gardens, balmy honeysuckle bowers, nightingales, and azure seas, seemed the wild imaginings of fancy.

On such a morning of outward depression, Mr. Rapham was riding to his farm. He had given up his sulky for a time, on account of the cold, and now rode a quiet cob ; the exercise warmed him, and he could ponder as he went. On this especial morning he was in about as evil a frame of mind as a man can well be. Everything seemed to go against his wishes.

Lady Letitia had just written the most engaging little note in the world, not to refuse the proposed alliance, only to delay matters somewhat ; the anxious mother, indeed,

hoped that Charlotte might be induced to step into her elder sister's shoes.

'My dear Grace entertains much esteem for you,' she wrote; 'but there are obstacles she did not like to confide even to her mother at first. I find that her affections are already bestowed upon another. Again, to become engaged to-day and to marry to-morrow—permit me to say, such precipitation is wholly against the usages of society. Even if my second daughter consents to accept the honour you proposed to bestow upon her sister, a little time must be given. Meanwhile, a cover will always be laid for you at our table, and I sincerely hope that in this case, friendship may ripen into a warmer feeling, for the future comfort and happiness of us both.'

Now if there was one thing that ruffled Mr. Rapham's temper, it was dilatoriness. What he made up his mind to do, he always wanted to do off-hand, without a moment's delay. He was now considering whether or no he should not throw aside this aristocratic alliance altogether, and commission his universal agent to find him a wife.

Allchere would find the matter easy enough. There could be no possible difficulty about it. If he wrote to him to-day, he would arrange everything by that day se'nnight—have forthcoming alike bride, trousseau, and marriage license.

He had the greatest mind in the world to see him at once about it. A pretty, lady-like governess, some poor clergyman's daughter, was what he wanted; not too young, but not middle-aged, that was the thing. Hundreds and thousands of handsome girls without a penny would snatch at the offer. He had only to make it.

On the other hand, as he cogitated the text of Lady

Letitia's missive, he felt that it was a putting off rather than a rebuff. By waiting, by exercising a little diplomacy, he might accomplish his wishes. He would send his bride-elect a handsome present, and thus bribe her into compliance.

Certainly one of the Lowfunds ladies would suit him admirably. Such an alliance would lift him in the social scale. Were he fortunate enough to have a son, that son would take his place as a fine gentleman when arrived at man's estate. The future of the house of Rapham, as far as rank and position went, would be assured.

Pondering thus, his mind turned with extreme bitterness to Villedieu. He said to himself that Villedieu was the author of all these imbroglios; but for that man Rapha would now be quietly at home, and himself under no disagreeable necessity of seeking a wife.

This last contretemps, he never doubted for a moment, was of Villedieu's authorship also. Lady Letitia, or Lady Letitia's friends, had taken fright at those speeches of his; they were trying to make her believe that ugly facts would come to light about his past history, and doing their best to make a bogey of him.

'Let them try,' Mr. Rapham said, between his set teeth; 'I am a match for them all.'

Yet another disagreeable fact had come to his knowledge that morning. Villedieu had paid the money, and was therefore free to vilify him to his heart's content. If there was one thing that exasperated Mr. Rapham beyond endurance, it was when people he had a grudge against got out of his debt. He liked people, up to a certain point, to owe him money. It gave him a hold upon them.

As chance would have it, a turn of the road disclosed a horseman riding slowly towards him, with loosened reins, evidently in deep thought.

The pair were as yet at a considerable distance from each other, but Mr. Rapham's sharp eyes recognised Villedieu at once.

If the elder man's mind brooded vindictively upon the younger, certainly Villedieu was thinking with still bitterer feelings of the trader.

And if the first felt that he had more than his share of worries, directly or indirectly brought about by the rider in the distance, the second felt that no one need envy him, and that if one man can be called another's evil genius, Ralph Rapham was his.

There were anxieties about money, to begin with. He had paid back the thousand pounds; how, he hardly knew. The extrication seemed miraculous as rescue to a half-drowned man. He only knew that if he had got out of one difficulty, it was to plunge himself into half a dozen more.

What galled him above everything was the old trader's transaction with his wife. It savoured not only of dishonesty but cowardice to him thus to take commercial advantage of a needy, inexperienced girl. And do what he would, he could not bring Norrice to forget it. The mortification of being cheated, the sense of having disappointed him, rankled in her memory.

She tried to be her old, bright, vivacious self; she was devotedness and wifely sympathy incarnate; but everything seemed an effort to her. When not occupied in helping him, she was cold, absorbed, as he thought, apathetic.

Naturally Villedieu set down Norrice's changed manner to the wrong cause. The truth never occurred to him—that Norrice should suspect him of having married her for her money; and unsuspecting as he was of the truth, her conduct naturally made another grievance.

He secretly accused her of want of spirit, of succumbing to evil fortune at the very moment when he most needed the stimulus of hope and energy.

There was, moreover, another source of irritation. The fame of the inventress began to be noised abroad. Hardly a day now passed but he received some cruelly ironic compliment paid to his wife, or equally hollow congratulations offered to himself.

'How delightful to hear of genius for once being rewarded!' said one.

'Happy Mrs. Villedieu!' cried another, 'to enjoy alike fame and—in spite of all the moralists may say—its most appreciable reward!'

'Lucky fellow!' would be the felicitation of a third. 'Instead of having a wife who screams at a mouse, or goes into hysterics when the chimney catches fire, to be blessed with a companion whose brains at a pinch would suffice for you both.'

What answer could he make to such sallies as these? He was too proud to own the humiliating truth even to his intimate friends. He let them have their way, and imagine him on the way to fortune.

Doubtless the horizon would clear soon, but at present it was gloomy enough.

No wonder that the two men encountered each other with veritable thunder-clouds on their brows. Villedieu was about to pass with a curt 'Good-day' and a nod,

but Mr. Rapham pulled up, evidently determined on a parley.

‘You’ve paid me my money, I see,’ he began gruffly.

Had he accused Villedieu of picking his pocket he could not have used a more injured, aggressive tone.

‘Yes, sir,’ Villedieu replied, with the alert look of a man released from an odious bond. ‘I am happy to think we have settled our little account.’

‘Not quite; don’t be so sure about it,’ the other rejoined, growing more and more morose. ‘You had better leave me and my affairs alone, Mr. Villedieu, or it will be the worse for you, I can tell you that!’

Villedieu smiled scornfully.

‘Really,’ he replied, with the quietly sarcastic air so exasperating to a man in a passion, ‘I don’t understand you in the least. I thought your worst was done already.’

‘Mayn’t a man call in money when it is his own? Folks in straits should keep a civil tongue in their heads.’

The vulgar familiarity of this speech roused the other’s ire. If the trader was boiling up at the notion that Villedieu had alienated him from his daughter, and was now thwarting his marriage, Villedieu in turn was giving way to long pent-up indignation. This man had not only ruined his wife’s fortunes, he had brought about the misunderstanding that made wedlock a wretched parody.

‘I am not thinking of the loan,’ he replied, with a careless sneer; ‘your worst was surely done when you cheated my wife out of her invention—for the young lady in question is now married to me.’

‘Just pay attention to your words, will you?’ retorted Mr. Rapham menacingly. ‘I won’t be called a cheat in any country!’

‘I don’t know by what other name to designate such a transaction,’ Villedieu said, too indignant to mince matters any longer. ‘You had consulted experts, and were fully sensible of the value of the wares offered for sale, whilst the seller was left in the dark. If this can be called an honest, much less an honourable proceeding, then words have no meaning.’

‘Do you call me a cheat, or do you not?’ cried the other, now no longer able to control himself.

‘I have said all I had to say,’ was the cool reply.

Villedieu, touching his horse’s flank, was about to ride on, when Mr. Rapham caught hold of the rein.

‘But I have not,’ he said, in a voice now hoarse with passion. ‘It was you who set my own child against me! You who egged on the riff-raff here to burn me in effigy! You who try to make folks think me a blackguard! And not content with that, you call me a swindler to my face, do you? I’m not a slave, I’d have you to know, though I come from the country where slaves are.’

But for that last sentence Villedieu would have borne Mr. Rapham’s affronts passively, by might and main have freed himself from his hold and ridden away as fast as he could. The humiliation of such a hand-to-hand encounter, the respect due to age, his wife’s affection for Rapha, would have checked his exasperation and stayed his arm. That final gibe, that odious expression of defiance, flashing, as it did, light upon a dark, infamous career, suddenly transformed the neighbour and former acquaintance into a mere ruffian, to be punished accordingly.

If there was one vice Villedieu held in abhorrence it was cowardliness, the taking base advantage of the weak and unbefriended. Cowardliness incarnate seemed before him in

the person of Mr. Rapham. Had he not amassed wealth by the most ignoble means a man can resort to, and further enriched himself at the expense of a helpless girl?

Lastly, there was the damning fact of aggression. Before he could avert the blow, the other's riding-whip was laid across his face. Whatever the issue of this encounter might be, the responsibility rested with the aggressor.

Swift as lightning these thoughts had come and gone.

Villedieu could not reason now; not Mr. Rapham himself was in a fiercer, more unbridled mood. And for the moment it seemed, indeed, as if these two horsemen were bent upon doing each other deadliest injury. It was the meeting together of two thunder-clouds, the shock of mountain torrents as they mingle, the hustling of fierce animals at feud.

No one was there to witness the scene, surely as strange as any enacted that winter day! A distant observer might have supposed some playful passage of arms taking place, the two figures springing upon each other from the saddle; their uplifted arms and violent gestures must surely simulate some wild conflict. But a nearer survey would have undone this delusion, and revealed the horrid truth: it is not only on the battlefield that the savage element latent in human nature comes out. The spectacle of these two horsemen, moreover, was strangely in keeping with the sombre heavens and monotonous gray landscape. A very death in life of Nature was here, without the beautiful, shroud-like appearance imparted by snow.

The world seemed a home of evil passions rather than good on such a day.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOMELY MIRACLES.

ONE cheering item had reached Villedieu's ears, however, on the eve of that encounter with Mr. Rapham. The date of the General Election was put off. A loophole of escape lay open to him.

'On my word,' he said, in one of those reckless moods that pained Norrice deeply, 'the very best thing that could possibly happen to us both would be the collapse of my candidature. We would go abroad. Living is cheap in Italy. We would wait till something turned up—till I could pay some of my debts. Of what use are all the fine theories in the world, unless you have money to back them? Anyhow, I am going to Strawton early to-morrow morning to see how things look.'

That prospect of an idle, careless life in Italy would have been enchanting to Norrice under other circumstances; but the notion of thus fleeing from duty, of shirking voluntarily incurred responsibility, was unbearable to her. Could she only come to her husband's aid now, and thus be the means of ensuring him an honourable, a useful career!

She realized with the infirmities of his character its good side also. She saw that, like many another, he only needed favourable conditions to be true to his best, his manliest self. It is not the highest natures than can take root like the grass blade anywhere. Fine and uncommonly endowed temperaments must have a certain soil, a certain atmosphere

to blossom in ; adverse influences dwarf or even crush them past recovery. To Norrice now, this alternative of her husband's became a question of vital importance, a matter of life and death.

She set to work on his behalf as zealously as some poor chatelaine of the Middle Ages bent on amassing the ransom of her lord, taken prisoner in the Crusades. She must, she *would* achieve another invention, and thus repair his fortunes.

She had been led, as we have seen, to make her first discoveries by the sight of under-fed women and ill-grown children staggering under burdens far beyond their strength. Familiarity with another kind of hardship now stimulated her to fresh inquiry and experiment.

Not far from Strawton, by the high-road, was the town laundry, managed by a company. In her former capacity of Sunday-school teacher she had known many of the girls employed here, and had often visited the premises when they were at work.

It was chiefly in summer that she pitied these poor things. Was it any wonder that many went wrong?—condemned as they were from morning till night to stand at the ironing-board, their faces blowzed and dusty, their hands swollen with the heat, their bodies, in spite of the thinnest clothing, in a perpetual state of perspiration.

Norrice asked herself if babies were any the healthier or happier for the embroidered frocks so laboriously ironed, if ladies slept any the sounder for the dozens of frills crimped and goffered on their nightgear, if a certain gloss on the shirt-front gave a diner-out a better appearance. And one day, wholly on a sudden, the thought struck her that every one of these processes, from the getting up of an infant's robe to

a parson's surplice, could be as well, if not better, done by machinery.

The temperature of an ironing-room must be high under any circumstances; but what a difference between the task of bending, flat-iron in hand, over the board, and manipulating a machine! The laboriousness of the two processes could not for a moment bear comparison.

The drooping, hollow chests of the laundry girls, and the heavy percentage of consumptive patients at Strawton, told their own tale. Children born of such mothers were, indeed, a wholly different race to those who suck in a splendid physique with their mothers' milk.

So she cogitated and cogitated, and finally set to work, keeping her own counsel for the present, not even mentioning a word of the matter to her husband. Her crowning triumph was to be a surprise to him.

The enterprise she had embarked upon might well have daunted a less valiant spirit. She could, as yet, only try in miniature what she hoped to effect on a large scale.

No one was by to help or advise. Money was not forthcoming for the purchase of the necessary fuel and appliances. And should she attain her end, perfect her ironing-machine, was she certain of finding a ready purchaser?

The essential point, however, as all inventors know, is to make sure of your principle. Be positive of that, and, like Columbus, you will find your America at last. Norrice never doubted that her America was there; the difficulty was how to reach it.

Whenever she had a spare day, she flew to the little workshop at Strawton. What she could be about with her big fires puzzled Mrs. Bee extremely, but she forebore to make inquiries. She noticed that Norrice seemed unnaturally,

feverishly animated at times, whilst she was seldom without a look of great weariness.

The truth was, Norrice worked much too hard at home, that is to say, in Villedieu's bachelor quarters; she acted the part of clerk, secretary, and amanuensis.

'This won't do,' he would say ruefully. 'If I can't afford to pay a secretary, I will give up the whole concern. You deserve one much more than I do.'

Such remarks pleased her, and she invariably humoured him in her reply:

'It is only for a time. When you are once in Parliament I shall leave you to shift for yourself.'

There came such occasional glimpses of the old confidence and affection; but the next moment Norrice would feel conscious of bitter disenchantment. She had brought him no money; the least she could do was to become money's worth to him.

Her first essay had been on a very modest scale. She knew well enough that if a baby's feeder could be ironed by mechanical processes, so could a lady's slip. Were the simpler experiment successfully performed, the more elaborate could present but little difficulty. She therefore first tried her hand upon small dandyisms of attire hitherto made smooth and shining by painful manipulation.

At last, after numerous experiments, and in the teeth of difficulties past counting also, it really seemed to her that she was very near attainment. The continent might be at some distance yet; she nevertheless descried unmistakable signs of land.

To her intense delight, one morning she accomplished the successful ironing of a man's wristbands and collar by machinery.

‘Come, do come here this very moment, mammy dear!’ she cried, unable for the life of her to keep her blissful secret to herself. ‘Did you ever see anything prettier or neater?’

There, before the delighted eyes of Mrs. Bee—Mrs. Bee was never astonished at anything—she adjusted another wristband starched and damped, and turned the handle of her machine; the roller with its hot iron plates went round, and out came Villedieu’s cuff, as perfectly ironed as if it had passed through the hands of some skilled French clear-starcher.

‘Dear me!’ Mrs. Bee cried, with her half-pleased, half-contemptuous air. ‘Do you mean to say, Norrie, you are the first person to have thought of anything so simple as that? But a petticoat, a shirt, a surplice now! Turn out these by machinery, and you would have done something worth looking at!’

Norrice’s look of exultation faded; an expression almost of anguish sharpened her features.

‘Oh!’ she said, wringing her hands; ‘had I only the means! had I but a full purse to go to, I could accomplish all that you say, and much more. Mother,’ she added, turning to Mrs. Bee with agonized, almost frantic entreaty, ‘you are a wonderful contriver. How can I get a little money?’

Mrs. Bee, in spite of her apparent simplicity and transparency of character, was a deep woman. She possessed a keenness of observation, a fine tact, a sensitiveness that the more brilliant or accomplished of her sex might well envy.

That little speech of Norrice’s revealed to her the truth she had been so painfully seeking. It showed the riddle

of Norrice's unhappiness, and laid bare the mystery of her married life.

'There are always ways and means of getting a little money,' she replied, in a voice full of cheerful encouragement. 'Let me think.'

'Mother,' Norrice added in that same voice of passionate, pathetic appeal, now too much moved to conceal anything, too lonely not to flee to this motherly bosom, 'you see this invention. If I had only twenty pounds—twenty pounds of my very own—I could perfect it and take out a patent. There would be plenty of money then for Frederick, for yourself, for us all. But where to go for twenty pounds? My hands are tied. My husband forbids me to give lessons, and all this while we are spending a great deal, getting into debt. If I do not make some money soon, my heart will break!'

A less discreet mother than Mrs. Bee would have put unpleasantly direct questions, insisted upon knowing this and that, had a fling at a son-in-law unable to earn money himself and too proud to let his wife do it instead.

Mrs. Bee kept strictly to the point, seeing matters through Norrice's eyes only.

'Twenty pounds; let me see. I have always been able to do anything I set my mind upon with a little management, and I won't be balked and baffled now. Just leave the matter to me. I will think it over.'

She went away, leaving Norrice in a reverie. She sat eyeing her machine as ruefully and wistfully as some poverty-stricken penniless mother a sick darling, whom money, and money only, could restore to health.

There was no doubt whatever that money could save her now, not from loneliness and sorrow, but from a future of bitterness, perhaps shame. And as she thought of her life

with Villedieu, and clutched at visionary wealth on his account, she became odious to herself.

She was no lover of money for its own sake. The things she cared most for were independent of worldly fortune. No more hateful necessity could be forced upon her than this craving for wealth at any cost.

Her mother's hopeful words had no power to hearten her. Twenty pounds were surely as unattainable to a woman in Mrs. Bee's position as a thousand; while, for herself, she was completely at the end of her resources. Already she had pledged the few trinkets she knew her husband would not miss. She had sold the most valuable of her scientific books, even her wardrobe had been reduced; and the little store with which she had entered upon married life was now almost empty. The bare notion of going to Villedieu for money was insupportable; yet twenty pounds might now prove the turning-point of their worldly fortunes.

'Take this, or this,' he would say, from time to time, pressing a five or ten pound note upon her; 'you must want money.'

But so long as she had a guinea of her own she refused; nothing should induce her to add to the sum of her husband's debts.

Yet it was hard—hard!

She knew well that her credit as an inventor stood high. Once this new machine was brought to perfection and properly protected by patent, she should run no chance of lacking a buyer. But she must have something on a handsome scale to show; at present, her little model looked rather like a scientific toy than a machine destined to work an economic revolution.

How long she remained thus lost in thought she knew

not ; she was at last aroused from her musings by the falling of something smooth and cold upon her hand.

Without a word Mrs. Bee had stolen in, and now pressed a handful of gold coins into her passive palm ; then as softly and silently she stole out of the room.

Norrice started from her seat with a wild cry of surprise and exultation. She held open both hands ; she counted her treasure again and again. There could be no mistake about it ; the so-desired sum was there, her own. Twenty pounds ! twice ten, real, unmistakable English sovereigns !

Her machine was saved.

‘ Mother ! mother ! ’ she cried in a voice choked with tears.

Mrs. Bee, however, made no answer. What need has a mother of thanks ? She realized the humour her child was in ; better, far better to leave her alone for the present !

Norrice, also, when the first thrill of gratitude and astonishment was over, was well pleased to be left to herself. She sank on her knees, and the golden guineas, each a symbol of sublime motherly devotion, were bedewed with tears, covered with kisses, sanctified by prayers and benedictions.

CHAPTER IX.

A BRIDE ON APPROVAL.

THAT equestrian encounter, although resulting in no bodily injury to either combatant, had weighty consequences. Mr. Rapham decided promptly that over-much of civilization did not suit him. He should feel more at home in a society less hemmed round with conventionalities, less subjected to minute criticism, less over-crowded. California, for instance, might suit him; or better still, a settlement on the Congo river. He would throw up the whole concern—his English farming, his housekeeping by contract, and carry a young wife with him to some new country, there to become a personage indeed, found a family, maybe a township, even a state of his own, to be called after him for ever.

It sounds a contradiction, yet is surely characteristic of human nature, that not Villedieu himself could more deeply resent the humiliation of the recent occurrence than Mr. Rapham. Perhaps, indeed, the fastidious gentleman, the polished man of the world, felt less keenly the sense of wounded pride than did the old trader. Villedieu had not the character of a gentleman to make. Villedieu, moreover, was not the aggressor. He could afford to treat the matter with contempt.

Mr. Rapham realized that it would not be so easy for himself to get over the affair. Even the friendliest of his neighbours would begin to regard him as a half-savage. No "first chop of county society," as Allchere had called it, for

him now. If he remained at Strawton, he must sink into the condition of a nonentity. The smallest tenant-farmer, the humblest manufacturer, eligible as churchwarden and town councillor, would be of more social importance.

He rode home in a condition of body and mind unenviable enough. The effect of Villedieu's castigation would wear off in a few days; it was nothing to speak of. But he felt weary, feverish, and morbidly anxious for change. Both place and people here were now odious to him. The sooner he could get away the better.

As he was crossing the hall in the direction of the dining-room, the automatic butler accosted him.

'If you please, sir,' he said, without the faintest sign of interest or curiosity, 'the young lady has come.'

Mr. Rapham started as if suddenly reminded of some unpleasant contingency. Had the man told him that the house was on fire he could hardly have looked more aghast.

An oath rose to his lips, but he checked himself, and went straight to his own room.

'Bring a glass of wine and a sandwich here,' he said, 'and serve lunch without me.'

He had forgotten that command sent to headquarters a few days ago. He had written to Allchere and Company saying that he wanted a young lady, on approval, as reader, companion, secretary, whatever they pleased to call it. She must be young, handsome, well-mannered, amiable, well-educated, and not engaged to be married. He would have no hangers-on about his premises, he added, leaving the experts of the great contracting house to read as much as they chose between the lines. He was not going to be such a fool as to tell all the world that if the girl suited him he intended to marry her.

By the next post came the most satisfactory reply imaginable.

‘We have the pleasure to inform you,’ wrote Allchere and Company, ‘that a young lady exactly answering to your requirements is just open to an engagement. We will therefore send her down to Strawton Park to-morrow, on approval.’

‘They are so—out and out sharp,’ murmured Mr. Rapham, as, stretched on the sofa, he sipped his sherry and ate his sandwich. ‘I didn’t want a woman about the place just now. However, if the girl is a smart girl and tractable, I’ll marry her, as true as my name is Ralph Rapham.’

Then he closed his eyes and tried to drowse.

Meantime the new-comer, the bride-elect on approval, was doing justice to her excellent luncheon with happy unconcern. She was evidently no adventuress, this tall, handsome blonde girl, as beautifully attired as a West-End milliner, and as well endowed with aplomb as an actress. An actress she was in a certain sense. Worldlings and psychologists would have discerned under the veneer of schoolgirlish naïveté and artlessness a knowledge of the world, a finesse, that altogether escaped Mr. Rapham’s observation.

Truth to tell, she was no mere waif and stray thrown suddenly upon her own resources, but one of Allchere and Company’s most accomplished auxiliaries; a member, indeed, of their feminine staff, and kept on the premises ready, like a fireman, for any emergency.

To-day a well-educated girl would be needed to accompany a yachting-party on a voyage round the world, a girl who could play and sing, dance, act charades, get up tableaux-vivants—in short, amuse everybody. Another day

it would be some elderly dowager whose companion had suddenly eloped with the footman. She must have a young lady of high character at once, able to keep servants in order, look after dogs, and make afternoon teas go off agreeably.

However difficult their clients might be to please, Allchere and Company generally succeeded, and naturally the post vacated by Rapha's marriage had been filled with the greatest care. Moreover, in spite of the automatic behaviour of their officials, they contrived to know a good deal of what was passing around them. The rupture between father and daughter, too, was now matter of public comment.

Mr. Rapham, there could be no doubt of it, intended to marry again. It was a bride-elect he wished to be sent down on approval. The candidate for such an honour must do credit to the great contracting house.

When dinner was announced, Mr. Rapham found in his drawing-room a vision of girlish freshness, grace, and animation that recalled Rapha. There was something more than fancied coincidence here.

Not only was the new-comer very nearly of Rapha's age, height, and complexion, she had a certain look of his absent daughter, a certain likeness of form as well as feature; accidentally, too, she wore a dress of rose-pink, Rapha's favourite colour.

At first this resemblance, or imaginary resemblance, pleased him. He said to himself that it would be easy to like a girl who recalled his own child.

Of Rapha as his daughter he tried not to think; but impersonally, as a typical maiden, just what a woman ought to be, he might cherish her memory.

To-night all the timidity and hesitation was on his side.

He had dressed himself with unusual care, eyeing his withered physiognomy in the glass somewhat ruefully. The morning's encounter certainly had not improved his appearance. He had escaped from the fray without tell-tale bruises, but looked haggard, and years older, he thought. And the great contracting house he relied on in all other respects could not help him much here. He might go to Allchere and Company for a wig, a beard, a set of teeth, but they could not smooth out his wrinkles or rejuvenate him by twenty years.

Well, some girls liked money as much as good looks, he said to himself; and after all, so long as a young wife knew her duty to her husband, and fulfilled it, what mattered her motive for marrying him? He did not crave affection, much less fondness; he asked for a suitable mistress of his house, a woman who should value her privilege as wife of a rich man; above all, a woman likely to bring him blooming children.

Weary as he was, depressed as he was, and by no means in the best of humour either, he yet determined to be agreeable. This young girl should not be repelled by his looks or behaviour; she should be made to feel at home.

'What is your name, my dear?' he asked, as they sat down to table.

'Leonora—Leonora Carlton,' she replied smilingly.

'Goodness alive, what names girls get nowadays!' he exclaimed. 'Why can't their godfathers and godmothers call them Sarah or Susan, as they used to do? Well, Miss—what's your name?'

'Call me Laura,' she said, highly amused with her uncouth host; 'that is short, and easy to remember.'

'Laura, then, you must talk to me. I can't talk,' he went

on. 'You must just amuse yourself—I can't amuse anyone. How should I?'

'Why should you?' laughed the girl merrily. 'If people can't amuse themselves, they deserve to be dull. I don't know what dulness means. I never remember ever having a dull moment.'

'That's what my daughter——'

Mr. Rapham stopped short, and a look of inexpressible anguish came into his face.

He changed the subject quickly, and Laura discovered that she must not talk of the absent Rapha.

'Have you ever been out in a situation before?' he asked.

Laura answered his question with a frank, girlish insouciance that again reminded Mr. Rapham of Rapha. Her experiences amused him just as Rapha's used to do, only that Laura had more novelties to relate.

She had accompanied a rich Russian family to Florida, acting as companion to a consumptive girl; she had wintered with dowagers at Naples and Cannes; she had spent a year or two in one of the Greek isles as teacher to two little Greek boys.

'That was the beginning and the end of my career as a teacher,' she added gaily. 'Those little boys, four and five years old, used to kick my ankles black and blue, and tear out my hair by the handful, and their parents only laughed. Then when an earthquake happened, everybody got away, leaving me to shift for myself, and but for an old shepherd I might have died of hunger.'

'Have you any relations?' asked Mr. Rapham, when one lively recital had followed another.

'One brother—poor Tom! I must tell you his adventures in Pernambuco.'

Poor Tom's adventures, which were of a buccaneering kind, diverted Mr. Rapham as much as the history of the little Greek boys who kicked their governess's ankles till they were black and blue. This sort of narrative he could listen to without fatigue; it reminded him of Rapha's stories of her school-life.

In the drawing-room an illusion still more trying awaited him. He did not care a straw for music, but he liked to have Rapha play and sing after dinner. It passed the time, it suited the place, and of course the grand piano had been bought on purpose.

When, therefore, the young lady walked up to the piano and, striking a chord or two, asked if she should give him a little music, he readily acquiesced.

He knew no more of pianoforte playing or singing than a crocodile of dancing, he said; but music was the proper thing after dinner; she should give him a song or two by all means.

In these days when feminine accomplishments have ceased to be a parody upon education, properly speaking, and young ladies are really taught to sing, there must, of course, be a great similarity between the performance of contemporaries. The songs Laura learned would be just the songs taught to Rapha, and teaching on precisely the same principles would lend a certain level style and execution.

Laura singing seemed to Mr. Rapham to be Rapha singing. As he leaned back in his armchair with eyes closed, from time to time sinking into a momentary drowse, he was subject to a strange, and at first an agreeable, an enthralling hallucination. That clear sweet carol was the voice of no stranger, but of Rapha come back again. His own Rapha was singing and playing to him. That pink-robed, slender

figure by the piano was certainly hers ; the fair, shining hair, the delicate purple, the rosy cheeks, were hers too. And the music and words were very familiar. She had sung this song to him again and again.

In a half-dreamy, semi-conscious state, he listened, allowing the weird fancy to take possession of him and hold him prisoner.

This was the first time since Rapha's departure that he had been moved with softness towards her, and had felt an inexpressible yearning to behold her face once more.

As the unconscious girl went on singing gaily and artlessly, his thoughts became confused. He was no longer master of himself. The occurrences of the morning had abnormally excited his brain, to begin with ; then came this unexpected, irresistible reminder of Rapha. He gradually fell into a state of waking dream. He was no longer alone ; Rapha had come back. All was again as of old.

Her song finished—yet another and another—Laura, discovering that Mr. Rapham slumbered, stole to her room to scribble a line to her bosom friend, Clara Carnegie, just to tell dearest Clara that her new employer was a very odd man indeed ; but she thought that she should have a very easy time of it, and only hoped he would keep her.

Hardly, however, had the door closed behind her, when Mr. Rapham woke up with a start. Finding the piano deserted, he rang the bell violently, the glamour of his dream still upon him.

'Miss Rapham—call Miss Rapham,' he said to the footman.

'Miss Carlton, sir? She shall come at once,' was the reply.

The next minute a bright figure danced in, a fair-

haired, slender, blue-eyed girl certainly, like Rapha, yet how unlike!

'I wanted to show you poor Tom's portrait, taken after that encounter with the natives,' she cried, engaging as before.

But Mr. Rapham, uttering a groan, pushed past her.

'Another time, another time, my dear,' he murmured, as he hastened to his room.

CHAPTER X.

THE VISION.

MR. RAPHAM'S first impulse was to send Laura away, and beg his agent to replace her by a lady of maturer years—a staid, sensible young woman of thirty-five, more fitted to fill the place of companion to one of his years. Rapha's image would not then seem to haunt the house, Rapha's figure no longer dog his footsteps like his own shadow.

Laura stayed on, however, rather because Mr. Rapham drifted into acquiescence than from any prompt decision. He was no longer capable of quick, resolute action; the events of the last few weeks had shaken and aged him even more than he was aware of. He owned that he was not now the man he had once been, and that the best, the only course for him now was to settle his affairs in England with all possible despatch, and take ship for

some new country. Laura should go with him, but in her present capacity of housekeeper, companion, whatever the world might call her. He would make her his wife later.

‘Would you like to go to California or Texas with me?’ he asked one day; and she replied, with girlish heartiness:

‘Above all things.’

A reply not unnatural in a girl whose ankles had been kicked black and blue by little pupils.

Laura, indeed, was ready enough to marry Mr. Rapham if he asked her. Anything, she said to herself, was better than a life of constant effort and artificiality; for no matter what part she was now called upon to fill by her employers, she could not be quite herself. There was always a part to play, a veneer of liveliness, sparkle, and good-humour to be put on.

She felt in the position of an actress who is never able to quit the stage, to give up her set smile and walk. Professional companions, whether employed by Allchere and Company or finding places for themselves, are all under the same dire necessity: they must smile and smile, and yet be bored to death! When the profession becomes a fine art, endurances and self-sacrifice in little things are carried to a pitch of heroism. The finished companion is the martyr of modern society.

Laura was not, of course, to set herself the task of winning the widower’s affections. Coquetry was no more permitted in the feminine staff of the great contracting house than the dropping of *h*’s or unconventionalities in dress and appearance.

The young lady ever kept ‘in stock,’ to use a commercial

phrase, was, above all things, well-bred and circumspect. A single breakdown here, would it not involve the downfall of the Allchere system? The artificiality was, however, far too skilfully, even subtly, managed for Mr. Rapham to see. Whilst words, looks, and actions were studied, he saw nothing but girlish vivacity, a cordial, even affectionate desire to please, and a temper sunny as Rapha's in happier days.

Whilst Mr. Rapham should have been courting a wife, he was in reality being drawn by fatherly instinct towards one who was gradually filling the place of his own child. There was much, almost everything, in their intercourse that recalled the absent daughter. Without Rapha's extreme sensitiveness, spiritual-mindedness, and insight into the finer relations of things, Laura possessed her flow of spirits, her capacity for enjoyment, her accomplishments, and far more than Rapha's cleverness in matters of worldly concernment.

In a very few days it was Laura this, Laura that, whenever Mr. Rapham happened to be in the house, and the slender, beautifully dressed figure, the fair face and sweet girlish treble, ever recalled the far-off Rapha. He said to himself that the feeling would soon wear off; and in order to put matters on a permanent basis, and get rid of these chimeras, determined to settle the question of marriage for once and for all. He would propose to her the next day; but when the next came, he said he would say all that he had to say on the morrow; and the morrow and post-morrow came, yet he could not for the life of him get out a word.

'I think I have heard of just the place to suit us,' he said one morning at breakfast; he had fallen back to the use of

the dual pronoun, as in Rapha's time, tacitly indicating that he looked upon Laura's sojourn under his roof as the beginning of a partnership. 'And thankful I shall be to get away from this abominable climate. One might just as well be in Siberia,' he added.

The parallel seemed apt. Snow had fallen during the night, and the heavy clouds threatened more to come. Yet how grand, how sublime, was the wintry landscape! Were it not for such spells of almost Arctic weather, we should lose impressions that nothing else in Nature can give us. For if storm and avalanche symbolize to us human passion and tragedy, the whiteness and repose of winter alone can symbolize Death—that solemn sleep which lends majesty to the meanest of mortal born.

'Yes!' Laura cried—she was not a young lady given to introspection or gravity—and as she spoke she pretended to shiver in her well-fitting crimson dress; 'yes! the orange-groves of Florida! It makes one warm to think of them!'

'I suppose you really don't care a straw where you live,' he asked, 'so long as you have everything your heart can wish for?'

The question was put significantly, and he hoped she would understand his real meaning.

Without affecting to do so, she replied, getting up to hand him his second cup of coffee, just as Rapha used to do:

'Girls never do care where they live, I fancy. You see, if we don't get one kind of enjoyment, we get another. In Russia, sledging and skating; in California, swinging in a hammock all day long. It is pleasant to feel so indifferent about things we cannot arrange for ourselves. Myself, for instance! I am just as likely to end my days in one place

as another. Kamschatka or Zanzibar, the South Sea Islands or Hudson's Bay—it is all one to me.'

Mr. Rapham laughed. She had not before seen him in so genial a humour.

'You have got your wits about you,' he said, and from his lips that was a fine compliment indeed.

He let her minister to him in small things, just as Rapha had done.

Breakfast over, she read aloud the only item of news from the paper that interested him—namely, the column devoted to the money-market. Then she wrote one or two short business notes and memoranda at his dictation; got ready his little sandwich tin and sherry flask. He preferred when farming, or going to town, to take his luncheon with him; it was far wholesomer, he said, and cost half the money of refreshments in the restaurants. Finally, she placed hat, gloves, muffler—everything he stood in need of—handy, and going to the front-door, would wave adieu as he rode off.

Such little graces of daily life, trifles although they seem, in reality play an important part in the sum-total of human comfort. Just as in prison discipline it is the absence of personality that breaks down the roughest, most unruly nature; thus alike the harsh and the sensitive need some kind of domesticity to make existence endurable.

Had Mr. Rapham returned to civilization a childless man, never known the sweetness of Rapha's intercourse, he would most likely have wedded some woman common as himself, and so found the sympathy, or what does duty for sympathy, necessary alike to the coarser as well as finer characters.

But Rapha's image was there, and could not be distanced

or got rid of. Her influence was upon him, although he knew it not. Insensibly, he was amenable to that tribunal of guilelessness and purity personified by his child, although in the flesh absent, yet in the spirit ever present.

To-day he was freer than usual from these vain retrospections or wistful longings. Rapha, for a brief space, seemed banished from memory, and with the feeling of relief came a power to look forward. He recalled Laura's affectionate solicitude; her pretty, taking ways; her joyous habit of looking at things; and a kind of youthfulness seemed to take possession of him. He even said to himself that he was not too old to fall in love and begin life over again like others. Not that as yet he was the least in love. It was hardly in his nature to admire women or women's beauty. His was a temperament capable rather of paternal than lover-like tenderness. Conscious of this, he still said to himself that the love would come.

With a brisker step and a brighter eye than usual, he made his way to his office, no more singular figure to be descried in the living stream flowing through the City. His dress had a certain oddity about it: the gaiters to which he clung so persistently; the short brown velveteen coat, over which he wore a cloak clasped at the neck, of the fashion of forty years ago, and only set aside upon occasions of ceremony; the stiff stock and upright collar, also of a former epoch—all these marked him from other men. Far more striking than any idiosyncrasy of dress were his looks. A glance told you that no European civilian was here; the hall-mark of civilization was as much wanting as in the Ojibbeway Indian strayed to some American capital, or the tattooed Patagonian exhibited in a London show. A strange, indescribable air of half-savagery seemed to cling to him.

The furtive, fox-like look of his small reddish-hued eyes spoke of a nature only tamed as far as outward appearances went, of a will that yielded to force alone. It was plain, too, that this small, spare, eager-eyed man had not lived smoothly in the broad light of day. His life, whatever it might be, had darkness and mystery about it—was no open book that all who ran might read.

As he threaded the busy streets, more than one passer-by turned to look at him. He looked so completely a new-comer there, as if he had that moment arrived from the heart of the desert.

It occurred to Mr. Rapham that as he had made up his mind to marry Laura Carlton, he might as well purchase a wedding-ring and ask her to accept it; by far the easiest way of making a proposal. He stopped at a jeweller's shop he knew of, and whilst bartering for the ring—he never by any chance whatever gave the full price demanded for anything—a vision of Rapha suddenly flashed upon him.

‘I can wait. Attend to that customer yonder first.’

Saying this, he pushed back the little tray of rings, and standing back to the counter, well screened from view by the objects in the window, he gazed out.

A block had just happened in the Strand, and a cab was drawn up just in front of the jeweller's shop, having Rapha inside.

Mr. Rapham gazed, holding his breath. The pale emigrant catching a last fond sight of his native shore—the shipwrecked mariner who, broken-hearted, sees a distant sail fade from sight, his last hope of rescue—could not have looked more passionately, more wistfully, than did Mr. Rapham now. Every vestige of colour had faded from his cheeks. His eyes had the fixed, painful intensity of one

whose reason dire calamity has unseated. He was too moved, too full of love, longing and despair, to utter a moan.

The picture he gazed on was lovely, yet very sad.

Rapha, leaning back in her warm furs, appeared all the paler, perhaps, for the red roses in her little bonnet. Sad she evidently was, and wistful also. At that very moment, indeed, she was thinking of her father. Often and often she had visited the City with him, and she was thinking now of all his generousities, all his affection, longing to be able to make him happy, to love him once more as of old.

The young wife sees not through a maiden's eyes. Rapha, in these opening days of married life, taking in vaguely, fondly, and perhaps pensively too, all its possibilities of wider sympathies, and new, closer ties, could not recover the careless gaiety of her girlhood. Even her husband's frank, manly, unsentimental love, whilst it satisfied her aspirations, awakened self-inquiry and remorse. Had she acted lightly in thus forsaking affection for love? Ought she not to have clung to her father, loved him, shielded him, in spite of everything?

Such were the thoughts that saddened her occasionally, and made her reverie pensive now. Could she only have known that her father was by! Could the pair but have met then! But Mr. Rapham stood as if paralyzed, electrified.

Drinking in his fill of the sweet vision, he remained at the shop-window motionless as a statue. A very heaven seemed near—a very hell seemed within his own self then. But like one under a spell, possessed by some horrid nightmare, he could not reach that fair heaven. Delivery from torture was close by, yet might have been leagues off.

A space of barely two yards separated him from his child, but he could not stir. The icy silence of distrust and alienation a word might now break, but he could not open his lips.

He felt, he knew that Rapha was secretly longing for him, lovingly drawn towards him; and for all that, he seemed unable to help himself—the chance of reconciliation went by.

‘Which ring do you decide upon, sir?’ asked the shopman, now returning with the trayful of wedding-rings.

But Mr. Rapham appeared stone-deaf. The block in the street had broken up; the cab bearing Rapha was lost to sight. He, nevertheless, remained gazing out of the window fixedly as before.

‘The ring, if you please, sir; I am now at your disposal,’ repeated the man.

Still his strange customer stood silent and motionless. The obsequious jeweller waited and waited.

At last, with the air of a man who does not know what he is about, leaving his umbrella and muffler on the counter, Mr. Rapham rushed out of the shop.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ANXIOUS DINNER.

THAT evening taxed Laura Carlton's resources to the utmost. In spite of apparent girlishness and reckless gaiety, she was not without experience in the more intricate of human affairs. The great contracting house made it a rule to employ only exceptionally clever women, however young, and, indeed, the younger the better, according to the notions of Allchere and Company. Painful it may be, yet true it is, that youth is at a premium in almost every walk of life. Youth is the floating capital of humanity. The young are ever capitalists, most often, alas, unconsciously! Such qualities as are imparted by years, the widened sympathies, the aculeated faculties, the finer feeling of mature age, are not, as a rule, marketable commodities. In the noisy, jostling give-and-take of daily existence, what we want is initiative, dash, absence of self-consciousness, freedom from introspection.

Middle-aged, tried, sensitive women, would have found Laura's present dilemma appalling. The girl, being young, careless and self-confident, just took things as they came, and made the best of them. She felt more in the position of a spectator at a play than a responsible agent in an actual drama.

What Mr. Rapham had done with himself throughout the day, he could hardly have explained. Quitting the jeweller's shop, he set out in a mood of vague anguish and

despair, to which passion soon gave shape. He would find out the author of all his misfortunes, and punish him as he deserved, no matter what might be the consequence to himself.

Frederick Villedieu was still his implacable enemy. Villedieu had heaped odium on his head, had prevented his second marriage—above all, had robbed him of his daughter.

By turns the sweet vision of Rapha, and the hateful memory of Villedieu—alternating heaven and hell—held him captive.

Now he would go to Rapha, clasp her knees, entreat her to return to him; next moment he vowed vengeance upon the man who had come between them. It might seem odd, yet was surely natural, that he felt no rancour against Silverthorn. The light-hearted, easy-going Professor had not peered into the secrets of his past life, and was in nowise responsible for the steps that had led Rapha into her precipitate marriage. He confessed, too, that Silverthorn was about the only person in England he found tolerable. But for Villedieu, Silverthorn would not have dreamed of asking Rapha to marry him. She might herself have changed her mind. Should he go to her?

The temptation was strong, but there came the thought of his money and of Rapha's scruples. She would make him tell her how he came by his great fortune; and when she knew all, would refuse to share it with him, would ask him to give it up as before. He was not going to be tied to the conscience of a girl. He was not going to be fooled out of his money.

The dread of his child's fond, inquisitorial gaze barred the way to her door. He knew where to find her, but he

could not prevail on himself to set out. Not that he felt anything to be called remorse. Conscience slept. It was the sense of having incurred Rapha's reproaches, Rapha's condemnation, that he could not bear.

The short winter day was fast closing in, and, irritated at the fog, the drizzle and the rain, at everything in the world just then, he returned home.

His mood was so fitful, and his thoughts so inconsequent, that by the time he had reached Strawton Park he had forgotten all about Villedieu for the moment. Vindictiveness and exasperation were now fastened upon another and wholly innocent object.

'Who sent you here?' he asked roughly of Laura, as in a sky-blue dress, airiness, prettiness, and commonplace piquancy impersonated, she danced into the drawing-room.

The unsuspecting girl stood dumbfounded. She had dressed for dinner almost with the coquetry of a maiden beautifying herself for the eyes of a bridegroom. After that morning's bluff allusion to the future, and pointed reference to her wishes, she never doubted that she was to be the wife of the millionaire. Certainly it was not such wedlock as she had read of in romances, and would have chosen for herself; but her employer seemed good-natured. He liked to please women after his own fashion, and he found her society agreeable. She might, in time, be able to sway him to her will.

'Who sent you here?' he repeated.

Laura glanced at him, and then the dreadful truth flashed upon her. Something had happened so to disturb Mr. Rapham's mind, so to agitate and unhinge him. For the moment he was hardly accountable for his words or actions.

She quickly recovered self-possession, and answered soothingly and caressingly :

‘Who sent me here, dear Mr. Rapham? You wrote to your agent for a lady housekeeper and companion. Don’t you remember——’

‘Don’t believe a word of it,’ he interposed sharply. ‘It’s all a trumped-up story. That scoundrel Villedieu got you sent here under false pretences. I’ve my daughter, and they want her money. They turned her out of the house one day when I was away. Do you know that? It’s a black conspiracy, and Villedieu shall hang for it, if my name is Ralph Rapham!’

‘Of course, under the circumstances, I will return to London to-morrow,’ Laura said, still outwardly calm. ‘Messrs. Allchere could not know all this.’

‘The villain!’ Mr. Rapham continued, still dwelling on Villedieu; ‘he made Rapha—my daughter, I mean—believe that I got my money by piracy on the high seas, to induce her to leave me. Then this fellow—it is all as plain as day—he will get the Government to ferret me out, and half my money will go to him as a reward.’

‘Dear Mr. Rapham,’ Laura put in, ‘I think you must be under a misapprehension. Messrs. Allchere could tell you all about it. You had better consult them.’

Mr. Rapham eyed her with a suspicious air.

‘That dress you have on, what business have you with it?’ he asked; ‘it belongs to my daughter. I bought it for her in Oxford Street, and it cost four pounds.’

‘Oh!’ Laura cried laughingly, still concealing her consternation, ‘there you are really wrong. Miss Rapham’s dress like this is hanging in the wardrobe here. The housemaid will tell you so, for she remarked to me how like the

two were—cut apparently off the same stuff. Shall I ring for her to bring it down?’

‘Don’t ring for anybody—don’t say anything about the dress,’ he said quickly, and in a voice of apprehension. ‘These servants, they look like wooden dummies; but my belief is that they are all spies, and that not a thing is said or done in this house without their knowledge.’

‘I hardly think it can be so,’ Laura replied. ‘You see, you are one of Messrs. Allchere’s best customers. They would be sure to send only thoroughly trustworthy servants to you.’

Dinner was now announced, and the pair sat down to table, Laura feigning to eat and drink with her usual appetite. She was, in reality, not in the least degree alarmed; she saw already that she had power to soothe and subdue Mr. Rapham’s strange mind. Youth, for the most part, moreover, not unwillingly faces such opportunity of exercising its own power; but a natural feeling of consternation, disappointment, and pity took possession of her.

This, then, was the end of her dreams, if, indeed, worldly speculation can be so called! Instead of a wealthy marriage, an adventurous career in new societies, excitement, luxury, and ease for the rest of her days, she confronted a trying dilemma: a brief period of strain and harass, and once more an elbowing through the crowded ranks of labour, a plunge into the prosaic unknown!

Laura Carlton would not perhaps have been worldly, and in a certain sense calculating, under more favourable circumstances. But the bloom of fine feeling gets rubbed off in the hand-to-hand struggle for existence. She could hardly commiserate the lot of a disinherited daughter into whose golden shoes she was to step. Rapha’s fate had hitherto

hardly touched her. Rapha, too, was happily married, and her husband could give her comfort, if not elegance. It did not seem that she need regret at the good fortune this alienation of father and daughter seemed to put in her own way. Mr. Rapham's millions must go to somebody. But now she saw things quite differently. There are certain phenomena in daily life that awe the most careless, and impart disinterestedness to the egotistical. The calamity that had overtaken Mr. Rapham and his daughter was one of these.

Laura was not naturally reverential. Reverence, as truly says the great Goethe, is the mental attribute most wanting in youth. Here, however, her worldliness, light-mindedness, and material views of life, met with a stern rebuke. She drew back, staggered at the awful visitation; so indeed in its awfulness does lapse of reason seem to us. For a little while the heedless maiden became a questioner, a would-be prier into the dread secrets of human destiny, and the life beyond the tomb—became, indeed, in the truest sense of the word, religious. Pity, too, called for its tribute. Where was the fruition of Mr. Rapham's vast wealth now? To whom could it bring joy? And the alienated daughter, the young wife, what would her feelings be when she heard of this catastrophe? Laura's immediate concern, however, was to divert Mr. Rapham's mind, and the presence of the servants helped her not a little.

Mr. Rapham had a morbid terror of being overheard by his domestics. In spite of his wild thoughts and hallucinations, he still exercised the old reserve, avoiding personalities and confidences at the dinner-table. Anxious to escape observation, he made a pretence at eating and drinking, and sedulously avoided dangerous topics. Once or twice, finding

himself on the verge of an indiscretion, he stopped short, and abruptly sent the footman out of the room under some pretext or other.

The dinner, nevertheless, proved an ordeal Laura would never forget. She stood in no terror of Mr. Rapham; but she could not tell from one moment to another what strange impulse might overtake him. Then, too, she had not yet wholly recovered from the shock of the situation. She had tripped downstairs expecting a lively *tête-à-tête* with a man who intended to make her his wife. She found instead one who was but a parody of his former self—a travesty of human nature—in his own image, a thing to move to intensest humiliation and pity.

‘These walnuts are not real walnuts,’ he said when dessert had been placed on the table. ‘If you mind what I say, you won’t touch them; they are imitations, poisoned with prussic acid.’

And he pushed his favourite dessert dish from him.

‘Try an apple,’ Laura said cheerfully. ‘Let me pare you one.’

‘I won’t eat another morsel. I am sure the cook and everybody in the house is in the pay of that man Villedieu,’ was the retort. ‘He is capable of anything.’

‘Mr. Villedieu, you say, has no money. People cannot be bribed without money,’ Laura said. ‘However, we will set to work and find out.’

‘I’ll go to the police the first thing in the morning,’ Mr. Rapham said. ‘Of course, it is to your interest to stand up for that scoundrel. He is master here; I am nobody.’

And the next moment, with an inconsistency that would have been whimsical under other circumstances, his thoughts were on another tack.

‘The servants are at supper. Just go down and listen to what they are talking about. It is my belief they are concerting together to carry me off somewhere. Mind and don’t let them hear you.’

Laura obeyed. In fact, throughout the rest of that terrible evening she humoured one wild fantasy after another, till at last, somewhat soothed and mollified, Mr. Rapham allowed himself to be coaxed into going to bed.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CRISIS.

EARLY next morning her trials began afresh. Wakeful, uneasy, it was not till long past midnight that she fell asleep, to be aroused before daylight by Mr. Rapham’s tap at her door.

‘Get up this very moment ; dress as quickly as you can. I want you to take the first train to London,’ he whispered.

She threw on a warm dressing-gown and opened the door at once.

‘Dear Mr. Rapham,’ she entreated, ‘it is only six o’clock. If I went to London now, I should find nobody up or stirring ; nobody that you want to see, I mean. I promise to be down to breakfast punctually at eight, so as to catch the eight forty-five train. Do wait till then, or the servants will think something extraordinary is the matter. They are so terribly inquisitive.’

By dint of one argument after another, she contrived to persuade him. She went back to bed, and obtained another hour of quiet. With the blissful adaptability of youth, she was able to snatch a brief but refreshing doze.

Punctually to the stroke of eight she descended to the breakfast-parlour, to find everything ready and Mr. Rapham in somewhat calmer mood. He said little, but was evidently pondering deeply. He ate and drank, too, almost with his usual appetite.

Laura, glancing at him from behind the urn, asked herself if indeed the events of the preceding night were not mere phantasmagoria, destined to pass away, rather than the first act of what threatened to be a terrible tragedy. He had dressed with unusual care. He was apparently collected, although somewhat sad. He gave orders to the servants with his usual decision. During the meal he looked like a man who feels himself on the verge of some crisis of fate, not like one in the clutches of wild delirium.

‘Have lunch for three, and order fires to be made in Miss Rapham’s rooms,’ he said as he rose from table.

It was not till they were seated in the brougham and being driven rapidly to the station that he explained himself.

‘I am going to fetch my daughter,’ he said; ‘married or not married, she will come home with her father. You will see that. They have schemed to get her out of the country—Villedieu and his people, I mean—and, once out of the way, they are sure of my money. I’ll never believe Rapha is married at all. They only told me so to set me against her.’

Laura said little. Under the circumstances, the best thing that could happen was for father and daughter to come

together. Rapha and her husband were the proper persons to be about Mr. Rapham in his present state. Rapha would be able to soothe and cheer him ; perhaps, indeed, a reconciliation with her would work his cure.

She could see that it was this alienation from his child that had unhinged his reason ; other events—the burning in effigy, the encounter with Villedieu, Lady Letitia's rebuff—were mere accessories : the real cause of this mental breakdown was a passionate, boundless craving for the sight of Rapha. That he had seen her the day before she gathered from stray hints, dropped almost unconsciously ; he had made no overt allusion to the fact.

Full of hope, therefore, and with the feeling that already a leaden weight of care had slipped from her mind, she drove with her uncouth companion to the address indicated. The poor girl was now as anxious to quit Strawton Park as she had been to reach it a week or two ago. She was scheming for the future, wondering what strange experiences would next be hers, and whether she should reach some sure, comfortable haven at last, in some quarter of the world ultimately find a home.

The sight of the busy streets and glittering shops brought a sense of cheerfulness and relief. Her ordeal would soon be over. Once Mr. Rapham was consigned to his daughter's keeping, she should be free to leave him.

Mr. Rapham evinced no less impatience to have his errand accomplished. From feverish garrulousness his mood had changed to taciturnity. He sat pale and speechless, his hands trembling, his eyes unnaturally strained, as if seeking some object in the far distance.

'We must be there ; this is surely the street !' was all he said from time to time.

It seemed to both as if that cab-drive would never come to an end.

At last it was indeed there—the name of the street so eagerly looked for—and Mr. Rapham signalled to the cabman to pull up.

‘I will wait here,’ he said in a low voice. ‘It won’t do for me to be seen, you know. You just ask for Rapha, and tell her I am waiting at the corner of the street to take her home. Be quick.’

All alertness, impatient as himself, Laura alighted and walked rapidly towards Silverthorn’s house. As she waited on the doorstep, she saw that Mr. Rapham had also quitted the cab, and now stood watching her movements.

‘Mr. and Mrs. Silverthorn live here, I believe? Can I speak to Mrs. Silverthorn?’ she asked of the young maid-servant who answered the door.

The girl’s candid face and prompt reply were a warrant of truthfulness.

‘They have left town, miss, and will not be back for three weeks.’

Laura’s heart sank within her. It was her turn to tremble and lose colour.

‘Can I have their address?’ she asked in a faint voice.

‘The Professor left word that no letters were to be forwarded,’ was the reply. ‘He is taking a holiday. They crossed the water last night on their way to Rome.’

Laura stood dumbfounded. Glancing in the direction of the cab, she saw Mr. Rapham’s rigid figure, the very personification of suspense, and the sight took away the remainder of her courage. Tears started to her eyes; she looked stricken. Her expression of helplessness and dismay did not escape the careless little London girl.

‘If you wait a moment, I will call missus,’ she said. ‘She can perhaps give you Mr. Silverthorn’s address in foreign parts.’

She ran downstairs and fetched the landlady, for Silverthorn and his bride still occupied his old bachelor lodgings. She was a pleasant-faced woman. The genial Professor ever contrived to have pleasant people about him, and Laura could not help unburdening herself.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I have come from Mr. Rapham, Mrs. Silverthorn’s father. He is very ill—in mind, I mean—and craves for a sight of her. This news will make him desperate. What *shall* I do?’

‘Well, miss,’ replied the woman, who was in Rapha’s confidence also, ‘Rome is not very far off when you come to railways, and I know Mrs. Silverthorn would come straight back for her father’s sake. She is always fretting about him. The Professor got his holiday on purpose to give her a change. Here is the address in Rome, and you had better telegraph at once and ask them to come back.’

Laura dared not wait another moment. Already several minutes had been spent in parleying. With hurried thanks, flushed, tearful, agonized, she hurried back to the rigid figure by the cab-door.

What followed she would remember to her dying day. At first he realized the pain of bitterest disappointment only, the never-to-be-uttered, cureless woe. He could not weep; tears would have relieved him. He huddled back in the corner of the cab, and sobbed the dry, pitiful sobbing of the distracted.

‘Oh,’ he said as he took her hands and kissed them, pressed them to his lips, ‘only give me back my child, and you shall have any money you want. Do find her, and bring

her back to me. I am sure she is crying to come, only they won't let her. She always cared for her father; they lie who say the contrary. "Dear papa, darling papa," she used to say as she put her arms round my neck, and kissed me night and morning. She was always hovering about me when I was in the house. It was papa this, papa that, from morning till night. I was always good to her. You must find her,' he reiterated, with a moan of helplessness. 'I shall die if she is not found, my little Rapha!'

Then to wild, unreasoning grief succeeded fierce, unreasoning anger. He shook his fists, he threatened, he cursed; nothing Laura could say had power to calm him.

'Don't you believe that story about Rome,' he said; 'she's not gone to Rome any more than I have. They've hidden her somewhere, the villains! I see through it all. Now that they have got Rapha away, they want to hunt me down and make me give up my money. We are not safe in this cab,' he whispered. 'The man, I am sure, is in the pay of my enemies, and perhaps a detective in disguise. We are spied upon every inch of the road.'

'We will get back to Strawton, all the same,' Laura said as cheerfully as she could. 'Only we must not speak too loudly and attract the attention of the crowd. That is the very worst thing to do, you know.'

He seemed to see the force of this argument, and leaning back in the cab, uttered low-voiced complaints and reproaches only, his thoughts ever recurring to Rapha.

'Why did I not interfere when they were carrying you off yesterday?' he moaned. 'I was close by her—did I not tell you?' he said, turning to Laura. 'I could have circumvented the scoundrels then. The police would have been on my side. Was it not my own daughter? What right

had anyone to hide her from her father? And now it is too late—too late. I shall never find her. I shall never see you again, my little Rapha !'

'We will think of what is best to do when we get home,' said poor Laura, as they approached the railway-station.

Only to get this terrible journey over, she thought. Her dread was lest they might by chance encounter Mr. Rapham's imaginary foe, Villedieu. To her intense relief, the first person she saw on the platform was Mr. Morrow. Mr. Rapham liked the courteous, amiable manufacturer, and, of course, knew nothing as yet of his engagement to Lady Letitia's daughter. He was in the habit of paying friendly visits to Strawton Park, and Laura felt that she might rely upon him as a friend.

'There is Mr. Morrow,' she said to her companion. 'He is very sensible and very kind. We will get him to travel with us.'

Mr. Rapham was on his mettle in a moment. He returned the manufacturer's salutation with his customary and old-fashioned politeness.

'Good-day to you, sir,' he said ; 'I hope I see you well.'

Mr. Morrow had taken his seat in the railway-carriage before he imagined anything was wrong. He merely thought that his neighbour looked strangely heated, and but for his reputation for sobriety, would have accused him of excess in drinking.

'Fairly, thank you,' he replied cheerily. 'But the money-market—what a state of things there, Mr. Rapham !'

The train had now moved off, and the three were alone.

'My business in town was not on the Stock Exchange

to-day,' Mr. Rapham said; 'I've something else to think about. You are a magistrate, Mr. Morrow; I appeal to you. And I tell you one thing, if it costs me the last penny in the world, I will punish the villains who have carried off my daughter.'

'Your daughter, my dear sir—your daughter!' exclaimed Mr. Morrow.

A significant look from Laura and Mr. Rapham's reply revealed to him the true state of affairs.

'You may well look astounded,' Mr. Rapham went on, growing more and more excited. 'But, you see, they couldn't get hold of my money unless they first hid away my daughter. That is why they have done it. What business is it of anybody's how I came by my money? I am not going to say. I will lose my tongue first. But they've carried off Rapha; I shall never see her again—never, never!'

And thus he made moan all the way.

CHAPTER XIII.

FROM FLOWERY VALLEY TO ICE-BOUND REGION.

THE pair of happy travellers never reached Rome after all. As little flower-gatherers entering a wood in search of the lily of the valley are tempted hither and thither by the wood-sorrel and the primrose, so these two found a dozen places on the way far too enticing to be passed by.

When the second holiday-week was broken into, they decided to leave Rome till they had a month, a year, or a life-time, as Silverthorn said, to devote to it, and obtain a glimpse of Venice instead.

‘What do we want with letters?’ he added. ‘It is the greatest possible mistake ever to have letters sent after you on a holiday trip. The very first you open is sure to contain ill-starred news; or, at the very least, something to ruffle you—thus the Fates will it. Whatever is happening at home is most likely quite out of your power to alter, either for the better or the worse. Let us then leave letters till the very last thing, regarding them as children do pills and powders, to do away with the effects of over-indulgence at Christmas.’

The letters awaiting them at Rome were to be forwarded to Innsbruck, the last halting-place on their travels.

At first, as was only natural, Rapha seemed to leave her sorrows behind her. She was not wholly untravelled; but how different that journey of a few months back to the

trip with Silverthorn! Then she had been shy and ill at ease with her newly found father—the future, however bright, had a dark cloud of uncertainty hanging over it. Now, in one respect at least, all riddles had been solved, all doubts set at rest. Her maiden dreams were over, and marriage had so far more than compensated for their loss.

This journey, to her ever-busy Professor, was in reality a post-dated honeymoon. Scant leisure had been his, as yet, for the proper enjoyment of his young wife's society.

Under the circumstances, Rapha must have been more than woman, and endowed with transhuman sensitiveness, to feel unhappy. She thought of her father—sorrowing for his loneliness, yearning to love and comfort him; but for the most part, her sun-bright day belonged to her husband. Each new experience, each fresh enchantment, seemed of his providing. His individuality for the moment absorbed her own.

There was little, perhaps, that could be called romance about such a love-story as theirs. The thunder-clouds of passion, the lightning-flashes of scorn that threatened to shatter the happiness of Villedieu and Norrice, were hardly likely to disturb the peace of these two.

Love was rather like the fair, calm promise of an English spring: tender green, as of a veil, covers the earth; the larks carol in the pure, pearly heavens; homely flowers bid us welcome here and there. We know what May in our dear native land is like, and we know what affection is like in such natures. Nevertheless, the beginnings of the life of one merged into the life of two is ever tinged with romance of a certain kind.

The sturdy Silverthorn, the artless Rapha, had moments

as exquisite and as egotistical as those impassioned, fiery natured lovers. There were times when she would feel ashamed of being so happy, and would blush at the personality and exclusiveness of their happiness. She never dreamed—how should she?—that in the natural order of things this concentrated devotion must come to an end. For marriage, above all to the maiden, if at first a microscope enlarging and exaggerating the individual, magnifying the tiny microcosm of self, may later on rather be compared to a telescope, not only making clear views of life hardly visible before, but bringing within focus many hitherto entirely hidden from view, and showing the relation of one to another.

Viewed thus, if marriage, according to the great Goethe, must oftentimes prove the grave of a woman's genius, it must, nevertheless, be set down as necessary to the development of character from some points of view. It is, perhaps, in the best interests of society that the one half of woman should remain celibate, the other devoting itself to family life; there being no greater error than to suppose either that maternity alone can raise a woman to the loftiest moral ideal, or that the natural longing of every feminine heart is for 'that sweet, safe corner behind the heads of children' our great poetess speaks of. Women, no less than men, are ambitious, and ambition is far-reaching. Immortality is not conferred by the fact of having given birth to a baby. But the name of her to whom we are indebted for 'Auld Robin Grey' will live as long as our language.

The happy travellers were now speeding from Verona to Innsbruck by the Brenner Pass, that magic ladder planted on the flowery floor of spring, its topmost rung in the regions of perpetual snow.

Spring had burst early upon that sheltered valley at the foot of the Austrian Alps.

They gazed with rapture upon the pastures, velvety smooth, bright as emerald; the abundance of field-flowers; the children sporting in cottage gardens. The warm, sunny atmosphere and bright skies seemed to herald the approach of summer.

Very soon all was changed. As the train slowly climbed the fearful ascent, flowers and sunshine vanished, an icy wind swayed the pine-branches, snow fell heavily, and the distant landscape was mantled in dazzling white.

Rapha shivered, and drew her warm travelling-cloak round her. The transformation was so sudden, so unexpected, that she felt alarmed.

‘Never fear!’ laughed Silverthorn. ‘The snowstorm is nothing; and we shall go down as gently and smoothly as we have come up. At Innsbruck it will be warmer, too.’

But Rapha could not at first shake off an eerie feeling. She wished that the snowstorm, the leaden clouds, and groaning pines had come first, and the gold, green, smiling, flowery valley on their tracks.

Like all holiday-makers who have been too happy, she dreaded the breaking of the spell. Warm sunshine had been their portion of late, in their hearts and about their path. Now, not only Italy was left behind, but the sun itself.

‘At Innsbruck we shall find letters,’ she said, her thoughts recurring to her father.

‘Unfortunately!’ again laughed Silverthorn. ‘Although, why should we dread letters now? They cannot undo a certain little ceremony that took place just two months ago.’

Rapha made no reply. Yes, it seemed to her, too, that she had all to hope, nothing to dread. Time might soften her father's heart—it could hardly estrange them more.

'We will try to be reconciled with papa,' she said, looking at her husband wistfully.

'I will do anything you wish, except put myself in the way of being kicked downstairs by my father-in-law,' was his reply.

Rapha thanked him with a smile, and, leaning back in the carriage, fell into a reverie.

Two months of married life had taught the sweet young wife many things, and altered the nature of her day-dreams.

As she looked far into the future, she fancied she now discerned the rainbow of peace, the arc of covenant.

What if this happy life of two became the life of three! What if Heaven blessed her with the dower of motherhood! Would not her father be won over to forget and forgive, then? He might blame her; and Silverthorn, perhaps, had not involuntarily incurred his displeasure. But were an innocent child born to them that should be the child of his children! Surely he must yield to such sweet advocacy. A little being, born under those circumstances, must inevitably prove a messenger of concord.

She smiled to herself, blushed, even shed happy tears at the very thought; and as she dreamed thus, the wintry landscape lost its portent—spring once more took possession of her heart.

'There are two telegrams for you,' Silverthorn said, with affected carelessness. 'Let me open them.'

Rapha, already trembling with eagerness and apprehen-

sion, waited whilst he broke the seals. The two missives, whilst bearing different dates, were worded precisely the same, and ran thus :

<i>From</i> 'MERTON MORROW, 'Strawton.	<i>To</i> 'MRS. SILVERTHORN, 'Rome.
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'Pray return at once. Your father is ill, and perpetually asks for you.'

'These telegrams are a fortnight old ; they must have been despatched soon after our start,' Silverthorn said ruefully. 'But don't break your heart, darling ; I will go at once to the office, and telegraph that we are on our way home post-haste.'

Rapha could not utter a word. She sat speechless and tearless, staggered by the blow. The worst news she had dreaded was that of her father's marriage. But the calamity of illness had never so much as crossed her mind. And he was longing for her ; his rancour, then, had passed away. What if she should reach home too late !

'See,' Silverthorn said cheerfully, as he sorted their letters, 'here is something more for you, from Mr. Morrow. Let me read it aloud.'

The kindly manufacturer had written so guardedly as to present the truth under a hopeful aspect. Mr. Rapham's condition, both mental and bodily, was serious ; at the same time, much was in his favour, and ultimate recovery might be looked for. Whether Rapha's return would do good or harm, no one could say ; but, seeing her father's eagerness, he begged her to hasten home. Meanwhile, she need be under no apprehension on one score. Mr. Rapham was at Strawton Park, and well cared for.

'Come, little wife,' Silverthorn said, trying to rouse Rapha

from her apathy, 'take heart; we must bear our burdens of sorrow as well as the rest. Life cannot be all holiday-making at Posilippo! We will get your father well—will do our best, anyhow.'

'Had we only gone to Rome!' Rapha said, with such a look of anguish that Silverthorn had not the heart to administer the reproof he kept for another time. •

'Had we only gone to Rome!' he merely exclaimed smiling. 'Were we but omniscient, superhumanly foreseeing, gifted with an insight into futurity, which, if we really possessed, would make life a game of chess, cunningly played! No, let us fold our hands, and wish all day long if you like, from morning till night, from the time we wear pinafores till we are bald and gray, but not that we could see yesterday's morn, not that we omitted one thing or did another foolishly, as events afterwards proved. We are but mortals, unable to see through brick walls, much less to foretell the events of to-morrow. So leave off crying, and let us comfort ourselves with the thought that we could no more predict your father's illness than—fortunately for ourselves—we can foresee how long we shall both live——' he added as he bent down and kissed her tear-wet cheek, 'or how many times we shall scold each other!'

That brusque, cheery speech had one good effect. It made Rapha first smile, then weep; and tears proved her best comforter. She tried to be calm and hopeful.

Silverthorn was right. Had he only gone to Rome, had we only done this, had we only omitted to do that! surely the saddest, most pathetic utterances framed by human lips! The most ironic, too, since hardly a week, a day, passes but we forget the self-administered reproof, and take pre-

cisely the same course for which we have already castigated ourselves.

Could Time run back and place before us the very same choice, the identical opportunity once so fatally misused, should we not by virtue of character, temperament and impressionableness misuse them as before?

There is a fine moral in that introspective 'Had I but done this, had I omitted to do that!' all the same. As the withered leaves and petals of a plant enrich the soil at the root, assuring fairer flower-harvests to come, so is it with the shattered hopes, the wasted energies, and unfulfilled purposes of the past. We are strengthened, perhaps beautified, by our buried selves; the noble life is the flower made perfect after much care and evil seasons. But, indeed, for that wistful lament, 'Had I only done this!' where would be the irony of human destiny?

As fast as trains could speed and tides would serve, the two anxious travellers continued their journey. Yet how long seemed the way to Rapha, how interminable the stoppages, how snail-like the pace!

Hitherto, she could never travel slowly enough. She preferred trains that halted at every station, as much sea as could be got, and frequent intervals of rest. But every moment had its preciousness now. The foreign scenes and glimpses of new landscape were as completely lost upon her as if she had been blind. She could not read, and from time to time would glance furtively at her watch.

At last, towards evening, they reached the port; if all went well, they should be at Strawton next morning.

The night was pitch-dark, and a fearful gale was blowing; but when did any British tourist delay his journey for an hour from fear of drowning? The business that calls him

home may not be urgent ; wholly indifferent to wind and weather, he embarks as coolly as if taking a penny boat across the Thames.

On such a night as this, it might certainly have seemed more prudent to sleep ashore. Such storms do not occur more than once or twice during the winter season, and are quickly over. But the handful of travellers waiting to be conveyed from Ostend to Dover were no more inclined to loiter than if their errand, like Rapha's, had been of life and death. One and all allowed themselves literally to be blown on board ; no other word can describe the wind which tossed them about like so many shuttlecocks and trumpeted like the roar of artillery. When the dreadful journey had begun, too, the homely heroism displayed below was really a spectacle for foreigners to admire. Those disabled landsfolk, so indifferent to bodily suffering and danger, showed the sturdy qualities which make us what we are as a nation.

The long, long purgatory did at last come to an end. After tossing about for double the allotted time upon awful seas and amid the darkness as of some terrible eclipse, the gallant little Ostend boat reached the shore. Then followed the swift railway journey to London in the early hours of mist and fog, the swifter journey, still under a depressing leaden sky, and Strawton was reached.

Rapha had borne up bravely till now, but when they were fairly driving in the direction of Strawton Park she broke down utterly. It seemed too good to be true. They were home at last. In a few minutes she should be by her father's bed-side, clasping his hand, soothing him with words of love and kindness. In vain Silverthorn tried to check this overhopeful mood, and put before her the possibilities of change for the worse, of quite unexpected contingencies.

‘We cannot be quite sure how we may find your father,’ he urged; ‘remember, his illness is not of the body only.’

She persisted, however, in believing that her worst sorrows were over.

They had nearly reached the lodge-gate, when they suddenly came upon Mr. Morrow.

‘I was on the look-out for you,’ he said; ‘I thought you must be back sometime to-day.’

‘Papa?’ was all Rapha could say, her knees trembling under her.

Mr. Morrow glanced from one to the other with a perturbed face.

‘My dear young lady,’ he at last stammered forth, ‘something quite unexpected has happened. We hope it is a mere whim, and that no serious harm will come of it; but your father has disappeared; he contrived to elude observation during last night’s storm, and we have not as yet so much as an inkling of his movements.’

Then the pair did their best to cheer and comfort her.

CHAPTER XIV.

FLEEING FROM—WHAT?

AT first the image of Rapha had pierced the dark cloud hanging over Mr. Rapham's mind like a golden sunbeam.

As glimpses of flowers and birds to close-shut prisoners, hopes of recovery to the sick, visions of green fields to toilers underground, came thoughts of her to his dark, passion-tossed soul. In a dim, undefined way, the sweet presence of his child was to set everything right. The sight of her face, the sound of her voice, were to prove the talismans charming away evil. Rapha, and Rapha only, could extricate him from the toils in which he was now caught. His passionate craving for her, abnormal from the first, reached the height of wild exultation, alternating with the frenzy of despair.

Now Rapha was near, now his only earthly hope was fulfilled, and his darling was at hand, to be clasped the next moment to his breast; and now unseen enemies had hidden her for ever from his sight; he might spend every penny he possessed and yet be unable to trace her hiding-place. Alike in moments of joyous assurance and torturing suspense, Rapha's name was continually on his lips, her form hovered before his eye. He would carry about with him little things she had used or worn—a glove, a purse, a ribbon, and kiss them fervently, as Catholics their relics.

But when he understood that she was really found, and

on her way home, a wholly new mood took possession of him. The seraphic figure that had seemed to beckon from the gates of Paradise was suddenly changed to that of an avenging angel armed with flame and sword. From the moment he realized the fact that she would soon be back, his unreason took this phase. He became as anxious to hide himself from her as he had before been for the meeting.

Was it that the awakenings of conscience, denied to him when he had been master of himself, became apparent now? Did the secret monitor, silent hitherto, make its voice heard amid the tumult and disorder in which he was now plunged?

Mr. Rapham had never shown the least self-questioning or remorse when alluding to his past career. There could be little doubt that certain passages of that career were dark and shameful enough; but as far as conscience was concerned, the past did not trouble him. He seemed anxious for the good opinion of the world, above all desirous not to shock Rapha; any balancing of good and evil in his own mind was quite another thing.

At last conscience had vicariously proclaimed itself. In endeavouring to hide himself from his child, he was in reality trying to escape the stings of remorse. Thus the impulses of a mind unhinged seemed about to atone for the calm deliberate judgment of former days. In his incoherent mood he had become more human, more manly.

He kept what was working within to himself; and as Rapha's return approached, manifested a collectedness that might well have disarmed keener watchers. He gave orders for her reception as if nothing were amiss, ate and drank almost as usual, and even affected pleasure at the prospect of the meeting. Those about him, his physician, attendants,

and Laura, were quite thrown off their guard, and imagined that the sight of his daughter was indeed to work the cure.

The checkmated bride-elect was still at Strawton Park, and perhaps more useful in ministering to the patient than anyone. She could be diverting without effort—as the young and careless only can—and her position, being irresponsible, was not felt to be very arduous. To play at dominoes, and otherwise humour the vagaries of an invalid, was better anyhow than having one's ankles kicked black and blue by little Greek boys. She was very well paid, and was already forming plans for a settlement with bosom friends in some state as yet not redundantly supplied with women.

All day long the storm had been raging at Strawton—such a storm as had not visited those parts for years. Veteran trees were uprooted, falling tiles made it dangerous to be abroad, whilst by spurts and gusts came down torrents of rain, inundating the lowlands. So furious the wind, rather the winds—for the four quarters of heaven furnished their contingent—that stout citizens, well buttoned in their broadcloth, had as much ado to make headway as seamen on a tossing deck; whilst, as if the storm, like human passions, had its sportive mood also, in every direction went flying hats, handkerchiefs, newspapers, and any other objects that came in its way. These laughable incidents diverted people's minds from the more awesome aspect of such a phenomenon.

Towards nightfall the climax came. It was as if the combined hosts of heaven were by common consent to be arrayed against the earth, one last cataclysmal onslaught of winds and waters to subdue the passive forces below.

It was then that Mr. Rapham achieved his flight. In

such an hour, when the very storm-fiends seemed let loose—the hurricane a destroying power gifted with intelligence; the winds, so many afrits, gnomes, evil geniuses, each having some separate vengeance to wreak upon the doomed world—who would have time to think of him? Truth to tell, the household had other matters on hand. The unslating of the roof by the cyclone could not be repaired whilst the storm lasted, and the rain was already forcing its way here and there. Mr. Rapham had retired with such obvious intention to go to bed, that no anxiety was felt about him. Lived the madman who would brave such a night?

Mr. Rapham, on the contrary, welcomed the foul weather, exulting in the thought that he was thereby veiled from observation. As evening drew on, a secret joy took possession of him. Rapha, they said, could not be back before the morning. The storm and the darkness would enable him to hide himself from her for ever.

All longing, all passionate love, all images of tenderness, were now banished from his breast. His child was his child still, beautiful, lovable, endearing; but she could have no love for her father; the sight of him could only fill her mind with abhorrence. She had quitted him for very loathing. Away, then, into the pitchy blackness of the night, into the turmoil of the tempest; away to silence, to dark oblivion.

Ever and anon these desperate thoughts were relieved by the sweet vision of yesterday. He saw Rapha's candid brow and caressing smile through the mist of storm-cloud and blinding rain; above the shrill blasts and fierce beats of the wind he heard her clear voice calling his name. But from both sight and sound he fled now as if a very spirit of darkness dogged his footsteps; covering his eyes and stopping

his ears, he sought ever a securer hiding-place in the storm. The night was indeed appalling, and bristling with dangers even to the wariest wayfarer.

In Strawton Park already many a noble tree had been maimed and crippled by the hurricane, and the battle was still raging. Like human things whose mishaps find vocal utterance, ever and anon came the crash of some bough torn from parent stem; or athwart the brushwood, some aged trunk, after futile struggling with its foe, would at last be laid low.

Beyond the precincts of the park was equal peril. The rain had swelled every stream to a river, and every dyke to the dimensions of a pond. Unprovided with a lantern, no traveller could here set his foot in safety. To plunge into these flooded lowlands was almost as audacious as to walk straight towards the coming tide.

But Mr. Rapham blindly staggered on. Every now and then he stopped and held his breath, as some runaway who gains scent of his pursuers.

‘Papa, papa, it is I—Rapha!’ he seemed to hear above the din of the hurricane.

The fancy made him dash forward more impetuously than before. Only to shut out that vision, drown that voice, was his craving as he unflinchingly confronted blast and rain. What harm could these do him now? He only wanted to hide himself.

And as he fled thus from images called forth by a distorted fancy, something like a prayer rose to his lips.

For the first time in his life a Name was invoked in awe instead of blasphemy.

‘Thou great God,’ he cried, ‘save me, hide me——

From what? The prayer remained inchoate and frag-

mentary. And it was answered in Heaven's inscrutable way. His agony of terror had reached the acme, when he was struck on the temple by a shattered branch. Merciful oblivion wrapt him round about as sound slumber. He fell stricken in the midst of a hurly-burly which had been to him a mere plaything compared to the warfare and turmoil within his own breast.

At last the vision of his absent child troubled him no longer. The beatific as well as the retributive eidolon ceased to haunt him. He lay there, perhaps as pitiable a human thing as any at the mercy of the storm, self-sought death seeming imminent !

CHAPTER XV.

AN IDEA IN SEARCH OF A PURCHASER.

WHEN Mrs. Bee had thrust her twenty sovereigns into Norrice's palm, she did not say how she had come by them, and the inventress at first was too overjoyed to ask.

Let not Norrice be accused of undue egotism. A discoverer, a creator, an artist, no matter his sphere, is bound to be an egotist. It is by virtue, indeed, of oblivion of self and others that the world's beautifiers attain their end.

A certain lofty-minded, exalted selfishness is necessary to all who have great work to do ; but only in natures gifted with this power and the insight to recognise it is such forgetfulness of everyday claims excusable.

No sooner had Norrice thought out the improvements necessary to her ironing-machine, disposing of the twenty pounds to the last farthing, than she was overcome with remorse. How could she have accepted her mother's money? Above all, what sacrifices lay at the bottom of the mystery? Mystery it certainly was. Mrs. Bee's twenty pounds seemed much more miraculous than her dinners out of nothing.

Her sudden elation of spirits vanished, she closed her workshop somewhat sadly, and joined her mother in the little parlour.

'Mammy dear,' she said, affecting an indifferent air, 'of course if this new invention of mine turns out well you shall have ease and plenty for the rest of your days ; but do tell

me—how *did* you contrive to get twenty pounds just now?’

‘What does it matter, so long as you have got the money?’ Mrs. Bee said pettishly, as she prepared the tea. ‘And you know, Norrice, there is nothing I object to so much as being pried into and cross-questioned.’

Norrice was determined to humour this captious mood, feeling sure she should worm out the truth by degrees. She let the subject drop for the moment, and, cosily settling herself in an easy-chair, sighed a little sigh of contentment.

‘How happy newly made wives are who have an old home and a mother to come to,’ she said with a look of positive exhilaration. ‘Yes, mother, it is worth while getting married, even if your husband be the greatest villain going, for the sake of a treat like this!—tea, as in the old days, alone with you. That dear old battered teapot! When Fred and I move into the big house in Park Lane I told you of, and eat off silver on weekdays and gold on Sundays, I shall love nothing so well as your old teapot; and your bread-and-butter and watercress—a dinner at Windsor Castle would not be half such a feast to me.’

‘What a child you are!’ Mrs. Bee laughed. ‘But all newly married women feel the same; and the more their husbands love them, the better pleased they are to get away, just for a time, of course. One can’t eat strawberry jam all day long.’

‘Bread-and-butter and watercresses are much better,’ Norrice said. ‘Well, mother, the election is to take place this day week. If I sell my ironing-machine and Fred wins his seat, what enviable beings we shall be!’

‘Now, Norrice, as if two such strokes of good luck were

likely to happen at once! But, before I forget it, do tell me where you put the slates and pencils you used for your algebra class; I can't find them anywhere.'

'Do you mean to set up as a professor?' Norrice jested. 'I am sure if you could teach young housewives how to live upon nothing, you would prove a benefactress to society, and a bond of union to thousands of newly married couples.'

'There are some things I can teach, I dare say, as well as my betters,' Mrs. Bee replied, with a contemptuous toss of the head. 'But where are the slates? Do be serious.'

'On the top of my wardrobe, I believe. Are you going to set up an infant school, by way of amusement?' Norrice asked, as she helped herself to more bread-and-butter.

'Not that, exactly; but I want something to do now that I have not you to look after; and many of the smaller tradesmen here, I am sure, would rather send their children to me than to the Board Schools. Music, too! I wish before you go you would look up all your old school music. I can teach children the rudiments as well as a pupil of the Royal Academy. Then French, again; I once translated "Telemachus" right through. Have we an old French grammar and exercise-book anywhere? I mean to set to work at once. Six pupils at ten shillings a quarter would be three pounds; twelve would be six pounds. I could make enough to live upon.'

Bread-and-butter and watercresses on a sudden seemed to lose their charm. Norrice grew pensive and thoughtful. She began at last to see through the mystery. Her mother had mortgaged her half-year's annuity!

She veiled her suspicions, and entered into the proposal with affected heartiness.

‘I will send you something more modern in the way of books,’ she said. ‘It is the school-book nowadays that makes the teacher. Educationalists need take no more trouble than hurdy-gurdy grinders, provided they have the last thing in the shape of an instrument. And I might come and take the higher branches! On my word, mammy dear, your notion is capital!’

The pair parted cheerfully; but the next day and the next, Norrice returned to Strawton to apply herself more sedulously than ever to her invention. Success now meant much more than the payment of a debt to her husband; it meant her mother’s daily bread.

Villedieu, who, although kept in the dark, divined the secret of these long visits to Strawton, railed at her for her assiduity.

‘You are a veritable tempter of the gods,’ he would say sarcastically. ‘Did not Fortune once drop a crown of gold upon your head, to be tossed off as if worth nothing the next moment? Instead of invoking success, you should try to propitiate the avenging Fates, and expect at least one dire calamity.’

‘Is it not calamity enough to be married under false pretences?’ she retorted.

Do what they would, these two could not help wounding each other.

All this time, when it seemed as if they were getting farther and farther apart, she could not help admiring her husband’s conduct. His manful, if at times reckless, battling with evil fortune; the alacrity with which he threw himself heart and soul into good causes, rather taking them upon

trust than feeling inwardly moved to play the part of reformer; the indifference with which he bore what were serious privations to one in his position—all these phases of character came out strongly under adverse fortune, and made him appear perhaps better than he was.

Norrice hardly knew whether to be more sorry for herself or for him. All counterfeit of tenderness had long been laid aside, the numerous little observances that softened daily life neglected.

They were husband and wife, linked together in social partnership, brought into closest contact by ties that could not be annulled. The discord, the jarring note, made itself perceptible in spite of self-control on both sides.

That last speech of hers, instead of being taken playfully, called forth a stinging reply. He could not occasionally help these bitter speeches, and he said to himself that she was the more in fault of the two.

‘The important fact,’ he said, ‘is to be married at all—like Henri Quatre, to have taken the perilous leap! Could the combined wisdom of the philosophers, could voyages round the world and up to the moon, could other experiences, supposing we lived to be a hundred, teach us what we have already learned together?’

She looked at him with an expression of painful inquiry, and he added lightly, as if bound to treat the matter like a joke:

‘I mean, how hard—how impossible—it is for two human beings, even the best intentioned in the world, to understand each other! Did ever any two? Not all that has ever been written by the wise, from Æsop down to Herbert Spencer, could make me believe it.’

Such bitterness did not often come to the surface. Both

studiously avoided anything like recrimination, much less disagreement, and circumstances favoured them just now.

Norrice was hardly more absorbed in her own invention than in her husband's political campaign. She was, indeed, using up her energies too fast—to use a homely phrase, intellectually burning the candle at both ends. She said to herself that soon the double strain would be over, and that life might afterwards offer too much tameness. Time enough then to take repose.

Meanwhile, it really seemed as if her words would come true, and that both her own efforts and Villedieu's would be crowned with victory. His return for Strawton was now looked upon by competent judges as a certainty; and she had, as she believed, brought her ironing-machine to perfection, and was busy upon her blue-book. Its price, so she fondly hoped, was to be her joy-gift to Villedieu on his election. If this money could not bring back the old love and the old confidence, it would, at least, make life easier and clearer for both; a weight of enormous obligation would be lifted from her mind.

Her specification drawn up, and the preliminary patent assured, she set out in search of a purchaser; and purchasers are not wanting when an idea finds its way into the market. The difficulty is to find out whether an idea is what it pretends to be, or a bit of commonplaceness in disguise: a mere travesty, after the mock philosophers of old, obtaining followers and fame on the strength of their long beards and tattered garments.

But if difficult for the capitalist to find his idea, it is equally difficult for the idea to find its especial capitalist. The marketable value of Norrice's first discovery was by this time noised abroad, and she found easy access to one

speculator after another. Their faces fell from fair weather to zero, however, when she announced the fact that her invention was neither a projectile capable of destroying, say, all London at a blow, nor an easy method of holding intercourse with the planet Jupiter. They had looked for something marvellous from a lady already so well known, and, forsooth, this fine talk was about nothing, or next to nothing—a mere substitute any fool might have thought of, for woman's labour in the laundry. It might be a time-saving, money-saving, health-saving invention certainly, but it was not 'likely to draw.'

'We must have something to draw, you see, madam,' said the mouthpiece of Messrs. Puff and Company, an enterprising young firm to whom she had been recommended, 'we must have something workable in the hands of a company.'

'Then you do not yourselves buy patents?' asked Norrice, glancing from her interlocutor to his three partners. They were all young, pleasant, well-dressed, prosperous-looking gentlemen, who evidently found the business of farming companies a lucrative concern. Mr. Puff looked at her with ill-concealed superciliousness.

'We never put our hands into our own pockets when we can get other people to go to theirs,' was the reply. 'We first cast about for something good, then give the public the opportunity of taking advantage of it. That is the system we follow.'

An admirable system, too, Mr. Puff seemed to think; he went on in the same cheerful, friendly manner:

'Not that we are unwilling to see what can be done with your invention, if you see fit to entrust it to us. We will invite our clients to an inspection, and hear what they say.'

If they seem disposed to come forward, we will put the concern before the public and work a company for you.'

It was a curious picture, and one highly illustrative of nineteenth-century civilization; this young, ardent, handsome woman in conclave with the other sex, men hardly older than herself, who, whilst respectful in the extreme, paid no more deference to her as a woman than if she had been the oldest, ugliest, most graceless of feminine granddames. Homage enough they were ready to pay of a wholly different kind. Had she come to them with something more extraordinary in the way of an invention, something to magnetize other people's money towards their own pockets, they would have accorded warm admiration. Who shall declare which is the worthier praise, that called forth by bright eyes and witching smiles, or by sheer intellect and spirit?

Having failed to awaken enthusiasm in these too ambitious breasts, Norrice bethought herself of a hard-headed Strawton manufacturer. Old-fashioned in his theories, not at all expecting miracles, as did the younger men she had just quitted, by no means a millionaire, yet the builder-up of his own solid fortunes, Mr. Joshua Smith, of the firm of Smith, Smith and Co., wholesale ironmongers and implement makers, might realize the practical utility of her invention. He had already, so at least report said, realized large sums of money by more than one novelty. So to Mr. Joshua Smith she went. A little prim, withered man, not better furnished with flesh and muscle than Mr. Rapham himself, precise in speech, dry in manner, unsympathetic in look as a barber's block, still wearing the swallow-tailed coat of thirty years ago, Mr. Smith yet received with the utmost courtesy a young lady who came to him about an invention; further proof, if any were needed, of the revolution taking

place in the relation of the sexes. Having listened coldly, taking apparently the faintest interest in her recital, he said :

‘Well, ma’am, time is money, as you know, and twenty people come to me in a week with inventions not worth a groat. However, as there are always as good fish in the sea as ever came out, and your machine is handy, shall we appoint the day after to-morrow, at eleven o’clock sharp, for an inspection?’

Norrice acquiesced, then got out reluctantly :

‘If you are pleased with my invention, would you be disposed to purchase it?’

‘I never go out of my way to look at wares unless I want to buy,’ was the curt reply, Mr. Smith unaware that he was thus obeying an injunction of the Talmud.

Norrice jotted down the appointment in her pocket-book delightedly, not remarking the fact that the date fixed coincided with that of the election.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ENGLISH GALA.

IT is wonderful how English folk contrive to make merry after their own fashion! We inhabitants of Tartarean darkness, phlegmatic, befogged, taciturn insulars—so at least foreigners depict us—are in reality as disposed for anything in the shape of a revel or raree-show as the lightest-hearted Southerner going.

If this statement appears in the least degree exaggerated, let the incredulous witness an election in the nearest county town.

Strawton was by no means behind its neighbours in this respect. Only give the good folks a chance, and they would rollick as heartily as any. Perhaps in more favoured spots people are sedater; but Strawton was ugly—life had to be endured there—so every possible occasion was seized upon for making holiday.

A stranger entering the town in ignorance of what was taking place must have supposed that some royal or civic ceremonial of extraordinary brilliance was about to be celebrated. The sober, shabby town was changed as if by magic to an airy coquette. It was the old story of Cinderella of the dustbin transformed into the ballroom queen.

From end to end of the dull, monotonous streets now fluttered streamers and bannerets of deep blue and orange—colours that no more harmonized than did the political

parties of which they were the emblems, yet formed as agreeable a contrast to the eye as a field of cornflowers and marigolds. Cornflowers and marigolds, marigolds and cornflowers. Strawton seemed a sea of them to-day—bricks and mortar for the time being obscured.

These waves of colour formed a uniform surface when beheld from a distance, broke up into grotesque and amusing items on nearer survey. Not only were public buildings, factories, shops and private dwellings beflagged, but every living thing, from the Mayor and Corporation to the costermonger's donkey, wore decorations in honour of the event. The very dogs and cats were evidently supposed to share their owners' interest in the contest, one and all wearing coloured streamers; whilst the horses sagaciously shook their manes as if they too knew what blue and yellow rosettes meant.

The butchers had decorated the trim carcasses and prime joints in their windows also. Was it to signify (truly enough) that there may be a measure of Liberalism or Conservatism in eating?—French cookery and innovation going with the former, old English roast beef certainly more in keeping with the latter.

But nothing more clearly betokened the interest felt in politics by Strawton folk than the favours worn by children and babies in arms. If infants cannot suck in correct political notions with mothers' milk, at least they should learn to know the right colour and abhor the wrong. Even the little workhouse lads, who were marched through the streets to see the decorations and the bustle, had contrived to get a farthing's worth of blue and yellow ribbon for their button-holes, symbol of their privilege as voters to come. As to the feminine portion of the community, one and all

made the occasion one of coquetry. For weeks beforehand mantua-makers and milliners had been busy with dresses, mantles, and bonnets of the respective colours. Certainly marigolds did not suit every complexion, nor cornflowers either; but these difficulties were surmounted by means of a little toning down. And new clothes are always in a sense becoming.

So much for the festive appearance of the town, which certainly did credit to a place so resourceless from a picturesque and artistic point of view. Another change was more striking still. A spirit of waggishness possessed alike young and old, rich and poor, the wise and the simple. Jokes that would have been resented as unseemly in the extreme at other times were to-day not only permitted but relished. For once the dire problem of the struggle for existence seemed forgotten. People neglected their business for the pleasure of making themselves hoarse on the right side.

Of pageant there was little or none, but popular enthusiasm and the readiness to be amused made up for all deficiencies. A rider dressed from top to toe in blue and orange, his horse as gaily dressed as himself; a break-and-four full of merry voters carrying banners, and horses, carriage and fares all gaudy as Merry Andrews; ladies in elegant landaus flaunting the colours of fathers or husbands; here and there something in the shape of a joke, a fat grunter let loose from its sty in order to stop traffic and create a momentary diversion; a chimney-sweep arm-in-arm with a man-cook, black and white contrasting no less strongly than their colours; a miller's cart, each sack of flour having a portrait of some local favourite—or the reverse—outlined in blue or yellow chalk; comic songs and improvised satire—these formed the lighter amusements of the day.

Meantime the cheering of street-boys, and, indeed, of the male population generally, began betimes, and so heartily that it seemed problematic if a single voice would have strength in it left for cheering at night.

A splendid time; in the words of the youngsters, 'A scrumptious time!' Would that an election happened at least once a week!

The ladies Lowfunds of course showed themselves in what really did duty for a tourney. As yet Gracie's engagement to Mr. Morrow was not made public, so that the Liberal colours worn by the retired manufacturer and Gracie's deep blue, as became blue-blood, did not create a scandal. Besides, as Lady Letitia said, anything short of dynamite and Nihilism is accepted nowadays. Radical notions are, alas! quite the fashion.

But two familiar figures who should undoubtedly have graced the occasion were absent.

The pretty heiress of Strawton Park did not appear, and Villedieu's handsome wife kept in the background. Rapha's non-appearance all could understand. Rumours were afloat that Mr. Rapham could no longer be counted among the living. But why Norrice should not be driving about tricked out in marigold colours was a mystery.

'He's ashamed of having married a teacher! What else could be expected of an aristocrat turned Radical?' cried one bystander wearing a blue rosette.

'Who can tell if he has married her properly, after all?' said a second opponent. 'They never went to church that I heard of.'

Norrice herself had begged that it should be so. To act the part of pictorial advertisement of her husband's candidature was not to her taste. She would much rather,

she said, spend the day quietly with her mother, and perhaps see something of the proceedings from a neighbour's window.

Villedieu consented to this arrangement with a bad grace, and could not keep back a bitter epigram.

'I know quite well what is in your mind,' he said. 'Had women governed from the beginning, not a state in Europe would have been burdened with a National Debt.' He added scornfully: 'But to count the cost of a yard of ribbon when your pound of flesh is mortgaged to the Jews, seems to me Quixotic cheeseparings. Have your way. You shall wear a gown of embossed marigold velvet costing twenty guineas a yard when we are rich—that is to say, when all outstanding debts of valuable public servants are cancelled by Act of Parliament.'

Norrice let him scoff. Perhaps, after all, she said to herself, it was as well that he could confront embarrassments with a light heart. No good could come of gloomy retrospection or dark foreboding. His philosophy, at least, enabled him to throw heart and soul into the work he had to do, whilst, for herself, it was only by an effort that she could attain to self-centredness and abstraction.

But her task was so far accomplished. Her ironing-machine had been pronounced flawless by a professional expert. Its marketable value had been appraised at a high figure. If a second time, indeed, Fortune would not woo her in a shower of gold, at least she might fairly hope to clear off her husband's debts.

'Only to do that!' sighed poor Norrice; 'only to embark him in a career of public usefulness, freed from the stigma of indebtedness!'

Come days of loneliness and even cold mistrust; come

yearning years of unsatisfied aspiration and hopes nipped in the bud ; come estrangement, deepening as life's clouds and sunshine waned—all this she could look forward to calmly, and even find such an existence enviable, were her husband's future wiped clean of stain.

So whilst the street boys were making themselves hoarse in the cause of yellow and blue—whilst drums were beating, bands playing, vehicles flying to and fro, and excited voters riding hither and thither wildly as John Gilpin ; whilst 'God save the Queen,' the 'Old Hundredth,' 'He's a jolly good fellow,' and other popular airs, were making a Babel of these usually quiet streets—Norrice and her capitalist were closeted in close confabulation.

Mr. Joshua Smith was not the kind of man to do anything in a hurry. Having scrutinized the apparatus with the greatest care, minutely entering into every detail, he must next see the instrument at work, and see it at work over and over again.

On the principle of beginning at the beginning, Norrice first experimented on a dozen pocket-handkerchiefs, which were turned out with the greatest possible expedition—in less time, indeed, than a laundry-maid could have manipulated one. She re-adjusted her hot plates, and next a man's collar was smoothed, glazed, and stiffened—a second, a third, with marvellous rapidity.

Then the triumphant inventress proceeded to more elaborate tests still, the article operated upon being a lady's slip, flounced and embroidered.

No hitch occurred ; the slip was ironed to perfection before a skilled workwoman could have got it well in hand.

All this time the wearer of the swallow-tailed coat had

watched the proceedings without the betrayal of any feeling whatever.

Norrice had glanced at the face of her Sphinx, unable to discern therein either approval or disappointment.

At last, however, Mr. Joshua Smith expressed his sentiments more eloquently than words could have done.

He drew forth his cheque-book.

Now, if there is an ecstatic moment in life when the cup of satisfaction is full to overflowing, and a light heart maketh a merry countenance, it is this—to sit opposite a purchaser who fumbles the blank leaves of his cheque-book whilst gazing at you. Room for another wish is not left.

Mr. Joshua Smith looked at Norrice; and, as if to let the sweet intoxication take possession of her, waited a minute or two before speaking.

‘Now, Mrs. Villedieu,’ he said, ‘what I buy, I pay for, as Strawton folk know right well. But cash is cash, and times are hard. All I can do for you is this, and you may go farther and fare worse. I’ll pay you five hundred pounds down, and make you co partner in the working of your invention.’

Norrice consented without a moment’s hesitation. She knew well enough that she had a plain, fair-dealing tradesman to deal with here—no money-grubber or extortioner. Five hundred pounds constituted no fortune, certainly, but was a godsend under present circumstances; and a greater boon still would be the future income to be derived from her invention.

Already she saw the most painful harass and lasting care of daily life removed, and a guarantee of fireside peace; if not the most perfect kind, at least such as she had craved for as some celestial blessing.

A few minutes later, and the brief transaction was over. Norrice's patent was transferred to the firm of Messrs. Smith, Smith, and Co., for the sum of five hundred pounds caution money, the inventress herself being made a sharer of all future profits. A legal form of transfer would be ready at the office for signature next day.

Meantime, Mr. Joshua Smith carried off the blue-book, and left Norrice her five hundred pounds. The poor girl was overcome with joy—perhaps she had never felt such a sense of relief in her life; and burdens heavy as Christian's had slipped from her shoulders many times.

'Mother—mother! come, share my good news!' she cried from the stair-head.

But no Mrs. Bee made her appearance, she having popped on bonnet and shawl to see what was going on.

Norrice returned to her workshop, hardly knowing how to contain herself. With trembling fingers she folded the cheque and placed it in her little purse, joy-gift to her husband on this day, as she hoped, of his crowning success; then she began to put away her appliances.

She was thus engaged, moving about rapidly in the overcrowded little room, her heart beating fast, her cheeks flushed, her limbs trembling, when she heard the canter of a horseman in the street below. It was her husband come to tell her how matters were going.

As she was about to extricate herself from her disarranged machinery and make for the door, a sharp cry escaped her lips, and she sank to the ground, half-swooning with pain.

In her excitement, she had forgotten that the plates last used for her experiment were still burning hot. Between these her poor trembling hand had been now caught—for

a moment only, yet long enough to occasion fearful torture and injury.

There she lay, life suddenly changed from wildest exultation to intense physical suffering, with no one by to alleviate it. Everyone in the house, even Mrs. Bee, was abroad electioneering.

CHAPTER XVII.

ANNEALED!

IN striking contrast with the tumult reigning at Strawton was the hush at the trader's mansion. A silence awesome and eerie as of death pervaded every part. From time to time, indeed, rumour got afloat that Mr. Rapham was dead, and that Villedieu's victory, if victory it proved, could now affront no personal enemy. Then, again, the story ran that Mr. Rapham still lived the life in death of hopeless unreason. Death comes not always at a rash mortal's bidding; his sable vesture skirts may be clutched at, his icy breath felt, yet will the dread deliverer oftentimes elude our grasp. Mr. Rapham had rushed wildly into the storm, fleeing from his child, who was his conscience, seeking the only refuge that remained to him now—annihilation. But the multi-form perils of that fearful night passed him by; the dangers he courted hearkened not to his prayer. When, at last,

merciful oblivion came, it was that of temporary unconsciousness, not death itself.

Soon after Rapha's return, he had been brought home by one of the search-parties from Strawton Park, a ghastly figure enough. He was found lying by the uprooted tree that had struck him in its fall, alive certainly, but that was all. Whether he would recover from that death-like stupor seemed problematic.

At first it was thought best for Rapha not to see her father. Should consciousness return, the sight of her might agitate him too much ; he ought to be gently prepared for it. Moreover, urged the physicians—despatched, as well as nurses, by the great contracting house—granting such a contingency did occur, no one could predict the patient's mental condition. Ultimate recovery Rapha was bidden not too strongly to hope for.

Her aspirations and prayers hit a higher mark. What is life bereft of soul? What is health of body without peace within? What is this mortal lot without love?

She was moved by one passion, one longing, one prayer only. Oh for a return of consciousness before death or mental darkness came ! Oh for one little lucid interval in which to make her father understand her daughterly affection, and sorrow, and pity ! Was it too much to pray for? Are prayers heard? Has any human being a right to expect heavenly interposition in personal affairs? Such doubts disturbed her from time to time, her mind alternating from humility and clinging faith to almost resentful sorrow and deep dejection. Her father's lot had been so lonely, so loveless ; and whatever might have stained his career, she was his child, he was her father ; she was bound to love him and stand by him in spite of secret disapproval. More-

over, it seemed to her fond, simple nature that their kiss of peace now, their reconciliation at the last, would be a benediction for him to carry to the grave, the chrism wiping away any brand of shame on his brow.

‘I was wrong, I see it now,’ she said to her husband. ‘I ought to have borne with my father, and not to have showed such abhorrence of what, perhaps, in his eyes, was no wickedness at all. He loved me as only widowed fathers can love their daughters. Your love, dear Gerald, is quite a different thing. If ever you have a daughter, and I die first of us two, you will understand how men so situated cling to their daughters, and almost worship them whether they are worthy of it or no. He made his large fortune for me. He did not care to spend money on himself. I ought to have thought of that.’

She broke off, and, wiping her blue eyes, appealed to her husband pitifully.

‘God is good. You believe, as I do, that there is a life beyond the grave. But the old familiar ties with those we love are broken for ever here. We can never see our darlings again as they were—be to them what we have been—on this earth, in our homes. To believe otherwise would be blasphemy. And so, death must always be very sad, in one sense—the sense, as human beings, we can best understand; perhaps the only one we can understand—a final, cruel parting. The little kindnesses left undone, the duties unfulfilled, can never be made right when once the grave has separated those dear to each other. If all had been peace and understanding between my father and myself I could better bear to lose him now. But to have parted in anger, and never be able to make it right, would break my heart.’

What had tenderest affection to offer but commonplace comfort and threadbare consolation? Silverthorn's sturdy nature was not, perhaps, able to allow for morbid self-reproaches, as he called these; but he humoured her now. Mr. Rapham might not only recover his reason, but his health partially, he urged. She must not yet despair.

And, after all, it is impossible to keep back our opinions as to right and wrong, even from those dearest to us. He did not see that she had any cause for self-recrimination. She was certainly bound to be dutiful and affectionate to her father, but not to uphold his theories or his conduct when conscience said 'No.'

At last this terrible tension came to an end. The physician announced that Mr. Rapham had recovered consciousness, and asked for his daughter.

Rapha uttered a cry of wild joy, and was about to follow him at once, when he stood still, eyeing Silverthorn significantly.

'Would it not be as well for Mrs. Silverthorn to take off her wedding-ring?' he asked. 'It is difficult, as yet, to say how far the patient is himself; but one thing is certain, he does not seem aware of his daughter's marriage.'

Rapha stood irresolute. Silverthorn quickly decided her.

'Is there any magic in a hoop of gold?' he asked, taking off the ring, and slipping it on one of his own fingers. 'Were it thrown into the sea we should be married none the less.'

'But to deceive him at such a moment!' Rapha cried.

'Maybe the last proof of affection you can show your father,' was the reply. 'Go, love; never hesitate. Forget me; be only the daughter for a little while.'

Some sick-rooms affect the mind solemnly as the sight

of dusky church aisles, lighted by mild radiance, when strains of low-chanted psalmody fill the air, and worshippers are on their knees. The blessedness of death is felt here, as the peaceful setting of the sun after a good day. Sadness reigns, but it is the sadness inseparable from mortality only.

Very different was the atmosphere of Mr. Rapham's bed-chamber. We influence our surroundings unawares, and, as wrote the great Jean Paul, nowhere the saintly wears a more heavenly look than on his sick-bed—nowhere doth the worldly one look harder.

As Rapha entered she was torn by the old, painful conflict. Whilst yearning more passionately than ever to love her father, and make her love apparent, the old shrinking and dread still made themselves felt.

Mr. Rapham's countenance had regained something of its old restlessness and vivacity. The pallor of his complexion and the bandage across his forehead did not in the least degree make him unrecognisable. He was outwardly himself, all the defects visible in health exaggerated by disease and injury. His eyes had a more searching expression than ever; his features were more sharpened; the want of feeling, expression, humanity, in the whole physiognomy was doubly, trebly apparent.

'Dear, dearest papa!' Rapha murmured, sitting down on the bed, and gently kissing his cheek.

He did not testify any agitation, rather a quiet, satisfied feeling, much as if she had been summoned from a tea-party at Lady Letitia's—not at all as if they had been alienated for months. The direst chimeras of a distorted fancy were no longer disturbing him. The dark cloud that had obscured his mind of late was partially lifted.

He caught her left hand, felt it, held it up to the light.

‘All lies,’ he said; ‘they told me you were married to that fellow Silverthorn. Is there anyone else in the room?’ he asked. ‘Send ’em out. I want to talk to you.’

The doctor and nurse in attendance obeyed the behest, and the pair were alone.

Still fondling her left hand, ‘Is everybody gone?’ he asked.

‘Yes, dear papa,’ she replied cheerfully, collected by a tremendous effort.

He leaned forward, and, to make assurance doubly sure, glanced round.

‘Don’t tell anybody,’ he went on. ‘That villain, Ville-dieu, has done for me. I should be well enough now but for that villain’s blow. Well, he can’t do me any more harm now.’

‘Try to get better for love of me,’ she whispered.

He shook his head.

‘It is hard to leave you. But don’t you fret——’

Here his voice had all the old insinuating cunning.

‘Don’t you fret about what will become of me when I am gone. Don’t you believe all the parsons tell you. You can build a church if you like to do it cheap, by contract; it will do me no harm, and no more good, either, than if I were just a rotten potato. I don’t say the world made itself. I don’t say there isn’t an Almighty. What I say is, let those contradict who will, when we die, we die, and there is an end of us. So don’t you fret, my dear, about what will become of me—of my soul, as they call it.’

Rapha bent down and kissed the shrunken cheek, with a feeling akin to despair. How could she bring a ray of light within reach of this dark, cloud-encumbered mind? How

communicate to him some touch of humility, and reverence of the Unseen Power?

‘What joy if we could only meet and love each other there!’ she murmured, pointing upwards—‘yourself, my mother, and I.’

He smiled fondly and impatiently.

‘Sit there, where I can see you,’ he said. ‘I wish your poor mother had lived to see you, too. They told me you were ashamed of me, and were married. I never believed them. I’ve been a good father to you.’

‘If you could only get better!’ Rapha said, suppressing her tears.

Again he showed fond impatience.

‘No use to cry over spilt milk,’ he said. ‘I’ve lived long enough to make a nice lot of money, and it’s tied down to you pretty tight. Your husband, no matter who he be, can’t make ducks and drakes of it. You will see. Mind and be presented at Court, as I wished. The pearl and ruby ornaments were bought on purpose. You know, Lady Letitia will be a good friend to you. I’ve left her something—nobody does anything for nothing in this world. She’ll find you a fine gentleman for a husband——’

He lay back, smiling, rather chuckling to himself.

‘I never told you, I quite intended to be presented at a levee myself. Shouldn’t I have made an odd figure in gold-laced coat, tights, and silk stockings! I thought how it would amuse you to see me.’

Then the chuckle died away, and he looked at her searchingly, with almost as much yearning passion in his face and voice as in her own. He was evidently trying to reach her inmost soul, just as she was trying to reach his, to get at a secret thought, and elicit some

fond expression of it for his comfort whilst there was yet time.

‘You weren’t ashamed of me, were you?’ he asked with tenderest insinuation—the humility and self-abnegation of the appeal having something almost sublime in it. ‘I’ve been a good father to you, Rapha.’

She could only answer him by tears and kisses. He seemed half convinced, yet went on pleading in self-advocacy, his voice dropped to a whisper.

‘Don’t let them poison your mind against me when I am laid under the turf. If I had not bought and sold the black folks, others would have done it; and they are not fit for anything else. I was no worse than scores. Don’t let that trouble you when I am gone.’

‘What right have I to judge you, my own dear, kind father? These things rest with God,’ Rapha answered passionately; affection and conscience pulled different ways. She dared not utter what was uppermost in her mind, yet what joy if he could be brought to see his conduct in its true light at last! One prayer, and one only, was in her heart and on her trembling lips. Oh, to see him meet his end in God-fearing and awe; to know that his spirit took flight with the chrism of peace and penitence upon his brow!

‘My own father, so kind to me always!’ she added brokenly.

He seemed greatly touched by this expression of love; his lips quivered, and a faint glow rose to his cheeks—was it of pride or shame? He lifted her little hand to his cheek, and replied half crying: ‘I wish now I had been more of a gentleman, a different kind of man, for your sake, my darling.’

Then he fell back exhausted. Rapha in alarm touched the bell; a physician and nurse entered, and ministered a restorative. All saw that the end must be near.

An hour or two passed thus, the patient lying in a kind of stupor. By-and-by, he opened his eyes.

'Rapha,' he murmured impatiently, 'I cannot see you. Ring for lights. Why do they let us be in the dark? The candles are in the contract.'

It was in reality daylight, the clear limpid transparency of a February afternoon. The films of death were gathering over his eyes.

'I have your hand; I know you are there. I want to see you once more,' he said plaintively. 'Make them bring lights, I say.'

But when, indeed, lights were brought to humour him, he paid no heed. Gradually his hand loosened its hold of Rapha's; he spoke no more—only once she caught the sound of her own name feebly whispered. And with that pure invocation on his lips, the worship of his child, which had been his only religion, his last earthly thought, perhaps some prayer unheard of mortal ears to keep it company, the spirit of the liberticide passed away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A REVELATION.

WHILST Rapha watched by her dying father, a scene no less strikingly contrasted with the tumult without was presented by Norrice's quiet suburban room. Had she been laid to rest in Strawton Cemetery, she could hardly have been more oblivious of all that was going on throughout that tumultuous, as it seemed, interminable day.

The ebb and flow of popular applause, uproarious as the tide of a tempestuous ocean ; the rattle of carriage-wheels ; the beating of drums ; the political choruses, caught up at intervals by the crowd ; the temporary lull towards evening ; the reawakened enthusiasm at midnight ; the climax when, general expectation being at fever-height, above a sea of up-turned faces a stream of electric light flashed these figures in the eyes of all :

Villedieu	.	.	.	.	7,109
Roberts	.	.	.	.	6,098

the anti-climax that followed, the victorious candidate being drawn in triumph through the town—of all this Norrice knew nothing, as she lay under the influence of an anæsthetic.

She had no recollection of falling asleep. It was rather as if physical pain had been stopped by some magic finger, and a dark and dreamless abyss sucked her gently in. Once or twice during the night the spell would be broken.

She was conscious of her own moans under direst suffering ; she saw her mother moving about, and again and again thrice-blessed darkness and insensibility came to her relief.

Next morning on awakening, by little and little she remembered everything—the transaction, the accident, the contest. Intense pain she felt no longer ; but the heavy lassitude was of itself a suffering. Soporifics had done their work well.

The night had been painless for the most part ; she was only paying the penalty of enforced unconsciousness. Her faculties were alert again ; but she could not use them in the ordinary way—leaden weights seemed to press down her eyelids, her lips moved without making an articulate sound. Mrs. Bee was at hand, and she heard her husband's voice in the next room ; but she could not call his name.

Mrs. Bee, like many other garrulous and apparently volatile people, possessed a solid side to her character. Under complicated circumstances, she could show a presence of mind and ready initiative that the more logical and consistent often lack. Her life had been one long-continued series of expedients and struggling against heavy odds. Thus it came about that nothing in the shape of unexpected calamity or dilemma put her out of countenance.

When, therefore, she returned home after an hour or two of street bustle to find Norrice moaning with pain and her right hand fearfully injured, she at once took the necessary steps. The hand was promptly and cheerfully dressed, and Norrice put to bed ; then, locking the street-door behind her, Mrs. Bee fetched the first doctor in the place.

‘ Don't let Fred know yet. ’

Norrice had murmured her request again and again, and Mrs. Bee promised to obey. It was only reasonable to

keep Villedieu in ignorance of this untoward occurrence in the midst of electioneering.

There would be time enough to tell him all when the contest was decided one way or another. So when he called to say how matters were looking, Mrs. Bee, with a perfectly unmoved face and natural voice, begged him not to disturb Norrice. She was not very well, and wished to be alone for a time.

‘We had better leave her by herself,’ Mrs. Bee added, and Villedieu obeyed the injunction the more willingly that he had hardly a second at his disposal.

Whilst, therefore, all Strawton was keeping holiday, and from one end of the town to the other rang never-tiring huzzas and hisses, Norrice lay inert and helpless in her mother’s suburban lodging.

She could not think. Physical suffering prevented her from shaping a clear thought; only one passionate impulse, one powerful instinct, made itself felt.

Her husband must have no anxiety on her account as yet.

About her own condition she showed, Mrs. Bee thought, strange passivity. Even pain seemed to trouble her more for her husband’s sake than for her own.

‘Don’t let Fred come to me till I am better,’ she said—‘till to-morrow,’ she added.

So when Villedieu rode up a second time, Mrs. Bee contrived to put him off with one plausible excuse after another. Norrice could not be disturbed now; she had fallen asleep she said, after much pain. She just hinted at a slight injury to her hand. One thing she promised him. Norrice should not learn the result of the poll, if favourable to himself, from any lips but his own; but the declaration could not be

made till after midnight. He would surely need a few hours' rest. Much better to leave her in ignorance till the morning.

He consented somewhat reluctantly. Time for persuasion and remonstrance there was none. It was as much as he could do to get back to his hotel in time for a change of clothes before the banquet. Yet the notion of not seeing Norrice till next day irritated him. He seemed to understand her less than ever.

For the next few hours he had other matters to think of ; but after the tremendous excitement of the victory and the triumphal procession through the town, the bitter thought came to spoil all. His wife was not by to share his success.

It was now three o'clock in the morning, and Mrs. Bee's lodging was half a mile from his hotel. Tired as he was both in body and mind, he hesitated before going to bed. He felt as if he must go to Norrice with the good news. Might not such show of tenderness melt the iciness of the past month, and bring them nearer to each other? She could not surely hold aloof from him in his hour of triumph.

True enough, he went to incur one disillusion more. His soft knock, several times repeated, brought no one to the door, no light to the window. All was dark, silent, inhospitable, irresponsive. In a mood verging on vindictiveness, he returned to his hotel, and, without taking off his clothes, threw himself on the bed. His success affected him coldly. How differently should he feel were Norrice the wife of his dreams, marriage the ideal union of his aspirations !

He had gone out of the beaten groove in choosing a wife, but he owned it now. One of those faultlessly bred, slightly

artificial drawing-room beauties he had stood in such terror of, could not have disappointed him more than the unconventional woman of genius, married irrespective of social position.

Where was the fault? Where was the remedy? Norrice was still the only woman, to use his own expression, who could interest him in anything and everything, the only woman really interesting to him. Her beauty, her wit, her intellectual resources, he admired more than ever. But, except by virtue of civil contract, she hardly seemed to belong to him at all. They dwelt under the same roof, ate at the same board, and shared the same worldly fortune; yet as day by day wore on, they grew in one sense, that the most important of all, more and more like strangers. The tenderness and sympathy even of close friendship, to say nothing of love, were wanting. She shrank from his tenderness as if from slights that wounded, and appeared happier when he was cold, matter-of-fact, and quite unlover-like.

With these chilling thoughts he fell asleep.

When next morning Norrice heard her husband's voice in the adjoining room, as her thoughts cleared, her mind flew back to the election. Had he come victor out of the field? Would the accident damp his triumph, or add trial to trial? Then, with a quick revulsion of feeling, she recollected her own success and the five-hundred-pound note in her purse, guarantee of more to come. Her husband's fortunes mended, there would be no soreness left with regard to the invention sacrificed to Mr. Rapham. This transaction with Smith, Smith and Co. might prove a bond of union between them. And in these softened moments, when she was nerving herself up to congratulate Villedieu on his success or condole with him in his defeat, she no longer blamed

him for his own reproaches. She alone had been at fault in withholding from him the particulars of her unwise bargain.

As she lay thus, her mind becoming more and more alert to what was going on, she heard another man's voice as well as Villedieu's, evidently that of the physician. They were talking cautiously and in hushed tones, but she caught every word.

'Must it be?' asked Villedieu, strangely agitated. 'No remedy but the loss of that skilful little hand? The thought is too terrible!'

'I have merely stated my own opinion,' was the reply. 'It will be advisable to telegraph for my colleague'—he named a celebrated London specialist—adding, 'Only the consultation should be held at once.'

Villedieu moved about as if looking for paper and ink.

'Will you write out the form for me? My hands tremble,' he said in the same agitated voice.

'Readily; I can drop the telegram at the office on my way back,' replied the doctor kindly. 'You will like to remain with your wife.'

She heard him make for the stair-head. Then Villedieu begged him to re-enter for a moment—one moment only, he murmured. He closed the door, but through the thin partition of wall Norrice's over-alert ears again caught the passionately eager tones—so fraught, so laden with feeling and anguish, that it seemed as if not only her life but his own hung upon the response of the oracle.

'Doctor!' he cried; 'for God's sake, speak to me as man to man. There is no danger?'

'Under prompt, skilful treatment, none whatever—at least as far as mortal judgment can predict,' was the quick reply.

‘She is all I have to care for in the world,’ groaned Villedieu.

Then she heard the physician utter a cheery word, shake his hand, and take leave. Her husband remained behind; the sound of his sobs reached her where she lay. He was weeping like a child.

‘Fred,’ she now murmured softly, after letting him weep a little. For herself, she felt that her last tear was shed. Pain itself, of fiercest kind, was nothing to her now. The alternative just proposed had no terrors. She glowed with the conviction of her husband’s love; she had not understood him. He loved her still; he had loved her always. ‘Fred,’ she repeated. He had not heard the first gentle summons.

He calmed himself by an effort, and, coming to the bedside, bent over her with a quiet kiss.

‘I heard what the doctor said to you just now. Have no fears. I have plenty of courage,’ she said, as she looked at him with an expression passionately tender as his own. ‘Then you do love me?’ she murmured. ‘You did not marry me merely because you thought I had money, after all?’

CHAPTER XIX.

FRIENDS IN COUNCIL.

WHAT moments were theirs now! The darkest clouds had rolled away, and after thunder came clear sunshine. Painfullest misunderstanding gave place to closest sympathy and the clear reading of soul by soul. In the midst of her helplessness and pain, Norrice could glow over her husband's triumph. All her old witchery came back.

'We must expect the stroke of evil luck amid so much good fortune, for you do not yet know all. Pull my purse from under my pillow, dear; you will find in it a cheque for five hundred pounds—mamma will tell you its history.'

She motioned him to bend his head close to her ear, and whispered:

'Fifty pounds must go to her.'

She added aloud, joyous and full of hope:

'And if I have to lose my hand, we will not break our hearts about it. I must set to work and invent a mechanical one, that is all.'

Villedieu, despite his anxieties, pocketed the five-hundred-pound note with his old rollicking coolness.

'You are very considerate,' he said, 'before half killing yourself, to provide the doctor's fees. But,' he added, grave and tender, 'you heard what was said. Keep up your heart, and all will be well.'

‘Don’t you think Norrice had better be quiet a little while?’ Mrs. Bee asked meekly, as she put her head in the doorway, and Villedieu as meekly obeyed.

He was in the strangest mental condition; grief and joy mastering him by turns. The alternative held out by the doctor was a terrible one. Yet what a life for him to look forward to—the Norrice of old by his side, sparkling, a dozen charming individualities in a day, and each his own! And if it must be so, and she must forfeit that fair, incomparably deft hand, it would be his task to make up for the loss. Such personal blemish, and daily, hourly privation would have been incurred for his sake. His lifelong devotion could but inadequately repay the sacrifice.

Norrice’s first thoughts were of her husband’s success.

‘You are really in earnest?’ she asked him, with a penetrating, inquisitorial look. ‘You mean to show the Strawton folks that they have got a representative with an idea—we will modestly put it down as one, at first,’ she added.

‘We had better say half of one,’ was his laughing reply. Then suddenly he became more serious. ‘However, it does not much matter how poorly I am punished in that respect. You have plenty; and, thank heaven! the laws about women are not so strict as yet but that a husband can borrow his wife’s ideas with impunity.’

‘But,’ she asked, with a fond, pained, half-imploring air, not quite understanding whether he were in jest or earnest, ‘you do care about these social questions you have taken up so zealously?’

‘One must care about something—why not for social questions?’ he said. ‘And never fear, you will prevent me from becoming a harlequin. I married you on purpose! What you married me for I cannot conceive. I suppose

because I put the proposition to you in an altogether original way?’

‘I suppose so,’ Norrice replied. ‘I never wished to marry; I felt married to my inventions. But one never can tell how one will behave when taken by surprise.’

‘Out with my secret,’ Villedieu added, now tender and lover-like. ‘I found you irresistible at Mr. Rapham’s dinner-party, when you wore that wonderful red dress of yours. The first five hundred pounds we have to spare shall be spent upon your portrait in oils in that identical red silk gown.’

As soon as Norrice was well enough, Rapha went to see her. The young wife had almost the forlorn look of widowhood in her crape-bordered dress. For a brief spell, indeed, sorrow, deep, passionate, overwhelming as that of a widow, had taken possession of her. Silverthorn’s cheery affectionateness could not, as yet, penetrate the cloud.

She fled to Norrice as to a sister, and the two friends for some time wept in each other’s arms without a word. Just as there are certain crises and moods a man can best talk over with his friend, so even happy, trusting wives will sometimes find a consolation in feminine friendship that love cannot afford.

‘You must think kindly of my father now,’ Rapha said, when she had dried her tears; ‘and there is one act of justice Gerald and I intend to render to you. Your patent, and all the money that it has yet brought, will be handed over to you as soon as poor papa’s affairs are settled.’ Tears again rose to her eyes as she went on: ‘He has left me everything—everything. What am I to do with so much money? Gerald does not care about money, either. It is very unfortunate for us that we are to be so rich. You will

take back your patent, won't you, dear? Gerald says you must.'

Norrice kissed her friend's hand, and replied, between laughing and crying :

'It is very unfortunate for me that I am so rich, too. I don't care for money either. But I have been all but broken-hearted for want of it. Heaven bless you, you generous darling !'

'Gerald says that you and Mr. Villedieu will want a great deal of money now,' Rapha went on. 'He says that to embark upon such causes as your husband has done, is to ruin yourself, even if you are a millionaire !'

'My mother's mental faculties will rust—that is melancholy to think of!' Norrice laughed. 'To have to make up a dinner of nothing, pay your landlady with an empty purse, dress according to the fashion without spending a sixpence—there is matter for the exercise of ingenuity. But when her leg of mutton hangs in the larder, her money is ready for the rent, the clothes have only to be ordered—what will poor mamma do?'

'You are happy to have your mother,' poor Rapha sighed.

'Forgive me for being so gay; I do feel for you,' Norrice said, ashamed of her own high spirits. 'I have had so much to make me happy lately; and you have much left,' she said caressingly. 'Do not dwell upon your grief only.'

'Has Mr. Villedieu spoken to you of my father?' Rapha asked, after a pause, and with some embarrassment.

A question was on her lips she hardly knew how to frame. She hardly knew how to say :

'Did your husband deal my father his death-blow?'

Norrice showed some hesitation also. How could she

tell Rapha that Mr. Rapham had been the offender—that but for him the unseemly encounter would never have occurred. Divining what was in her friend's mind, feeling herself to be the braver of the two, she took the initiative, kindly and boldly.

'Fred wished me to tell you that he is quite sure of one thing. Mr. Rapham was not at all himself when he attacked him on the road to Strawton; and there was no injury on either side. Fred is quite sure you may make your mind easy so far. You see, dearest,' she added, trying to lead Rapha from such painful surmises, 'so many other circumstances are sufficient to account for your father's mental condition—the trying life in tropical climates, the excitement of coming home, the change of daily habits. Pray—pray do not think of all that has happened as preventible. We cannot prevent character; and what is life but an expression of character?'

Rapha said no more at the time. She was not consoled; yet, perhaps, went away less sorrowful than she had come. After all, Norrice was right. We cannot prevent character. No happy concatenation of events would have made her father's way of looking at things acceptable to her. They had been related by the closest human ties, but, alas! can any more tragic note be struck in the symphonies of Fate? Only this tie of blood seemed there—father and daughter seemed to belong each to an alien race. Can any influences bring natures diametrically opposed together? Are their natural antipathies to be lived down?

Such was the problem that darkened her young life. The shadow of a tragedy would long fall across her sunny ways.

Norrice's next visitors were Gracie and Mr. Morrow, who came to felicitate and be felicitated.

It cannot be said that Gracie had ever fallen in love with the timid, ambitious manufacturer ; nor can it be affirmed that Mr. Morrow had fallen in love with his bride-elect, according to the accepted sense of the word. If, instead of personal attributes, belongings, surroundings are fallen in love with, may not the promise of wedlock be equally fair ?

Mr. Morrow personified in Gracie's eyes blessings she had longed for much more ardently than love and romance—freedom, emancipation from routine and artificiality ; above all, a more individual existence. Once a wife, the sense of being a daughter—a woman too many—would not weigh upon her ; and how many girls marry for no better reason ? Mr. Morrow, for his part, had fallen in love with Gracie's lineage, her good manners, the atmosphere of birth and breeding she carried with her wherever she went. And as affection based on such solid objects is more likely to endure than that called forth by mere outward attraction, surely these two had every chance of being happy.

As to Mrs. Bee, she was the very last person in the world to lose her head at the prospect of worldly fortune.

'I turn to my favourite author, Lucian, upon such occasions,' she would say. 'No fear of not finding a moral with him. Now the question is, not how much money we possess, how many titles or estates, but how much we should fetch if, like the philosophers in Lucian's witty piece, we were put up to auction ? Dear me, I fear many of us who think no end of ourselves would, like poor Diogenes, be hard to get rid of at threepence halfpenny ! Even Epicurus, it seems, fetched but eight pounds ; whilst

ten sages remained positively unsold for want of a bidder. I should be very unhappy if I thought no one would bid for me; but certainly the possession of money won't add a penny to my worth. So I keep Lucian handy, and, in the midst of my splendour, try to be humble.'

CONCLUSION.

BUT Norrice was not to lose that deft right hand of hers; remedies—slow, tedious, but, as it seemed, sure—were tried instead, and by little and little the injured limb recovered. As she lay in bed, full of hope and joy, despite physical suffering, she said to herself, 'If the maiming of a limb is such a privation to human beings provided with doctors, nurses, and every alleviation, what must be the loss of a wing, a leg, or an eye to animals? How can men endowed with conscience wilfully, and in quest of pleasure, mutilate innocent creatures for whom the world was created as much as for ourselves?'

Such thoughts may well make us blush; how much more so that of deliberately tormenting animals in the so-called interests of science! This might well make one doubt the moral progress of the world, were it not that in our own time it was held lawful to traffic in flesh and blood. Going back a century or two, we find that instructed men and women deemed it righteous to torture their fellows for a

mere difference of opinion; and looking back still farther, do we not see Roman matrons—vaunted for their virtues and patriotism—amusing themselves by running pins into their slaves? That man or that woman who would purchase immunity from suffering at the expense of an innocent and helpless animal must be a coward indeed!

Rapha, when they next met, thrust into her friend's hand the Blue-book that more than anything else had seemed to divide her from her father. 'Do not think ill of him,' Rapha murmured, as she put Norrice's specification in her hand. 'I think I shall feel almost happy now, and you will do so much good with your money. You ought to be rich.'

Norrice smiled, unable to thank her, except by a warm hand-clasp. 'You and I shall never be rich, I fancy, however much we may have.'

'No, indeed,' Rapha said, 'and, Norrice,' here she again looked apologetic, 'I shall always think of my father as kindness itself to me; but I want to undo some of the evil he did, and my husband is quite willing to let me have my way. If Mr. Villedieu gets up a memorial to do away with slavery in the Soudan—or anywhere—we will give him what money he wants. There will be enough and to spare for our simple housekeeping and Gerald's scientific experiments. I shall be so much happier when papa's great fortune has melted away.'

It seemed likely to melt away, what with munificent donations to Villedieu's anti-slavery league, Silverthorn's ventures in scientific discovery, and other noble, or at least praiseworthy, ends. And the simpler their mode of life, the smaller their income, the more cheerful grew Rapha.

Mr. Rapham had not carried out his threat of leaving her his fortune in trust for her children. It was hers to do with as she would, and this freedom softened her recollections of him, and gradually threw a pathetic halo round the past.

If Rapha and Silverthorn found abundant uses for their money, how unlikely were Norrice and Villedieu to become miserly! Villedieu relished, above all things, an unfettered, unconventional life. His notion of enjoyment was a bachelor's lodging, embellished with the presence of a wife. Nor had Norrice leisure or inclination for the exigencies of fashionable life. The bachelor's lodging was, however, hardly practicable; she must have a workshop, so they found one of those roomy, old-fashioned houses standing in a garden, of which, perhaps, a score or two yet remain in London proper, and here she worked as ardently as in her Strawton attic. Nor was he less zealous, only in different lines. His new career called forth all his energies; backed up by his wife, he promised to take a leading part. That very year, Norrice was able to enjoy the first real holiday of her life! When autumn came, and both were free for awhile, Villedieu carried her off to the South of France, not travelling, however, in the prosaic orthodox way. Having reached Grenoble, they started for Cannes in a huge berline, or family coach, with four horses, after the good old fashion, making short stages, and sleeping at rustic hostelries on the way. That astounding bit of road between Grenoble and Gap seemed to Norrice's eyes as sublime as scenery could well be; but grand and beautiful as are the Alps of the Dauphinois, perhaps sublimer still are the scenes that await the traveller farther on. So from Gap to Sisteron, and

Sisteron to Cannes, they travelled leisurely, finally landed in the House Beautiful of the world, if any exist—the blue-skied, azure-sea'd, flowery Riviera. There Norrice had her fill of one kind of beauty, the journey to Florence, later on, giving her ample store of another.

‘But we must not stay here too long,’ she said to her husband. ‘I feel in the land of lotus-eaters. We shall forget all the duties that await us at home.’

Lady Letitia having once crossed the barrier dividing the family escutcheon from the manufacturer's signboard, and finding existence bearable in the new atmosphere, neither choke-damp nor fatal rarefaction, did not stop there. One by one Gracie's younger sisters were encouraged to follow her example, the condition of a retired manufacturer's wife being, as Lady Letitia said, so very comfortable. She had no idea such people could be so comfortable. She should have preferred curates, for the look of the thing, but how could a daughter of hers marry a man as poor as herself? The teachings of Robespierre and the consequences of the Revolution must be accepted.

Mrs. Bee's imagination continued as active as ever, although she was no longer under the necessity of conjuring up visions of roast venison when sitting down to the Barmecide's feast. She still delighted to make excursions into the byways of literature, and lighted upon many a parable as edifying as that of Charon and Menippus. ‘But I don't know how it is,’ she would say; ‘I often think I shall never be so happy again as when I had my dear Norrice to myself, and would dream for hours of the fame and fortune in store for her. Well, the dreams have come true—but what a difference between hoping and possessing! I felt young

then, and nothing in the shape of a difficulty could daunt me. Now the sight of a wheelbarrow overturned upsets my nerves. Yes, we should all be poor creatures if we had things our own way to begin with.'

THE END.

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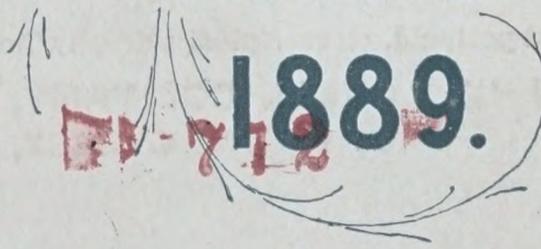
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