A SPOILT GIRL

By

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A SPOILT GIRL.

CHAPTER I.

"BE you for parson's house at Culverley?"

The time was six o'clock in the evening, the season September, the place a little way-side station in North Kent, and the speaker the driver of the local carrier's cart.

The person he addressed was a tall, well-dressed man, thin, bent, and so hollow of cheeks and bright of eyes that the carrier treated him to a long stare of unfeigned curiosity and compassion. When the gentleman spoke, it was in such a harsh, cavernous voice that the carrier started and looked at him as if half doubtful whether the stranger really belonged to this world.

"Yes; I'm for Culverley. Why?"

"'Cause the Vicar's cob's broke down, fell an' cut her knees bad on Cotting Hill, so I was to arsk you if so be you'd like a lift to Culverley in the cart there?"

And he jerked his whip in the direction of a singular object outside.

The stranger followed the direction of the whip with curiosity, and saying, "Well, let's have a look at it first," he left the platform and proceeded, by the light of the station-lamp, to a minute inspection of the

vehicle. Meanwhile, the carrier eyed him askance, with a resentful suspicion that the stranger's criticism was an unfavourable one.

"How far is it to Culverley?" asked the stranger, at last.

"Matter o' four mile," grunted the carrier. "You can walk if you like, only it's comin' on ter rain, an' it's ten to one you'll lose your way at one or other o' the cross-roads," he added, malignantly.

The stranger muttered something inaudible, and looked inside the cart. A strong smell of apples, a stronger one of coffee, a still stronger one of cheese, and a vision of two portly ladies hemmed in by huge baskets, decided him.

"I'll walk," said he, "unless you can make room for me beside you."

"Oh, I can do that," responded John Tustain, readily; "an' we can put your luggage at the back there right enough."

So the porter put the two smart leather portmanteaux, the gun-case, and the Gladstone on to the back of the cart, where they made a striking and pleasing addition to the pile of earthenware, live fowls, and Windsor chairs already there.

Then John Tustain encouraged his horse with a clk-clk and a flick of the whip, and on they jogged along the level road towards Culverley.

The stranger was in a taciturn mood, and John Tustain, who had ascertained by an inspection of the labels on the luggage that the name of his passenger was "Mr. Hubert Besils," glanced at him with increasing curiosity.

"Been to Culverley before, sir?" he asked.

"No. I answered an advertisement of a furnished house to let, and, as it seemed to answer my requirements, I took it by letter."

"Ah, I thought so," was the prompt and discouraging answer.

"Why? Anything wrong with the place?"

"Oh, no, sir. Not at all, sir. It's a very nice place. All the folks as takes it says as how it's as nice a house as they ever was in, sir."

"All of them? Why, is it often to let, then?"

"Well, sir, it's a nice house, as I said. An' the Vicar he could do with less room an' more money, so he gets a tenant for it when he can, sir."

"I see. What sort of man is he, the Vicar?"

"Oh, a very nice gentleman, indeed, is Mr. Griffith. An' the young ladies, all of the seven, they're all very well liked in the neighbourhood, sir."

"Seven of them! Then the place is rather overrun with the Vicar's daughters, perhaps?"

"Oh, no, sir. They're such nice young ladies that we couldn't do with one less, an' that's a fact."

"And the sons? A half-dozen wild boys, perhaps, who swarm over the grounds?"

"Oh, no, sir. There's only two sons, an' they're both at Oxford."

"Wife a bit of a grey mare? Most of these parsons' wives are."

"No, sir. Nobody has anything but a good word for Mrs. Griffith. By the bye, sir, if you should be coming back again, I could take your luggage, even if you cared to walk yourself."

"To come back! Why, I'm going to spend the winter here, at least."

"Well, sir, I live next door to the blacksmith's, an' I could fetch your traps any time, if so be you *should* change your mind."

"I won't forget. But, as I tell you, I am settling down here. I have been ordered rest, and I sha'n't be moving again for some time."

From the depths of the cart behind him Mr. Besils fancied he caught the sound of a smothered explosion of laughter. But the merriment of his fellow-travellers did not concern him, of course. And then the cart jogged on in the silence of the whole party until it came in the dusk to a village, in the heart of which a whitewashed and picturesque inn stood, inviting travellers. In front of this building the carrier's horse stopped of its own accord, and John Tustain, with a grin and a shrug of the shoulders, took the hint and descended from his seat.

"Coming in, sir?" asked he, as he did so.

Mr. Besils shook his head, but changed his mind a moment later and followed the carrier into the "Dun Cow," just in time to hear that worthy raise a laugh at his expense.

"Who hev ye got in the cart, John?" asked a crony, as Tustain entered the bar.

"Oh, a rum chap enough," replied John, with a broad grin. "He's taken parson's house at Culverley—*for rest and quiet!*"

And a roar of rude laughter from the entire crowd of villagers in the bar told Mr. Besils, who was just outside, that his conduct was considered eccentric indeed.

"And, pray, will some of you good folk tell me the exact objection to my finding rest and quiet in parson's house?"

As the deep, harsh voice of the stranger uttered these words a sudden hush fell upon the assembly, and, while some of the customers buried their faces hastily in tankards of ale, the landlord looked with curiosity at the tall, gaunt figure, and the landlady peeped at him from behind her husband's back, as if there was something uncanny about the person who could put such a question. The stranger meant to be answered, that was certain. There was a tone in his voice that showed that he was accustomed to prompt obedience.

So the landlord made the best of it.

"Well, sir," said he, "of course we didn't know you was so near."

"Well!"

"The fact is, sir, that Culverley Place is just behind the Vicarage; an', you see, sir, people don't expect quiet so near to the Brancepeths."

There was chorus of assenting murmurs, and one of the bolder spirits in the bar added, emphatically,—

"Old Nick's abroad when Harry Brancepeth's not at home."

And the rest of the assembly chuckled acquiescence.

The stranger, however, seemed amused rather than disturbed by the alarming prospect.

"If that's all," said he, grimly, "the Vicarage will do well enough for me. I think I can manage to survive Harry Brancepeth and all his works, and be comfortable in spite of him."

For a moment the assembly seemed to lose its breath. Some of the men in the bar looked at each other, and some looked at the landlord, and some, when they had recovered themselves a little, went so far as to wink. It was evident that they enjoyed the joke hugely, poor as it seemed to the stranger to be. Mr. Besils paid for the glass of ale he had ordered and not tasted, and went back to his seat in the cart. John Tustain followed, in high good humour, for he was still enjoying the merriment occasioned by his companion.

"How many are there of this alarming crew of Brancepeths?" asked Mr. Besils, as they drove along up a steep hill, with a picturesque and striking hedge on either side of it.

"Well, there's old Sir Giles, but he don't count hardly now, for he's been paralysed this five year, an' it's all that time since he's been on a horse. He was master of the hounds, he was, an' a pleasant gentleman enough when he was sober; but, Lord, when he wasn't he was a caution! They said he was meant to ha' lived in the times when we was all slaves to the great folk. But he wasn't a bad sort, an' he was a rare good 'un compared to the young 'uns."

And John Tustain shook his head emphatically.

"And how many are there of them?"

"There's Giles, that's got his father's name, but little else of his father that's worth havin'. He's twenty-five now, an' he's crammed enough wickedness into that twenty-five years to last any ordinary man fifty. An' then there's Athelstan, an', if anything, he's rather worse than his brother. An' then

there's Radley, an' for certain he worse than the other two put together. An' then—an' then—" went on John, honest John, with the air of one who was coming to a climax at last—" an' then there's Harry!" He paused significantly, and then added, with forced calmness, " Well, I won't tell you nothing about Harry, for you might think as I was making up. That's the ringleader, that's all I'll say. An' then there's Quin, but he's youngish, not more'n seventeen; but he won't be no different from the rest, that's certain."

Mr. Besils listened with great interest, but with still more incredulity. It was evident that he took the reports he had heard with a large grain of salt. The wickedness which makes a sensation in the country might pass for average rectitude in town.

" And what do they do, these desperadoes?" he asked in his harsh, mocking voice. " Do they string up a groom to the nearest tree if he fails to touch his hat with sufficient civility? Or have they been known to have a quiet rubber of whist on a wet Sunday?"

The countryman saw that he was being " chaffed," and at once grew sullen.

" You'll see, sir, soon enough," he answered, drily.

Mr. Besils saw that he had given offence, and he proceeded to make amends.

" Seriously," said he, in a less irritating tone, " and without a moment doubting the accuracy of your reports, you must allow that it is very difficult to conceive how the mere fact that a particular family reside in a detached house in a neighbourhood can

be enough to render intolerable the existence of another family in another detached house in the neighbourhood. Why, at that rate the five of them would go far towards depopulating the county!"

The carrier chuckled drily.

"All I can say is that the Vicarage has been let five times this year, an' that none of the five tenants have stayed a month."

But the new tenant uttered a short, derisive laugh.

"They won't get me out in a month," said he.

The carrier gave his companion a whimsical look, but he said, civilly—

"Well, sir, I'm sure I hope they won't, especially if you're wishful not to be moving again so soon. At the same time, for people that's getting on in life, an' not in the best of health, sudden shocks an' the pranks of a tribe of savages make a sharp sort of a medicine."

Mr. Besils looked quickly at his companion.

"How old do you suppose I am, then?" he asked, with some interest.

John was taken aback by this unexpected question. He paused an instant before replying, and when he did so, it was with the evident intention of flattering his fare by taking a half-dozen years off his age:

"Well, sir, not more than four- or five-an' forty, I don't suppose."

Mr. Besils' strongly marked countenance contracted with some expression which the carrier could not read; but he said nothing, and they jogged on in silence until, half-way up the long hill, John turned his

horse's head and stopped the cart to give the animal a few minutes' rest. As he put a stone behind one of the wheels, he raised his head suddenly, listening.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, sharply.

Mr. Besils listened too.

"I hear horses galloping, and—and a voice shouting."

John Tustain nodded.

"I thought so," said he, ominously. "Them's Brancepeths, or I'm a Dutchman!"

"And what if they are?"

"It just depends on how the fit takes them," said John, laconically. And going to the front of the cart, he nodded to the two women inside, and told them to "Hold tight, for them devils was coming."

Hubert Besils laughed, pulled up his silk muffler, chose a cigar, and settled himself for a smoke. He had not the least doubt but that a few words from him would have the power to exact from the young men the respect which most men pay to a good-humoured remonstrance from another man of their own class.

The sound of hoofs came nearer. The riders were coming up the hill, and at a good pace. They were laughing and talking all together, making, as John Tustain observed, noise enough for a regiment. They were clearly in a lively mood. It was now so dark that even when the merry party came very near, Hubert, looking out from beneath the hood of the cart, could get no better view than of a dark cloud of moving figures behind a lighter cloud of dust. But he discerned five little red specks of light

from five cigars or cigarettes, and he was thus enabled to decide that of the whole lawless tribe not one was missing.

He was much amused to notice that the two women inside the cart and Tustain himself were a prey to real trepidation, and that they listened, and tried to appear unconcerned, much as a party of non-combatants might do who found themselves close to the enemy in war-time. All he was anxious about was that he might get as good a look at them as might be as they rode past.

Suddenly above the gallop-gallop of the horses, and the babble of laughter and talk, there rose a wild cry like the war-whoop of a savage. Then someone said "Hush!" and there was a pause of an instant, all the horses being stopped with a jerk, while the riders whispered together.

John Tustain groaned, and went quickly to his horse's head.

For a moment there was silence, and Hubert, excited against his will, looked out at the dark mass a little way below, and felt his pulses stirred with expectancy. He saw the trees waving above the group, and the distant blur of light in the low ground below, where the spires of the town of Fernsham were massed together in the dusk. And he heard the impatient pawing of the horses and the hiss of the whispered consultation. Then there was a cry, a rush, he scarcely knew what. The carrier's horse was backed, his traces were cut, and with a smart crack of a hunting-stock the animal was sent galloping down the hill, while the perpetrators of the out-

rage, with a mocking laugh and a simultaneous cry of "Good-evening, gentlemen!" went up the hill at a smart trot, and disappeared at the next turn of the road without so much as a glance behind.

CHAPTER II.

"PERHAPS you'll believe me now when I say they're old Nick's own brood," grumbled the carrier, as he picked himself up from the border of grass at the side of the road, where he had been flung by his riotous assailants.

But Hubert Besils was too much enraged to answer. To be treated with such indignity by a parcel of rude hobbledehoys was an experience as unprecedented as it was revolting. At the same time the outrage put him upon his metal and gave him a new interest; and he said to himself, as he set his teeth hard, that he would not leave Culverley until he had shown these rough young cubs that there was one person at least in the world whom they could not mock and insult with impunity.

John Tustain had gone limping down the hill in search of his horse; so Hubert, impatient at this delay, told his two frightened female fellow-passengers that he should finish his journey on foot, and, having received some direction from them, proceeded up the hill at a brisk walk.

He was not long in reaching the summit, and he

then saw before him a stretch of flat table-land across which a level road, still bordered by a hedge on either side, led to the little village of Culverley. He had just taken the right fork of two branching roads, when he saw the lights of the village twinkling at the bottom of a slight descent before him. On his left the hedge now gave place to a high park wall, overhung by a thick growth of trees, and a little further he came to the tall iron gates, through which he got a peep at a square unpretending building, representing two periods and two styles of homely architecture, which he afterwards discovered to be the home of the notorious Brancepeths.

This being satisfactory evidence that the end of his journey was nearly reached, Hubert pushed on more quickly, and in a few minutes found himself in one of the prettiest villages in England.

An ancient and picturesque church, one portion of which was the sole remnant of a monastic establishment of the thirteenth century, stood on high ground in the centre of the village, well sheltered by trees. From the south porch a straight, steep path, bordered with yew-trees, led through the hilly churchyard down into the little group of irregular, red-roofed cottages which clustered at its foot. Nothing in the village was straight, or formal, or made with any thought of economy of space or convenience. The road wound round the hill, and branched off to the right and left, in delightfully irregular curves. The cottages did not form a stiff, straight border to the road, but were planted here and there, at every imaginable angle, in accordance with the whimsical

caprices and requirements of the builders of centuries ago. You walked up a narrow and unnecessary alley to the post-office, which was a thatched cottage with a glass jar in the window containing "jumbles" and a basket of new-laid eggs. At the next turn in the winding road you came upon an ancient inn, with pointed gables and beams of carved timber let into the dark brick front.

At this point the cottages came to an end on this side of the village; and Hubert Besils, who had been tempted thus far by the quaint charm of the place, retraced his steps to the path at the foot of the church-yard.

And here he found himself face to face with the Vicarage itself, which stood at an angle formed by the road by which he had entered the village and another road which skirted the east side of the church-yard, rising to the high ground beyond the village by a steep ascent. Here, on the summit of the hill, Hubert found on the church side of the road a plain, substantial house set at right angles to it, and on the opposite side an inn more modern and more pretentious than the first, but picturesque also in its irregularity of front and in the multiplicity of its outbuildings.

Having made this survey of the village, the traveller returned to his own new domicile with a pleasant sense of comfort awaiting him, for the long, low, red-tiled building, well walled-in from the road and embowered in trees and evergreens, was just such a house as he would have chosen. He had already noticed that the garden must be of considerable size, and that

the height of the enclosing wall diminished as it ascended the hill.

Just as he stopped for a moment to look over this wall into an open space of lawn and flower-bed, he heard again the sounds which he had already learnt to associate with the approach of the Brancepeths. This time the noise of hoofs and voices came from the trees which stood either in or behind the Vicarage garden.

The sounds brought the blood to Hubert's head, and he instinctively drew himself up and clenched his fists, although he had no immediate expectation of seeing the young rascals, who must be, he supposed, riding through their own park.

To his utter amazement, however, he saw the whole party, riders, horses, and all, emerging from the trees at a gallop and riding straight across the Vicarage lawn, taking grass, flower-beds, paths, just as they came, and making for a place where the wall was low. Here they "took off" in beautiful order, and landing in the road outside, galloped past the new tenant down the hill, and turned sharply to the right in the direction of the park-gates.

Hubert had been too much taken by surprise by the unparalleled audacity of this fresh outrage to offer even the mildest protest. But when he dashed open the Vicarage gate and thundered at the knocker, his hand was trembling and his face was white with passion.

The door was opened by one of his own servants, who had come on the previous day to prepare for his arrival.

At the very first sight of her lugubrious counte-

nance, Hubert felt sure that he should have to listen to more doings of the undesirable neighbours.

"Well," said he, sharply, "have you settled down all right? And is the luggage come?"

"The luggage has come at last, sir, all except yours," answered she. "But—— Oh, sir, the people that live near——"

"That'll do for the present," interrupted her master, shortly. "I'll hear all about it by and by."

"But, sir, please I must just tell you this, that the cook wouldn't stand it, and she's gone back to Hull," said the servant, in a tone which seemed to threaten a similar move on her own part. "She said she wasn't used to being chased round the grounds by a pack of human wolves, nor yet to having rockets let off outside her kitchen door, please, sir!"

"What!" roared Hubert, glaring at the brown copies of "old masters" which hung on the walls of the hall.

"Yes, sir. And, if you please, they all ride right through the orchard and across the lawn half a dozen times a day, and nobody dares to speak to them; and, if you please, sir, everybody says that it's impossible to live near them, and they say they are just the curse of the county. They're a deal more like heathen savages than Christian gentlefolks, sir, and I hope, sir, you won't think of staying unless you get them to promise to behave better."

"Of course I will," said Mr. Besils, impatiently. "Do you suppose, Hatchard, that I shall allow any half-dozen undisciplined cubs to play their pranks on me and my household unchecked?"

"No, sir, I don't suppose you will," answered Hatchard in a more equable tone. She had been some years housekeeper as well as parlour-maid in Hubert Besils' bachelor establishment, and knew that he was the last man in the world to bear any sort of thwarting or annoyance calmly.

"So set your mind at rest, and cook me a chop," said he, already mollified by finding the wide, low hall, with its dark pictures, bright draperies, and shallow, old-fashioned staircase, as much to his taste as the exterior of the house had been.

And he walked into an inviting room on the right, which proved to be the drawing-room, and in full view of the ravages done by the intruders on the smooth lawn, he made up his mind that he would grapple with the enemy without delay.

For he was determined to stay in his doubtful quarters, not only because he liked the house itself, but because the idea of a fight with these scatter-brained young rascals gave his rather dogged and pugnacious nature just the stimulus he liked.

It was indeed by virtue of these same qualities of bull-dog courage and tenacity that Hubert Besils had made his way. Forced by the death of his father when he was little more than a boy into a responsible position at the head of a great shipping firm, he had overworked himself steadily and persistently ever since, with the result that he was threatened with complete breakdown, and found himself suddenly banished, by his physician's peremptory orders, into an exile which would have proved tedious without the excitement provided by the Brancepeths.

As it was, he had already become quite eager for the fray; and no sooner had he made a tour of the cosy, old-fashioned house, and eaten his chop in a low-ceilinged, oak-panelled dining-room, than he put on his hat and started to complain to the Vicar.

The present abode of the Reverend Francis Griffith and his family proved to be the old house just outside the church-yard. Hubert went through the little gate, along the stone-flagged path which ran close under the house-wall, until he came to a door painted green, as unpretending as the back door of a cottage. He rang the bell, and the door was immediately opened by a tall, fair, mild-looking girl who had round shoulders and wore spectacles. One of the Vicar's daughters, evidently.

"Can I see Mr. Griffith?" asked Hubert, with determination.

"Papa is away," answered the young lady, with a frightened look. "But if you will call again to-morrow——"

"Thank you. Can I see Mrs. Griffith? I will not detain her long."

The girl hesitated, and glanced round her apprehensively.

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be of much use, if you have any business to talk about. Mamma is almost an invalid."

At that moment a door on the right opened, and a bright girl's face looked out. At a glance from her sister, the owner of the face sprang into the little narrow hall, which was hardly more than a passage.

"You are Mr. Besils, I suppose?" said she, de-

cidedly. "Of course we can guess what you have come about. Please come in."

She went back to the door by which she had entered the hall and held it open. The next moment Hubert found himself in a low-ceilinged, plainly-furnished room, which seemed to be full of nothing but girls, tall, fair, and spectacled, like the first one he had seen. The bright-faced one, who was darker of hair and complexion than the rest, and who was the only exception to the type, took the lead again.

"You've come to complain of the Brancepeths."

The visitor, in a meeker tone, admitted that he had.

"Well, then we may as well tell you at once that we can do nothing, and that if you can't manage either to make terms with them or to force them to make terms with you, you may as well go away again at once, just as everybody else does."

"Kathleen!" protested one or two of the pale and spectacled ones.

"It's quite true," persisted the audacious Kathleen, doggedly. "And it's best to say so at once. Of course it would have been better still to have warned you before you came of what you had to expect. But when you're dreadfully poor——"

"Kathleen!" protested two or three more of the girls.

"—And it's dreadfully important whether you let your house or not, you have to stifle the promptings of the higher morality."

"Kathleen!"

The protest was quite a breathless one this time.

"Meanwhile," went on the rebellious one calmly, "there's always the chance that a tenant will turn up who's not to be daunted by Brancepeths."

"Why, yes," said Hubert, grimly, "that tenant's turned up now!"

Seven girls' faces were turned in an instant eagerly towards him.

"Hooray!" cried Kathleen. "Of course, you know, they wouldn't be so bad if it were not for Harry. You've heard of Harry?"

"Oh, yes, I've heard of Harry."

"Well, quell Harry and the rest will be easy. Some of the others are not all bad, so they say."

At this point there was a demure exchange of faint, pale smiles among Kathleen's sisters.

Hubert, who had some work in hand, got up to go.

"I want to know where I can find a couple of men who would do a bit of rough work for me to-night. Labourers would do."

"Well, at this time in the evening your best chance would be to look in the public-houses," said Kathleen. "But I warn you that whatever you do will be reported up at the Place. The villagers have to keep 'in' with them up there, or their lives wouldn't be worth living."

She ran down the stone path to open the gate for the visitor, and gave him an encouraging nod of farewell as he reached the door of "The Chequers."

When morning dawned at Culverley, a superstructure of boards had been built up along the top of the Vicarage garden on the orchard side, making it

two feet higher, and on the top of this had been fastened a length of barbed wire.

At ten o'clock Hubert went out to chuckle over his work—and found the boarding and the wire torn down and fresh hoof-marks on the lawn. And then a note, brought by a grinning groom, was handed to him.

The handwriting was large, and round and bold, and the contents were these:

"SIR,—I and my brothers have always been used to riding through the Vicarage grounds, and we mean to do so still.

"Yours truly,

"HARRINGTON BRANCEPETH.

"—— BESILS, ESQ."

Hubert, who was getting quite happy in the excitement of this contest, instantly went in search of a board of suitable size, and having painted it black with his own hands, inscribed upon it in white letters these words:

"Any Person Attempting to Ride through This Garden will be Stopped."

This board he had put up at the place where the Brancepeths were in the habit of jumping over the wall into the garden. Then he got out his hunting-crop, lit a cigar, and took up his position in a low basket-chair, to read his paper.

Nothing happened until about a quarter to one, when he heard the voices in the distance, and prepared himself for action. On the noisy group came,

with their usual clatter, tearing through the orchard, making straight for the garden wall. Hubert kept his seat, did not even turn round until he heard the sound of a horse's hoofs on the garden path behind him.

At that sound he sprang up, faced about, and with great nimbleness and celerity caught the bridle of the oncoming horse and ran with the animal, checking his speed and causing him to swerve suddenly.

"Give it him, Harry! Cut him down!" shouted a voice behind the foremost rider.

Obeying this injunction almost before it was given, the leader of the party leaned forward in the saddle to strike Hubert with a whip. But the new tenant, instead of releasing the animal, pulled him still further round, and so suddenly that his rider was unseated and thrown to the ground.

And Hubert, amazed, confused, ashamed, but hardly remorseful, saw that the rider whom he had so roughly unhorsed was a woman.

"What! Harry thrown!" "Harry hurt!" cried the rest of the band, as the remaining marauders immediately swung off their horses and surrounded their sister. Hubert, stunned with perplexity, mechanically offered the young lady a helping hand. But she sprang to her feet, crimson with rage and mortification, and disengaged herself rudely from one of her brothers, who had put his arm affectionately round her.

"Don't. Don't!" she cried in a strangled voice. "I'm not hurt, but I must thrash him for this. Out of the way, out of the way, and let me get at him!"

Before Hubert had got over the shock of finding that the redoubtable "Harry" was one of "the gentler sex," Miss Brancepeth had sprung upon him like a young tigress, and lashed him furiously with her riding-whip.

CHAPTER III.

At the first blow from Miss Brancepeth's stinging little whip Hubert Besils' face turned livid; at the second, a bar of bright scarlet rose from his chin on the left side to his cheek-bone on the right, causing his lip to swell, and making a mark which was almost a cut in the flesh. She raised her whip a third time; but he was too quick for her; seizing her uplifted hand, he tore the whip out of it so roughly that she uttered a little cry, and held her wrist with her other hand.

"You brute! You've hurt her. You've hurt my sister!" shouted one of the young men, whom Hubert afterwards knew to be Athelstan, the second son.

And he made a rush at Hubert.

But he was not prepared for the ferocity of Besils' counter-attack. Before Athelstan's upraised fist could touch him, the new tenant of the Vicarage stepped quickly out of his way, and striking out with his fist in his turn, landed on his would-be assailant's cheek a blow which threw him staggering backwards.

Whereupon Giles, the eldest son, came to his brother's rescue, and was advancing with his hunting-

stock ready, when Harry stepped forward and barred his progress.

"That's not fair!" she cried, in an authoritative tone. "We are four to one. He mustn't call us cowards!"

"That's just what I do call you," said Hubert, with less anger than contempt in his voice. "A pack of wretched, cowardly cads, without a spark of manliness in the men or womanliness in the woman. You're not fit to live in a civilized country, any of you; and if you only had the pluck to go about by yourselves, instead of in gangs, like the ruffians you are, you would precious soon get knocked on the head by some of the people you have ill-used; and it would serve you right."

This tirade, delivered with all the energy he was capable of, threw the assembly for an instant into the silence of absolute amazement.

It was the very first time that the lawless lot had been told the plain truth about their conduct in plain terms: the first time that they had been told, in so many words, that what they had thought dashing and spirited was really despicable and odious, and that instead of being a daring band they were only a ruffianly gang.

Of course they were not convinced: it was not likely that they would give up a long-cherished belief so readily. But it was at least something to have made them hear reason, even although they would hardly listen to it. And the pale, lean man, with the swollen bar of red flesh across his face, scored a moral victory, as he stood facing the angry group,

and directed his piercing grey eyes first on one face and then on another, not omitting to give the lady, as well as her brothers, the full benefit of his scornful glances.

Harry was the first to recover herself. She had become very pale while listening to Hubert, but it was apparently with indignation and not with shame; for when he had finished, she turned her head haughtily to her eldest brother, and said—

"Really, I don't think it's necessary for us to stay and listen to any more of this person's vulgar abuse. Our remedy is with Mr. Griffith. We must go and protest against his letting his house to tradesmen!"

It happened, unfortunately for Miss Brancepeth, that this speech, which was meant to be overwhelming, was heard by one more person than she expected. The whole party had been so much absorbed in the exciting incidents and conversation of the last few minutes, that not one of them had noticed the sounds of wheels and hoofs in the road outside the garden.

Everybody was rather startled, therefore, when a tall, well-dressed woman, of the same type as Hubert himself, but better-looking than he, suddenly appeared in the midst of the group. She threw herself into the fray at once, regarding Harry through her long-handled eyeglasses with a haughty stare which even that hardy young lady found difficult to confront.

"Tradesmen!" she said, taking up the girl's last word with contemptuous surprise. "Have you been taught, young people, that persons can be insulted

with impunity if they happen to be tradesmen? And are you under the impression that my brother keeps a small shop and that you are his social superiors?"

"We are certainly that," answered Harry, drawing herself up. "We are one of the oldest families in Kent."

"And we," said the new-comer, quietly, "are one of the oldest families in England. But I quite understand that you are too ignorant to know that." Then, turning with a very dignified sweep of the head to her brother, she said, "Surely, Hubert, these people are not here by your invitation?"

"No," answered he, promptly; "they are trespassers."

"Evidently, then," said the lady, quickly, "however long they may have been established in Kent, they have not yet been here long enough to learn good manners."

There was now a movement among the male intruders which showed that they felt they had been where they were long enough. The appearance and manner of the unknown lady had impressed them more than their sister, who made a final attempt to reassert the supremacy which she felt that she had lost since the sudden appearance of the older lady upon the scene.

"At any rate," said Harry, raising her voice and speaking with an air of reckless defiance, "I've given the person you call your brother a taste of what he may expect if he dares to interfere with us."

And she threw a half-angry, half-frightened glance at Mr. Besils' disfigured face.

The other lady uttered a little cry of horror and indignation.

"Really," she said, after a moment's pause, "I'm afraid we shall have to make our friends in Kent among the lower classes, if these are the habits and customs of the best families."

Again there was a stir among the Brancepeth brothers, and the eldest touched his sister's arm impatiently. But Harry resented this, and said, sullenly—

"It was his own fault. He brought it upon himself. He threw me off my horse: and," she continued, suddenly firing up with a passionate anger far surpassing all her previous outbursts, "I've never been thrown before, never in my life. I might have been killed!"

"It was indeed fortunate that such a fearful calamity as that was avoided," retorted Hubert's sister in her most cutting tones.

But this was too much for Harry's brothers. Athelstan, the tallest of the family, and perhaps the wildest looking, protested.

"I daresay it wouldn't have mattered to either of you if she'd been killed, but you see we ruffians happen to be fond of our fellow-ruffian."

"And," added the eldest in a still louder voice than his brothers, "if you had hurt her, by Heaven we'd made you pay for it!"

"I don't know whether one may dare suggest that we should be glad to have the place to ourselves for a little while?" said Hubert's sister, blandly. "But if——"

The Brancepeths were delighted to get away. The whole adventure of riding over their neighbour's lawn and flower-beds had been spoilt for them by the mean-spirited reception of these miserable strangers. They did not attempt to mount their horses again, but led them through the little front gate as quickly as they could, doing more mischief than ever, though it was unintentional this time, among the late geraniums, the asters, and the chrysanthemums in their awkward efforts to pass all together through a space only wide enough for one.

Harry went last, and as she paused a moment at the gate, she turned to say, in the most insolent tone she could assume—

"I suppose you think we're ashamed of ourselves. But we're not."

"I think you ought to be," retorted Hubert's sister; "but I know that is reason enough why you should not be."

Harry, having by this time passed through the gate, made her final retort by slamming it violently behind her. For a moment there was silence between the brother and sister.

Then Hubert said—

"Don't be too hard upon the girl. I don't suppose she has any brains to spare, and she has been villainously brought up. It's not her fault that she's odious; it's her misfortune."

His sister glanced over his shoulder, with a malicious little smile; and then Hubert heard the tramp of horses on the other side of the wall. The Brancepeths had for once in their lives behaved

quietly, and mounted their horses in silence; so that it was not until they rode off that Hubert learned how near they had been.

"They must have heard what I said, I'm afraid," said he.

"Well, it is evidently time they did hear a little truth about themselves," said his sister, as she put her hand affectionately through his arm and led him towards the house. "To think that you should have come here for rest and to recover your health, and that you should drop into such a hornet's nest as this! You must go away with me to-morrow. Better come to our place, although you don't like London, than run the risk of being killed by these young savages. Or shall we go over to Paris, and on to the Riviera?"

"No," said Hubert, decidedly. "I hate the Riviera. One meets there such a lot of brutes one's had enough of in England. And London, no, I couldn't stand London. You can go back if you like; of course I can't expect you to stay in such a hole as this. But I intend to finish out my six months," he went on in a dogged tone. "I'm not going to be frightened away by those cubs."

His sister sighed. To argue with Hubert was out of the question: he had will enough for half a dozen.

"Then I'll stay with you," she said, resignedly. "And in the mean time come indoors and let me try to do something for your poor face."

The Brancepeths rode home without once recovering their wonted boisterous spirits. They snapped at each other a little, and were altogether lacking in

that dash and spirit on which they usually prided themselves.

Harry, in particular, was moody and cross. That fall from her horse rankled in her heart; she felt that it lowered her in the esteem of her brothers, with whom her daring horsemanship was a special subject of pride. She was not altogether pleased with the rest of the adventure. Spoilt hoyden as she was, she had been unable to listen to the words of Hubert and his sister without certain disagreeable pricks of conscience. Conceited as she and her brothers were, the contempt of them and the disgust with their conduct which had been shown to-day by the audacious strangers had found out a weak spot in their armour of self-esteem.

"What a horrid woman she was!" Harry said, querulously, as they approached their own place.

There was a moment's pause.

"Wasn't she a dreadful creature, Athelstan?" persisted Harry in a still more decided tone.

"Well, she—she did say some nasty things," admitted her brother in an exasperatingly mild voice, "but she's a fine woman, and, and——"

Harry laughed contemptuously.

"Perhaps you'll say that the man was a fine man?"

Here fortunately she got more sympathy, and of the characteristic kind she was accustomed to.

"Beast!" said Giles.

"Brute!" said Radley.

"Puppy!" said Athelstan.

"And the idea of their calling us ill-bred!" cried

Harry. "Wasn't it too funny? As if we were sweeps like themselves!"

But here again there was an unaccountable hesitancy on the part of the more timid males.

"I don't know about their being sweeps!" suggested Athelstan with an air of critical doubt.

"*She's* not a sweep, if he is!" said Giles, decidedly.

"Perhaps you like to hear your sister told that it would have been a good thing if she had been killed!" cried Harry.

"Rubbish! We've found our match in one way; we shall have to try to be even with him in another," said Giles.

The third son, Radley, whistled.

"I met old Griffith this morning," said he, "and he begged me to tell you all that he hoped we wouldn't worry his tenant, as he was a good one and very rich."

Giles looked at his brother.

"Wonder if he likes baccarat," said he, under his breath.

Athelstan, who was the nearest to him, said, quickly—

"He won't play with us, if he does, after this morning!"

Giles looked steadily at his horse's ears and said no more. But he was thoughtful and silent for the rest of the short ride; and as he stooped to open the gate, on reaching home, his brother Radley asked him, in a low voice, what he was thinking about.

"I'll tell you presently," answered Giles in the same tone.

And they all bent their heads, and parted the overhanging boughs of the yews and the beeches with their whips as they rode up past the house and round to the stable entrance beyond.

CHAPTER IV.

CULVERLEY PLACE was by no means the imposing mansion which a stranger might have expected from the airs its possessor gave themselves. A plain two-storeyed house, painted white, with a slate roof which sloped down to either side from the centre, it had no pretensions to architectural beauty or even to great size.

There was only a very short drive from the gate to the house, and a modest little portico sheltered a modest front door, on each side of which was a large window. There was a little lawn in front of the house, and another on the right-hand side, with bright beds of flowers relieving the mass of green. On the left side of the house, and at the back, the trees grew thickly; while a fringe of tall evergreens shut in the garden from the road in front.

The whole effect, to a new-comer, was gloomy in the extreme. No outlook at all in any direction was there. For even on the right where there was a little bit of open space, fenced in with wire, there was only a view into the cherry orchard, the trees of which grew close up to the fence.

The entrance hall was not very large, and was chiefly remarkable for the unmistakable evidence it

gave of the bias of the tastes of its owners. The low walls were covered with foxes' pates, some mounted badly, some mounted well, some dating from two generations back, some the spoils of more recent adventure. Wherever there was a space on the walls between these trophies, sporting pictures, most of them bad ones, were hung, or inartistically arranged bundles of swords, yataghans, South Sea islanders' spears, hunting-crops, and fishing-rods. In one corner was a collection of guns, old and new, from the ancient flint-lock to the latest thing in breech-loaders.

One other feature made this hall remarkable, and that was the apparently careful manner in which the architect had shut out the daylight. An unaccustomed foot would have stumbled half a dozen times on its way from the front door to the staircase.

Just before reaching this you came to an opening on the right where a door had formerly been, and passing through this you found yourself in what had once been the drawing-room, but which was now a comfortable inner hall, with a fireplace and a table in the middle. This corner of the house held a good many relics of foreign travel early in the century. A former generation of Brancepeths, more civilized than those who now occupied the old house, had collected delicate carvings in ivory, curiosities in jade and Indian brass-work, ancient altar-cloths, and quaint Bohemian goblets.

All these the young Brancepeths regarded as lumber, and so they were allowed to rest in the glass cases which were fastened to the walls of this nook.

At the end of this inner hall was a door which opened into the drawing-room.

This apartment belonged to a different epoch. While the rest of the rooms were low, this was lofty; and while they were comparatively small, this one was long and wide. It had, in fact, been added to the building at the beginning of the present century, a hundred years later than the erection of the main structure.

It was a pleasant room, fragrant with memories of a past generation of the ladies who wore sandals and carried reticules, who read "The Keepsake" with interest, and whose ideal of beauty was "raven-black" hair, a consumptive complexion, sloping shoulders, and a bent neck.

These were the dead-and-gone inhabitants who were responsible for the *papier-maché* tables and trays, with wonderful representations of flowers in mother-o'-pearl; for the *pot-pourri* bowls, the harp, and the "Flight into Egypt" in cross-stitch, framed and glazed and, moreover, honoured by candle-branches attached to its frame, which hung in a conspicuous position on the white-and-gold wall.

Family portraits in every medium—oil, water-colour, and crayon—hung on the walls which they failed to adorn. The furniture and the carpet were pale-coloured; the curtains matched the furniture, and were of light brocade, lined with yellow satin. A tall, glass-backed chiffonier, a dainty davenport, and a modern upright grand piano, with its back against the wall, were the remaining most noticeable features of the room, which had two tall windows

reaching to the ground, and admitting as much daylight as the trees did not shut out.

In one corner of this room little Lady Maggie Spene, the late Lady Brancepeth's widowed sister, was "doing her accounts" when Harry burst in.

"Why, my dear, what's the matter?" asked she, as she noticed the frown on her niece's face.

"The matter is that we've been insulted, ill treated, all of us, by a couple of--of—of cheese-mongers!" cried the girl, pulling off her gloves and throwing them to her aunt, who caught them and smoothed them out without remark.

"Dear me!" said she, too much used to these young people and their ways either to protest or to take the information quite literally.

Lady Maggie had managed her brother-in-law's household for the past fourteen years, and was popularly supposed to lead an awful life among the wild Brancepeths. But, as a matter of fact, the tiny lady, who was as great a contrast to them in appearance as she was in character, secretly admired her unruly brood, and considered them a spirited, handsome lot, superior to herself in every way, and spent her time in meek remonstrances to them, in apologies to other people, and in prayers to Heaven on their behalf.

Her little old-maidish ways were withal so sympathetic, stiff as she seemed to outsiders, that now, as ever, she found no difficulty in getting from Harry the young lady's own version of the morning's events.

The girl was down on the floor, at her aunt's knees, pouring out her woes with flushed cheeks and

panting breath, when Giles, her eldest brother, burst into the room, and, catching some words about "wretches not fit to live within miles of decent people," he sharply bade her hold her tongue.

"For my father says the Besils are a ten times better family than we are, and that we all deserved to have our heads broken for riding through the Vicarage grounds, and he says Aunt Maggie is to put on her bonnet at once and go over to apologise, and—and—now, look out for a shock, Harry!—to ask them to dine with us this evening."

And he pointed this thrust with a significant nod.

"What!" shrieked Harry, springing up and whirling round like a feather in the wind. "What! I don't believe it!"

"All right," said Giles, calmly. "There's no need for you to believe it. You will see to-night whether it's true or not. And I should hope you will have the good sense to behave properly and to make yourself agreeable. For if you don't, I can tell you my father will tell you some things about your conduct which you won't care to hear."

Harry had snatched up her gloves, caught up her riding-habit, and come close to her brother.

"You've been talking to papa! You have some reason of your own for making him take this ground. I know you have!" cried she, with flashing eyes. "But I won't knock under like that. Whatever you boys may do, I'll not be civil to the people who have insulted us, but I'll insult them back whenever I get a chance. And if they come to dinner to-night I won't meet them. I'll—I'll go to bed!"

"I'm sure you're quite welcome to!" retorted her brother, as she flung herself out of the drawing-room, slamming the door.

"Is it true, Giles, that I'm to go to the Vicarage?" asked Lady Maggie, with resignation.

She was used to these apologetic errands, but she had not learned to like them.

"Rather! Go and ask my father."

It was quite true. Lady Maggie hurried into the morning-room, where she found old Sir Giles in a great rage. Although it was his own fault that his children were so ill brought up, and although they were only an advance upon the model he had set them, Sir Giles was capricious, and easily worked up into a fit of disgust with his progeny, as a change from his usual approval. His eldest son was well aware of this, and, having great influence with his father, he had found no difficulty in persuading him that Harry had transgressed even those wide limits set by the family rule upon their conduct, and that an apology and an attempt at amends were imperatively called for.

Luncheon was scarcely over at the Vicarage, therefore, when Lady Maggie Spene was announced.

Neither Hubert nor his sister knew who she was nor where she came from, but Mrs. Floriston, who had no idea of shutting herself up, went into the drawing-room to receive the visitor.

No greater contrast could have been offered than by these two ladies. Mrs. Floriston was tall, good-looking, with strongly marked features, and perfectly dressed.

Lady Maggie was tiny, plain of face, insignificant of manner, and "dowdy."

Nevertheless each woman found something to like in the other, and Lady Maggie broke the ice with ease.

"I have come," she began, in her little whisper of a voice, "to apologise for the behaviour of my niece and my nephews this morning."

At this Mrs. Floriston's lips pinched a little. But Lady Maggie would not let her have time to interrupt.

"I spend my life in apologising for them," she went on, plaintively. "Their conduct is absolutely shocking—shocking! No words can describe it, I know. But they have been allowed to run wild. Their father, Sir Giles, has not been able to walk for some years; and they never listen to me. I can only say that their hearts are better than their manners——"

"But surely it is no proof of a good heart to cut open the face of an unoffending stranger because he objects to have his grounds turned into a bear-garden!"

"Don't speak of it!" cried Lady Maggie, holding up her little hands and turning away her head in horror. "It is most dreadful!—most dreadful! I can only say that they are heartily ashamed of themselves, and that I have come to beg you and Mr. Besils, on behalf of Sir Giles as well as of the young people, to overlook this—this disgraceful outrage, and to show your forgiveness by dining with us to-night."

Mrs. Floriston was a woman of the world, so she expressed no surprise, but only a dignified and forgiving satisfaction at this invitation. After some little persuasion, she accepted it on her own account, but declined it for her brother.

"He is a hermit," she explained. "He never goes out at all. And you know," she added, confidentially, with a deprecating little smile, "that the poor fellow is so much disfigured by—well, by the young lady's whip that he will not be presentable for days and days."

Lady Maggie moaned her distress. But none the less was she delighted that Mr. Besils would not come. For Harry was still in sullen and rebellious mood, and not to be depended upon for anything but incivility.

When her visitor had trotted down the path again and disappeared behind the Vicarage shrubs, Mrs. Floriston, who was a shrewd, worldly woman, pondered this matter of the invitation, and decided that there might be a wish on the part of the older members of the family to secure her brother as a match for the appalling Harry. They had probably found out that he was well off, and had been unfeignedly grieved at the unhappy opening of the acquaintance.

Certainly Hubert was sufficiently repelled to begin with. But the girl was handsome in her way, and handsome young women who are in every way undesirable often exercise a malignant influence over bachelors. So reflected Mrs. Floriston, as she went back to her brother and announced that she was going to dine at Culverley Place that night.

He was indignant, but he let her have her own way.

"Only if you invite them here in return, especially if that nondescript creature who calls herself Harry comes too," he added, emphatically, "I shall be out, mind that!"

There was quite a flutter of expectancy among the people at Culverley Place that evening; and when Mrs. Floriston was announced and swept into the drawing-room in a light grey brocade gown, with her bodice flashing with diamonds, she found the four young men huddled in corners or swaggering about with ostentatious airs of being at their ease, while Harry stood, mute, defiant, and evidently dressed with great care, at the extreme end of the drawing-room.

Giles came forward with more apologies, and Mrs. Floriston forgave him graciously on her brother's behalf, and shook hands with him and all his three brothers.

"I haven't got to apologise!" cried Quin, the youngest, joyfully, when his turn came.

Everybody laughed, and then the young men felt more at their ease; and Quin got pushed forward, and made a little hero of, just because he had been lucky enough not to form one of the attacking party of the morning.

Then there was old Sir Giles, in his corner, to be introduced, and Mrs. Floriston sat down by him, and listened to his old stories and laughed at them, until he was convinced that she was the most charming woman he had ever met in his life.

Only Harry stood aloof, having given the visitor a cold bow, and effaced herself immediately behind her brothers. Lady Maggie breathed a sigh of relief that she had not been still more rude.

When dinner was announced, Sir Giles was wheeled in his chair to the dining-room by his second son, Athelstan, apologising as he went for the infirmity which made it impossible to escort his guest.

In the dining-room, which was the most strongly characteristic apartment in the whole house, Mrs. Floriston looked round her with a smile.

"Anyone can see in a moment, by this room," she said, archly, "that the house is full of nothing but—bookworms!"

"Yes, yes, that's it! We're nothing better than a set of old bookworms!" said the host, laughing at the little joke till he was purple in the face, and showing by his joy thereat how vastly superior he considered himself and his sons to mere students and scholars.

For it was in this room, which was long and much too low in the roof for health or comfort, that the fox-hunting mania had planted its strongest evidences. The walls literally bristled with foxes' pates, no less than two hundred and fifty of which hung on the walls, looking out grimly and glassily over the feasts of their slayers.

"They look rather ghostly and uncanny," said Mrs. Floriston, with a pretty little feminine mock shudder, which drew from Harry an exclamation of contempt.

"They won't eat you," she said, with a sneer.

"Why, no, I don't suppose they will," rejoined Mrs. Floriston, suavely. "But they must be rather shocked at seeing such a poor sort of feminine creature as I after the gallant amazons they are accustomed to!"

At this wicked little speech, the sting of which lay in the glance and manner which accompanied it, the disloyal boys all laughed, joining in malicious enjoyment of their sister's discomfiture. It was she who had been the ring-leader in the trespassing expeditions; it was fair that she should take her share of the punishment.

But Harry was furious. Silent and sullen she sat through dinner, with a frown on her face which caused her brothers to leave her alone, which they did the more readily that they were being highly entertained by their brilliant guest.

Mrs. Floriston herself, although this strange, uncouth family of handsome lads rather amused her, felt very much relieved when Lady Maggie gave her the signal for retiring. The boys were all becoming very noisy, as they all drank a great deal, and all liked to make themselves heard at the same time. While the heat of the many candles, the glitter of the mass of silver on the table, and the tedious spinning out of Sir Giles' stories, which grew more and more circumstantial as the meal went on, all combined to make her welcome her release.

But there was another trial in store for her—Harry. That young lady stalked into the drawing-room, wearing the same air of ferocious discontent that had disfigured her during dinner, and threw her-

self into a corner with a book, without a word or a glance for the other two ladies.

Neither Lady Maggie, who was pleased with her new acquaintance, nor the guest herself seemed to concern herself with the young girl, who thus felt doubly aggrieved. She looked out of her corner indignantly at the queenly figure in the low chair by the fire, who leaned back and fanned herself with a great ostrich-feather fan, surrounded by folds of the grey brocade, and sparkling with diamonds in the light of the candles in the gilt candelabra on the mantelpiece.

Why Harry should feel so indignant she did not herself know. But the truth was that she recognised her own superior in the well-bred woman whom she had insulted, and who had taken by storm the gentlemen of the family.

Lady Maggie folded her tiny hands and looked approvingly at her well-dressed guest.

"You will find us very dull folk here, I'm afraid," she said, doubtfully.

"Why? What makes you think so?"

"Oh, there's hardly anybody about here that dresses well, or talks amusingly, or—or that you would find interesting, I think."

"Really? I have no such fears myself. I've found some very interesting people already."

Harry's face grew still darker. This interloper was going to patronize them!

"I'm afraid your brother doesn't think so," said Lady Maggie, smiling.

Harry threw down her book with a defiant slap.

"Oh, I've frightened him away!" she cried, mockingly.

Mrs. Floriston scarcely turned her head.

"My brother has some old-fashioned tastes," she said, quietly, "which I have not yet been able to reform. About the manners of ladies he is very particular."

She had intended to give Harry some rebuke of this sort before the evening was over. The girl became scarlet, but she laughed as if much amused.

"Old bachelors always are," she said, sneeringly.

"I don't know what you call an *old* bachelor," retorted Mrs. Floriston, quietly. "My brother is twenty-nine."

Harry jumped up.

"Then his old-fashioned tastes haven't agreed with him very well," she said, rudely. "He looks fifty, and speaks as if he were a hundred. Good-night!"

And she dashed out of the drawing-room and appeared no more that night.

While Lady Maggie poured out apologies for her niece's shocking behaviour, Mrs. Floriston fanned herself gently, appeared to listen, and reflected:

"I have effectually quenched all possible danger to Hubert from that quarter. The wretched creature will never come within speaking distance of him after *that!*"

And Mrs. Floriston, when she went back to the Vicarage escorted by a couple of boisterous young male Brancepeths, thought she had done a very good evening's work.

CHAPTER V.

Poor Harry's humiliations were not over when she disgraced her unhappy and uncouth self by rushing out of the drawing-room and leaving her aunt to lament over her awkwardness.

On the following morning, when she came sulkily to breakfast, always a late meal at Culverley Place, she was greeted by mocking cheers.

"Who sulked because somebody else had on a prettier frock than she had?" sang out one kind brother.

"Who ran away and wasn't missed?" cried another.

"Who will have to be on her best behaviour to her neighbours?" shouted a third.

"Best behaviour! You'll see that I don't mean to change my behaviour for those cads!" said she, fiercely. "You may all go and cringe to them if you like, and make eyes at that woman with the long nose just because she has some big paste brooches on her dress."

"Paste! My dear, they were diamonds!" hastily put in Lady Maggie, in whom her guest's brilliant appearance had roused real respect.

"She's jealous, jealous, jealous!" crooned Radley. "But she will have to put on pretty manners for all that, and let Mr. Besils see that she's not quite the clownish dairy-maid he takes her for!"

"Pretty manners! Shall I?" cried Harry, whose cheeks were on fire. "I shall not change my manners for him, unless——" And she made a moment's significant pause to give effect to her concluding words, "unless I change them for the worse!"

But this awful threat was received with fresh shouts.

"We're not afraid! Because, you know, that's impossible. If your manners alter at all, it must be for the better."

Harry, instead of flying out with a fresh retort, looked more sullen than ever.

"You'll see," she said, below her breath.

And pushing aside her aunt, who put an affectionate little arm round her, while trying to silence the jeering lads, she drew up a chair to the table and began her breakfast.

But she could not eat. And after a valiant attempt to make her usual hearty meal, she suddenly pushed back her chair, and, without a word in answer to the continued taunts and jibes of her brothers, she left the room. They glanced at each other in astonishment.

"Well, that's the first time I've seen Harry leave her breakfast!" cried Quin. "You fellows shouldn't have teased her so. It's a shame!"

"Serves her right!" said Athelstan, surlily. "She's getting too bad for anything. The way people look at her and whisper when we pass is quite scandalous. It's time she learnt how to behave properly."

The boys were still all under the influence of the

very different type of womanhood they had met the night before. Only Giles was silent about his sister, not because he was indifferent, but because her attitude of sullen anger was a new thing and might be considered alarming. Giles was just as much of a savage as his brothers; but the helplessness of his father had thrust some of the duties of headship upon him, so that he had some of the qualities of a barbarian chief which the rest had not. He had a little more insight, a little more discretion, than they. And now he thought proper to interfere.

"You'd better leave her alone," he said, at last. "There's no knowing what you might drive her to if you worried her too much. You know she's quite bad enough at all times; but if you dare her to do something worse than her usual pranks, why, it's a hundred to one she'll do it."

Giles was quite right. Harry had gone to her own room in a mood of sullen recklessness, the result of acute misery, which boded ill for somebody. Never before had she been so deeply humiliated as she had been by these two strangers. The cutting words of the brother, the calm disdain of the sister, were equally galling to the spoilt girl. But worse than these, the jeers, the jibes of her hitherto adoring brothers rang in her ears and incited her to mischief.

Her manners couldn't be any worse than they were, couldn't they? Well, that was all they knew about it! The girl tore her handkerchief to shreds, as she sat devising impossible schemes of revenge, which was to be thorough, daring, overwhelming.

If she could but find some such vengeance she would have her brothers again at her feet, ready to follow her, to back her up, as in the old days before the appearance of this hateful woman with the diamonds and the contemptuous smile.

Her anger made her mad. She could not think. Her head seemed on fire. She jumped up from the low seat in the window corner, which was her favourite nook, and snatched up a hat. She disdained gloves, and only wore a jacket when her brothers wore their overcoats.

In a few seconds she was outside the house; a few more, and she had slammed the front gate under the yew-trees behind her.

She started with no more definite idea than that of getting cooler, so that she might devise mischief with spirit. It was not by design, therefore, that she presently found herself in sight of the gables of the Vicarage. And at the same moment she perceived one of her enemies, and the most virulent, come out of the gate and turn in the direction of Mr. Griffith's house.

Harry stopped short, her excitement growing stronger as she watched Hubert Besils walking up the hill. His back was towards her; he had not seen her; she chose to fancy that there was something in his very manner of carrying his head which showed that he was conceited on the score of his treatment of herself on the previous day. She set her teeth hard; she clenched her fists; this was the man who had sneered at her, who had lowered her in the eyes of her brothers. The young savage felt

that she hated him with a hatred which could not be quenched.

Instinctively she raised one clenched hand, while her cheeks glowed, and her eyes blazed with anger.

At that most unfortunate moment Mr. Besils turned his head and looked behind him. And seeing Miss Brancepeth in this threatening attitude, he had the audacity to laugh at her! At least, that was what the young lady said to herself, although it was indeed but the faintest of smiles which he could not repress that flitted across his face.

But it was quite enough to excite the angry girl beyond the bounds of quiet endurance. Casting about rapidly in her mind for some way of testifying open hostility, she could think of nothing more telling, nothing more daring, and at the same time outrageously impertinent and rude, than the act of the defiant street Arab.

She snatched up a stone from the road and threw it, aiming at her enemy's head. It struck the soft felt hat Hubert was wearing, and tilted it forward upon his nose.

He turned on the instant, saw who the offender was, and, racing back down the hill at lightning speed while the girl, uncertain what to expect, stood her ground defiantly, he sharply boxed both her ears.

Harry was almost stunned, partly with amazement, but partly also by the force of his blows. At first she could not speak; but she turned very white, and stared at him, gasping as if for breath.

Hubert was rather frightened, rather ashamed of himself.

"Well," he said, irritably, "you shouldn't behave like a street boy if you're not prepared to be treated like one."

And then, to his horror, the amazon burst into tears, real, most feminine tears.

The poor man was petrified. For some seconds, which seemed to him long hours, he stood with his head turned away, hearing her sobs, but altogether without ideas as to how they could be stopped. At last he said—

"Well, well, what's the use of crying? It's done, and can't be undone. I'm sorry——"

"Sorry!" echoed Harry, fiercely, checking a sob to utter the word. "What do I care for your sorrow?—your pretended sorrow? You—you—you hateful, you—you ill-bred ruffian! Oh, to think I should be humiliated like this by such a cad! I am so glad"—she was positively grinding her teeth at him—"that I scarred your horrible, wicked, ugly face!"

But this speech touched Hubert's sense of humour, and he smiled in spite of himself.

"I'm very glad you did, if it's any satisfaction to you," he said, quite jauntily. "And, after all, if I'm a cad, what are your own brothers? Don't you think we're all in the same boat, and a ruffianly lot together?"

"Well, they do know how to treat ladies. Ask your own horrid sister!"

Hubert, thankful to see that she had dried her tears, reflected a moment. He wanted to give the girl a lecture, but felt that his own behaviour had lowered

his position as a moral teacher. He answered, in a very meek and gentle tone—

"There are some ladies whose manners are so exceedingly—unconventional that, if one were to treat them in the conventional way, one would run the risk of making a fool of one's self."

"And so, instead of that, you have made a fool of me. Oh, I do hate you for this, and for all you have brought upon me! You have made my brothers sneer at me already; and—and when they hear"—she threatened to weep again, but gulped the inclination down—"of *this*——"

"But why should they hear of it?" asked Hubert, eagerly. "Why not keep it to ourselves? I'm not any prouder of the occurrence, I can assure you, than you are. Let's forgive and forget, and make a compact never to breathe a word of this to anyone."

And, anxious to soothe and satisfy the girl, Hubert held out his hand. Harry brushed it rudely away from her.

"I don't want to make any compact with you," said she, shortly. "To hear you talk, one would think I was a child! But I have not forgotten the way you insulted me yesterday, and I shall never forget it as long as I live."

"I insulted you? I like that!" said Hubert, in astonishment, real or feigned. "I only told you what I, or anybody else, must think of people who took such liberties as you did."

"You said we were cowards."

"Well?"

"Well, you know we're not!"

"Do I?"

"Why, yes. We do things that nobody else in the whole county dares to do."

"Oh, I know that. But the restraints which other people put upon themselves are not the result of cowardice, but of decency."

"Do you mean that our conduct isn't decent?"

"I do mean that, emphatically."

As he said this Hubert moved sharply to one side, as if to avoid a blow.

"You needn't be afraid. I am not going to hit you," said Harry, superbly.

"I'm glad to have your assurance to that effect," responded he, gravely. "For really you've made so much havoc in my personal charms already that I hardly dare to show myself at Mr. Griffith's, where I'm going now. I am wondering what they will say when I tell them that it's the result of an interview with a lady belonging to one of the oldest families in Kent."

Harry did not like this tone, but she tried to look as if she was indifferent.

"Oh, they'll know who it is!" said she, with a movement of the head almost pronounced enough to be a toss. "Everybody knows that I can take my own part."

"And throw your own stones," suggested Hubert.

"Well, if you're going to the Vicar's I won't detain you," said Harry. "But what can you find to interest you there?"

"Women, real women," replied Hubert, promptly.

Harry shrugged her shoulders.

"Do you think I mind being told that I'm not a real woman?" she asked, scornfully. "On the contrary, I take it as a great compliment. I hate women. They are mean, spiteful, small-minded creatures, and I am heartily ashamed of belonging to them at all. What made me angry was to be called a coward. And I intend," she went on, with great spirit, "to prove to you that you were wrong. What would you say if I were to face a gang of poachers all by myself?"

"Why, I should say," answered Hubert, unable to disguise the fact that he thought this proposal a huge joke, "that you had gone quite mad, and that it would be necessary for your friends to put you in a lunatic asylum."

Harry's cheeks, which had been flushed with excitement throughout the whole of this interview, became suffused with a still deeper tint. She lowered her eyes and bit her lips, and Hubert saw her long, shapely hands twitch. Then she looked up suddenly, and flashed a glance of superb scorn at him out of her grey eyes.

"You don't yet know the Brancepeths!" she said, proudly, as, with a haughty bend of the head, like the gesture of an offended empress, she turned her back upon him and went down the hill again.

Now this was quite delightful. For Hubert could not but be certain that she would not be allowed to carry out her mad project, even if she did for a moment entertain it seriously. He stood looking at her erect and striking figure, which had more of the grace of a stalwart and active young man than of a member

of the gentler sex, and he thought what a pity it was that she had not been allowed by nature to have the body, as she certainly had the spirit, of a boy.

And as he thought this, she suddenly turned once more, and invited him with an imperious gesture to approach her.

He obeyed, feeling guiltily that she must have seen the smile on his face, and that it would be considered a fresh grievance against him.

"I think I had better warn you, since you are going to the Griffiths' house, that it must be 'hands off!' as far as Kathleen is concerned, if she should be the attraction," she said, in a cold tone. "My brother Athelstan has taken a fancy to her."

The conclusive manner in which she uttered this announcement amused Hubert still more. But he answered, quite gravely—

"I'm sure it is very kind of you to give me the 'tip.' But are you sure Miss Kathleen has taken a fancy to him?"

Harry stared at him in ingenuous amazement.

"To *my brother?*" she stammered out.

"Yes," croaked out Hubert, in the harsh voice which so effectually prevented her guessing the intensity of his enjoyment. "Because, if you think she does like him, there would be some fun in my entering the lists and trying to cut him out, wouldn't there?"

Athelstan's sister was aghast at this irreverence. She was for a moment struck dumb. Then it flashed into her mind that it was of no use to argue with such an obtuse creature as this. She had

warned him; she would now leave him to his fate. So she only shrugged her shoulders and smiled. Hubert thought he would have a little more fun with her before he let her go. So he said, very gravely—

"But I am not altogether sure that I like Miss Kathleen best. The others, the ladies with the glasses, look very intelligent, and are all apparently very amiable."

"Ah, I thought one of them would suit you better," rejoined Harry, quite seriously.

She was again on the point of turning, when Hubert, anxious that she should not spread unfounded reports as to his visits to the Vicar's, detained her by saying—

"My admiration is for the family collectively, not individually. I am not all what is called a ladies' man."

Miss Brancepeth took no apparent interest in this statement; she left him without further comment.

CHAPTER VI.

Hubert Besils was laughing to himself for the rest of the way up to the Vicar's house.

This impossible creature with the mediæval manners was intensely amusing, certainly. Her sublime, untroubled faith that she and her brothers were the salt of the earth was too curious and interesting, as an undoubted remnant of Dark Ages, to be lightly tampered with.

He was in high good humour when he was shown, by a small servant with a worried expression and a red face, into the small drawing-room.

This apartment he had not seen before, and his first sensation on entering was one of wonder whether the two parents and the seven daughters and the two sons could ever get into it at the same time. It faced the south, otherwise the one small square window would hardly have lighted it sufficiently, even at mid-day. It was not well furnished; it was shabby as to curtains and carpet, and against one wall stood a harmonium, an instrument the sight of which always set Hubert's teeth on edge. Yet the poor little reception-room had an atmosphere of refinement and of human kindliness, such as every room of a house long inhabited by refined, kindly people must always acquire.

It was Jessica, one of the girls with glasses, who presently came in.

"You want to see papa, of course, about those Brancepeths," she said, in a tone of gentle resignation. "He is out at present, but——"

"I need not trouble him at all," replied Hubert, quickly. "I only called to relieve his mind by telling him that we have made it up. My sister, Mrs. Floriston, dined at Culverley Place last evening."

"I am very glad to hear that," said the young lady, in a tone which had little of congratulation in it. Then she hesitated a moment, and finally made up her mind to be frank and disagreeable. "I hope you will not think me ill-natured if I suggest that you had better not make up your mind too soon that

you will have no more unpleasantness with them. They are really a most difficult family to get on with. It's impossible to deny that."

Hubert thanked her for the warning, which he took lightly enough; and after a few more remarks, he took his leave.

But when he got to the end of the stone pathway which ran along in front of the house, and had his hand on the gate to let himself out, a voice from the raspberry-bushes on the right detained him by an excited whisper.

"Oh, Mr. Besils, one moment. I must speak to you!"

And he saw the bright-faced Kathleen, in a large hat, with an old knife in one hand and two huge freshly-cut cabbages in the other. Over these gigantic vegetables her brown face peered, wreathed in mischievous smiles.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she broke off again, in a fit of laughter which seemed impossible to subdue. "Please forgive me, but—I saw you just now—I saw you from one of the up-stairs windows—box Harrington Brancepeth's ears! Oh, oh, oh!"

She was laughing again. Poor Hubert's face grew crimson.

"I do beg you to forget it, to forget all about it, and above all not to mention it to anyone else," said he, in an emphatic whisper, leaning as far across the wooden paling which shut in the kitchen garden as he possibly could. "It was quite inexcusable of me to do it; and I do beg, for the sake of the young lady herself, who has been good enough to forgive

me, as well as for me, that you will keep it a secret. I assure you it is not my habit to go about doing such things."

Now this sounded rather a comical speech to the merry Kathleen, who had to exercise strong constraint upon herself to prevent her laughing again.

"Oh, don't be afraid. I'll keep your secret," she said. "And I assure you I think you're the first person to find the proper way to treat her."

"You're quite sure you haven't mentioned it to anyone already?" whispered Hubert, persistently.

A footstep in the road outside made him look round apprehensively as he spoke. Athelstan Brancepeth, who had lately developed a tendency to rambling in this particular part of the road at those hours when Kathleen was most likely to be seen in the garden, was frowning from the roadway. Kathleen saw him, but affected not to do so. Hubert was rather amused by the occurrence.

"That young man is looking daggers at me," he said, in the same low voice as before.

"I don't care how he looks," replied the young lady in the same low voice. "I don't wish to have anything to do with him."

"Oh, well," replied Hubert, whispering still, "if I can reform the lady members of the family you might try your hand with the gentlemen."

The merry Kathleen laughed so much at this that Hubert began to laugh too; and Athelstan, who had no legitimate excuse for interfering, but who was in a tumult of rage, walked up the hill at rapid pace, and then, suddenly veering round, unable to keep away

from the fateful spot, as rapidly walked down again. Hubert was raising his hat as he went through the gate. And Kathleen was saying, in a tone just loud enough to be heard by Athelstan, "I'll keep your secret, never fear!"

So that Hubert, when he passed the frowning young Brancepeth and entered the Vicarage garden, found himself in a curious position for a confirmed bachelor and woman-hater, of being in league with two ladies at once for the guarding of a solemn secret.

Unluckily, however, Hubert had in all innocence brought down upon poor Kathleen the wrath of Athelstan Brancepeth, who presented himself in his turn at the gate of Mr. Griffith's garden, as soon as Mr. Besils had disappeared.

Kathleen was cutting another cabbage, and affected not to see him.

He began to open and shut the gate, and to swing it backwards and forwards on its hinges, making a most horrible squeaking noise. Still she took no notice, so he was forced to address her.

"Don't you see there's someone here?" he asked, in a surly tone.

She just turned her head.

"I thought it was one of the village boys," said she. "They always swing the gate like that, as if they were afraid to come in."

Athelstan grew scarlet, and stalked in, slamming the gate behind him. Then he leaned over the palings of the kitchen garden, and watched her as she shifted her knife to the hand which supported

the cabbages, and drew the netting tenderly over an exposed corner of a pear-tree which was laden with fruit.

"You seem to take as much care of that tree as if it were a human being!" said he, in a scoffing tone.

He was so angry with her that he must find fault with something.

"That tree is going to do more for me than any human being," answered she. And a smile of pride and pleasure came into her bright face as she gently lifted one of the boughs, to show the rich fringe of pears it bore. "These are Marie Louises, and they are going to bring me my winter pocket-money. Enough muslin to make me a frock to wear at the Infirmary Ball, for one thing!" cried she.

And her brown eyes sparkled at the prospect of the dance.

"Ball! The Infirmary Ball! The idea of caring for such things!" said Athelstan, more scornfully than ever. "I didn't think the Vicar approved of dancing!" he added, viciously.

Kathleen's face clouded a little.

"He doesn't—much," she admitted in a more subdued tone. "He had to be coaxed. But when Mrs. Floriston offered to take me——"

"Mrs. Floriston!" interrupted Athelstan, in a loud voice. "Oh, then I suppose you mean to dance with that beastly brother of hers."

Kathleen set her lips firmly, and turned to go on with her cabbage-cutting. But her interlocutor's

ire was excited by her silence, and a crash among the gooseberry-bushes behind her told that he had leaped the barrier which stood between himself and her. She was rather frightened, although she gave no sign. Athelstan was the handsomest of all the brothers; and the Vicar's pretty daughter liked to fancy that there were more signs of grace about him than could be seen by the general eye. She was discreet, however, and he could not certainly boast of having received from her any encouragement in the attentions which he would fain have paid her.

She was startled when a loud and gruff voice close to her ear said—

"Have you promised to dance with that man Besils or have you not?"

"Please get out of the raspberry-bushes. You are treading them all down," said Kathleen.

"Confound the raspberry-bushes! Are you going to dance with him?" roared Athelstan.

The girl was frightened, and she sprang away to the fence, under the pretext of taking her cabbages indoors. But she was a girl of spirit, and she was indignant with the intruder for his attempt to bully her.

"I am going to dance with whom I please, of course, Mr. Brancepeth," said she, bending her head, so that her shady straw hat hid her face with its heightened colour and sparkling eyes.

"Oh, you are, are you? Very well, then. Here goes for your pear-tree! There! And there! And there! And *there!*"

At each repetition of the words the young savage dealt at the poor pear-tree a furious blow with the

hunting-stock he carried; and when at last too angry, and too much out of breath to utter any more words, he still went on dealing at the tree a series of vigorous blows, until the whole of the splendid crop of fruit, torn and shaken so roughly down, lay, with the fragments of the now torn and ragged net, in a bruised and broken and quite valueless pulp upon the ground.

When this was accomplished, he stood back, panting and red in the face with his exertions, and looked defiantly at the girl.

But the moment he caught sight of her he experienced such a revulsion of feeling, such an overwhelming sense of shame and contrition, as he had never in his life known before.

Kathleen had lost her brilliant colour, and was quite white. Even her lips, instead of being carmine, were grey. In the few seconds during which the affair had lasted her eyes had lost their sparkle, her manner its vivacity. She still instinctively clutched her cabbages, but she was holding them so tightly that they were being crushed against her cotton frock by hands the convulsive movements of which betrayed the intensity of her despair.

Athelstan was cut to the quick. He would have given the world to undo what he had just done. He wanted to comfort her, to compensate her, to tell her that he was sorry and ashamed.

"I—I wish—I—hadn't done it!" he blurted out, hoarsely. "I—I did it without thinking, without—— But you needn't look like that about it. After all, it's only a few pears. I'll get you some more!"

Then she looked up, no longer pale, no longer dull of eyes, but shaking, trembling with anger like an outraged princess.

"Only a few pears! You will get me some more," she cried, not loudly, but in a low, ringing voice that seemed to vibrate in the young man's heart, and thrill him through and through with shame, remorse, and dismay. "They represented to me all the pleasure, all the little presents, all the enjoyment of the winter. You have left me just nothing!"

And, breaking down at last utterly, the girl sobbed.

"I'll get you some more. I'll buy you some more," stammered Athelstan, ready to cry himself.

But it was her turn to be scornful now.

"You!" cried she in the same low, penetrating voice. "*You!* Why, you Brancepeths never give pleasure, or make amends for any of the infamous things you do! You do nothing but bring disgrace upon yourselves and injury upon other people, whatever you do and wherever you go. I would not accept compensation from you, even if you could give it me!"

And she fled like a hare into the house, leaving the half-indignant but wholly remorseful Athelstan to beat a retreat as quickly as he could.

CHAPTER VII.

It was about nine o'clock that evening when Hubert, whose favourite mare had arrived that day at Culverley, took it into his head to go for a ride.

The night was rather cloudy, but it was light enough for him, as he intended to keep to the high-road, and to put off the thorough exploration of the country for the broad daylight. He did not himself quite understand what the feeling was which prompted this freak of a night ride. It must be the change of climate, he supposed, which had aroused in him a new sense of restlessness, and made him prefer the gentle exercise and the silent companionship of the brown mare to the cosy fireside and his sister's bright talk.

He somehow wished, although he had not ventured to make the suggestion, that she would choose some other subject for her severe and caustic remarks than the vagaries of the Brancepeth family. He was tired of their very name he said to himself, impatiently; the neighbourhood seemed to be pervaded by them. Go where you would, they were the all-absorbing topic of conversation. Even he, oddly enough, could not get that remarkable specimen of humanity, the female Brancepeth, out of his head. She was so far outside the realms of the possible that her image became positively haunting.

He went in his mind again and again through their

interview of the morning, alternately reproaching himself for his unconventional treatment of her, and priding himself upon having had the courage to show her what she deserved. After all, he concluded, since she could hardly be called a woman, he could not well be blamed for not treating her as one.

Confound the Brancepeths!

He had got as far as this in his vague reflections, when the noise of hoofs and shouts behind him announced that the inevitable ones were still on his heels. In another minute Athelstan overtook him, and drawing rein so sharply that he almost had his horse upon his haunches, he asked, abruptly—

"My sister! Have you seen anything of her?"

Hubert, much annoyed by his tone, did not stop.

"Your sister! What on earth should I know of her?"

"That won't do. You were with her this morning. I must have some other answer than that, or by——"

He had his hand on the rein of the brown mare; and she, unaccustomed to the touch of so rough a hand, began to rear and plunge.

Hubert, furious, had raised his whip, when a mediator appeared in the person of Giles, who shouted to his brother to take his hands off and to ride on.

Athelstan obeyed, grumbling. The more pacific Giles then addressed Hubert, apologetically—

"Awfully sorry, Mr. Besils, to have to trouble you at all. But my sister Harry has disappeared, and——"

"But, my good fellow, what on earth can the dis-

appearance of Miss Brancepeth have to do with me? Has she shown such a passionate attachment to me that where the one of us is the other must be? Or do you suppose that I've put her under lock and key?"

"No, Mr. Besils. That isn't it. The fact is that we know you've had some sort of quarrel with her this morning, for she's been talking about you and grumbling and swearing to her aunt all day, ever since she met you out this morning. And so, when she didn't turn up at dinner to-night, and when we found afterwards that she'd gone out riding, and that she'd *taken her revolver*, why, of course, we thought we'd better find out if she'd met you."

"Met me with a revolver!" said Hubert, lugubriously. "I suppose you think it's lucky for me she didn't?"

"Oh, I don't say that," rejoined Harry's brother, hastily. "I don't suppose she'd do you any harm. But she's hasty, and so I thought I'd better see you if I could. So we called at your place, and when they said you'd gone out riding in the very direction she took, why——"

He paused and hesitated.

"It's quite by chance that I've come this way," said Hubert. "It's the only road I know yet, that's why I took it. But it seems you know where she's gone, then?"

"We made inquiries in the village, and a carter met her on the Bredding Road."

"And you have no idea why she's gone that way?" said Hubert, who was not greatly interested in the

matter, thinking that the whims of this strange family were as unimportant as they were unaccountable.

"No. But the Bredding Woods are infested with bad characters, the most dangerous sort of poachers——"

To Giles' amazement, at these words his companion started violently and uttered an exclamation of horror.

"Poachers!" echoed he. "Poachers! Good heavens!"

Giles peered into the other man's face in the darkness.

"Well?" said he, hoarsely.

Hubert had grown cold with alarm.

"She—she—she said," he began, stammering in his anxiety, "that—that—something about meeting poachers by herself this morning. But I never gave her words a second thought."

"Ah!" exclaimed Giles. "You should always give a second thought to the threats of a Brancepeth." And he whistled to his brothers, Radley and Athelstan, who were on the road in front of them.

"To Bredding. She's gone to Bredding Woods," he said, briefly. "Ride like——"

They did not wait for another word, but spurred on their horses.

"I must wish you good-night," said Giles, curtly, to Hubert.

"No, no," answered Besils, as he gave the brown mare the spur also, and galloped on by the side of the eldest of the Brancepeths. "I feel that I am partly in fault for this, and I can't rest until I know

the girl's all right. But—great Heaven!—who would have thought she was serious? She said I shouldn't think her a coward if she were to face a party of poachers by herself. And even now I can't help thinking she has only gone off to frighten us all. Surely she would never dare—she would never be so mad——"

"She'll dare anything; and she's mad enough for anything," interrupted the young lady's brother. "Let's only hope," he went on, as he whipped up his horse, "that she hasn't either been murdered or committed murder by this time!"

Then they rode on in silence, a little behind the other two, straight along the old Roman road; passing wide sloping fields and bare spaces where the hops had been cleared, with here and there a little patch left, a forest of hop-poles with a ragged fringe hanging from them, last vestige of a crop which had been a failure, and where the hops had been left on their poles as not worth gathering.

"They'll be out a night like this," said Giles, in a low voice.

For the sky was clouded, and it was only now and then that the moon appeared at all, shrouded as she was in veils of mist.

To Hubert there was a sense of whimsicality, of unreality, about the whole affair. He believed that they would come upon Harry safe and mocking, delighted to have thus been the means of keeping, not only three of her brothers, but the taunting stranger, in a quite unnecessary state of alarm about her. He sincerely hoped that he should be the first

to meet her, being resolved that he would mock in his turn, and shame the silly girl, if possible, into repentance for this freak. Although, therefore, he took care not to confide his reflections to her brothers, who were genuinely alarmed, he soon lost his own fears, and enjoyed the night ride.

Bredding Woods were about fifteen miles from Culverley, and the party reached the outskirts of them in a little over an hour. Then they divided, and rode, each by himself, but within call of another of the party, into the wood. Hubert, who was entirely ignorant of the locality, soon got astray, and finding himself off the path he had been directed to follow, forgot the object of his quest in his anxiety on his own account.

He shouted, but got no reply whatever. He had not only lost his way, but had got beyond hail of the rest of the party. Suddenly it struck him that this result had perhaps been foreseen and intended by the brothers, in revenge for his share in getting their sister into this scrape.

The idea seemed a sufficiently probable one, and was alarming in the extreme. How on earth was he to get out? He was in a part of the wood where the trees were tall as well as close together; so that, although the leaves had for the most part fallen from them, what little light the moon occasionally gave was shut out by the net-work of branches and boughs overhead. The brown mare stumbled, having trodden in a hole, which the heaps of decaying leaves had hidden. Hubert dismounted, and was going to shout once more, when a cry, followed immediately by the

sound of two shots, reached his ears. He started, the sounds came from no great distance.

There was another cry, a woman's. Then one more shot, followed by the noise of a scuffle, with shouts and threats, and finally a cry which he understood:

"Serves her right! Curse her!"

By this time Hubert had judged from which direction the sounds came; and, leading the mare by the bridle, he forced his way as quickly as he could through the undergrowth, until he found himself in a small glade or opening where, although the undergrowth was as thick as ever, there were no trees. It was from the end of this glade, on Hubert's right hand, that the sounds came which had attracted his attention. He could just distinguish moving figures in the obscurity, for they were at the very edge of the wood, and behind them was the open country, forming a grey background against which they looked black.

A struggle was going on. Hubert shouted, and he was answered at once by a cry which sent a thrill through him. It was the cry of a woman, and of a woman in desperate need.

"Hold on! I'm coming!" he shouted, as he put his arm through the reins of the brown mare, and ran by her side as fast as the nature of the ground would allow.

But it was fast enough. As soon as his voice rang out he saw, by a rapid change of position on the part of the struggling figures, that his approach had caused as much consternation among the party

as relief to one member of it. Another moment, and he saw a creature flying towards him, and three men making rapidly for the cover of the trees.

"Oh, thank God! I—I——"

It was poor Harry, no longer the defiant amazon, but a panting girl in tattered garments, with only a rag left trailing behind her in place of her riding-habit, no hat on her head, and one of her sleeves half torn out, a pitiable sight. One of her arms she held out towards Hubert, the other hung down at her side. Just as she reached him she stumbled, and as she tried to speak, she suddenly stopped, swayed for a moment, and fell a dead weight in his out-stretched arms.

Hubert uttered a low cry of horror. She was covered with blood.

As he laid her gently on the ground and knelt beside her, he heard a shot fired in his immediate neighbourhood, and at the same instant a bullet whistled past his ears.

CHAPTER VIII.

HUBERT whistled softly to himself.

This was a pleasant situation, certainly. To be alone in a wood, on a dark night, with a wounded and insensible girl on his hands, and with an invisible enemy taking pot-shots at him from the shelter of an adjacent tree, was decidedly the most terrible predicament he had ever been in.

His best chance was in trying to make himself heard by one of the Brancepeths, who could not be very far off, although he had somehow lost them for a time so entirely. So he made the glade ring with his voice; and this movement on his part at least had the one desirable result of dispersing the gang of poachers. For Hubert heard a scuffling and rustling among the brushwood, getting gradually further and further off, until at last there was silence.

He had at first entertained the idea of calling to the poachers themselves, appealing to their humanity, and trying to prevail upon one of them to go for help to the nearest dwelling. But then he reflected that, even if he were successful in inducing one of the vagabonds to start on such an errand, it was more than likely that the man would change his mind and sneak off by the way; while if he were to fall in with one of the young lady's brothers, complications would ensue which it were best to avoid.

Then the shot fired at himself decided him: there was no alliance to be made with gentry of this sort.

Now through the lucky chance that Hubert was considered by his sister as an invalid, he was provided, by her care, with two or three things for which he now blessed her. In the first place, he had a flask of brandy in his pocket, at which, on his making the discovery that it was there, he had jeered and jibed. In the second place, he was obliged to carry on his saddle a neatly rolled up cloak, and in one of his pockets a silk muffler.

This last he now felt for, and used to wipe away the blood from the young lady's face, so that he

might ascertain the extent of her injuries. He found a cut near the right temple, under her fair hair: it bled a good deal, so he tore off a strip of her own handkerchief and bound it round her head. Then he discovered a more serious injury, which he had suspected as she ran towards him. Her left arm was broken. This was the most serious part of the damage; but there were cuts on her hands and wrists as well.

"Poor little girl! Poor little goose!" he was muttering to himself as, having laid her gently down with a heap of leaves for a pillow, he stood up to feel for his flask. By the time he had found it Harry had recovered consciousness, had tried to move, and had uttered a low cry of pain.

"Keep still. You had better keep still," said he, as he dropped down beside her again. "Don't move yourself; but let me put my arm under your head; I have something here that will do you good."

"What is it?" she asked, in much the same voice as usual. "Brandy? Ugh! I don't like it!"

And she turned her head away without tasting it.

"Rubbish!" said Hubert, crossly. "What does it matter whether you like it or not? You've got to take it, so open your mouth."

In the obscurity, he could see that she looked at him with an ingenuous expression of mingled doubt, surprise, and a sort of pallid and washed-out defiance. Nevertheless, after a few seconds of absolute inaction on either side, he holding the silver cup to her lips and she keeping her lips tightly closed, she gave way, and swallowed the brandy.

"I don't quite know what I'm to do with you," then said Hubert, doubtfully.

"You can leave me here, if you like," she said shortly.

"Yes, that's very likely, isn't it?"

"I daresay you think it's what I deserve."

"Perhaps I do. However, it's not practicable, you see. We're in a civilized country (though really I've begun to doubt that myself the last few days), and if I were to leave you here, as you propose, my conduct might excite unkind remark."

Miss Brancepeth suddenly took it into her head to try to rise; and she managed to do so, staggering a little, however, when she got upon her feet. At the same moment, and just as Hubert put his arm round her for her support, she cried out, and shivered with pain.

"My arm—I can't lift it. What have I done? Is it broken?"

"I'm afraid so. If you move about in that violent way there's no telling how much pain you will give yourself."

"Well, well, what am I to do? What am I to do?" cried the girl, impatiently. "I want to get out of this place, and you want to get rid of me. You know you do: you've said so!" she cried, fiercely.

"I hope I haven't said anything, or done anything, to make you think me inhuman," said Hubert, very gently. "Do try and be quiet and reasonable for a little while, for your own sake; and let us think what is best to be done. You know this place better than I. Is there a house, an inn, a cottage, anything near?"

"Not—very—near," said Harry, who was drooping a little. "About a mile off there is a little inn. I don't know of anything nearer, unless there may be a cottage at the other side of the wood. But that's some distance off."

Hubert reflected.

"If you would let me, if you would trust me, I could set your arm myself," said he. "I've had some practice in surgery out in Australia."

Miss Brancepeth hesitated a moment. Then she said, shortly—

"All right. Tell me what to do."

"Lie down as you did before, and keep quite still. I won't hurt you more than I can help, but you must be brave. You wanted to show me that you were brave, didn't you?"

This was rather an unfortunate question, considering the dire misfortunes into which that wish had led her. Harry was quite meek now, however, and she placed herself for the operation without a word.

"You will have to wait a few minutes, while I prepare some splints," said he, as he took out a big clasp-knife and looked for a suitable tree.

While he was doing so, she called out suddenly—

"You won't think me a coward if I keep all the time without crying out, will you?"

"No, indeed, I shan't."

Then there was silence for a few minutes, while he got ready. Hubert was too anxious about the operation he had to perform to give much thought to the subject of it. He worked as rapidly as he could, for

the night had cleared, and he had to take advantage of the moonlight while it lasted. Harry was as docile a patient as he could have wished, and bore the operation bravely. When he had finished he looked in her face for the first time.

"I had no idea a girl could bear pain so well," said he, appreciatively.

The poor amazon smiled, and then her head dropped. She had fainted again.

Fortunately, she soon came back to consciousness. She started slightly when she saw Hubert's face near hers.

"Oh!" she said, evidently aware of what had happened, but unwilling to own her weakness, "I must have dropped off to sleep, I think. It was that brandy."

"Yes," said Hubert. "It was the brandy, no doubt. And now you must have a little more, for I want to get you out of this place."

She looked at him doubtfully, rather resenting the patent fact that he was humouring her. But she made no open resistance to anything, even submitting to be helped to her feet and to being wrapped in Hubert's cloak. When he, with many apologies, offered her his own hat, however, she protested. He succeeded in overruling her objections, assuring her that people who put themselves on the sick-list through their own folly have no voice in their own treatment.

And then, making her take his arm, while he again took the brown mare by the bridle on the other side, he led her by slow steps, watching the ground so that

she should not put her feet into any holes, out to the road.

"What about your horse?" he then asked. "What's become of him?"

Harry put her hand to her head.

"I—I—I don't know; I don't seem to remember," she said, in a dazed manner. "I—I don't remember anything after I had got to the place where I found the poachers. I got down, and left him standing while I fired a shot from my revolver right over their heads. I thought it would startle them and frighten them away, or that the noise would bring up some of the keepers in time to help me."

Hubert looked at her in stupefaction.

"Come," said he, at last, "you must get on 'Blackberry.' Your brothers are about, and they'll come across your horse, I dare say."

He helped her to mount the brown mare, and as he walked beside her, leading the animal himself, and remaining close enough to help her if she should again feel faint, they proceeded in the direction of the farm she had spoken of.

"I suppose you think me very foolish?" she said, at last, after having watched his face in silence for a little while.

Hubert looked up into her face.

"Well, to be frank," he answered, promptly, "your foolishness seems to me to be almost beyond belief."

"Well," she rejoined, petulantly, "you said I was a coward. I meant to show you that I was not."

"You have shown me that now, by the way you bore the pain of having your arm set," admitted he,

in a tone of what seemed to the girl rather grudging appreciation. "As for the freak of your exposing yourself to the dangers of meeting with a gang of poachers, it was insanity, not bravery, and we will say no more about it."

"It was your fault," retorted Harry. "You dared me to it. You shouldn't call me a coward."

"But what did it matter to you what I thought?" said Hubert, in a dogged tone of argument. "Surely you could afford to snap your fingers at the opinion of a person you despise!"

Harry said nothing to this. But she stared at him as if rather puzzled herself. Then her thoughts apparently wandered away a little, for she put up her hand to feel the bandage round her forehead, and presently asked—

"Shall I be disfigured?"

"I hope not, I'm sure. There will perhaps be a little mark on your forehead, under your hair. I don't think there will be more. You got off very lightly, considering the danger you ran."

His tone became grave again. Harry shuddered.

"The men—two of them—attacked me. They were going to run away at first, when I fired; but then they saw I was only a woman," and her tone became exceedingly bitter, "so they shouted and made for me."

"Well, what could you expect?"

"I did make a good fight for it," said Harry, plaintively. "I got my back against a tree, and I could have tackled one by himself, I know. But the odds were too much for me. They got me out, the

two of them; the other was on the watch, thinking there were others near to back me up. I think it was the butt-end of a gun that broke my arm. I felt something like a house falling on my arm, and then I couldn't lift it up again."

"And the brutes went on after that!" said Hubert, in a low voice.

"One did. He was trying to hit me again when I heard your voice. Oh, wasn't I glad! But how did you get here?"

And her tone suddenly changed to dawning perplexity.

"I was out riding, and your brothers overtook me, and they said you had been seen going towards Bredding Woods. And then I remembered what you had said about poachers in the morning; and, knowing you were mad enough for anything, we all tore along as hard as we could to see what you were up to."

There was a pause, and then Harry said, in a meditative tone—

"And so you've saved my life! It's rather odd that it should have been you, isn't it?"

"Why odd? As long as there was somebody to do it, surely it doesn't matter who it was."

"Well, it's rather a pity it wasn't Luke Standen," said Harry, musingly. "It would have made him so awfully happy!"

"Well, don't you think I'm happy enough over it, then?"

"Oh, I daresay. But not in the same way. Luke Standen has been in love with me ever since I was twelve."

"Well, that isn't so very many years, is it?"

"More than six," said Harry. "Isn't that a good test of affection, that it should last six years?"

"It will be a better test when it has lasted sixty."

"Why, I shouldn't expect it to last all that time, even if I were to marry him."

"Why, aren't you going to marry him?"

"Oh, no. He's too poor. He's got an elder brother, and even he won't have much. Poor Luke's got to be a clerk in a bank, or something horrid like that. And as I shall have nothing, how could I marry him?"

"Then you don't believe in love in a cottage?"

"Oh, I suppose some people love in some cottages. But then they must be people who are used to cottages, you know, and who can boil potatoes and scrub floors. Now, I can groom a horse, but that accomplishment wouldn't be very useful, for we shouldn't be able to keep a horse."

"Let's hope that a rich uncle of Luke's will come back from Australia, so that you may be able to avoid the cottage after all."

"Oh," said Harry, ingenuously, "but he would be too late. I'm going to marry Lord Ambry. Do you know him? His first wife died two years ago. He's got grown-up children of his own, and grandchildren, too. You would have seen him about here, only that he's laid up with gout just now, and can't get out."

Hubert could not repress a slight movement, indicative of the disgust he felt.

"You're going to marry a gouty old man with

grandchildren!" cried he, not concealing the light in which he viewed the announcement.

"Well, I'm obliged to. People think I'm very lucky. But of course he would not want to marry me if my face were disfigured."

"Then," replied Hubert, warmly, "I think it's a pity you were not disfigured."

"I'm very much obliged to you."

Hubert was silent. He felt that he had already said too much. But this girl had somehow the faculty of irritating him out of discretion. She would not leave him alone, however.

"Why do you speak in that tone of disgust? What right have you to find fault with what I do?"

"None at all," he answered, promptly. "I am sorry if I seem to blame you. No doubt it is other people who are to blame."

"My father? My brothers?" said Harry, sharply. "*They* approve of it."

"No doubt. But does your aunt, Lady Maggie?"

"Oh, Aunt Maggie's opinions are always out of date."

"I thought so. Her opinions would be mine, I expect. However, as you say, I have no right even to make a remark about the matter. Please consider that my words were only an abstract expression of opinion as to marriages between old men and young women in general."

"Perhaps," said Harry, after a pause, "you are sorry you saved my life, since I'm going to marry Lord Ambry?"

Hubert hesitated a moment.

"I can't say that, of course," he answered at last. "But—well, I would rather have saved the life of the girl who was going to marry——"

"Whom?"

"Luke Standen."

"Thank you," said she, coldly.

There was constraint between them after this, and they went on silently until Harry varied the monotony of the ride by becoming faint again. Hubert, on the alert, supported her in the saddle.

"Keep up!" said he, in a coaxing tone. "Keep up your strength and spirits just a few minutes longer. We're very near now."

The girl rallied valiantly, and kept her seat, with Hubert's help, till they reached the farm-house.

At the very time of their arrival they saw Giles Brancepeth in the distance, mounted on his own horse and leading Harry's. After this, therefore, all was plain sailing. They knocked up the people of the farm-house, who had gone to bed, and Harry remained with one of her brothers in the sitting-room while another rode home for a carriage. Hubert escaped as quickly as he could from the thanks of Harry's brothers, mounted his own mare "Blackberry," and rode back to Culverley.

Just before he started he asked himself whether he should go indoors and wish Harry "good-night." He decided in the negative, for an odd reason.

"I don't like her," he said to himself. "And—and I don't want to have to like her. She's d——d plucky though, d——d plucky!"

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. FLORISTON was thrown into a state of great anxiety by the share her brother had had in the events of that momentous evening. She did not learn all about it until luncheon-time on the following day; and in the mean time she had met the Vicar's wife, and heard so much to the discredit of the Brancepeths, that she was even sorry she had dined at their house.

When, therefore, Hubert told her the whole story, she set about devising plans for weaning him from his intention of spending the winter in the neighbourhood.

In the mean time it was important to find out what sort of impression this objectionable young woman, with her undesirably handsome grey eyes, had made upon him, and whether his reluctance to quit the Vicarage had anything to do with her.

"I hope she was grateful to you for doing so much for her," she began, being too clever to betray her deep anxiety.

"Quite as grateful as was necessary, considering the exceedingly strained relations between us. When a young lady has signified her appreciation of your many good points by cutting you across the face, it's wonderful how long it takes to get on friendly terms again with her."

"The longer the better!" thought Mrs. Floriston. But all she said aloud was, "Doesn't she improve at all on closer acquaintance, then?"

Hubert, who was peeling walnuts, answered in a careless tone, as if his occupation took up more of his attention than the subject of the conversation.

"Oh, I don't want to be too hard upon the girl. She hasn't had much chance of being—anything but what she is. She's engaged——"

Mrs. Floriston breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"—to Lord Ambry."

"To Lord Ambry! That young girl! Does she know—anything about him?"

"Presumably not as much as we know. But she knows he is sixty, that he is a grandfather, and that he is laid up with periodical attacks of gout, and she is quite satisfied."

"Really, it's very shocking, don't you think so?"

"When I ventured to say so, I was told to mind my own business."

This seemed to Mrs. Floriston a favourable opportunity for a suggestion she was longing to make.

"Don't you think, dear, that we had better have as little as possible to do with these people? I hear there are even worse accusations made against them than that of marrying their womenfolk to old men. It appears it's not safe to play cards with the brothers, and that they don't pay their racing debts."

"Well, the young men have been civil enough. One can't quite turn the other way if they wish one 'good-morning,' especially as they consider I've laid them under an obligation."

"Exactly. Then don't you think the best way to avoid them is to leave the place?"

"It would be one way, certainly. But I have never yet been frightened out of an intention; and I don't mean to let the presence of the Brancepeths frighten me out of my intention of spending the winter here. And I am out of the nursery, you know, Maud."

Mrs. Floriston knew better than to say any more.

She was delighted to find, as the days went by, that Hubert kept himself commendably free from intimacy with the family at Culverley Place. He did not even call there, to inquire how Miss Brancepeth was after her accident; and Mrs. Floriston, although she would have thought his neglect inexcusable in the case of any other sufferer, took his duty upon her own shoulders without a murmur.

But although she called assiduously, she never once saw the convalescent, and she was shrewd enough to think this a bad sign.

She knew that this avoidance of her on the part of Harry must be the result of some strong feeling; and strong feelings between the household at Culverley Place and that at the Vicarage, of whatever kind, were undesirable. She began to dread the inevitable moment when Miss Brancepeth would be about again, and when she would meet Hubert, and there would be reproaches and explanations.

And then, to her great annoyance, just when she heard that Harry had quite recovered, and was expecting to be on her horse in a day or two, Colonel Floriston, her husband, wired for her to come back home, as he had sprained his ankle.

"Just like Hugh, to sprain his ankle at the wrong time!" murmured Maud, when she read the letter.

There was no help for it, however. And within an hour of her receipt of the telegram Mrs. Floriston was driving to the nearest station, with her brother beside her.

"I do hope, dear, that you won't be worried or annoyed while I am away by those horrid Brancepeths!" were her parting words to him.

But it was only one of the horrid Brancepeths whom she really feared.

Hubert drove back to Culverley, had his luncheon, read his paper by the dining-room fire, and then walked in a leisurely manner across the hall to the drawing-room.

It was a dark November afternoon, and there was scarcely any daylight left. A red fire, partly coal and partly wood, threw a warm glow on the white skin hearth-rug, the grey and gold walls, and the white dimity covers of the old-fashioned sofas and arm-chairs.

A tall figure sprang up from the fireside as Hubert entered, and he stopped short in astonishment and perhaps dismay.

For the intruder was Harry. Even by this faint light he saw that a great change had taken place in the girl's looks. She had grown thinner, so much so that the outline of her face was altered, and at the first glance she did not look like the same woman.

"Miss—Brancepeth!"

"Yes, yes; why, who did you suppose it was?" cried she, impatiently. "What a long time you have

been over your luncheon! Are you always so long? Or did you guess that I should be in here waiting for you?"

"I certainly did not guess that," said he, with decision. "But—er—how did you—when did you come in? And do you know that my sister has been called away? She went to town this morning."

"Of course I knew your sister was gone. Do you suppose I should have come if I hadn't? She doesn't like me. She's what I call a cat."

This was plain-speaking indeed. It did not help the conversation forward. After a pause, during which Hubert looked at the fire, and tried to appear as if he hadn't heard her last remark, she went on—

"As for the way I got in: look here!"

She produced a penknife, and nodded towards the window: "I put back the catch with this and got in?"

"Why, that's a burglarious sort of entry, isn't it?"

"Well, I didn't want anybody to know I'd come. You know how people chatter about their neighbours' affairs?"

"But this is the way to make them chatter, Miss Brancepeth. Let me call at your house if you are good enough to wish to speak to me."

"I'm good enough to wish to speak to you *here!*" replied Harry, emphatically. "You won't come up to the Place, I know. And I don't blame you for it. Sit down, for I've got a lot to say, and I must collect my ideas."

She had reseated herself on a low, square stool in front of the fire; and she intimated to him, with

an imperious gesture, that the place he was to take was the corner of the nearest sofa, close to her and to the fire.

Not knowing what to do to propitiate and get rid of his embarrassing guest, Hubert slipped into the seat she pointed out.

Harry, who did not in the least share his embarrassment, remained silent for some time, resting her chin on her right hand, and tapping the steel bar of the fender with the walking-stick she carried in her ungloved left hand. Hubert watched her, and was more struck than before by the alteration which the past few weeks had made. She suddenly turned her face towards him, and her eyes met his.

"You're watching me," she said, impatiently. "And I don't like it. I know you're thinking what an odd creature it is, and wishing it would go."

"I am wishing the creature would go, certainly. But it is for the odd creature's own sake, not for mine. If the creature's brothers found out it was here, the creature's unwilling host would stand a very good chance of having his head broken, that's what I'm thinking."

Harry only smiled.

"You can take care of your own head," said she. "It is of no use for you to appeal to me for pity; for you are the sort of person who has no pity for others."

"Miss Brancepeth!"

"Oh, yes. You have read me more than one lecture; now it is my turn to read you one. What right have you to judge me so harshly as you do?

You tell me I ought to marry Luke Standen, and not Lord Ambry. Have you ever seen Luke?"

Hubert was astonished.

"Why, no," stammered he, in some confusion. "I have not. But——"

"Well, then, wait till you have before you are so certain I ought to marry him. Why should I marry him more than Lord Ambry, since I don't care for the one more than for the other?"

"But, surely, if you don't care for either of them, there is no necessity for your marrying either of them."

"Yes, but there is. We're frightfully poor, and getting poorer every day. If anything dreadful happened, and we were smashed up and had to leave Culverley, we should sink right down into—oh, into coal-porters, or—or billiard-markers, or something unheard of like that. Giles says so. And I should have to be drowned, like a kitten, Giles says, since no one would have me for a companion or a governess, and there are no women grooms."

Hubert tried to keep a grave face, since the girl was terribly in earnest; but the effort was too much for him, and he began to laugh.

She shot an astonished and angry glance at him.

"I beg your pardon," said he, quickly. "I didn't mean to laugh. But you're not really afraid of being drowned, are you, like a kitten?"

"Well, the only alternative is to marry Lord Ambry."

She looked at Hubert; but he was discreet this

time, and made no reply. There was silence for some minutes, and then she startled her host by jumping up from her seat and beginning to pace up and down the room.

"I wish you'd never come to the place!" she cried, impatiently. "It's all through you that I got my arm broken, and was shut up for days and days in the house thinking, thinking—and I hate thinking—until I have made myself so miserable that I want to die. I was happy before, riding and hunting and shooting all day, and then coming back too tired at night to do anything but go to sleep. And now you have put ideas into my head and spoilt it all for me! And you don't even care enough to call at the house to ask if I am getting better."

Hubert was moved by the girl's earnestness, by the restless unhappiness which betrayed itself in every look and tone.

"You are quite right; I ought to be ashamed of myself," said he, as he rose and stood by the mantlepiece. "I ought to have called. But I was afraid of—of intruding, and, besides, I never do pay calls."

"You call at the Vicarage!" said she, sharply.

"Well, the Vicar is my landlord, you know."

"You are in love with Kathleen, aren't you? Athelstan says so, and he says he'll blow your brains out if you marry her."

"He's very good, I'm sure. One doesn't seem to be able to do anything in this place without incurring some bodily injury from one or other of your family."

"Don't! don't!" cried Harry, sinking down upon the sofa opposite to him.

And he saw a tear start from her eye and roll down her cheek.

"It's the second time you've made me cry. I, who never do such a thing," cried she, indignantly, as she dashed away the trace of her weakness. "Do you think you ought to remind me of what I did to you, when I've had to have my life saved by you? Oh, how humiliating it is to think of it! When other people would have been so glad to have done it, too, and would have been quite proud of it!"

Hubert did not at once answer. Presently Harry sat down again on the square foot-stool, and looked searchingly into his face.

"Why don't you answer me? What are you thinking about?" she asked, inquisitorially.

"I was thinking," answered he, frankly, "that you are the strangest combination of a young man and a baby that I ever met. Instead of being thankful to have got out of the scrape you were in that night, you are full of childish vanity because you happened to be saved by the wrong man."

"That's the baby part of me; then what is the man part?"

"You are straightforward and daring, and simple-minded?"

"But you don't like those qualities?"

"I do."

"I thought you didn't like anything about me?"

"You were mistaken," answered Hubert in his most judicial tone.

"Do you like me enough to accept an invitation to the Place?"

"Oh, if you put it like that, what can I say?"

"Then there!" cried Harry, as she produced from the pocket of her dress a note, which she tossed over to him.

He caught it, opened and read it. It was an invitation from Sir Giles to dine at the Place that evening.

"Giles made him write it, I think," remarked Harry, as she got up to go.

Hubert saw a strangely reserved expression come suddenly into her face, which was as open and frank as a child's.

"Well, are you coming?" she asked, shortly.

"If you wish it, certainly."

"I'm not sure that I do," she answered, musingly. "Luke will disapprove of you."

"Why?"

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter if he does. Good-bye."

She held out her hand.

"Now," said she, "I can make a bet that you will come."

"You don't think it wrong to take advantage of your special knowledge?"

"Oh, the boys never pay their bets, so it doesn't matter," said Harry, ingenuously. She walked towards the window. "I suppose you have never been in love, have you?"

"Why, yes; I'm generally in love, I think. Most people are, aren't they?"

"I don't know. I've never been. I think it's silly."

"Then is it because you look upon me as a silly person that you asked me the question?"

"No; just the reverse. You seem to me to put on airs of being ridiculously wise. Good-bye."

The window had already swung on its hinges behind her, and he saw her vault over the wall into the orchard and disappear among the bare fruit-trees in the gloaming.

He walked backwards and forwards a few times in the room, just where she had walked. Then he stopped and looked at the fire.

"An odd creature!" he mused, as he twisted in his fingers the note which contained the invitation of Sir Giles. "Not detestable, as I thought at first. Only absurdly odd. Handsome, too, and rather interesting as a curiosity. Never been in love? she says. Good heavens! What a life she'd lead a man if she were!"

There was a sharp tap on the window. Hubert was surprised to find that his heart leaped with strange excitement as he threw it open.

But it was not Harry, as he had found himself hoping. It was a short, thickset young man, with a square, flabby face, a long upper lip, and a pugnacious nose.

"Another of the local ruffians!" thought Hubert, as, without any warning, the new-comer dealt him a tremendous blow in the chest.

CHAPTER X.

FROM the day when, by his ill-advised act of passion, Athelstan Brancepeth had destroyed poor Kathleen's pear-tree and her prospects of winter pocket-money at the same time, no word had been exchanged between these two young people.

This was not Athelstan's fault.

If ever a man tried to atone, by abject, patient self-abasement, for a wrong done, that man was he. He hung about Mr. Griffith's garden; but, however stealthily he approached, Kathleen was always slipping out of sight, blind and deaf to him, when he reached the palings. He wrote her letters, not particularly well spelt, but very, very humble, promising to pay her the price of her pears, and begging for forgiveness. The letters were returned unopened, and redirected to him in a handwriting which was not hers.

He went to church; but her seat was a long way from the pew which belonged to Culverley Place, and she always came out in the very centre of a body-guard of freckled, spectacled sisters.

Although he was constantly on the lookout for an opportunity of meeting her alone, it was not until the afternoon of the day on which Mrs. Floriston started for town that he at last had the good luck to espy her in the distance, crossing a boggy, fresh-ploughed field, with an umbrella in one hand and a bag of books in the other.

He was on horseback, trotting slowly along the high-road, on his return from a day's cub-hunting. His heart leaped up, and he reined in his horse sharply when he caught sight of the girl. She could not escape him now, for he saw by the direction in which she was going that she was on her way to Middleforth, a straggling village on the outskirts of Mr. Griffith's parish, where there was a small chapel, served by him and his one curate.

There was always, so it seemed to the Brancepeths, who used to meet the Vicar's womenkind going to and fro, a meeting or a service of some sort being held in the chapel, and Athelstan knew that it was duty and not pleasure which took Kathleen through inches of mud on this foggy, sloppy November afternoon.

He jumped off his horse and waited for her.

There was a high bank, with a little scrubby fringe of hedge on the top, which hid her from his view as soon as he dismounted. He listened for her approach, his heart beating very fast. What a long time these girls take to get over the ground! And she had seemed to be skimming along like a hare, too! Presently the suspicion seized him that she had seen, and meant to avoid him.

He left his horse in the road, crept up the bank, and peeped through the bare brambles. There was nobody in sight. And she had been making straight for the spot on which he stood.

In an instant the passionate young man felt his excitement, his penitential self-abasement turn to resentment. Who was she, this parson's daughter, to treat

a Brancepeth like this? He mounted his horse again, rode on a little way, and examined the landscape in every direction. And in a few seconds he caught sight of a flying figure, the very figure he wanted to see, disappearing behind a little copse into a foot-path which was a roundabout way into Middleforth.

He was not going to miss her this time, the little vixen. With more of anger than of humiliation in his feelings, he put his horse at a gate which stood in the way between him and her, cleared it, and, galloping across the intervening fields, came up with her when she was splashing through the mud of the little sloping, slippery path.

"You've chosen a pretty way to come!" said he, sulkily, raising his hat with a scowl, and reining in his horse to accommodate his pace to hers.

No answer. She hurried on, splashing into a big puddle, and tearing her ulster against a bramble which protruded from the copse.

"I know you've only taken this path to avoid me, and it serves you right that you're getting all over mud!" said her amiable pursuer. "You *are* a vixen!"

No answer again. But he could hear her panting, and had at least the satisfaction of knowing that she was angry too. A little way ahead the path she was following became wider, and was enclosed between hedges. Here he would have to keep outside, and she would be able to maintain her obstinate silence with more ease, since there would be a barrier between them. So he rode on a little way, and then, suddenly dismounting, stood beside his horse right in her path.

She paused for a moment, and then made up her mind what to do, and came on quite steadily until she was within six feet of where he stood waiting.

"You will not prevent my passing, I suppose?" cried she then. And she looked up, and flashed at him steadily such a look from her brown eyes that he felt himself suddenly overawed and put to a disadvantage. "After what you have done already, you could hardly do that!"

Now at these words Athelstan, much to his own astonishment, suddenly broke down. His surly manner changed. He spoke with the shamefaced piteous confusion of a boy.

"I—I—I—oh, Miss Kathleen, you are hard on a fellow! Wasn't I sorry? Haven't I tried to speak to you again and again to tell you so?"

"Papa doesn't wish me to speak to you again."

"But he has no right to prevent you from hearing me apologise!"

"I don't wish you to apologise. I only wish you not to speak to me."

"You do really wish that?"

Now it was Kathleen's turn to be astonished at herself. She found it quite surprisingly hard to put the necessary dashing assurance into her answer—

"Yes, I do."

Certain little passages of half-trivial, half-tender words, certain short silences, certain shy glances, which had from time to time, at longish intervals, helped to pass the time at chance meetings between them at the local flower-shows and other more formal assemblies, came to the minds of these two, as the one

pronounced and the other listened to this edict of eternal severance.

She had said the words with her eyelids lowered, so that she could not see how he received them. There was a pause, and then Kathleen heard him tightening the girths of his saddle, not so much because they were loose as because he wanted something to do with his hands. She glanced up quickly. His back was turned. She made a dash for it, and passed him. Then, without a look behind, she fled along the path, splashing through pools of muddy water, slipping over dead branches of trees, until she was well within the shelter of the hedged walk which led into the village.

It was a missionary meeting at the chapel which had brought her over. Mr. Griffith was kept away by duties in another part of the parish, and it so happened that Kathleen was the only one of the ladies of the family who could be spared to represent the Vicar's household at this important function.

She was very much ashamed, poor girl, at the plight in which she was obliged to present herself at the chapel. As this was also the school-room, there had been rather a scramble to get the place in order in time for the meeting; and the missionary, who was a lady, was taking off her goloshes, surrounded by billows of slates, when Kathleen dashed in.

The meeting was not a very large one, although it had been announced, as a great attraction, that the lady who held it would appear in native Indian dress at one point of the lecture. This was, of course, the excitement of the afternoon; and the elderly females

in shabby bonnets, who, with the exception of the school-children, formed almost the whole of the audience, were whispering together very audible comments on the prospect before them.

"What's it like, this Injin dress? I 'ave 'eard tell it's nothin' more nor less than a few beads," remarked one, whose recollections of what she had heard of the South Sea Islanders were probably coming to her aid.

"Oh, it'll be more'n that, or she wouldn't wear it, a respectable-lookin' person like her!" said a wiser friend, reassuringly. "Of course there's Injins—and Injins, just like there's differences among ourselves. *We* shouldn't wear no low necks and short sleeves out there to show 'em how they dress over here!"

Kathleen, who had taken off her waterproof and seated herself at the harmonium, was smiling to herself at this scrap of dialogue when, to her unspeakable horror and amazement, the chapel door creaked on its hinges, and was thrown wide open to admit—Athelstan Brancepeth.

To describe the sensation produced by his appearance would be impossible. A bull in a china shop is a welcome visitor compared to a young man of known irreverent and sporting tendencies, in a well-splashed scarlet coat and top-boots, in the midst of a select party of old village gossips, met together for the quiet enjoyment of harmless twaddle on a wet afternoon.

The school-children sprang up with one accord, like reeds blown by a sudden gust of wind. The

old women shook with scandalised consternation. The poor missionary, although she did not know the Brancepeths and their reputation, looked frightened and perplexed; while Kathleen, who felt that this visitation was due to her, felt that the chapel walls were swimming round her, and that the keys of the harmonium were dancing with unaccustomed liveliness close to her eyes.

Only the cause of the excitement seemed to take things as a matter of course, although he probably felt more emotion at the unusual circumstances in which he found himself than he expressed with visible signs. Contrary to the prevailing impression that his object was to create a disturbance, the unwelcome guest bore himself with great discretion, made himself as unconspicuous as possible by seating himself behind a row of females of extensive proportions, and sat like a mouse until the proceedings began.

The wise ones began to exchange glances and whispers, and to nod their heads in the direction of the Vicar's pretty daughter. She, however, was careful never to turn her head, least the merest glimpse caught of her crimson face should prove a tacit acknowledgment that she knew of his presence.

The missionary began nervously, with a prayer and a hymn. Athelstan made as little clanking of his spurs as possible when he knelt down, and sang the hymn through with plenty of zeal and vigour when he stood up. Kathleen breathed more freely. There was evidently nothing to fear from him until

the meeting was over. She tried to compose herself to listen to the lecture with attention and profit.

The address was of the familiar harmless, unnecessary type.

The speaker, a quiet-looking, but energetic young woman of the class that upper servants come from, had been some time in India, and had worked hard, with very small results, among the ladies of that country, whom she looked upon as greatly her inferiors. She considered them quite remarkably obstinate because they had received her with curiosity and courtesy rather than with enthusiasm and reverence, and was strongly of opinion that something serious would happen to the country unless enough pennies were speedily collected to send her out again among them.

Of interesting information she had of course very little to give; but she told a few harmless anecdotes without much point, and finally wound a scarf around her, and hung a pair of huge brass earrings round her ears, to give them, as she said, "some idea of what the natives looked like."

This was rather disappointing; but the hearers glanced at the intruder in scarlet, and threw the blame of this meagre display upon him. Then there was another hymn, in which Athelstan joined with a display of lung-power which obtained universal admiration, and then another prayer, and the meeting was over.

Kathleen played one voluntary, and then another; in fact, she played on as long as there was anybody to play to, in the hope of tiring Athelstan out.

Then she sprang up suddenly and closed the instrument, feeling that the old busybodies would be sure to say she was waiting for him. And then she left the building hastily by a side-entrance, after thanking the missionary, and giving her father's apologies for his unavoidable absence from her "most interesting address."

And of course she ran into Athelstan, or was run into by him, before she reached the end of the little street.

"Won't you speak to me?" asked he in a low voice.

She hesitated. Then, thinking that after all he had behaved less badly than he might have done, she softened sufficiently to give him only a modified snub.

"I would rather not, please," she said, in a reluctant and gentle tone. "You know you ought not to have gone to that meeting," she burst out in sudden excitement.

And then she turned away rather quickly, and Athelstan felt happier, since he fancied he detected on her face a quickly repressed smile.

"I didn't do any harm—*this* time," he pleaded, meekly. "Just tell me this: did you really think her lecture 'very interesting'? You know you told her so."

Kathleen swung her string bag of books nervously. She felt that it was wrong to be thus parleying with the enemy, but, on the other hand, she did not want to be *too* rude.

"One is obliged to say those things," she said,

looking away into the gathering dusk over a hill. "Besides, you made her nervous. You had no right to be there," she added, quite severely.

"I only came in as one of the public," said Athelstan, still as meek as a mouse.

"Oh, no, you didn't!" said Kathleen, sharply. "You did it to annoy me."

Now this was a very foolish speech. She saw at once the disadvantage at which it placed her. Athelstan came a step nearer on the instant and took hold of her bag of books.

"Let me carry these for you; you know they're heavy, and it's a bore to take them. And," he stooped now to whisper, "and you know I'm longing to do something to make amends. Let me—do."

But his near approach, the momentary contact of her hand with his as he tried to take the bag by force, frightened her and put her on her dignity again.

"No, oh, no! Please, please get on your horse and ride on. Papa will be very, very angry when he knows I've spoken to you at all. And when he hears that you were at the meeting—somebody's sure to tell him—I don't know what he will say."

"A pretty thing for the Vicar of the parish to disapprove of people trying to improve their minds and save their souls!" grumbled Athelstan. "He'll be complaining of my going to church next, I suppose?"

"He *does!*" rejoined Kathleen, eagerly. "He says you make the children giggle."

"Well, *he* makes them yawn!" retorted Athelstan, hotly.

Kathleen drew herself up.

"It doesn't matter what he does," said she, with dignity. "He's the Vicar."

This was unanswerable. Athelstan, after a moment's silence, tried another tack.

"It was he who sent back my letters, I suppose?"

"Of course. I asked him to."

"No, you didn't."

Kathleen blushed, but it was too dark for him to see how deeply.

"I mean," corrected she, haughtily, "that I asked him to redirect them when he said that they were to go back."

"How did you know that the letters were from me? I've never written to you before?"

"I guessed," admitted Kathleen, quickly, and blushed again. "I thought you would apologise."

Athelstan stooped again.

"You will go to the ball, won't you?"

"N-n-n-no." The answer was almost a sob.

"Through me?"

There was no answer to this. Athelstan drew himself up, knitted his brows, and suddenly put his hand to his pocket, pulled out his watch, and looked at it: not at the time, but at the back, and then inside at the works. Then he slapped it into his pocket again quickly, and turned again to speak to her.

But she had gone; in the twilight she had made

her escape down an alley close at hand, and there was nothing for him to do but to mount his horse and return home at a gallop by the high-road.

CHAPTER XI.

At the time that Athelstan and Kathleen were having their short passage of arms in Middleforth Village, Hubert Besils was just recovering from the astonishment into which he had been thrown by the attack of his unknown assailant on the lawn of the Vicarage.

"Who are you?" he asked, as, without waiting for an answer, he dealt a blow in return at the pugnacious intruder, which sent him staggering backwards. "One more of the Brancepeths, I suppose? You have the same amiable and ingratiating manners."

"My name's Luke Standen," replied the thickset little man, shortly. "And I want to know what you mean by entertaining a young girl in your house?"

"It was an accident," answered Hubert at once. "Miss Brancepeth came to call on my sister, and finding she had left for town this morning, she was too well-bred to rush away at once, as if she was afraid of me."

But Luke Standen snorted incredulously.

"Rubbish!" ejaculated he, shortly. "I know Harry."

Apparently he did, for, instead of making any further inquiries, he said, despondently—

"I saw her go back over the wall. She's always up to some wild folly or other."

"And I suppose it would be impertinent to ask what you were doing in this garden, which seems to be public property?"

"Oh, I apologise," said Standen, in a curious tone. And then he made up his mind to be frank, and in a good-humoured and rather pleasant voice said, "The fact is, sir, I followed her through the orchard and saw her get into your house. I'm always following her about. I can't help it. But I shouldn't have gone as far as I did to-day if I hadn't been jealous. I hope you'll accept my apologies. I had no business either to watch her or to let my temper get the better of me and strike you. But, I assure you, sir, that girl does make a fellow mad!"

"I should think she might," answered Hubert, reflectively.

"You see," Standen went on, "it didn't matter my seeing her come, because I know her wild ways. But supposing anybody else had seen her, what would they have thought? Now, what would they have thought?"

"That's just it. Surely there must be somebody, her father or her aunt, who would speak to her with authority and check these freaks? Couldn't you try now, instead of following her about without any protest?"

But the young man shook his head.

"She wouldn't listen to me. She wouldn't care a rush for what I say. I was going to suggest that *you* should."

"I!" exclaimed Hubert. "Good gracious, I haven't spoken to her more than a dozen times! And—and we have been by no means on the best of terms, either."

"Ah, but you saved her life. You're a lucky beggar!" said Standen, enviously. "I suppose it's that makes her think so much of you."

"Think so much of me!" returned Hubert, blankly.

"Oh, yes. I knew she'd come and see you; she was so piqued at your not coming to her." Then, after a moment's silence, he asked, sharply, "Aren't you in love with her?"

"No, certainly not. You may make your mind quite easy about that."

But instead of appearing relieved, Luke Standen sighed.

"Now, I made up my mind you would be," he said, regretfully.

"Why, man, you don't want a second rival, do you?"

"Rival? No. Rivalry is out of the question. She doesn't care for me in the right way; never did and never will. But I should have liked to see her married to a decent fellow, and not to that vile old brute Ambry. You're rich; you'd have been listened to. I'm sorry."

Hubert was touched by the young man's simple sincerity. He invited him into the house; and the two men who had begun half an hour before by exchanging blows were soon smoking in amicable silence before the study fire.

And then Hubert heard a few more details con-

cerning Lord Ambry and his engagement, which made him sorry for the young girl who, at the age of eighteen, was to be sacrificed to the interests of her needy and greedy family. It appeared that even old Sir Giles, a not over-squeamish man, had hesitated to marry his fair young daughter to a man who had led so notorious a life as Lord Ambry. But the old viscount, who was not accustomed to be thwarted in his whims, had got such a hold on the estate that it depended on his good pleasure whether the Brancepeths should be sold up or not. And the property was to become hers outright, by settlement, on her marriage.

"But that would mean her brothers' benefit and not hers," added Luke. "And as Lord Ambry is mean as well as jealous, he would make up for this one free-handed act by cutting down her allowance."

It seemed a hard case for the girl, certainly. And when the two men took leave of each other a little later, Hubert said that Luke must pluck up heart and try to win her yet.

Luke, however, only smiled grimly and shook his head.

"I'm not good enough for her," he said. "But I'd like to see her the wife of a man who was."

They met again that evening, and by appointment walked up to Culverley Place together.

Harry was alone in the drawing-room when they entered, and she flushed with evident displeasure when she saw them enter together.

Luke Standen sighed. He knew her well enough

to be sure that it was he whom she considered *de trop.*

Hubert, who had never before seen Harry in evening dress, was struck by her splendid appearance. She wore a plainly-made gown of plum-coloured velvet, cut square back and front, with short puffed sleeves. It was a rather matronly garment for so young a girl, but it showed off her fair hair and white neck to brilliant advantage. She wore no ornaments but a tiny thread of a chain round her neck, on which hung a small, old-fashioned locket.

She shook hands graciously enough, but seemed worried and anxious.

"Papa's had a letter from Lord Ambry," she said quickly to Luke. "We are not to wait dinner, but he is coming."

And she threw a comprehensive glance, full of some unspeakable anxiety, over her own hands and arms. Luke took the first opportunity of explaining this glance to Hubert.

"He's given her some handsome jewelry," he whispered. "And he'll expect to see it. And it's all been borrowed—and pawned by her brothers!"

They were seated at dinner by this time, and Hubert, whose interest in the story of the young girl and her marriage was growing stronger, looked at Harry. It seemed to him that she looked as if she had over-exerted herself so soon after her convalescence, and that the talk seemed to confuse her and make her dizzy.

Going to marry old Lord Ambry! The idea was disgusting. Hubert had not known how repulsive

the thought was until that evening. He felt his heart go out suddenly to the motherless girl, brought up a hoyden by force of circumstances, who was so full of spirit and dash and daring, and yet who loved her father and her brothers so well that she took her own sacrifice of herself for their benefit as a matter of course.

Surely she was not well! It seemed to him that as she sat at the table she drooped and grew paler. And at that moment her large grey eyes met his, and her face broke into a very sweet, faint smile. It was a smile that went straight to his head, or his heart, and Hubert felt that, in the hot room, he shivered.

He glanced round at the rest. Nobody was taking any notice of her except himself. Even the faithful Luke, as much flushed and excited as the Brancepeth young men, was bowling out his opinion of the merits of a new light-weight boxer. Little Lady Maggie was occupied in gently begging her nephews not to drink too much, "as Lord Ambry was coming!" Hubert thought the addition of a reason significant.

Hubert was afraid that he was in for a long penance at the table after the departure of the ladies. The dining-room, with its flaring candles and its low ceiling, was intensely hot, and its occupants were very boisterous. He was much relieved, therefore, when in a very few moments Radley proposed that they should adjourn to the drawing-room to play *baccarat.*

It was evidently a favourite diversion with them, as the tables were arranged and the cloth spread in

a very short space of time. Then Athelstan and Quin might be seen wheedling their aunt for money to play with, while old Sir Giles gave some to his daughter, which she had to share with those two young men. Giles and Radley seemed to be better off, however; and Luke glanced at them out of his eyes in a peculiar manner which Hubert noted and wondered at.

Then they took their places, and the play began. For a long time things went smoothly enough, Giles being the banker. Hubert, who had thought they might be rather disagreeable people to play with, was delighted to find that he had done them an injustice.

At last, however, Giles declared that he had lost too much to go on, and suggested that Hubert should be banker instead. To this Harry, however, who had been sitting very quietly and saying nothing, strenuously objected. Her objections were overruled by her brothers, one of whom, Radley, told her to shut up and not make herself disagreeable.

Hubert, therefore, took over the bank, and the play began again.

Now he had had his suspicions excited, so that he watched the cloth very narrowly. And before many deals were over it became patent to him that some of the party were not playing fairly. He was not surprised; and although he was disgusted, he preferred being cheated to making a row about it. As soon as he was quite sure of what he had seen, therefore, he announced that he should only deal once more, very quietly, without mentioning any reason and without betraying anything by his manner.

But there was another pair of eyes on the watch, and the owner of these was not so reticent. Hubert was paying those who had won in the last deal, and drawing in the money of those who had lost. Passing from one to the other, as he took them in order as they sat, Hubert came to Radley.

"How much?"

"Sixteen shillings, please," answered Radley, pointing to the little pile in front of him.

There was a little cry, and Harry sprang up. Bringing her hand down sharply on the table, she cried—

"You are cheating! You have lost, and not won. You pushed it over the line."

There was consternation, a breathless pause, and then a hubbub. How dared she accuse him of such a thing! She ought to be ashamed of herself! What did she mean by it? Giles, who was of those who had sprung up, was seizing her roughly by the arm, when Hubert, suddenly interposing, struck his arm down.

"Take care, take care what you're doing! Remember her broken arm!" cried he in a low voice.

"How dare she accuse us of cheating?"

Lady Maggie was trying to soothe the excited girl, but it was of no use. Against the great mirror over the low mantle-piece, with its row of reflected candles, her tall, dark-gowned figure stood out boldly in a haze of light.

"I do," she repeated, clenching her hands, and facing boldly the frowns of her eldest brother. "I accuse Radley, and you too. I've watched you, and

you both said you'd won when you lost. Mr. Besils, you saw them cheat, didn't you? Tell them what I say is true."

Everybody turned quickly to Hubert, and both Giles and Radley lost countenance a little. But Hubert, rising very quickly from his chair, put the end of his cigarette carefully into an ash-tray which stood on a table behind him, and said so calmly as to deceive them all—

"Miss Brancepeth is mistaken, I am sure."

Everybody was relieved except Harry, who snatched up the pack of cards from the table and dashed them into the fire.

"I will not have you cheated under my father's roof," said she, steadily, flashing upon him her grey eyes in a look which stirred him to his heart's depths, "even if you are willing to be cheated!"

And, sweeping through the room with her head very erect, and refusing to touch Luke Standen's meekly offered hand as she passed him, she left the drawing-room.

There was no more baccarat that night.

Amidst a confused din of scrappy and irrelevant small talk they all adjourned to the billiard-room where Luke and Quin Brancepeth began to play, while the others made small bets and smoked.

As soon as he could, Hubert slipped away in search of Harry.

The billiard-room was part of a forty-year-old addition to the main building, and outside there ran a corridor from which one other room opened. Hubert saw that the door of this second apartment was ajar,

so he pushed it a little way and peeped in. A great, musty-smelling, bare room it looked in the faint light which came through the one large window from a stable-lamp outside. From two chandeliers there still hung faded festoons and roses of coloured paper, primitive and cheap decorations which told that this was the ball-room.

It was not quite deserted though. By the window, which she had thrown open, Harry was standing. It seemed to Hubert, as he came quickly towards her, that she swayed and staggered as she stood.

"May I come in? I have not frightened you, have I?" said he, very gently as he saw her start.

"Oh, no. I—I—I am tired," she said, rather snappishly.

And then, just in time to be caught by his ready arm, she turned giddy, and found her limbs give way under her.

"It seems to be always you," she said, putting her hand up to her head and trying to smile.

"When it ought always to be—somebody else?" he said in a whisper.

She trembled a little, but did not answer. And after a pause she said, sharply—

"Why didn't you back me up just now? You *know* that Giles and Radley were cheating!"

"What! And have a quarrel, a miserable, disgraceful row over cards, in your presence and Lady Maggie's?"

Harry was silent. Presently she said, "I hadn't thought of that. We're not used to chivalry here, you see. But still, you were wrong." And she

sprang erect again: "Will you go back with me now and confess you saw them cheat? It will make them ashamed of themselves and do them both good."

"No, I will not, Miss Brancepeth."

"And if I insist?"

"If you insist, I will go back with you, and I will say—just what I said before."

She walked away from him impatiently into the darkness.

"How obstinate you are!"

He said nothing. He was beginning to feel that he must keep a strong guard upon his tongue when in the presence of this girl, who was now exerting over him a fascination which he found it impossible to resist.

She came and stood in front of him again, close by the window, in the dim light of the lantern. Her face was full of excitement, and when she spoke, her voice was full of passionate earnestness—

"Go away," said she, suddenly, looking at him with strange intensity, and pressing her hands against her breast. "I want you to go away. I don't want you to come here any more; I don't want to see you any more. You come out of a world that I want to forget, where people are honest, and men are courteous, and women are kind. I don't want to remember anything about that world; I have to live in a different one. Say good-bye now, and promise never to speak to me again."

She held out her hand impulsively; and Hubert, thrilled by the touch, clasped her fingers in a strong,

warm grip. Words such as he had never spoken to a woman before, were coming to his stammering tongue, when a sharp, thin masculine voice, refined, cold, and imperious, made them both start.

"And where is Harrington?"

At the same moment the door of the room was thrown noisely open by one of the boys, who, first starting the echoes with a loud "view-halloo!" announced, in stentorian tones—

"Lord Ambry!"

CHAPTER XII.

At the first sound of her *fiancé's* voice Harry had sharply withdrawn her hand from Hubert's grasp.

Quin, who was ushering him into the dark ball-room, cried out, with the delicate tact of seventeen—

"Here she is, Lord Ambry. She's afraid of the dark, so she's got Mr. Besils with her to frighten away the bogies."

"Idiot!" said his sister, as she ran forward and held out her hand. "Even bogies are shy of a place with you boys in it. Mr. Besils came in to shut the window for me."

They were all by this time in the wide passage outside, which was carpeted with cocoa-nut matting, lighted by several hall-lamps hung from the ceiling, and furnished with wicker chairs upholstered in striped-grass matting.

"Shutting the window!" echoed Lord Ambry, who was a small, slight, well-preserved man, with an aqui-

line face, which was very withered, lined, and dry, a moustache which was dyed a pleasing shade of brown, and a suspicion of pink on his cheeks which was probably not there until he had made his morning toilet. He had the good sense not to wear a wig, but his carefully dyed hair, grown long and plastered down in an artistic fashion over the crown, emphasised, rather than concealed, his baldness. The cut of his clothes was rather youthful, but his voice from time to time betrayed his full age, which was between sixty and seventy. "Rather rash, was it not, my dear, to sit by an open window on a cold night like this, when you are hardly strong again yet after your accident?"

And as he took her offered hand in his he drew her gently towards him and kissed her cheek.

Hubert felt that he should have liked to strangle the man. He was sufficiently keen of perception to know that there was an implied triumph over himself in the kiss. Lord Ambry must have heard of the share Hubert Besils had had in the occurrences of the night of Harry's accident, and he was jealous of the younger man.

"Oh," replied Harry, who had been passive, but not responsive, to the caress, "the rooms were so hot, and it was only for a moment. Let me introduce Mr. Besils; you know he saved my life and set my arm," she went on, rather hurriedly. And, without raising her eyes to Hubert's face, she turned towards him and said, "Mr. Besils—Lord Ambry."

The two men bowed, but neither offered his hand. And Lord Ambry, although he was obliged to thank

the person who had saved the life of his chosen wife, he did so in such a ceremonious manner as to be hardly civil. He then offered Harry his arm, and led her back through the narrow passage into the hall of the main building, and thence into the drawing-room. And, with the reasonable excuse that he had not seen her for a long time, and that he had been detained so that he could only have an hour in her society, Lord Ambry monopolised Harry for the remainder of the evening. When Hubert took his leave he was prevented, by Lord Ambry's manœuvring, from exchanging a few words alone with Harry. He felt irritated, disappointed, angry, not understanding a peculiar look which the girl had given him as he shook hands.

When, therefore, he had entered the Vicarage garden, after bidding good-night to Luke Standen, who had left him at his gate, he was rather startled, therefore, to hear a long, low whistle from the orchard behind the house. He stopped and listened. The whistle was repeated twice. Deciding that this must be a burglar's signal, Hubert let himself into the house with his key, provided himself with a thick walking-stick, and went out again in the direction from whence he supposed the signal had come.

Yes, there was certainly some one on the other side of the hedge—some one whom, to judge by the cracking of the twigs, must be getting impatient and trying to effect an entrance. So he approached stealthily, and was in the act of raising his stick to bring it down on the intruder's head, when Harry sprang erect behind the hedge, whispering—

"Stop! It's me!"

"I might have known it!" murmured Hubert, despairingly, as he dropped his arm.

"Yes," rejoined the young lady, imperturbably; "whenever there's any mischief abroad, you might be quite sure one of us is at the bottom of it. Why, you ungrateful wretch, you ought to be thanking your stars that I'm not *in*side!"

Hubert, who was in a strange tumult of feeling, tried to speak harshly, though in his heart he was yearning for another touch of the hand that had held his in such a warm clasp a couple of hours ago.

"What are you thinking about, to face such risks as you do? Isn't Lord Ambry still at the place?"

"Oh, yes; he's staying all night. Ugh! Don't let's talk about him!"

"But that's just what we must do. You must talk about him, and you must think about him. You can't shuffle that off until you're married——"

Harry thrust out her left hand menacingly.

"That's just what I intend to do, and it's of no use, as you know, to try to make me do anything but what I choose."

"You forget," said Hubert, who was getting indiscreet in his turn under the influence of her presence, "that I succeeded—once in making you do what I chose."

"You mean," replied Harry, in a gentle voice, "on the night I broke my arm?"

"Yes. You wouldn't do this and you wouldn't do that. You wouldn't take the brandy and you wouldn't let me help you. But you had to give in,

and be obedient and submissive, just like a little child."

There was a short pause. He heard the cracking of the little twigs in her fingers.

Then she said, softly and without apparent displeasure, "Yes, so you did. You made me do just what you chose then. But do you go so far as to think you could always?"

Hubert did not immediately answer. The girl's young voice, with its new modulations of feeling, had a charm which intoxicated him. He had to restrain himself, to think, to pause, before every word. At last he said, quite harshly—

"If I could, I would make you run indoors now as fast as you could, and make up your mind never to do any more such foolish things again as long as you lived."

"What foolish things? Coming out here to-night?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well, if you don't want to talk to me, go indoors."

Much against his will, Hubert had to laugh. She was delighted.

"There," she cried, "you pretend you want to get rid of me, and all the while you don't. You are not honest, Mr. Besils."

"I am honest when I tell you that it is terrible to me to see a charming young girl taking no more thought than you do for her reputation."

It went much against the grain with Hubert to have to say this, but as she had moments of docility this evening, he cherished a hope that his words

might have some effect. He had not guessed, however, how strong the effect would be.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the answer came like a whirlwind—

"Reputation! What does my reputation matter now that I am going to marry that man? As long as he doesn't know, I don't care what I do; and when I am once married to him I shall care less. You don't think I am marrying him because I *like* him, do you?"

"Then you ought not to marry him. The very prospect is doing you harm already. It is awful—to hear you talk like this!"

For answer she laughed scornfully.

"Why, how would you expect an odious girl to talk but in an odious way?" she asked, mockingly. "Have you forgotten what you called me, how you treated me, when you first came? How you said I was cowardly, odious—I heard you say it to your sister—and how you boxed my ears?"

In truth, he had forgotten it very thoroughly. This taunt made him pause. He perceived suddenly that the change was not only in his own feelings; it was in the girl herself. The hoyden had been the outer case; there was a warm, fresh girlish heart underneath, which circumstances had laid bare to him. As he did not answer, the girl herself went on, after a short pause, in a gentle tone—

"Never mind. I deserved it, of course. You may box my ears again if you like—now."

"You—you deserve it," said Hubert, in a low voice, not very steadily, "for—for coming out here."

"But I wanted to see you, and Lord Ambry doesn't approve of you, and wishes me to 'drop the acquaintance.' He says so. So, if you want to see me at all, you must just see me when I have the opportunity, when he doesn't know anything about it."

"Then, Miss Brancepeth, I have no choice but not to see you at all."

"Do you mean that?"

"Certainly. You are going to marry Lord Ambry; therefore he has the right to forbid any acquaintance for you that he disapproves."

"Luke Standen is not so particular. He is going to see me just the same." There was a pause, and then she went on, in a hurt tone, "Of course, then, since you don't wish to know me any longer——"

"I did not say that."

"Well, since you will not know me any longer, you will not be interested to hear that I am in a terrible difficulty."

"What is it?"

"Lord Ambry gave me some jewelry in the summer, and he says I'm to wear it at the Infirmary Ball."

"Well?"

"Well, well, I can't. I haven't got it."

"Tell him so, then."

"I daren't."

"Where is it?" asked Hubert, who knew already.

"It's been *pawned*," said Harry, in a whisper.

"By your brothers. Tell them they must get it back for you."

"But they can't. You might as well ask a ragpicker for a bagful of diamonds."

"Well, shall I?"

"Oh, would you? I can pay you back as soon as I am married, you know."

"You will have to get me the—the documents, you know."

"You mean the tickets? I will. I'll pick Giles's pockets. It's no use asking him; he'd put me off and sell them for a little more money."

"And now you must go back home. And, mind, you are never to do anything like this again."

"All right. But how am I to give you—the documents? While Lord Ambry's staying here—and he'll be here till after the ball—I shan't be allowed to see you, I'm quite sure."

"There's the penny post."

"Quite true. And I can just write. I can't spell, though. You won't mind that?"

"I'll look over it. Good-night."

"Good-night."

She held out her hand, and he was shocked to find how cold it was.

He prophesied that she would have a bad cold on the following day; and, indeed, as she answered him her teeth began to chatter and her body to shake. She had come out through the thick grass of the orchards in her thin kid shoes, with only a little silk shawl wrapped round her shoulders.

Yet she did not hurry indoors now as she ought to have done, but went slowly, dragging her feet unwillingly after her, and stopping from time to time to look back over her shoulder into the darkness of the Vicarage garden. And as she drew near to the

old walls of Culverley Place, and vaulted over the railings on to the lawn, she shuddered, not with the cold, but with a new feeling of distaste and disgust, as she glanced up at the windows of the spare room.

A wilful, spoilt creature she was, this victim of neglect and improper training. But there was no wickedness in her; with a heart as free and a mind as innocent as a child's, she had accepted as a matter of course the husband who could avert the family ruin. And it was not until the first faint stirrings of an emotion she did not understand made themselves felt in her breast that the thought of her future husband moved her with a sudden, strong sense of repulsion, and she realised that she was to make a sacrifice.

As for Hubert, he was neither so young nor so guileless as the girl, and he could not disguise the change which had taken place in his feelings towards her. He knew that he was in love with this wilful, wild little person, and he told himself plainly that if she had been free he should have been compelled to experience a great struggle between his heart and his mind. For, however easy it might be to persuade oneself that a woman may be moulded by the hand of affection, it was certain that that hand would find it impossible to mould the woman's brothers; and the young Brancepeths might be reckoned upon not to spare either the purse, the credit, or the feelings of a rich brother-in-law.

On the whole, Hubert, while he felt that his heart yearned to the impulsive young girl, told himself that he was glad the temptation to marry her was

out of his reach. And yet—and yet—— He smoked a great many cigars before he could compose himself for sleep that night.

It was on the following morning that the Vicar, who had just gone into his study after breakfast to make some notes for his Sunday's sermon, was startled by a thundering knock at the front door, such a knock as threatened to bring that rather frail and unpretending structure down into the hall.

But the start he gave was nothing to the bound with which he sprang up in his chair when Edith, his third daughter, came in to announce, with an expression of mild horror on her fair, freckled face, that Athelstan Brancepeth, the especial black sheep of the Vicar's aversion, wanted to see him.

"Wants to see me!" echoed Mr. Griffith, who was a tall, thin man with a perpetual stoop, and a look in his eyes as of a man who saw in every envelope a bill, and in every visitor a collector of taxes.

"Yes, papa, he said so," answered his daughter, as if herself doubting whether she had heard aright.

"Oh—oh—oh, well, let him come in," said the Vicar, with a worried frown.

It was the first time that a Brancepeth had called upon him, and such a visit seemed portentous.

When, however, the dreaded visitor made his appearance in the study, it was with a manner so different from that which his loud knock had prepared Mr. Griffith for, that the Vicar looked at him in uneasy amazement. Was this one of the dashing, the devil-may-care Brancepeths, this tall, shy, blushing young man, who hung his head more like a school-

boy sent up to be caned than a full-grown morning caller?

He did not offer to shake hands, but flung himself at once into the subject of his visit.

"I've come, Mr. Griffith, to say I'm sorry I hurt your pear-tree, and I've come to pay the damage."

And he thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out a handful of money.

The Vicar sighed. The sight of money always made him want to sigh. It was such a welcome object, and it disappeared so quickly.

"The pears belonged to one of my daughters," said he, stiffly.

"Oh, I know," interrupted Athelstan. "To Miss K-Kathleen. She would have sold them for her pocket-money. How much would it have been?"

"She expected to make about two pounds," answered the Vicar, severely.

"I've got it!" cried Athelstan, triumphantly, as he put down a sovereign on the writing-table and began to count out his silver. "I've got it. There it is exactly."

It left him with one and fourpence, which he put back in his pocket, as he looked up at the Vicar with a countenance which even that austere gentleman thought open and prepossessing in its frank enjoyment. He even hesitated a moment before quenching the young fellow's honest delight.

"I am sorry to have to put such a question, but I am compelled to ask you how you got this money? Whether it was by betting, or gambling, I mean?"

"It was at baccarat last night," answered Athelstan.

"It isn't often that I have luck to win, but I did for once, in a way."

"Then I'm sorry that I cannot take the money."

Athelstan grew hot and crimson. He stared, he stammered; he was miserable, ashamed, indignant, all at once.

"I played fair," said he, shortly. "I did, word of honour. I always do. Ask any of them, and they'll tell you so. Ask Mr. Besils, who saw all the row——"

He stopped short suddenly, perceiving by the change in the Vicar's expression that he was telling more than that gentleman knew. But the Vicar was not surprised.

"The row!" he repeated, with dignity. "You must see, Mr. Brancepeth, that it would not do for me, a clergyman, to take money which had been won by gambling in such——"

He was about to add "in such a house as yours," but checked himself in time. Athelstan stood trying to dig holes in his boot with the end of his hunting-crop, dumb with emotions which were salutary but not pleasant. There was a short silence, during which the Vicar looked at him with some gentle surprise and satisfaction at finding some signs of grace in a Brancepeth. Then Athelstan jerked his head up suddenly.

"May she take the money," asked he, with an earnestness which was rather touching, "if I sell some of my things to get it?" As the Vicar hesitated, the young man pressed the point with still more fervour. "You know, Mr. Griffith, you yourself read something about the sinner that repenteth,

don't you? Well, you ought to give the sinner the chance of showing his repentance, oughtn't you?"

A little smile, promising for Athelstan, began to quiver round the Vicar's drawn mouth. At last he said, magisterially—

"Mind, it must be real repentance, not sham. You must bring the money to me, not to my daughter; and you must not make it a pretext for communicating with her. For that I forbid."

The conditions were rather hard, certainly; but Athelstan accepted them even with eagerness. He said, with the simplicity and straightforwardness which he had shown throughout the interview—

"I want her to have her money, anyhow. I'm awfully ashamed of what I did, and I'm very much obliged to you for letting me make some amends."

He rode straight into Fernsham, and sold his watch and his breast-pin; and he left the money at Mr. Griffith's house in an envelope on his way back. And he spent the rest of the day in certain unaccustomed reflections on the inconvenience it entailed to have a standard of morals and conduct so different to that accepted by the world outside Culverley Place. Athelstan was as rough, as reckless, and as thriftless as his brothers, but he had some good points which they had not, and among these was a rudimentary conscience, which had pricked him more severely than of yore since he had felt the barriers which the conduct of himself and his family placed between him and the Vicar's pretty daughter Kathleen.

He saw her that very afternoon; but she was dis-

creet, and kept her head in the opposite direction until all fear of a meeting of eyes between her and Athelstan was passed. He felt hardly used, but still he cherished enough interest in the cruel fair one to experience intense excitement when, on the following day, he saw her in Fernsham shopping with two of her sisters.

It was not too much to hope for that she was spending his money. She certainly looked radiant, and prettier than he had ever seen her look before. He could not tear himself from the town, although his business in it was done, while she remained. So he gave his horse into the charge of a boy, and hovered about the shop-windows until he saw the three girls, who were by no means so ignorant of his proximity as they pretended to be, enter the principal draper's shop in the town.

He felt conscious that he was making himself ridiculous by flattening his nose against the panes of a large window full of tarlatan skirts, feather boas, and festoons of ribbon; but he did not care. He must know what Kathleen had been buying.

By the time the three girls were inside he thought they must be buying the entire stock. He would have thought they must have slipped out by some side door unknown to the unenlightened male if he had not managed from time to time to get a peep at the three heads, all bending together over the treasures which the shopman was displaying.

The lamps were all alight when they at last came out: and then, whether by accident or design he did not dare to think, Kathleen lagged for a moment

behind her sisters. It was not difficult for Athelstan, under cover of the darkness, to stoop suddenly until his head was on the same level as hers.

"What have you been buying?" he asked, in an excited, peremptory whisper.

"Muslin," replied she as briefly as possible, in the same low tone.

But then she unbent just so far as to throw at him one quick glance, full of gratitude and pleasure and modest, maidenly good will.

Then he grew bold, and snatching her hand, squeezed the poor little fingers up in a bear's grip.

"I shall come to church on Sunday," he whispered.

But she shot at him a glance of demure horror and surprise and ran after her sisters, who had not once turned round to look for her.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE end of the week before that of the Infirmary Ball had come, and yet Hubert had received no communication from Harry.

Although he told himself a hundred times a day that he was very glad, as it relieved him from an awkward complication, he knew in his heart of hearts that he was nothing of the kind. He thought of very little else but that girl, and when he met her out riding with Lord Ambry, and saw how dutifully she kept her head turned away from him, he began to be sorry that she had been so docile to his own

teaching. He had told her that she ought to cut those acquaintances whom Lord Ambry disapproved of, and she had retorted by making him the first victim.

It was astonishing how dull the place had become, and yet he found himself by no means anxious for the arrival of his sister, who had promised to return in time to take Kathleen to the ball.

And then he heard in the village that Lord Ambry had been called away suddenly for a few days, and that he would not return until the night of the ball.

Hubert walked back towards the Vicarage with a lighter heart when he had heard this, for he had an instinct that he should meet Harry before long. And as she was sure to be on horseback, he ordered the brown mare to be saddled and brought round. This was his real reason, but he did not own it to himself. On the contrary, when Harry rode by alone, while he was putting on his gloves at the gate, he turned his head away, affecting to think she would cut him as usual.

He heard her horse stop.

"I'm going a long way to-day," he heard her say, in a voice so low as to be almost a whisper. "Right down to the sea by Sandhythe. I shall be all by myself unless——"

He had turned to her by this time and met her eyes.

He raised his hat in a distant manner.

"Oh, of course," said she, as she touched her horse with her whip and looked steadily at his ears, "I am not afraid of riding by myself."

She did not wait for a reply, but rode away. Hubert was touched to the quick by the paleness of her cheeks, the sadness in her eyes. When the mare was brought round, he debated with himself whether he should accept her implied invitation and follow her "down to the sea by Sandhythe." He knew he had better not; but the temptation was too strong for him.

Perhaps piqued that he had not accepted her offer more promptly, the young lady, who had a good start, took a road he did not know; and it was not until he had gone six or seven miles, and had reached the flat, dreary sea-shore, with its fringe of mud, that he saw Harry a little way in front of him, resting in her saddle, looking out at the grey water.

"Why didn't you wait for me?" asked he, as he came out.

"Because I thought you didn't want to come."

"Did you think that, honestly?"

No answer. It suddenly struck her as very strange that he and she should be side by side, silent, as if they were old friends.

"Why don't you talk?" said she. "You ought to talk to me. You haven't known me long enough to be silent."

"I spoke last. I asked you a question and you did not answer. I'll ask you another. Aren't you cold standing here in this windy place?"

She shook her reins and rode on a little way, pointing with her whip to a little tumbledown structure which looked only like some sort of excrescence on the colourless mud.

"Do you see that hut?" she said. "I passed it coming along, and I am going to ask the old dame who was hanging out her washing outside whether she'll give me a cup of tea. You may come, too, if you like, and pay for it. For of course I haven't any money. But you shall have that back, too, when I'm Lady Ambry."

What a difference there was in the girl's manner of alluding to her marriage! She spoke now with decision, like a much older woman. Hubert, who was astonished to find the effect her presence had upon him after the two weeks of separation, wondered what the girl's thoughts had been during her *fiancé's* stay. He made up his mind to ask her.

But at that moment they arrived at their destination, which proved to be a small lonely cottage, in front of which was placed a board, supported on two barrels, displaying half a dozen stone bottles of ginger-beer and a bottle of sweets. The proprietress of this emporium was at her door, tying on a rusty bonnet. She looked at her would-be customers with annoyance rather than with welcome.

"An' I was just a-goin' into the town to get a few things in," she grumbled, the rough, unpleasant Kentish accent sounding very strongly in her words. "But there, that's always the way."

Hubert would have gone on in search of some more hospitable roof, but Harry was obstinately bent on punishing the woman for her discourtesy. So she dismounted and entered the cottage, while Hubert tied the horses up in a shed on the opposite side of the road, where a dozen fowls were running about.

When he, in his turn, entered the cottage, he found Harry already seated in a broken-down horsehair-covered arm-chair by the fire, warming her hands. The room, which was tiled and uncarpeted, except for a rug on the hearth, was evidently kitchen and living-room as well. It was barely furnished, but was clean and homely. The old woman having gone away, grumbling, to fill the kettle, Harry shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

"We shall have hard work entertaining our good hostess," she said. "But I mean to succeed. By the time we leave her she shall love me!"

The old woman, however, avoided her blandishments in an unexpected manner. When she re-entered the room she had a shawl round her shoulders. Placing the kettle on the fire, she went straight to the front door, opened it, and, standing half in and half outside, addressed her unwelcome guests thus:

"You'll find tea and sugar and all you want in the cupboard yonder." And she nodded towards the corner behind Harry. "So now you've got all you want. My old man will be back from the fields in a minute or two, and you can give him a shilling for the tea. And mind, if the door opens, to keep the fowls out."

And without any more ceremonious leave-taking she slammed the door and started to do her errands in the town, leaving them in sole possession.

Hubert and Harry stared at each other in amazement.

"The old girl's not a bad sort, after all, to trust strangers like that!" said Hubert.

"It's evident the Brancepeths are not known about here," was Harry's comment.

Then they sat by the fire and watched the kettle in silence.

At last the girl broke out into a little cry of pleasure.

"Are you enjoying this queer picnic as much as I am?" she suddenly asked.

"Quite."

"No, you're not. You can't be. Because you aren't going to have to marry some one you don't like."

She had all in one breath past from hilarity to seriousness. Hubert answered without looking up.

"You have changed your tone, I think, since we last discussed the subject?"

Harry glanced at him quickly, with a little blush rising in her face.

"Perhaps I have. I don't know. I don't remember. I'm sure I never said I liked him."

"No. But—I don't think you spoke quite so strongly."

She sprang up, threw open the cupboard in the corner, and got out two cups and saucers. Then there was a hunt for the tea and sugar, which were discovered at last in stone salt-jars, which she placed on the table. Hubert watched her anxious and unaccustomed movements as she insisted on handling the heavy kettle by herself, and he was tenderly amused to see how well the occupation became the amazon.

"Why," said he, as he took his cup from her

hands, "you said you didn't believe in love in a cottage, and yet——"

He stopped short, for something in his words had made her start and tremble. When she spoke, it was in a low voice, and in a quiet, dreamy tone.

"I didn't know anything about cottages, that was what I said."

"Nor about love? You said you knew nothing about that, either."

She said nothing to this, but sat down in her rickety chair and sipped her tea. The clock ticked on, very loud in the silence. The sound of the waves rolling in as the tide came up could be heard, and the whistling of the wind round the cottage. It was so dark now outside that that part of her face which was not in the red glow of the fire was in black shadow. Hubert, by an impulse he could not resist, called her softly by her nickname—

"Harry!"

She did not look up at him, but he saw a shiver pass over her, and a faint smile come into her face.

"Harry!" he called again. Still she would not look at him. So he slid down from his seat on to his knees, and looked up into her face. "Wouldn't you like to know something about love, Harry?"

The tears sprang to her eyes. It was with an abrupt change to her old impatience and recklessness that she cried, "You always try to make me cry!"

She thrust out her hand to repulse him, but when he seized it, she let her fingers rest in his without a struggle.

"Look here, child," he went on, in a voice which

made her tremble, thrilled by his passionate tenderness, "it is not too late. If there were the slightest chance that you could be happy with that man, God knows I would cut off my right hand rather than speak to you like this! But there is not. You are being sold, bought and sold, without a voice in the horrible bargain."

"You mustn't say that. You mustn't say that. I have given my word," whispered she, in a paroxysm of fear, as again she tried to push him away.

"You gave it without knowing what you were doing. Without understanding that there might be some things, the most precious things to a pure, good woman, that you were losing beyond recall. Harry, you say you have been thinking during this last fortnight. Tell me, child, what have you been thinking about?"

"Oh, I can't, I can't. I have been miserable."

"Because of your approaching marriage?"

A shudder was her answer.

"And, Harry"—his voice was in her ear—"would you have been so miserable—if you had been going to marry—me?"

She suddenly broke away from him and stood erect.

"No!" she cried, passionately. "You ought not to ask me. You *know* I shouldn't."

"Then marry me, Harry. They will let you. I am rich, too. And I love you with all my soul!"

But the girl shook her head.

"If you were not rich, or if I didn't care for you," she answered, softly, "I would marry you to-morrow.

Even if I didn't love you, I would a million times rather have you for my husband than—than *him!* But just because I do care for you, very, very much, I will not be your wife, and give you my brothers for your brothers-in-law! So now you are answered, and you must not speak to me about it any more. Come, get the horses, and let us be off home!"

Love had endowed the hoyden with dignity as well as gentleness. Hubert obeyed her without a word, helped her into her saddle with just one look as her foot rested for an instant in his hand; then they began their ride home across the flat, windy marshes, with something in their hearts which made them insensible to the cold blast and to the drizzling rain which had begun to fall.

CHAPTER XIV.

THERE was an excitement, an exhilaration about this long ride home to Culverley which stirred the blood of both Hubert Besils and Harry, as, with their faces to the cutting wind, they galloped over the flat waste of barren, sandy sea-shore, with the salt spray on their cheeks and in their hair.

Both knew that this ride together was a contraband pleasure, and one they were not likely to enjoy again. For Harry's answer to her lover's pleading had not been the "No" of the hesitating maiden who means "Yes"; and Hubert, while he felt his heart leap up at her simple confession of love for himself,

knew that the girl's masculine training had given her at least a strength and decision of character which almost forbade him to hope to change her mind.

Still, it was not in his nature to fail to make the attempt.

"Harry," said he, putting his hand lightly on her rein, when they had left the sandy heath for the road, and had let their horses gallop subside into a trot, "do you think I'm going to take such an answer as that, eh?"

She was silent.

"You say you don't care for Ambry; you do care for me! Then why on earth won't you have me? If I will take you, brothers and all, isn't that my lookout?"

"Not more than it is mine. There are plenty of bad things about the Brancepeths, but there are some good ones, too. I am too proud to do some things."

"What things?"

"Why do you ask me to tell you what you know? That if you were to marry me you would never have any peace; that you would be worried every day and all day long with appeals from my impecunious brothers. How should I feel, knowing what was going on? And how should I like to know that your sister was going about telling everybody what a dreadful marriage you had made, and how greatly you were to be pitied!"

"Well, but won't all these tragic things happen just the same if you marry Ambry?"

She turned round quickly, with such a tender look in her childlike grey eyes that Hubert felt the blood

rush to his head, and a passionate longing to hold her in his arms seized him.

"Ah!" she said in a low voice, "I can bear that, though, because I don't care for him. It would break my heart to think that I had brought misery and wretchedness upon *you!*"

"My darling!" The words escaped from his lips against his will, as he took her hand in his own and pressed his lips to the little bit of bare wrist he could find under the cuff of her habit.

She did not try to withdraw her hand, but sighing, she said—

"This is the last time you may say that to me. Lord Ambry has heard something, and he is jealous of you. I am not even to dance with you at the ball next week."

"By-the-bye, what about the jewelry? Have you got the—the documents?"

She laughed and blushed, put her hand to her watch-pocket, and took it away again.

"I am ashamed——" she whispered.

"I'll hold out my hand, then, and look the other way. And you shall put your hand out, also looking the other way. And so——"

"And so we shall both ride into the ditch," added Harry.

"Never mind. We shall have spared our feelings; and, by the time we get home, a little mud more or less won't matter. Come, I'm looking away, and I'm waiting."

Laughing again, Harry handed the folded envelope she was carrying.

"It's all right. I didn't see; I give you my word," said he, as he put the envelope into his pocket-book. "And now, how am I to give you these things back, if I am not to see you?"

"Oh, you'll find some way," said Harry, confidently. "And mind, it will be of no use to send them, because Giles or Radley would get hold of them again, and they would never reach me at all then."

"But don't they understand what that is?" said Hubert, impatiently. "It's theft."

"They don't care what it is so long as they get the money," said Harry, sagely. "Lord Ambry has promised to give me a necklace worth three thousand pounds for a Christmas present; one that belonged to his first wife, I think. And he told me about it when the boys were there: wasn't it silly? I saw Radley look at Giles directly. He's going to bring it when he comes to the ball. And of course," she added philosophically, "I shall not be allowed to take it home."

Hubert made no comment aloud. Harry, after a short silence, said, gently—

"You see I was right. You will be very glad some day that I wouldn't marry you, even if you are not now." He had begun to protest, when she cut him short by striking the brown mare he rode with her whip. "Come, ride on, instead of perjuring thyself!" she cried, gaily. "Don't let's pretend we're going to be miserable for the rest of our lives just because I have sense enough to stop you from indulging in a foolish caprice. You see I can look at the matter soberly, even if you can't."

And so she allowed him neither protest nor prayer, but gave him hard work to keep up with her until they arrived, mud-splashed, heated, and still full of intense excitement which gave them no rumours yet for the aching pain of separation, at the village of Culverley.

Harry pulled up her horse before they reached the gates of the Place and held out her hand.

"Good-bye," was all she said.

But there was in her face so much sweetness, in her voice and in the touch of her ungloved hand so much feeling, that Hubert was seized with a desire more passionate than ever to make this girl his wife, with all the obstacles to their happiness which he saw himself as plainly as she did.

The Infirmary Ball was a great event in the quiet neighbourhood, and most of the young girls were building fairy erections of romance and of pleasure about that most glorious evening of the year. Athelstan, when he passed Mr. Griffith's house, could see, by craning his neck a little, the billows of white muslin which rose on the dining-room table day after day, and he wished that he could find another excuse for a call.

Unluckily for him, however, the relations between Culverley Place and the Vicar's were always too strained for any attention of this sort to pass without comment. But he was determined to have a few words with Kathleen before the night of the ball; and, as he found it impossible to penetrate the body-guard of sisters who surrounded her on her way to and from church on Sunday, he waited for

her one evening at the church-porch, when the children were going in for choir-practice.

For it was Kathleen who trained the choir.

She came up so quietly, and hurried into the building so fast, that he had only time to raise his hat without saying a single word. But he followed her in, and took a seat in the unlighted part of the church without exciting any remark, without, indeed, having his presence noted except by Kathleen, whose voice betrayed that she was nervous and uncomfortable when she began her address to the choir.

"Now I am very sorry to say," she began, as she took her seat at the organ, "that we shall have to give up the anthem for Christmas, because we can't get a bass. John Tustain's son has had to give it up, for the doctor says he mustn't go out again at night for another month, and we can't practise in the daytime, because none of you can come then."

There was a chorus of lamentations. At Middleforth they were going to do an anthem, and Culverley didn't like being "cut out" by its little neighbour.

Wasn't there anybody they could get to fill John Tustain's place?

Kathleen was just assuring them, with as much regret as they could express themselves, that there was nobody available, when a loud, clanking step on the stone floor made her look up with a loudly beating heart.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Griffith," said a gruff voice, which made all the members of the choir look

round in a startled manner, "but I've got a bass voice. If I could be any good, and if it wouldn't be too hard to knock it into me, I'd sing the bass part."

Poor Kathleen was filled, not with gratitude, but with consternation. She knew very well that the Vicar would rather have no music at all in the church than let one of the Brancepeths sing in the choir. But how to intimate this without seeming ungracious, if not absolutely rude?

The choir, to a child, recognised her difficulty, and began to shuffle about and to titter.

"Really," said the confused girl at last, with just one glance at his face, which, for no reason that she could understand, caused her to blush crimson, "it is very good of you, Mr. Brancepeth. But I'm afraid you don't understand what a long time it takes to get up anything of the sort properly. It would be too much of a tax to come as often as we should have to practise."

But the obtuse creature persisted.

"Oh, I don't mind how often I come," said he.

Kathleen could not make any more objections in the presence of the choir, of whose nods and winks she was already painfully conscious. There was nothing to do but to let him stay, and then to "choke him off" privately when the others had gone —a most unpleasant process, which she dreaded.

She therefore asked him, in a rather formal manner, if he would mind waiting until they had gone through the Psalms for the following Sunday. He retreated to his old place with docility, but promptly came up again when the Psalms were over.

Now, Athelstan, whose knowledge of music was of the slenderest possible kind, had been gifted by nature with an excellent voice and a correct ear. Whether through natural aptitude or devotion to his teacher, too, he proved remarkably amenable to instruction; with the surprising and perplexing result that the anthem went much better with him at the end of an hour than it had done with John Tustain's son after three weeks' work. Kathleen, against her will, was charmed with the result of her work on her big, docile pupil, and she found herself bullying him with real artistic enjoyment.

Then, when the soprano, who was the village school-mistress, asked if she might go, Kathleen found herself plunged into a worse difficulty than she had expected. Everybody was delighted with the evening's work, especially poor Athelstan, who was openly radiant at the compliments his fellow-singers shyly paid him. How was she to tell him that he wouldn't do, when he had just proved triumphantly that he would?

She dismissed the choir with nervous haste and shut the organ.

Athelstan stayed.

He could not offer to help her, because her movements were so disconcertingly rapid; but when she said "good-night," turned out the gas, and fled out of the church, all without taking breath, anxious to get the dreaded meeting over in the open air, where she could not be hemmed in and held at bay, he was by her side when she got outside the porch.

"I hope I didn't give you much trouble," he began, meekly.

Kathleen let her bundle of books slip in her embarrassment and nervousness.

"I'll carry those things," said he.

And he had the whole pile under his arm before she could do more than make the faintest attempt at remonstrance.

They were going down the steep, uneven path between the yew-trees through the church-yard. Going at a rapid pace, and unable, in the dusk, to take sufficient care where she stepped, Kathleen stumbled against a stone. Athelstan put his arm through hers.

"Let me help you down."

It frightened her to find her own arm trembling at his touch. This, of course, was another result of nervousness merely. They went in silence to the gate, which he opened. Once on the other side of it, she disengaged herself with a "thank you," which sounded as cold as if he had offended her.

"I must tell you now," said Kathleen, gathering all her courage for this desperate strait, "about the choir. Papa does not—would not let anyone not belonging to the village sing in the anthem."

"But I do belong to the village!" said Athelstan.

"Oh, no, that's not the same thing. You are not one of the villagers. It's hard to get his permission to sing anthems at all; he says it's playing with the church to get up such things. And I know quite well that if I tell him you are going to take the bass

for us he will say you do it just for fun, and that it must be given up."

"Very well," said Athelstan, submissively. "Of course, if you insist on chucking me out, I must go."

"It is not I, Mr. Brancepeth. You sing beautifully, and you would have made the anthem go splendidly, I know. I am very, very sorry that we can't keep you."

"Oh, all right. Should I be any use if I came and sat with the choir on Sundays?"

"Oh, no. Papa——" began Kathleen, hastily. And then she stopped.

"I suppose papa thinks there's something profane in the sound of a Brancepeth's voice!" exclaimed Athelstan, with at last a little wounded feeling in his tone.

"Oh, how absurd!" said Kathleen.

But she hardly spoke as if she thought so.

They walked on a little way, Kathleen hoping no one would see them together, not wishing to send him away, and yet feeling guilty in the pleasure she felt in his presence.

"You are going to the ball, aren't you?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Yes. Oh, yes. Oh, thank you!"

There was a world of smothered gratitude in the answer.

"You—you'll give me just one dance, one waltz, won't you? Just to show we've—it's all made up?"

He heard a sort of smothered sob.

"Oh, I should like to—but I mustn't."

"You mustn't!" echoed Athelstan. And his tone

was no longer meek. "What do you mean by 'you mustn't'? What's to prevent you if you want to?"

The girl held out her hand for her books.

"Mr. Brancepeth, why do you ask me? Why do you speak to me? You know what papa said to you; he told me what he said. Well, it is he who says I mustn't dance with you. It's only on condition that I promise not to that I'm allowed to go."

She hurried out this confession in such a tone of distress that, if Athelstan had not been too much occupied with his own feelings to be observant, he must have been flattered by this salve to his vanity. As it was, however, he was thrown into a transport of rage by her avowal.

"You're only allowed to go on condition you don't dance with me!" he almost shouted. And the young girl, while horribly frightened by the violence of his tone, thought what a nice voice he had, and how he made it ring out in his anger till it seemed to vibrate in her own heart. "I never heard of such a thing! It's a piece of confounded cheek, a bit of narrow-minded parson's intolerance, to dare to say such a thing! What have I done that I am not fit to dance with a girl? It's infamous! That's what it is—infamous! I only wish we were back in the times when the parsons could be made to know their proper place, and could be flogged back to their pulpits when they dared to interfere with affairs which were no business of theirs!"

But it was Kathleen's turn to be angry at this insult to her father.

"You can scarcely say that his daughters are not

papa's affairs, Mr. Brancepeth. Whatever you think, I should never dream of disputing his authority over me. And I shall most certainly not dance with anyone he disapproves of."

"Why does he 'disapprove of me'? Answer that. I don't say I'm as well behaved as a parson; but what have I done that I should be treated as if I were not fit to speak to you? Is he as particular about all the fellows you dance with? Because, if he's consistent, he ought to be!"

"It's dreadfully bad taste of you to talk like that about 'parsons' to me!" cried Kathleen, who was now at a white heat herself. "And you know quite well he's right. Why, at the last Infirmary Ball——"

She stopped short, but the allusion was enough for Athelstan.

"Go on," said he, with a sudden change to sullenness.

"Well, people said—well, you *know* what they said!" she cried, desperately.

"No, I don't," retorted he, bluntly. "What was it?"

"They said that you ought none of you to have been allowed to come in; that you were not in a proper condition."

"Do you mean they said we were drunk?"

"They said you were—were—not sober."

"Well, that's the same thing, isn't it?" returned he, roughly. "And look here! I don't care what they said, and we shall appear in just what condition we choose; and if anybody dares to protest against our appearance there, we'll make it hot for him!

There are your books. And I hope you may enjoy yourself with your well-behaved partners!"

And he slapped her books down on the nearest window-sill of her father's house, which they had by this time reached, and dashed off in a passion up the road, not looking at her as he raised his hat.

By this time Kathleen was crying as if her heart would break. What had she done? Offended him past hope of reconciliation, for one thing. And had she not also perhaps missed, by her own conduct, the chance of doing a little to bring him to more civilised ways of life? And yet, what could she do but tell him what her father had said?

Between her conscience and her inclination, the Vicar's pretty daughter was in the lowest depths of misery as she crept into the house, telling herself that she did not want to go to the ball at all now, since her own words had perhaps hastened the sort of catastrophe the Brancepeths were always bringing about. Just to spite her, would not Athelstan be more boisterous than he and his brothers had been the last time?

CHAPTER XV.

KATHLEEN was not the only person who looked forward to the ball with some dread. Mrs. Floriston, who had fulfilled her promise to return in time for the great function, saw something in her brother's hands on the evening before that of the ball which roused in her feelings of the strongest uneasiness.

It was an open jewel-case, in which lay a dazzling cluster of ornaments of turquoises surrounded by diamonds. Hubert was looking at them with deep interest; and Mrs. Floriston, who had never seen such a thing in his hands before, was seized by a fear that they were a gift for the obnoxious Harry.

Not that Hubert had made anything in the nature of a confession of his feelings towards the girl; he had not even mentioned her name. But women are quick of perception in these matters, and his sister trembled. For while Hubert himself saw all the inconveniences which would attach to an alliance with the house of Brancepeth, to Maude the terrors of such a prospect appeared in tenfold horror.

She did not dare to question her brother on the subject, but tried to calm her own fears by hoping that the jewels might prove to be for some other woman, herself perhaps, or the Vicar's little daughter. Although this would be by no means a marriage for her brother after Maude's own heart, it would be an ideal alliance by comparison with the one she dreaded.

As a matter of fact, the jewels she had seen were those which Lord Ambry had given to his *fiancée;* Hubert had gone up to town on purpose to recover these in time for the ball, but had been unable to find an opportunity of giving them to Harry.

So he had to start for the ball with the case in his pocket, trusting to his luck to obtain a chance of delivering them into her hands on arrival. This proved to be easy enough; for, on reaching the Corn Exchange, where the ball was held, the first face he saw, as he escorted his sister and Kathleen and

Jessica Griffith up the stone staircase, was that of Harry, leaning anxiously over the balustrade above.

Mrs. Floriston's heart sank when she noted the quick glance of recognition which passed between Hubert and the young girl.

"You will leave your hoods in the cloak-room, of course," he said quickly to the ladies. "I will come and fetch you when I have disposed of my overcoat."

No sooner had he seen his sister and her charges disappear than he found himself seized by Harry. She caught his arm and looked up into his face as if he had been an old friend.

"Hallo!" he said.

And then they both laughed, and she blushed, and began softly tapping her gloved hands together.

"Well," said she, answering the thought which had sprung into the minds of both, "we do seem to have known each other longer than we have. It is because of that queer beginning, my breaking my arm and your setting it."

"Yes, I suppose so," said he.

And then the two stood silent, pushed about by the crowd of people who were arriving in a steady stream, until Hubert remembered that in a few seconds his sister would come to look for him.

"I have brought your jewels," he said, in a low voice. "But I cannot very well give them to you here."

"There's a balcony," said she. "You could—there."

He followed her along the wide stone landing until

they reached the balcony, which was really the roof of the stone portico walled in with striped canvas, and furnished with low cane chairs. Here they seemed to be safe from observation, and Hubert drew the case from his pocket. Harry stood silent and thoughtful while he opened it. When he looked up at her, it seemed to him that she had never looked so lovely. Her tall figure looked its best in the gown of pearl-white silk, with full sleeves of peach-coloured velvet, and a little pearl-white *chiffon* about the low bodice. She wore no ornaments, no flowers. Her wrap was a long cloak of peach-coloured velvet, bordered with marten fur, which Hubert thought was sable.

"You have no flowers. If I had known, and if I had dared, I would have sent you some. Would you have worn them?"

He had no business to say this; the tone was a worse offence than the words; for he spoke with the accents of a lover, and he looked into her eyes with an expression which caused hers to droop.

"Of course I would have worn them, if you had sent them," she answered, simply. "But I am glad you did not. I like flowers, and I don't like to see them die in my own hands. You may send me some, if you like, to-morrow."

Her tone was so sweet, so caressing, that it was excusable in Hubert to hope. Indeed, he was intoxicated by his love for her, and by the admissions which she unconsciously made with every glance from her childlike grey eyes. If he had at that moment been asked what his chances were, he would

have said that he expected to go back home that night with her promise to be his wife.

"I will send you some," he said.

He had forgotten the jewel-case, which he still held closed in his hand. It was she who reminded him, by touching the corner of it, what the reason of their *tête-à-tête* was. Hubert shivered.

"They will not suit your dress to-night," said he, sharply. "The blue of the turquoises will spoil it all."

She smiled, evidently not resenting his jealous tone.

"I must wear them, though," she said.

The tone in which she spoke cast a sudden chill upon Hubert in the midst of his passionate hopes. He looked at her in bewilderment. Even with the love-light in her eyes she wore an expression of determination which told that she had, among other good and bad qualities of the Brancepeths, that of making up her mind and of working out her own will.

"Well, if you must, let me put them on for you," he said.

She made no objection, but stood silent and submissive before him, while he fastened the long spray brooch to the side of her bodice, the upright ornament in the coils of her fair hair; then he took one end of the necklace in each hand, and clasped them together at the back of her neck.

And at the touch of his hands she shivered.

Hubert lost his head. With his hands still about her neck, he whispered—

"My darling!"

A great flash of light seemed to illuminate her fair young face, and at that moment she was ready to waver in her resolution, to break her word to the man she hated, and to plight her faith to the man she loved.

But even as Hubert, seizing his opportunity, was bending to kiss her, the sound of Lord Ambry's biting, cold voice broke suddenly upon their ears.

"I am horribly afraid I am in the way, but if Miss Brancepeth could spare me two minutes, I would really promise not to keep her more."

They were both facing him, the man and the girl, and Lord Ambry looked steadily first at the one and then at the other. He disliked Hubert Besils intensely, having scented danger to the prospects of his love as soon as he heard of this interloper who had dared to thwart Harry as she had never been thwarted before. Now he hated him with such a virulent hatred that he would have married Harry for nothing but the pleasure of cutting out his rival. For he could not despise this man who, without being handsome, was distinguished in appearance and in bearing, and who looked, even to the most casual observer, a much better match for the tall, beautiful girl than he was. It galled Lord Ambry to know that his own height was considerably less than that of his *fiancée*.

Hubert, who felt that the moment which was fatal for Lord Ambry was propitious for himself, glanced at Harry, bowed, and retired. Harry, who was very pale, looked up as he went through the open cur-

tains, and caught sight of her eldest brother, who was evidently in a state of expectation of some sensational occurrence, and who was standing outside the curtains, apparently listening for what might be going on on the other side of them.

Lord Ambry noted the resolute expression on the young girl's face, and saw that he must not attempt to carry matters with a high hand. He placed a chair for her, and addressed her in tones which were as persuasive and tender as long experience of the capricious sex had taught him how to make them.

"Sit here, sit here, so that I can see you better. I am jealous, Harrington; I can't bear to let another man get so much as a smile from you. That is only right, isn't it?"

"I suppose, I—suppose so," answered Harry, as if she scarcely understood.

She looked as if she had been rudely awakened from a sleep full of pleasant dreams, and instead of complying with his request to her to be seated, she remained on her feet, idly playing with the leaves of a big palm which stood in one corner of the covered-in balcony. Lord Ambry had intended to reproach her; but the look on her face made him think better of it, and smothering, or at least concealing, his own anger against her and Hubert, he opened an old morocco case which he had brought with him and held it before her eyes. It contained a necklace of pearls, diamonds, and opals, set in an old-fashioned way, a treasure which would have brightened the eyes of most girls.

But Harry looked at it coldly.

"Opals. They say they are unlucky," was her only comment.

Lord Ambry drew himself up.

"They have been worn by more than one of the ladies of my family," said he, with a trace of stiffness in his tone. "And they have none of them had cause to complain of—of anything, in fact."

"Oh, they are very beautiful, very"—she seemed to hesitate for a word—"magnificent."

But she spoke without interest. She was thinking of something else.

"I hope you will do me the honour, give me the pleasure of seeing you wear them to-night."

He lifted the necklace out of its case, and looking up, frowned slightly at the sight of the jewels she was already wearing. He was probably thinking that there was some little mystery about the disappearance and reappearance of those turquoise and diamond ornaments. Harry drew back a step.

"You told me to wear these to-night," she said, rather hastily.

Lord Ambry frowned a little more. His suspicions were growing more acute.

"Well, I wanted to see whether you had—given them away."

Harry blushed angrily, and he hastened to add—

"I apologise for having done you an injustice. But I know you are so generous. Now, however, that I have brought you this, I want you to let me put it on you. It will go much better with the dress you are wearing than the blue stones."

A little smile hovered for a moment on Harry's

lips: Hubert had said this too. She made another step back as Lord Ambry came forward, insisting

"No," she said with decision, "I will wear these, or—I will wear none."

Lord Ambry grew more persistent still. Perhaps he guessed whose hands had fastened the turquoise ornaments in their places. With a dexterous movement and a display of agility which she did not expect from a man of his years, he suddenly snapped asunder the clasp of the necklace she was wearing with a violence which roused her to open hostility. Taken by surprise, she could not hide the revulsion of feeling caused by his touch. It was that short interview with Hubert, those few trifling words exchanged with the man she loved, which had made even passive acceptance of Lord Ambry's caresses impossible.

She shuddered and drew back. Her elderly *fiancé* saw open repugnance, revolt in her eyes. She put out her hands as if to ward off his approach. He was in the very attitude Hubert had taken, holding in each hand one end of the splendid necklace, as Hubert had held the less dazzling one.

"No," she said, in a low voice, but with fixed determination in look, tone, and manner. "I will not wear that. I will not wear any. Lord Ambry, I am sorry if you are disappointed. But I can't help it. I can't wear your presents, and I can't—oh, I can't marry you! I'm dreadfully sorry, and ashamed of myself; and I know you must think me changeable, capricious, ridiculous. Please forgive me. Please

don't be angry with me for being honest. But I couldn't be your wife, I couldn't—now."

Lord Ambry, if he could have given free vent to his feelings, would have been stamping on the floor and cursing Hubert Besils and the whole family of Brancepeths, not excepting the girl before him. His fancy for Harry, his admiration for her well-developed style of beauty, had been very strong, strong enough to overcome his dislike of her impecunious and importunate family, with whose demands he intended to make short work when he was once married. He was not accustomed to opposition or to failure, and he was furious at this check to his plans. He received her rebuff in silence, and did not speak again until he had considered what argument he had better use with her. He chose well.

"Do you know, my dear Harrington, what your father and your brothers would say, and what the consequences would be to them"—here he paused a moment, to give her time for reflection—"if you were to indulge this momentary pique, and if I were to let you treat me like this?"

Poor Harry lost her colour, and her face fell.

"I—I can't help it," she stammered.

"But you can, my dear girl, you can," urged Lord Ambry, gently. "Don't decide too hastily. Just think the matter over quietly, when you are by yourself, and then put it to yourself whether it is not better and more honourable to carry out your promise, and to make not only me but your family happy, than to indulge the whim of a moment, a passing sentiment, and leave us all in the lurch?

Just consider it quietly, and let me have your answer to-morrow."

Perhaps this gently-spoken and well-considered speech might have had its due effect upon the excited, impulsive young girl if Lord Ambry had not wound up by taking her hand, in its long pearl-coloured glove, caressingly in his and imprinted a kiss upon the upper part of her arm, between the end of the glove and the peach velvet sleeve.

The touch repelled her. She glanced at his bald head, at the wrinkles which were not those of age only. And she shuddered. He felt her recoil, and looking up to meet her eyes, he saw in them such an expression of aversion as repelled him.

They stood away from each other, both knowing that this was the end, indeed. Then Harry with nervous haste unpinned the brooch on her bodice and took the jewelled comb from her hair.

"You must let me give you back these," she said, in a frightened whisper, without looking at him. "And—and I'm dreadfully sorry, you know that, because you know what's going to happen. And—and—good-bye."

She was quite white, trembling so that she could scarcely stand. She would have held out her hand, but the uncompromising scowl on Lord Ambry's face forbade it. She did not look happy, poor child; she did not look relieved; above all, she did not look at all like a girl who is about to exchange a distasteful lover for one whom she cares for.

A poor, scared, shaking creature it was, not the brilliant Miss Brancepeth of her arrival half an hour

before, who slipped through the curtains, and almost fell into the arms of Giles, who had evidently been listening outside.

He caught her, and whispered eagerly—

"What's up? What have you been saying to Ambry?"

"I've broken it off. I'm not going to marry him. Giles, I can't!" whispered the girl pleadingly, miserably.

"Oh, that's all right," replied her eldest brother, philosophically. "Besils is the better off of the two, for he has no encumbered property at his heels. And you like him, don't you?"

But Harry's face only grew more deathly white as she broke away from her brother without reply.

CHAPTER XVI.

THERE can be very little doubt that, if Lord Ambry had been able to follow his inclination, he would have left the Corn Exchange immediately after his rupture with his *fiancée*, without even entering the ball-room.

But he was a man of dogged temper, who would not slink away and betray how much he suffered from the rebuff. He had a lingering hope, too, that Harry would come to her senses before the night was over, realise either by herself or with the help of her brothers' arguments what she was losing by her folly, and relent with a little persuasion before

the night was over. Of course everybody would see that there had been some breach; but he knew enough of the world to be satisfied that if he stood his ground, it would be the girl who would suffer in people's estimation, and not he.

So he put both the diamond necklace and the turquoise set in safe-keeping, and followed the example of Harry by making his way to the ball-room.

Harry was dancing when he entered: at least, she had taken her place for a quadrille with her partner, who was not Hubert. Lord Ambry took the bull by the horns, by selecting a partner and taking his place opposite to Harry. Naturally enough, all the people in the room who could see what was happening, began to exchange first looks and then whispers about the couple, whose engagement had been known throughout the county. For when they met in the dance, as they were bound to, each avoided meeting the other's eyes.

The news flew through the room like wildfire: the engagement between Lord Ambry and Miss Brancepeth was broken off.

Hubert, who had not been dancing, had already seen enough to set his own heart beating fast before a casual acquaintance, a neighbouring country gentleman, brought him the news.

"Have you heard the latest?" said the good-humoured club-gossip. "It's off between Ambry and Sir Giles's daughter. He's well out of that," added he, with emphasis.

"On the contrary, I think it is she who is to be congratulated," said Hubert, hotly, his tone and

manner letting the other man into the secret at once.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, I—I—quite agree with you that—that he was much too—too old for her for one thing."

"And much too disreputable for another," returned Hubert.

The simple country gentleman was taken aback. Who was this man Besils, that he should presume to find fault, in such terms, with one of the Kent great men? On the other hand, if, as seemed probable, he was himself a suitor of Miss Brancepeth's, he was certainly a better match, from the point of view of appearance, than small, bald Lord Ambry. For Hubert, though his nose was too long and his face too thin, his mouth too straight and his chin too long, for him to lay claims to beauty, was tall, and had in looks and manner that indefinable something which makes the person who has looked once look again.

"Of course," went on the gossip, after a pause, "Miss Brancepeth is the handsomest girl in this part of the county."

"And to my mind she is the most attractive girl in any part of any county," said Hubert, as he moved away.

For Harry had made her partner lead her straight back to her aunt, and had just given Hubert a glance which was an invitation. Hubert stood beside her for a moment without speaking.

"Come," said he, at last, "this is our waltz, isn't it?"

"If you like," said Harry, dexterously avoiding one of the local magnates, a bore of the first water, to whom the waltz really belonged.

Hubert was in an ecstasy of happiness; he had never thought that the touch of a woman's hand, the glance of a woman's eyes, would be able to intoxicate him like this. They waltzed in silence, content to be happy, and it was not until they were standing by an open window in a smaller room dedicated to lovers and dowagers, that he made any allusion to the event of the evening.

He was playing with her fan, and criticising it severely.

"I don't like these spangly things," said he. "It may be the latest thing, of course——"

"Oh, no, it isn't. It's the cheapest. Things like that I have to pay for out of my allowance——"

"Then the next must be paid for out of mine. Which do you like best—pearl or tortoise-shell? I suppose you like those big ones made of long curly feathers? I have often thought it must be a fine thing to be a woman, just to have one of those regal-looking things."

But Harry pursed up her lips.

"I won't have one, though," she said, in a tone of decision. "You may send me the flowers to-morrow, if you like, but nothing else."

"But you let Lord Ambry give you presents?"

"When I was going to marry him. But I have given them all back, you see."

She showed him that the places where the jewels had been were now bare of ornament. Hair, bodice,

neck, all were unadorned. The girl smiled triumphantly.

"But now you are going to marry me."

"No, I'm not."

"You are, though."

Harry sprang up.

"We won't talk about disagreeable things now," cried she, impatiently. "Let us be as happy as we can for one evening; leave all the tiresome discussions till afterwards."

"But, Harry, if you care for me, why should there be anything tiresome about such discussions as that?"

"I won't give you any reasons; I won't give you anything but dances. And if you dare to say anything to me that I don't want to hear, I won't waltz with you any more. And I don't want to hear about marriage. I've been dreading it for months, and now I've got it off my mind at last, I'm not going to be worried about it again in a hurry."

He was obliged to humour the whim of the wilful girl, though it made him uneasy, and marred for him the happiness of a night which would otherwise have been a long dream of Paradise. And yet perhaps this caprice of Harry's really intensified the delirious pleasure which the confirmed woman-hater felt in the society of the beautiful hoyden. The possibility, remote though it seemed, that she might slip through his fingers after all, put him on his metal, enhanced the excitement of every look, of every touch, of every meeting of their hands.

It was during the duty-dances which he and she

were obliged to give to others that his fears pricked him the most. It was easy to forget them when his hand was upon her waist and her fair hair almost brushed his cheek. Pretty Kathleen Griffith, who was his partner in the Lancers, looked up in his face with an arch but rather wintry little smile. He reddened, recalled thus suddenly to his duty of making himself amiable. And it occurred to him that his companion was not quite so bright as usual.

"I believe I'm boring you to death, Miss Griffith," he said, penitently. "I can see it in your face, so polite denial will avail you nothing."

"It's not that," answered Kathleen, in a tone which betrayed a little more. "I don't know that I am enjoying myself very much—not so much as I thought I should. But it's my own fault. I chose white, and there are so many in white."

Hubert looked round the room. It was not quite so bright a scene as the Hunt Ball, where most of the gentlemen wore pink; but there was plenty of colour in the dresses worn by the ladies, and Hubert saw no such terrible preponderance of white.

"Your dress is charming," said he; "we must look further for the cause of this failure."

And then a blush, a look, and, moreover, the sight of Athelstan standing in a sulky attitude in one of the door-ways, opened his dull eyes.

"Ah!" he said, solemnly. "You wouldn't find it so dull if the first letter of the alphabet were in my place!"

Kathleen, confused, gave a little quivering sigh.

"I'm not allowed to dance with him," she said,

almost in a whisper. "Even if," she hastened to add, "he wanted to, or *I* wanted to! And yet," she added, plaintively, "he—he—nobody would have known he was a Brancepeth to-night!"

Hubert could not help smiling.

"Here," he said, "you've got another dance down for me, haven't you? The supper dance, I think it is. If I don't turn up, you might—sit it out with him, mightn't you?"

Kathleen's face brightened with hope, and then immediately clouded with despair.

"It would be keeping the letter, but not the spirit, of my promise, wouldn't it?" she said, with secret yearning.

"Well, well," said Hubert, who was determined to give the girl her harmless pleasure if he could, "ask my sister what she thinks? And if she should think it all right, why, I shouldn't be surprised if a little bird were to whisper to him——"

"Oh, no, no!" interrupted Kathleen, blushing deeply. "Please, *please* don't let him think I want to speak to him! For I don't, really!"

And Hubert did not insist.

But it was very strange that he did neglect to turn up for the dance in question. And that Athelstan, whose eyes Kathleen had avoided meeting all through the evening, should plant himself in front of the Vicar's daughter with startling suddenness, and say, in a voice loud enough to set a dozen people tittering—

"Miss Kathleen, am I drunk?"

The girl started, blushed deeply, and looked much shocked.

Athelstan met her frightened eyes with a steady gaze.

"You said, you know, you couldn't dance with me because we always came 'in an intoxicated condition.' So I ask you, Am I intoxicated now?"

Kathleen tried to laugh, looked down at her fan, and finally said, with spirit—

"You had better ask a better judge than I am, Mr. Brancepeth."

But instead of taking her advice, Athelstan said—

"Don't be frightened; I'm not going to ask you to dance. But—may I talk to you till your partner turns up?"

"I—I suppose I can't prevent you, can I?"

"Oh, yes, you can. Nothing more simple. If you say 'Go,' I'll go and talk to that girl in white and yellow instead."

Now, Kathleen hated the girl in white and yellow, and had watched her without once looking straight at her for a long time. Athelstan had appeared to devote himself to her, and Kathleen did not know how much that girl in white and yellow had had to do with the failure of the ball with herself. So these words raised a tempest in her breast, and she answered with flashing eyes—

"Go, then! Pray go! She's looking this way. She is waiting for you."

But the tone had just that suspicion of pique which Athelstan wanted to rouse in her. So he sat down beside her, and said—

"I would go if I were sure you meant you wanted me to. But—I hope you don't mean it: I am sure

you wouldn't if you knew how much I've wanted to speak to you."

He stopped, and Kathleen waited. But there was a long pause before she said, softly—

"You wanted to speak to me? What did you want to say?"

She gave him just one shy, sidelong glance, just to assure herself that it was really he, the tallest, the handsomest man in the room, the one who made all the others look lank-haired, and stiff of gait, and fishy-eyed, and altogether unendurable and tedious and ugly. Then she looked down again, waiting with a little flutter of excitement at her heart for his answer.

"Oh, a lot of things. But they've all gone out of my head now I've got the chance of saying them. Let me see!" And he put his face into his hands, and Kathleen, from behind her fan, glanced at his head, and thought how beautifully curly his hair was, and wondered whether it was soft to the touch, or bristly like papa's.

"Well," he went on, "in the first place, I've got to apologise—I'm always having to apologise—for getting so angry that evening when I saw you home after the choir-practice."

"Oh, but it was all my fault, and I've been so sorry, and I've wanted to tell you so," burst out Kathleen in an humble, earnest tone. "I had such difficult things to say, you know; not my own words at all, but papa's. I should never, never have said such things myself."

"What, that some of us were screwed at the last

Infirmary Ball? Well, you might have said it; it was true enough."

"But you're not this time!" said Kathleen, eagerly.

"No. We're getting quite respectable. Giles and Radley kept sober for Lord Ambry; and I for—you."

Silence.

"Well, aren't you going to signify your approval?"

The couples were waltzing past them; the air was fanned into their faces by muslin and *chiffon* skirts; flying ribbons would flutter past, almost touching their heads. The commonplace prettiness of "Down by the Sea" seemed a revelation of exquisite music. Kathleen shivered, not with cold, but with delight. And all because, forsooth, a young man who had no excuse for behaving badly at any time had chosen not to behave badly on this one particular occasion!

She was sensible that her joy was extravagant, and she took care not to betray too much.

"Isn't the approval of your conscience enough?"

"Oh, dear, no! I don't believe I've got one!"

"Oh, you must have. We all have. Mine is pricking me now."

"Why?"

"Because I'm breaking my promise to papa."

"But you're not dancing with me?"

"No. But this is as bad."

"I suppose it is. You ought not even to speak to me?"

No answer.

"You used to like to, once."

Still no answer.

"Didn't you?"

There came an answer this time, but it was uttered in such a soft little whisper that, what with the music, and the whirr of flying feet, and the buzz of talk among the dancers, it was quite excusable in Athelstan not to be able to hear without putting his head very close to hers.

"Not—more—than—I—do—now!"

There was a pause. It seemed scarcely worth while to take his head away, especially as the lace curtains of the recess in which they sat screened them from the scrutinising glances of the waltzing couples.

"Do you mean," asked he, with the air of a person who wants the solution of some weighty scientific problem, "that you didn't like talking to me then, or that you do like talking to me now?"

Kathleen realised that she was being pushed into a dangerous corner, and she rebelled.

"Oh, you know! And why do you ask me? You ought not to ask me!"

"Yes, I ought. Kathleen, isn't it rather rough on a fellow? Come now, tell me that. You know I'm cracked about you, everybody knows it. And where's the harm? One would think it was an insult, by the way you all take it! Is it still the pear-tree? I shouldn't do those things if I were your husband. Are you afraid I should?"

"Oh, hush! hush! Let me go and find Mrs. Floriston!" cried Kathleen, really alarmed by this unexpected turn in the conversation.

"No, you don't!" cried Athelstan, keeping her in her seat by the power of the strong hand; "not till you have listened to what I have to say. One doesn't

screw oneself up to the point of asking a girl to marry one every day, and I mean you to hear me. I want you to be my wife, Kathleen. Isn't there a chance?"

"Oh, no, no! Papa——"

"Papa be hanged! I don't want to marry him! Look here, I'll take an answer to this: Would there be a chance if it were not for papa?"

"I don't know. No, I don't suppose so. It doesn't do any good to put cases like that. Besides, of course, *of course*," emphatically, "it wouldn't make any difference."

But Athelstan didn't believe her. He played with his gloves and looked thoughtful.

"What is it he principally objects to in me?" asked he, presently. "Or is it everything?"

"Why, yes, of course, it's everything," replied Kathleen, promptly. "He says you're idle——"

"That's because I've never had anything to do," interpolated Athelstan.

"—and vi——" She stopped.

"Vicious? Well, I'm not."

"—and that you have no self-control. And that you're—you're—one of the Brancepeths."

"I see. That sums up everything conveniently. Now, nobody but a parson would dare to sum a man up like that! And of course you quite agree with him?"

"No. I always do say all I can for you," protested Kathleen, plaintively.

"Well, why don't you say a little more, and tell him you mean to have me for a husband?"

"But I don't!"

"Oh, come, come, think again! Look here, I don't believe you dislike me."

"But not to dislike a person is one thing, and to be ready to marry him is another."

"Well, it may be so to start with. But when you know that this person whom you don't dislike worships you, can't think of anybody but you, can't get you out of his head, in fact, and that he's ready to do just whatever you want him to, and to give up everything you don't like just to please you, well, what then?"

Kathleen was whimpering; her handkerchief went stealthily up to her eyes.

"Oh, please, please, don't!" she whispered. "You know it's of no use!"

"But why? Why? Am I such a fearful rascal that there's no hope for me? No reliance to be placed on my word? And are you so sure, either, that you wouldn't like me better for a husband than a man as good as the Vicar? Perhaps, you know, you wouldn't be good enough for *him*. Of course you're more than good enough for me; but the mere fact that you do like me a little proves that you are not quite so good as you think yourself, doesn't it?"

"I'm not good at all," said Kathleen, humbly. "But, oh, I should be happy if I thought you would really try and—and——"

"Reform? Why, so I will. Just because you want me to. And I'll get some work to do, if it's breaking stones on the roads. You shan't have to be ashamed of having spoken up for me, I promise

you. And, look here, I won't worry you again about what we've been talking about till you and everybody can see for yourselves that I mean what I've said."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" cried Kathleen, in an earnest voice. "I can't tell you how glad!"

"And don't you think, if you believe what I've said," suggested Athelstan, insinuatingly, "that I might take you into supper? Just to give you an opportunity, you know, of mentioning any little thing I ought to do that I might otherwise forget?"

Now duty pulled Kathleen two ways. For while, on the one hand, she was certainly violating the spirit of her promise to her father, could she do less than strengthen and encourage a man in a good resolution?

In the end, she let him take her in to supper.

CHAPTER XVII.

Now Hubert had been mindful of his own interests as well as of Athelstan's when he gave that young gentleman the hint upon which he had acted so promptly. For this manœuvre left him free to take Harry in to supper.

She was in high spirits, and although Hubert could see that she was less free from anxiety than she pretended to be, there was no doubt about the relief she felt on finding herself free from her distasteful engagement to Lord Ambry.

As for the disappointed suitor himself, he bore

himself with discretion, and finding as the evening went on that there seemed no prospect of Harry's relenting in his favour, he had already begun to console himself by reflections on the undesirability of an alliance with her family. This sentiment did not, however, smother his resentment; and, as old Sir Giles' unpunctuality in paying off the interest on the mortgage had given him the power to foreclose, he resolved to take this revenge without delay.

As soon as supper was over the viscount took his departure.

Giles and Radley, who had been keeping a steady watch on his movements, as well as on those of Hubert and their sister Harry, exchanged glances. All was not well. Hubert, taking the viscount's departure without a word to any of the Brancepeths as a sign that the time had come for him to get his answer from the reluctant and apparently capricious Harry, had begun to press his suit in earnest.

The girl, however, refused to listen. Finding that he was not to be put off, she left him abruptly, and taking refuge with the amenable Lady Maggie, declared that she was tired and wanted to go home.

Her compliant aunt, used to regarding the imperious Harry's wishes as commands, left the ballroom with her at once; telling Giles as she passed out that they were ready to go home.

But when the two ladies, cloaked and hooded, met Giles again at the top of the staircase, he was looking very black. He seized his sister roughly by the arm.

"I am to congratulate you and Besils, I suppose?"

he said, uneasily. "We all knew how things were going."

"I am afraid you did not," answered Harry, who was very pale.

She was drawing her long gloves up her arms, and she did not meet her brother's angry eyes. She saw, however, that Radley was standing behind him, and that Hubert was in the door-way in the back-ground. Giles pretended not to understand, although his tone betrayed his fears.

"What do you mean? You have thrown over Lord Ambry for Besils, we know that!"

"Indeed, I have done nothing of the kind. The engagement with Lord Ambry is broken off, that's all."

Radley came a step nearer; Hubert, who was within hearing, glanced at the girl with an imploring look in his eyes. Giles looked at his sister as if he foresaw that a tussle was coming.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are not going to marry Besils? Why, you have been dancing with him, flirting outrageously with him all night. Do you mean——"

Hubert interrupted his angry harangue by touching his arm.

"Don't bully your sister," he said, in a low voice. "It is hardly delicate, is it, to speak to her like this?"

His voice was so low that even Harry, near as she was, caught no more than the sense of his words. But Giles, who knew how much depended upon his sister's caprice, as he thought it, would not listen to the dictates of good taste. He turned to Hubert.

"Mr. Besils, you are an honourable man; my sister must not trifle with you as she has done with Ambry. Her own good name is at stake. People talk, people notice: she has made herself the talk of the county to-night. You know that as well as I do. There is only one thing for her to do now. Answer me, Harrington. Has Mr. Besils proposed to you to-night?"

"For Heaven's sake, don't ruin what chance I have with her by speaking to her like that!" cried Hubert, pulling Giles away by main force from the head of the stairs, where Harry was still standing like a statue, with the same set expression on her handsome mouth.

"There! There! You have told me you proposed!" cried Giles, in excitement.

He was heated with champagne, but not to the point of misunderstanding what was said to him. He freed himself from Hubert with a rough jerk of his arms, and seized his sister rudely by the arm.

"Now, then," said he, "are you going to have him, or not? Remember what your answer means —to you—to us!" he added in a fierce whisper close to her ear.

Radley, who was more intoxicated than his brother, had drawn near to Harry on the other side, and heard her steady answer.

"I am not going to marry him."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when Radley, raising his right hand quickly, dealt his sister such a severe blow on the face with his open hand

that it left for a moment a livid patch upon her cheek followed in another instant by a scarlet mark.

"Curse you!" cried Giles at the same moment.

Harry staggered, and Hubert, springing forward, put one arm round her, while he administered to Radley a blow which sent him stumbling and reeling against the balustrade.

For just one second Harry faltered, and pressing her hand against Hubert's while his arm supported her, she glanced eloquently up into his face.

"My darling, my darling!" he whispered, hurriedly. "You will give way, and let us both be happy, won't you? It will be all right then—for all of us!"

But the girl was deaf to his entreaties; she steeled herself against his passionate pleadings. Glancing with heightened colour at the group of curious faces which the rumour of the *fracas* had caused to appear on the landing, she repulsed Hubert by a sudden, determined movement.

"You are impertinent, sir," she said, drawing herself to her full height and speaking with an affectation of great haughtiness. "Let me go—with my brothers!"

And taking the unwilling arm of her eldest brother, she swept with him down the staircase, leaving Lady Maggie, who was paralysed with fright, and Radley, and the still more intoxicated Quin, to tumble down the stairs pell-mell after her; and the dancers in the ball-room to discuss the latest sensation afforded by "the Brancepeths."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHILE Hubert was left speechless with disappointment and the yearnings of baffled passion, and Mrs. Floriston was congratulating herself on the turn affairs had taken, scandalous as they were, the young Brancepeths were plotting more mischief before they reached the carriage.

Giles saw that no time was to be lost in devising some way of escape from the quagmire into which their sister's caprice had plunged them. There must be a council held at once.

Radley and Quin had come in the landau with the ladies, while he and Athelstan had driven from Culverley in a dog-cart. Giles put the two ladies, who were both very quiet and quite silent, into the carriage, and shutting them in, said that he and his brothers would return later.

"We can get a couple of horses at the livery-stables close by," he explained to his aunt, ignoring Harry altogether.

As soon as the landau had driven away, he turned to his two brothers.

"Where's Athelstan?" said he, sharply.

He was at that very moment coming down the staircase, "to see what the row was about." Giles thrust his arm through that of his second brother.

"Let us come out of this heat and crowd," said Giles. "I want to talk to you all. Be quiet, can't

you, Quin? Or I'll stop the landau and send you home."

"Look here," said Athelstan, who was the only one of the four who was entirely sober, "can't you do without me? Just for an hour? You go home and talk over what you like, and I'll find my way back later. I'll get Mrs. Floriston to give me a lift."

"You fool!" said Giles, with clenched teeth. "Don't you know what has happened? Or have you been so wrapped up in the parson's daughter that we've got to tell you everything over again?"

And he gave his brother, in a few words, a garbled account of the recent events. Athelstan, who was in love himself, was sorry for Harry, and made a shrewd guess at her reasons for behaving as she had done.

"She's fond of him, I believe, and she doesn't want to saddle him with—us!" he said, meditatively. "And of course there's something to be said for that view; and at any rate she can't be forced into marrying if she doesn't want to."

"And do you know what it means to all of us if she throws away a second good chance like that? Do you suppose she'll find another rich man to come forward to be made a fool of, when she's thrown over two of them in one night? Don't you see she's cutting her own throat as well as ours?"

"Well, it can't be helped."

Athelstan, who was brimming over with good resolutions, discerned a chance of beginning a new sort of life, after cutting away altogether from the old. His want of sympathy disgusted Giles, and a violent quarrel was only averted by an abrupt suggestion

from Radley, who pulled his eldest brother on one side to whisper it in his ear.

After a rapid exchange of comments in a low voice, Giles spoke in a different tone.

"Well, boys, who's for a lark?" he asked, drawing Athelstan and Quin to him, and nodding to Radley. "What do you say to easing old Ambry of the jewelry he was mean enough to take from Harry? There's a necklace worth three thousand pounds—I saw it. And a set of things that we know something about already. His coachman is an old fossil who would tumble off the box if the carriage were stopped, his footman is hardly more than a boy. Come, what do you say to it?"

Quin was delighted, and he said so, so noisily that he had to be silenced by his brothers. Athelstan, who, it is sad to say, was enough of a Brancepeth to feel a momentary exhilaration at the suggestion, shook his head.

"Highway robbery," he murmured.

"What, have you turned virtuous since the parson's daughter has taken you in hand?" sneered Giles.

Athelstan reddened and stopped. They were walking along the very wide pavement of the old-fashioned country town's principal street. They had reached a gas-lamp, under which they all stood waiting for Athelstan's answer. A handsome group they were, these notorious Brancepeths, with their well-cut features and stalwart forms, their exuberant vitality, the dare-devil expression on their flushed faces. Radley was the only one of them who was

not above the middle height, Quin the only one who was not regularly handsome of face. Athelstan, whom all the rest were now watching curiously, was the best-looking of them all.

He thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and planting himself firmly in an attitude of defiance, said in a sullen, dogged tone—

"Perhaps I have. Anyhow I'm not going to have anything to do with this business. And if you'll take my advice, you'll think better of it yourselves, all of you. Do you think he won't recognise you, the old fox? Or that everybody wouldn't know whose work it was, even if he didn't?"

"You won't join us, then?"

"No, I won't."

"Then get back to the parson's daughter, and be d—d to you!"

Athelstan received this command in perfect good temper.

"All right," said he, as he moved quickly away in the direction of the Corn Exchange. "Go and put your heads under the pump, all of you, and you'll be in a better condition to judge of your own plan, and to see what asses you propose making of yourselves."

He ran back to the Corn Exchange, leaving his brothers too much excited to heed his excellent advice. He thought, when he left them, that they would give up their mad project on finding that he would not join in it. But even before he reached the door of the building he began to have doubts; and as he went up the staircase on his way back to

the ball-room his fears grew so strong that he went down again, and returned to the place where he had left his brothers.

They had disappeared, however, and, after scouring the town in search of them, Athelstan was obliged to return to the Exchange without having found them.

Here another disappointment awaited him: Mrs. Floriston, with her brother and the two Misses Griffith whom she had chaperoned, had gone home. There was nothing left for him but to return to Culverley alone.

After a few minutes' consideration, he decided to hire a horse at the livery-stables and ride home. But a few words exchanged with the stableman made him change his mind.

"The other young gentlemen were in here twenty minutes ago, sir; so they've got the pick of the mounts," said the man.

"Oh, they've been here, my brothers, have they?" said Athelstan, pricking up his ears.

"Yes, sir. They were in good spirits, the young gentlemen. Never see them in such good spirits! I shouldn't be surprised if they was to do a bit of cross country work on their way. They wouldn't never be content to jog along the road, not them!"

Athelstan rode off. But when he was clear of the town he took a short cut to the right, and got into the road which Lord Ambry's carriage would have had to take on its way home.

It was a dark night and the rain was falling; the roads were deep in mud and very slippery. He

could not see far on the way before him. Before he had gone far along the high-road, however, he heard the sound of a galloping horse, and he drew rein just in time to avoid a collision with a frightened coach-horse, with dangling harness and trailing reins, which was tearing down the road at a mad pace.

"They've done for us all this time!" said Athelstan to himself, as he galloped forward to the scene of the mischief.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHEN Athelstan Brancepeth left his brothers in Fernsham High Street, those graceless young persons were ripe for the wild project which Radley had been the first to propose.

"— the sanctimonious prig!" cried Radley, as soon as Athelstan had left them.

It was a strange term to apply to one of his brothers, but Giles and Quin echoed the sentiment with much heartiness. For it was the first time that one of their number had made any opposition to one of their lawless escapades. So unaccustomed were they to look at any project of theirs in the light in which it would appear to ordinary, law-abiding citizens, that it did not occur to them that this precious plan of theirs was any more daring, or more objectionable, than many they had carried out before.

Robbery on a lesser scale, the plundering of orchards, the pilfering of any money left about their

own house by anybody, they had been accustomed to from childhood. This new venture was more dangerous; but the peril had its fascination, and they were hardly sober enough to realise what they were risking. And they were all three burning with indignation at the loss to themselves involved in their sister's idiotic return of the jewels which had been given to her. They began to feel as if it was Lord Ambry who had robbed them, and to believe that they were only anxious to recover property which had been wrongfully wrested from their needy hands.

So within a few seconds of Athelstan's return to the Corn Exchange they had stormed the livery-stable, mounted the three best horses there, and ridden off on their disgraceful errand.

Giles had enough of his wits about him to take certain precautions. They had all come over from Culverley in thick overcoats and cloth caps, so that, with their coats closely buttoned up, and the peaks of their caps drawn down, there was very little to be seen of their faces, which were further concealed by the silk mufflers round their necks. Now this was not much of a disguise, certainly, but as it was pretty certain that their identity would be guessed from the very nature of the enterprise they were engaged in, Giles thought that as long as the person they were about to attack could not swear to their faces, this was all they need trouble themselves about. He reckoned upon the hushing up of the story by an understanding between old Sir Giles and Lord Ambry, just as many another scandal had been hushed up for them among their own "set" before.

They left the town by the Culverley road, and branched off through lanes and over fields, in the direction of the road along which Lord Ambry must drive on his way back to his place at Croke Hall.

It was just after they had taken a small fence to get into a grass-covered lane which led direct into the main road that Giles felt the touch of something hard upon his arm, and looking down to see what it was, saw that it was something Radley held in his hand.

"What's that?" he asked, startled.

Radley laughed unpleasantly, and peering into his brother's face, Giles fancied he discerned a sinister expression on his younger brother's features. Even Giles, ruffian that he was, felt a cold shiver down his back as he knocked up his brother's hand.

"A revolver! What do you want with a revolver? In the d—'s name, put the beastly thing away. Or stay, give it to me."

But Radley, laughing again, reined in his horse, so that his eldest brother should ride past him.

"What have you got to be frightened about?" he asked, jeeringly. "I didn't say I should use it, did I? And it's just as well to have it on one. On these occasions nobody knows exactly what is going to happen."

"That's just it, by —!" said Giles, hoarsely. "One never does. And we want to stop short of murder, I suppose?"

He said this sarcastically, but Radley answered in all seriousness, with a sullen, fierce tone which alarmed his elder brother, even while it excited him.

Radley was undoubtedly the most vicious and the most cruel of the brothers, the one with the most coolness and cunning, besides. And where he would lead the others, when their blood was up, would generally follow with dash and impetuosity.

"If we were to settle the old boy's hash, quite by accident and much against our will," he said, in a whisper, "there'd be nobody to appear against us, and the mortgage wouldn't be foreclosed."

"What rot!" retorted Giles. "If he didn't do it, his executors would. We're not going to risk our necks on an off-chance like that."

Even Giles showed no abhorrence of the deed suggested; it was the consequences only which concerned him. But riding slowly, as they were now doing, down a steep lane, in the drizzling rain, with the wet leaves falling from the trees overhead, and the long straggling brambles from the hedge occasionally catching at his clothes, he was in the mood to recognise more clearly the nature of the mad prank they had in hand, and he began to come to the conclusion that the risky game was not worth the candle.

He drew rein suddenly. They were within fifty yards of the high-road.

"Look here," said he, gravely, "I've had enough of this. Let's chuck it!"

Even while he was speaking, Radley's ears caught the sound of wheels and hoofs on the road.

"Sh—sh!" said he. "The old——is coming! Listen!"

They did listen, keeping so still that the slight

noise made by their horses as they tossed their heads was the only sign of life the whole group gave. And they heard the splash-splash of the mud and slush in the road as the carriage horses stepped along, and the hissing sound of the wheels as they rolled along the wet heavy ground.

"Chuck it, shall we?" whispered Radley.

The words were a sneer, a challenge. Already Quin had passed his brothers, and they heard him open his clasp-knife, a formidable weapon which he always carried, and which had been guilty of many a lesser outrage before this.

"Hallo! What's that for?" asked Giles, who was being carried away by his younger brothers, and who began himself to sniff the battle from afar with an irrepressible feeling of exhilaration.

"To cut the traces," replied Quin, in a whisper.

"Right!" cut in Radley, sharply. "You settle the footman; Giles will take the coachman. Leave the old fox inside to me."

The carriage was very near now, jogging along in the darkness, the lamps on either side shining murkily, like two dim old eyes in the thick, marshy mist which gathered under the hedges and rolled in a filmy sheet over the fields beyond.

Suddenly the horses came to a dead stop. The old coachman and the young footman, both half-benumbed with the damp cold in spite of their fur capes, stared about them hazily, not in the least understanding what had happened. The lamps, indeed, showed them some men on horseback, one on each side of them; but for the first moment they

had no suspicion that such an anachronism as a highway robbery at the end of the nineteenth century was being committed.

It was the voice of their master, ringing out through the fog which woke them to a knowledge of the truth.

"Drive on, you fools! Drive on!"

The coachman felt for his whip, but it was gone. At the same moment he felt a sharp tug at the reins in his hands, and the next thing he knew was that he was off the box, lying on his back in the road. This was Giles' share of the work. Meanwhile, Quin had not been idle. One horse he had already cut loose, and he was at work upon the traces of the other, when the footman, having recovered his wits, leapt off the box and attacked him manfully.

With an oath, Quin turned upon the lad, slashing at him with his open knife. But his assailant was not to be shaken off. Seizing Quin's right hand, the footman wrestled with him, and succeeded in taking him away from the remaining horse, which, however, frightened by the noise and commotion, had begun to plunge and to rear, and to add a new peril to those in which its master stood. Meanwhile, Radley, who had opened the carriage door as soon as the attack began, was finding his part of the adventure more onerous than he had expected. Lord Ambry realised the situation with remarkable swiftness, and was not inclined to let himself be robbed without a struggle.

Finding that his injunction to the coachman to drive on was unheeded, he perceived that he and his

assailant would have to struggle hand to hand. He tried to get out of the carriage, but could not effect his purpose. Not a word was spoken by Radley, who had, moreover, extinguished the lamp on his side by taking it out of its socket and throwing it over the hedge.

But Lord Ambry gave a guess as to the identity of the perpetrators of the outrage; and when he found himself no match for the young ruffian in whose clutches he was, he injudiciously let out his suspicions.

It was when he felt Radley's hands in the pocket of his fur-lined overcoat that his discretion gave way.

"I know who you are, you rascals!" he cried, in a voice which the other young Brancepeths heard also. "And if you dare to rob me, you shall be put in the dock for it, I promise you!"

An exclamation of satisfaction broke from Radley's lips. He had got the cases, both of them, and now his only care was to take himself and them off as quickly as he could. But this was not so easy. The old man flew at him, even in the cramped space of the carriage, with unexpected fire and fierceness.

"Give up those cases, give them up, I say, or by——"

He had thrown himself upon the thief with so much force that Radley found himself flung down upon the front seat. Lord Ambry's hands were upon his throat; he felt himself shaken like a rat. A sharp, hissing sound escaped from the young ruffian's lips.

Ping! Ping!

There was a cry. Then silence.

Giles and Radley stood up in the road to listen. It had taken the efforts of both of them to reduce the young footman to submission, and this they had not succeeded in until they had bound his hands together tightly with a handkerchief, and thrown him into the ditch which ran along one side of the road. Even in this plight the plucky lad continued to shout for help with all the force of his lungs, without heeding the muttered threats of the brothers.

Giles had from the outset been carried away, as usual, by the charm which daring and reckless adventure had for all the lawless family. He had done his share with as much brutality as the others, and with considerable enjoyment of the fun. But there was something in that little sound which suddenly quenched the exhilaration both of Quin and himself. They listened; they drew a step nearer each other in the darkness.

But before they had exchanged a word they found Radley between them.

He was panting, breathing so heavily, indeed, that Giles thought it was he who had been wounded.

"Hallo!" whispered Giles, hoarsely.

Radley staggered against him.

"Let's be off! Let's be off! I've got them!" he panted out.

The brothers stood for a second like men recovering from a heavy debauch. They realised, as they stood huddled together in the mud and slush of the roadway, hearing the cries of the footman on the one hand, and the scraping and splashing of the near side

horse which, still attached to the carriage, had drawn the vehicle against a heap of stones, and was struggling in evident terror to get free, threatening with every movement to turn the carriage over on its side.

"What—have you done?" asked Giles, under his breath, clutching at his brother. Radley shivered.

"It's all right," he whispered. "I've done no more than either of you. Let's get off."

One more second they lingered, until a groan from under the hedge where the coachman was lying made them start.

Then, with one accord, they turned and ran away. Yes, literally ran away, snatching the bridles of the three horses, which had been hastily fastened to a stake in the hedge.

They rode back towards Culverley by a circuitous way, at the suggestion of Giles.

The excitement was cooling now; gray light on haggard faces and splashed clothes makes many an uncanny discovery. They had had their fun; the blood had run hot in their veins, and they had indulged to the full their reckless love of excitement and violence.

Cantering back upon tired horses, heavy-eyed, silent, and sullen, the young men opened gates instead of clearing them, and, as they rode without a word up the drive of Culverley Place to the stables, and put up their horses themselves very quietly, without rousing any of the servants, they began to understand in their heart of hearts that even for the Brancepeths, the very *fine fleur* of Kentish aristocracy, there might be a day of reckoning.

CHAPTER XX.

Now Athelstan would have come up with the attacking party long before matters had got so far but that he had overshot the mark, and joined the high-road at a point beyond that at which his brothers had stopped Lord Ambry's carriage.

He was riding slowly along, not without a doubt as to whether he should go on or turn back, when the noise of a horse galloping up to him from behind caused him to turn in the saddle.

He saw at once enough to confirm his fears, for the broken harness and the trailing reins showed that his brothers had successfully accomplished at least one part of their projected outrage. Without attempting to stop the frightened animal, which had passed him before he had realised that it was riderless, Athelstan turned his horse's head and galloped back along the road.

He had not gone far before he came upon a sight which gave him a great shock. In the sickly, weak light of a dull, rainy morning, the carriage, now lying on its side, a complete wreck, looked to his staring, bewildered eyes like a great black hearse. On his left hand, under the hedge, lay the motionless body of a man; while from the ditch on the opposite side of the road came hoarse cries and moans and entreaties for help.

Athelstan was off his horse by this time and on his knees beside the coachman. Thank heaven, he

was not dead! Being an elderly man and very heavy, he had been completely stunned by the force with which he had been dragged down from the box into the road; but he was now recovering; and when Athelstan had loosened the clothes about his neck, he began to revive.

Athelstan sat him up, and went to the ditch, where the footman, exhausted both by his shouts and by the struggle in which he had taken part, was lying, in a drenched, helpless condition, in the water and mud. He had never once lost consciousness, so that he had all his wits about him.

"His lordship! Where's his lordship?" he asked, with his teeth chattering. "Have they killed him? I heard the shots."

And then, catching sight of the overturned carriage, he stood with his staring eyes fixed upon it, without uttering another word.

Athelstan shivered. He hesitated to approach the vehicle; and it was the poor, half-drowned lad beside him who made the first movement towards it.

"I—I hope it's all right," stammered he, as he turned the handle of the door which was uppermost.

The words died upon his lips. For what he saw inside was a motionless heap, a shapeless something, inert, silent. He called, in a voice which was faint and hoarse and weak—

"Lord Ambry!"

There was no answer, no sound. He and the footman exchanged looks of horror and fear. Then, nerving himself for the discovery which he might have to face, he got inside the wrecked vehicle, and

lifted bodily in his arms the motionless figure. Blood was upon the face, the clothes; it was still oozing through the left sleeve, and trickling down upon the broken glass of the window which lay undermost.

Athelstan looked at his face, put his hand under the fur coat. Then he sent forth such a shout as made the footman and the old coachman start and shiver.

"He's not dead, not dead! Hooray!"

It was like the cry of a great schoolboy; and, moreover, he had hardly uttered it when the young giant broke out into loud sobs. They had let themselves in for a nice thing, those brothers of his! But at least they had not committed murder. He held the bald-headed old reprobate as tenderly as a mother holds her child upon her knee.

"What's the damage?" cried he, in cheerful, stentorian tones which made Lord Ambry open his eyes.

"Matter!" growled he, in most unamiable accents, when he saw in whose arms he was. "Matter! Why, the matter is that you d—d young scoundrels have put a bullet into me, as you very well know. And it's of no use to turn penitent now, because it's too late."

"You'd better let me see if I can stop the bleeding, anyhow," said Athelstan, cheerfully. "Or you'll find that it'll be too late for you by the time you get home. Here." And he turned to the footman. "Have you got enough life in you to help me get him out?"

Between them they got Lord Ambry, still growling vengeance, out of the wrecked carriage, upon the

cushions of which they placed him, while Athelstan took off his coat and examined the wound made by the bullet. It was a flesh-wound in the upper part of the arm, and it was still bleeding freely, so freely indeed that Lord Ambry seemed again to be on the point of fainting from loss of blood, as he had done once already.

However, the footman found a brandy-flask in the carriage, and Lord Ambry, having swallowed some of the stimulant, felt himself equal to another and more violent attack upon the man who had saved his life.

"You and your precious brothers are simply the curse of this county," growled he, between the sips of brandy. "And I'm not sure I'm altogether sorry you've gone so far as this, because it gives me good grounds for riding the place of you."

Athelstan, who had certainly done what he could to repair the wrongs committed by the others, answered rather hotly—

"What do you mean by me and my brothers? I've done all I could for you, and——"

"It's of no use to pretend you were not one of the gang," replied Lord Ambry, stubbornly. "You always work together, and I don't know that your coming back to see what the damage is was not part of the plot."

"What plot?"

"Oh, you know well enough. The plot to steal the jewelry I had about me. Nobody knew of it except your rascally crew."

Now these last words revealed the fact that Lord

Ambry had not recognised any one of the Brancepeths, but had known them by their actions. So Athelstan proceeded to lie stoutly in the interests of his brothers.

"My brothers went home from the ball before I did, and they scarcely knew what they were doing then," said he. "As for me, you can see, I should think, that I don't look as if I'd been in any row or scrimmage."

Lord Ambry was too ill to argue the point, but he was not too ill to look stubborn and unconvinced. Athelstan, who was on the lookout for help to get the wounded man home, heard the wheels of a carriage, which proved to be that of a party returning from the ball.

They were ready to do all they could; and the whole party, consisting of two gentlemen and a lady, got out and finished their journey on foot, giving up the carriage as an ambulance for the Brancepeths' victims.

Athelstan volunteered to accompany the three wounded men home to Croke Hall, and took his place without any thanks from Lord Ambry, whom he discovered, as the drive proceeded, to be the least seriously injured of the three. The poor old coachman was only partially conscious from time to time; while the young footman was evidently feeling severely the effects of his courageous struggles.

It was a dreary drive. On arriving at the lodge-gates, Lord Ambry gave some directions rapidly in an undertone to the man who opened them; and Athelstan made out that he was ordering the police

to be sent for. The next moment the viscount turned to him

"You can consider yourself in custody," said he, shortly, "until something more has been found out about this affair."

Athelstan reddened and looked anxious. But it was not for himself. He had no fear that they would be able to fasten any of the guilt of this escapade on him. But he might be made to implicate his brothers if he were skilfully cross-examined, and then the long immunity enjoyed by the family would be over.

He was shown into a large, handsome square room, the walls of which, to within three or four feet of the ceiling, were entirely panelled with books. Under a heavy, hooded stone chimney-piece there burned a small fire, more for the sake of cheerfulness than for warmth, for the room was heated by hot pipes, which ran round the walls, screened by an ornamental grating underneath the lowest of the book-shelves.

Athelstan, who was angry at the treatment he was receiving, turned abruptly to the servant who showed him into the room.

"How long am I to remain here?" he asked, sharply.

But the only answer he received was the turning of the key in the lock outside the door.

The room was lighted by a brass lamp, which stood upon a table near the fireplace. It was not fully turned up, so that the light it gave was meagre. But Athelstan, as he glanced round him in search

of a way of escape, saw a movement behind one of the long, heavy curtains which shut off the bay containing the windows. Springing towards the curtain, he drew it back, and discovered a couple of stalwart men-servants armed each with a stout stick.

He reeled back, feeling dizzy and sick. So then, it was thought necessary to guard him as if he had been a wild beast. The men clutched their weapons, evidently expecting an attack. But he retreated very quietly to the table and sank into the big, square, morocco-covered library chair, and stretching his legs out, thrust his hands into his pockets and stared gloomily at the puny flickering light of the fire.

The house of Brancepeth was crumbling, indeed, and he could not even get home to warn his brothers of what was coming.

CHAPTER XXI.

HARRY had returned home from the ball in a mood of black despair, which was more than the natural reaction after the excitement of the ball and the pleasure of Hubert's society.

She knew what she had done, and realised the desperate position in which her refusal to marry either Lord Ambry or Hubert Besils had placed her. It was upon her marriage with a rich man that her brothers had counted for reinstating the family in their old position for rescuing them from the diffi-

culty into which their own thriftless extravagance had plunged them.

And yet she could not regret either of the two momentous steps she had taken that night. Now that she knew what love was; now that the womanly heart in her had been touched, indeed, she could not marry a man like Lord Ambry, who was now personally distasteful and repulsive to her. On the other hand, she could not burden the man she cared for with the needs and importunities, the scandals and the scrapes of her graceless brothers, only one of whom seemed capable of better things.

So that there seemed nothing before them all but ruin, dire, complete, disgraceful, and, morever, hastened by her action.

Harry did not cry: it would have been better far if she had. She sat back silently in her corner with her eyes closed pretending to be asleep, but betraying herself to the eyes of her watchful aunt by the set expression of her white, handsome face, which Lady Maggie could see by the light of the carriage lamps.

It was when the drive was nearly over that Lady Maggie's tiny hand crept softly under the arm of her silent niece. Harry was not a girl whose confidence it was easy to get: she was reserved and reticent about those things which affected her most deeply. But Lady Maggie, who saw and heard more than she ever confessed, knew more about the state of affairs than Harry would have thought possible. The girl was startled to hear her aunt's thin, flute-like voice saying, close to her ear—

"My dear, you have done quite right, quite right. You have behaved like an honourable woman. I am sorry for you, dear, very sorry for you. But—you are quite right, quite right."

Harry made no answer in words: she was afraid of breaking down. But she gently returned the pressure of her aunt's little hand.

Harry was too anxious, too restless to go to bed. She felt that the manner in which her brothers had gone off by themselves instead of returning as they had come, boded some sort of mischief. She exchanged her ball-dress for a warm dressing-gown, and sat by her window, which was at the front of the house, watching for their return.

If she had been in a less anxious frame of mind she would have gone to bed, wearied out with waiting and watching long before they made their appearance. For by the time they rode up the drive to the stables the morning had broken, and it was light enough, even under the trees of the place, for her to scrutinise every detail of their disorderly and even ghastly appearance.

Blood-stained, covered with mud, with torn clothes and heavy haggard faces, the three brothers, as they came up the drive in single file on their tired horses, presented to their sister's horror-stricken eyes a spectacle which she never forgot.

What had they done? Though she could not guess the truth, Harry knew that some fearful misfortune had happened, and that the return of her brothers was bringing the shadow of some new disgrace upon the old home. She could not rest until

she had found out what it was; so, opening her door very quietly, she slipped down the staircase, and seating herself on a corner of the divan in the inner hall, waited for her brothers to come in from the stables.

They entered the house almost without noise—an unusual and bad sign. And they went straight into the dining-room and shut themselves in without rousing the household, in their customary manner, to attend to their wants.

Harry crossed the hall softly and listened at the door. Even if she had been brought up to more scrupulous niceties of conduct, Harry would have felt justified in this act of eavesdropping; for long before she had heard a word she knew that it was no ordinary escapade in which they had been engaged.

The first words she overheard gave her so great a shock that she could scarcely refrain from betraying herself by a scream.

The voice was Radley's.

"I tell you I didn't kill him. I didn't do him as much harm as you did to the other poor devils. If any one of them goes off to hooks after the business it will be the old man you dragged off the box!"

Then Giles spoke in a sullen tone.

"It's a bad business."

"Oh, well," said Radley, who seemed by his tone to be much less affected than either of the others, "it couldn't be helped. And we've got the jewelry at any rate. Look! It will fetch enough money to take us away, if necessary——"

"Let's hope it won't come to that," interrupted

Giles. "They didn't recognise any of us, that I'll swear. Of course we shall be suspected, but that's nothing. We're suspected of everything that goes wrong in the county, from a lost hen to a church on fire. It was a good thing, as it happens, that Athelstan wasn't with us. As they are generally four of us to any mischief, the number three will puzzle 'em! By the bye, what's become of Athelstan, I wonder?"

"Oh, never mind him. Let's have something to eat and drink. I'm hungry, and my throat's like a limekiln," said Quin, speaking for the first time, and with as much unconcern as if the outrage had been a very trifling matter.

"You're a cool hand for a young 'un," said Radley.

"Well," said his youngest brother quite cheerfully, "what's the use of making so much fuss, just because we've gone a little bit further than usual? It will all blow over, as it always does, and in the mean time we can enjoy ourselves with the money we get on the jewelry. And after all, they were ours, that is—Harry's. And it's her fault, not ours, that there has been all this bother about getting them back from the mean old hunks."

This novel view of the circumstances made his brothers laugh, and they sat down to the table, where some cold meat, some wine, and soda-water had been prepared for their possible needs. Harry stole away from the door, went to her room, and put on her hat and her riding-habit. She had made up her mind what to do. Then she waited in her own room, with her door ajar, until her three brothers came up to bed.

It was broad daylight by this time, the daylight

of a dull and misty December morning. Nobody was yet stirring, for the household was not an early one. In a few minutes Harry stole softly out upon the landing and listened at the door of Giles's room. He was so much accustomed to a bad conscience that it in no way affected his slumbers. He had no sooner settled his head upon his pillow than he was asleep. His sister, hearing by his breathing that this was the case, turned the handle of his door and went in. She felt in the pockets of his clothes, in the wardrobe, and at last under his pillow. And it was here that she discovered the jewels.

Harry set her teeth hard as she dashed the tears from her eyes. She was fond of her brothers, and now her heart felt very sore, very tender, as she looked at the tired face of the sleeping man, and realised the terrible situation in which he, and Radley, and Quin had placed themselves by this last and worst outrage.

She must save them if she could from the consequences of their folly, their crime. But, even as she, with trembling hands, drew the jewels from under the pillow and crept out of the room with them, she felt that her heart failed her. She could restore them to their owner; but could she soften him? If she had cared for Lord Ambry, it would have been easy enough. But as it was, she was doubtful of her own powers. It was with a mind full of misgivings that, having saddled her horse with her own hands and led him out of the stable just as the men were coming in to their work, she began her long ride to Croke Hall.

It was nearly eight o'clock in the morning when Harry passed through the lodge-gates of Lord Ambry's mansion and rode up the avenue to the house. The door was opened even before she had time to dismount.

She could scarcely command her voice, so full of fear was she as to what she might hear in answer to her words:

"Will you ask Lord Ambry if I can see him? You know who I am—Miss Brancepeth."

The man showed her in, and ushered her into a long, cold drawing-room, the shutters of which he proceeded to open, with apologies.

She was standing, deaf, unheeding, full of unspeakable joy that the worst at least had not happened. Lord Ambry was not dead: her brothers' crime had stopped short of murder.

She was left alone for about twenty minutes; then a lady entered, whom she had never seen before, but whom she recognised by the likeness to Lord Ambry as his eldest married daughter. Lady Barrington was rather short, rather stout, with hard eyes and a straight mouth. Her manner was stiff and cold.

"I am sorry, Miss Brancepeth, that you cannot see my father. Perhaps you have not heard that he was attacked last night by some ruffians, on his way home from Fernsham, and that he is ill in bed."

"I am very, very sorry to hear this," said Harry, in a low voice.

Then she debated within herself what she should do. She saw at once that Lady Barrington would not allow her to see Lord Ambry; that his daughter

would be only too glad that the engagement was broken off, and would put all possible obstacles in the way of a meeting and possible reconciliation between her father and Harry. With him, Harry felt, she would have had at least a chance a woman always has with a man; and, with the jewels in her hand, she might have done something to mitigate his anger. But to give them into the hands of this coldly vindictive-looking woman would be, so Harry thought, to put a proof of her brothers' guilt into inimical hands. This was not to be thought of. The next words Lady Barrington uttered confirmed the girl in her resolve.

"Considering who the persons were who attacked my father, I must confess that I am astonished to see you here this morning, Miss Brancepeth."

"Who were the persons?" asked Harry, firmly.

Lady Barrington slightly raised her eyebrows.

"We have reason to think they were your brothers. In fact, we have one of them in the house now, waiting for the arrival of the police."

In a moment Harry, on hearing this, had recovered all her spirit, nerve, and fire.

"Let me see him," said she.

It was not an entreaty, it was a demand. Lady Barrington hesitated. But the next moment she discovered that her visitor was not the sort of person who can be put off with excuses when she has made up her mind.

Harry was already at the door.

"You are very impatient," said Lady Barrington, almost fretfully.

"I mean to see him."

Harry was in the hall, trying the doors of the other rooms. A man-servant, evidently on guard, made a movement towards the door of the library, and thus gave her the clue she wanted.

She brushed the man's hand sharply aside, and turned the key, which was in the lock.

The next moment she was in the room, which was still shut up, and lighted only by the dying lamp and the dwindling fire.

"Athelstan, Athelstan!" cried she, hoarsely.

The young man started up from the arm-chair and caught his sister in his arms.

At the same instant there was a stir—a commotion in the hall. Something had happened.

"What is the matter?" asked Athelstan, as another man darted into the room, and exchanged a hurried whisper with the two men who had been on guard behind the curtains.

"Sir," answered the man at once, in a voice full of regret and alarm, "I am very sorry, but I suppose I may as well tell you—the coachman, the one that was hurt last night—is dead, sir. And—and the police are here, sir."

The hands of brother and sister closed together with a tighter grip, and the silent look that flashed from eye to eye was one of despair.

CHAPTER XXII.

Now there was between Harry Brancepeth and her brother Athelstan a bond even stronger than that which existed between her and the rest of her brothers. The two had always been "chums." But the friendship had been cemented lately by their mutual discovery that they were in love; and although they had not exchanged many confidences on the subject of their unlucky attachments, each was in sympathy with the other.

When, therefore, they heard the terrible words which told them their brothers had not only been guilty of murder, but that the police were already on their track, they were for a moment speechless with horror.

Then Harry whispered—

"You had nothing to do with it, at least, had you?"

"Nothing in the world, except that I did all I could for them, and that I really think I saved Lord Ambry's life," whispered he back.

"Thank God!"

For another minute they remained silent, so benumbed with the misery and disgrace which had fallen upon them that they could not think or form any plan of action.

This temporary paralysis helped them in a way they could not have anticipated, but which Harry presently perceived and took advantage of. The

servants who had been on guard in the study since Athelstan's arrival at the mansion had found their prisoner so docile that they supposed him to be cowed and spiritless. They were, moreover, touched by the clinging affection, the despair, which both brother and sister showed on their meeting.

So that the door of the room was left open, and even the man who had stood outside the door, probably considering that the arrival of the police was his signal for being off duty, had turned his head away to watch the police-sergeant as he went into the dining-room, followed by two constables.

Harry, with a woman's quickness, grasped the situation even in the midst of her misery. It flashed into her mind that they would certainly try to detain her as well as Athelstan, in order that the others might be seized at once before they had been warned. And if she were detained, the discovery that she had the stolen jewels on her person would assuredly follow; and this would incriminate the unlucky family still further. So she whispered—

"They can't do anything to you, can they?"

"I don't think so."

"You could get away now if you liked by making a dash for it. And I would meet you outside, and we would make shift to ride back home on my horse together?"

Athelstan considered a moment.

"That would never do. I'm not going to run away. It would be the worst thing I could do—for everybody. But you're different. Get away if you can, and warn the others. Tell them not to run

away, but to take precautions, to make up a story, to do the best they can for themselves. Tell them not to be scared. Lord Ambry will be willing to give them a chance, I should think, for my father's sake. You know they are old friends. I shall try to see Lord Ambry. If the boys were taken up it would kill my father. You know that."

"But—listen. I have got the jewelry! I took it from under Giles's pillow. I wanted to give it back to Lord Ambry. But he won't see me. What shall I do with it?"

"Upon my soul I don't know," whispered poor Athelstan, alarmed to see how closely the net seemed to be tightening round their feet. "At any rate you must get away. I don't suppose they will dare to stop *you*."

Harry, who was still clinging to her brother, holding his hand, turned quickly and strode to the door without another word. She guessed there was a danger of her being detained, so the only leave-taking she indulged in was a slight pressure of Athelstan's hand as she let it go.

As she had expected, there was a movement among the servants. The man who stood at the door barred the way, apologizing as he did so. But Harry drew herself up, and, looking the man straight in the face, asked by whose authority he dared to detain her.

"The police, ma'am," said he respectfully, in a low voice.

For a moment the girl felt dizzy and sick. It had come to this, then, that the whole family, the proud Brancepeths, were under surveillance. Then she re-

covered her nerve, remembering how much depended upon her speedy return home. By a rapid and unexpected movement she threw her whole weight, that of a tall, well-developed young woman of exceptional muscle and agility, upon the man's outstretched arm. He gave way; but recovering himself quickly, he called his fellow-servants to his assistance, and pursued her through the hall.

Fortunately for her, the footman who stood between her and the front door, when she reached the outer hall untouched, was moved by a chivalrous impulse on seeing the beautiful lady's white face and haggard, sad eyes.

His fellow-servants, calling, pursuing, were not yet in sight. He heard their cries, "Don't open the door! Keep the door shut!" and by a first impulse he barred the way. But the next, he himself turned and drew back the bolt.

"Quick, ma'am! The horse is on the left!" he whispered, as she flew past him without a word, but with one grateful look from her wild eyes.

She leapt the flight of steps at one bound, snatched the reins of her horse from the servant who was holding them, and, springing into the saddle like a bird, was tearing through the park towards the gate before her pursuers had got farther than the front door.

She had not reached the lodge-gates, however, when she perceived that here was a more effectual barrier. The lodge-keeper had evidently been warned not to let anyone go out, for even the little side-gate was shut, and the man, who was standing under the

porch, retired into his lodge at her summons, instead of coming out. It would be waste of time to try to cajole him.

Her sense of the danger her brothers ran was getting stronger as each fresh obstacle presented itself. Get home she must, she must, if her horse dropped dead at the stable-doors!

The fence round the park was high, and protected at the top with that terror of all riders, barbed wire. Nevertheless, she must take all risks and go over it, since egress by the gate was denied to her. Turning her horse's head sharply, she rode over the wet grass at an easy canter, with her lips pressed tightly together. Already the swift motion through the cold morning air was doing her good, benumbing her agitated mind, relieving the tension which was causing her temples to throb and her heart to beat as if it would burst.

The lodge-keeper saw her intention, but was powerless to do more than shout to her to stop. For answer Harry touched her horse with her little whip.

"Steady, my beauty! Now, over you go!" she cried, in a tone which the animal understood and obeyed.

Responding to his mistress's call, he took the fence as lightly and easily as if it had been but a couple of feet high. Harry drew a long breath. Patting her horse's neck, and smiling once more, she nodded triumphantly to the lodge-keeper, who stood, with his face pressed against the iron work of the gate, a not altogether unwilling witness of her escape.

It was the most ironical part of the fate of the

Brancepeths that their escapades dazzled even the victims of them, and the unconcealed admiration of the country folk for the very pranks they deprecated encouraged the scapegraces to fresh outrage.

Harry in particular, being not only a woman, but a very beautiful one, got pity instead of blame for all her caprices. Everybody said that she was as generous-hearted as she was wilful, and that, when she was with the gang, they were at least sure of compensation from the trespassers.

All the way home the one thought dominated all others in Harry's mind: she must get the boys to stand their ground. For Harry knew that the moral courage of Radley and Giles was not so great as the physical callousness which enabled them to face immediate danger to their persons. She was afraid that they might be seized by panic, and, by running away, owned themselves beaten before the battle was begun.

The sun had begun to shine through the mist and fog by the time she rode up to the gate of Culverley Place. It was half-past nine, and in the usual course of things the family would have been at breakfast. Harry had her hands upon the latch of the gate, when, stooping in her saddle to lift the latch, she saw under the trees a horse, saddled and bridled, but without a rider. The animal had evidently been ridden some distance at a smart pace; for he was splashed with mud and breathing hard; his coat was wet and his flanks were heaving.

Harry wondered what this portended; in her anxiety small things seemed of grave import.

A little wiry lad, whose face seemed familiar to her, ran out from the back of the house, and running towards the horse as fast as his legs could carry him, sprang into the saddle and turned the animal's head towards the gate. When he saw Harry, his face, which had been white before, grew suddenly crimson.

Harry passed through the gate and barred the lad's progress.

"What are you doing here? Where do you come from?" she asked.

Even as she spoke, she recognised him as one of the stable lads from Croke Hall. He answered stammering, but Harry saw that he was telling the truth—

"If you please, ma'am, I've come—on the quiet—to tell the young gentlemen—that—that—if you please, ma'am—they've sent for a warrant—cos' the coachman's died."

He uttered the last words in a mysterious whisper.

Harry was dumb. Here was another most terrible proof how strongly suspicion was running in the direction of her brothers. A little flicker of sickly hope, however, made her stammer out—

"You have been sent to tell them? Lord Ambry sent you?"

But he shook his head decidedly.

"Oh, no, ma'am, not Lord Ambry. It's he as has sent for the warrant. It's one of the grooms sent me."

Harry's heart sank again. She tried to put a brave face on the matter, although she knew that it was only a farce to do so. After all, there was one rock

upon which to fall back—Lord Ambry's friendship for Sir Giles. He would never allow this matter to go fatally far while Sir Giles lived, that for certain. In decency it was impossible for him to do so.

"Thank you," she said to the lad, in as steady a voice as she could produce. "I don't know how this can concern my brothers; I don't know what it all means. But I thank you for your trouble. Who did you see?"

She was suddenly anxious for the answer.

The lad hesitated; he looked guilty and confused.

"Please, ma'am, I didn't see nobody 'ceptin'," he dropped his voice—"'ceptin' Sir Giles."

"Sir Giles! My father!" cried Harry, quickly, in a voice of alarm. "What—what did you tell him?"

"I told 'im there was a warrant out, or was goin' to be," answered the lad, looking more frightened than before.

The blood seemed to run cold in Harry's veins.

"What did he say? How did he take it?" she asked, hoarsely, already moving towards the house.

The tone in which the lad answered her told her that he shared her own fears.

"He took it awful strange, ma'am," he answered, in a shaking voice. "He just mumbled something, an' made a gaspin' noise, and then said nothin'. And I was afraid he was angry with me for telling him; an' I run away."

Harry waited for no more. She was off her horse and inside the house in an instant. The butler was standing at the hall door, watching the boy.

"My father—Sir Giles!" cried she, in a shivering voice.

The man answered quietly enough.

"He is in the dining-room, ma'am, at breakfast."

Harry felt reassured.

"And my brothers?"

"The young gentlemen went out about an hour ago, ma'am," answered the butler, who, if he knew anything, evidently did not know much of the night's proceedings. But then the escapades of the young gentlemen were so frequent that it took a good deal to rouse the servants of the household to excitement on such a subject. "All but Mr. Athelstan: he's not been home all night, ma'am."

Harry threw down her whip upon one of the hall tables and entered the dining-room. No one was in it except her father, who was sitting, with his back towards her when she came in, in his usual place at the head of the table. Even Lady Maggie was not there.

Harry, upon whom a great fear had fallen, approached her father with a gentle tread.

"Father!" she called, as soon as she was near enough to put her hand on his shoulder.

But he did not move.

For a moment she remained standing beside him, without moving her hand from his shoulder, without looking down. She knew what had happened: she had foreseen what must happen, if such a terrible announcement as that about the warrant for the arrest of his sons were made to him suddenly. She felt the need of a few moments' preparation before she had to realise the truth.

Then she went slowly down on her knees, and shutting her eyes, leaned her face against his shoulder.

"Father," she whispered, "you can't hear me, and I'm glad of it. I'm glad, my dear, dear old father, that you won't see the horrible, horrible end that's got to come to the old place and to all of us. I'm glad, I'm glad!"

But as she spoke, the tears and sobs which she had so long suppressed burst from her; and when Lady Maggie entered the room a few minutes later, followed by the butler, they found poor Harry in a paroxysm of grief, clasping her dead father in her arms.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Sir Giles Brancepeth had been a bad father, in that he had neglected the moral training of his children and encouraged them in the lawless conduct in which they delighted: but he had been a very indulgent one, and Harry had loved him passionately.

Now she had not only to suffer her own sense of a great personal loss, but to realise that his death involved the utter ruin of the family. She had secretly hoped that Lord Ambry would not even foreclose the mortgage on the estate as long as old Sir Giles lived. She had believed it impossible for her brothers to be put on trial for their recent outrage during his lifetime.

Now both these hopes were dashed to the ground.

Her aunt led the girl away into another room, and tried to console her; but in truth Lady Maggie wanted comfort herself. The news that her nephews had been guilty of some worse outrage than usual had reached her ears; and the sudden disappearance of three of them and the non-appearance of the other filled her with uneasiness only less than that which was felt by her better-informed niece.

At last Harry, arousing herself from the lethargy of misery into which she had fallen, sprang up from the floor where she had been sitting in a crouching position at her aunt's knees.

"Aunt Maggie!" she cried, "I'm only making you more miserable, and getting no comfort myself. I must go out. Unless—unless," she added, in a gentler tone, "you want me? Unless I can do anything?"

The ready tears sprang to Lady Maggie's eyes. This was a sign of the change which had appeared in Harry lately, that she was considerate of others.

"How kind you are getting, dear!" she said, innocently, as she wiped her eyes.

Harry reddened.

"You ought to say, How unkind I've always been, Aunt Maggie!"

"No, no, my dear," replied Lady Maggie, quickly. "It's natural for young people to be thoughtless. I have never thought you unkind. Go out into the air. It will do you good."

Now Lady Maggie was almost as much to blame as her brother-in-law himself had been in spoiling her niece and her nephews by unwise indulgence. And

she did, in a way, recognise and repent this. Gentle, affectionate, and rather weak, it had been so much easier to her to suffer for their faults than to correct them. Harry saw this dimly too; and as she kissed her aunt before leaving her, she looked at her with a mournful, wistful expression which went nigh to breaking Lady Maggie's heart.

A minute later Harry was in the orchard.

It was not wholly for the relief of the fresh air that she has been anxious to escape from the house. She wanted to find her brothers. What could their sudden disappearance, after an unusually early breakfast, mean but that they had taken fright and run away, instead of standing their ground like men of courage?

In that case where would they have gone to?

She went round to the stables and learned that they had not taken their horses, but that they had given orders that the three mounts they had hired at Fernsham the night before should be well-groomed and taken back to the town without delay.

They could not, therefore, have gone far, she thought. It was, of course, possible that they had gone off by train; and that they had walked to the station. But this was hardly likely, as the appearance of the Brancepaths on foot would certainly arouse more attention than if they had been on horseback. She thought it probable, therefore, that they were hiding about the grounds waiting to see what turn affairs would take before they decided on a definite line of conduct.

She waded through the wet grass of the orchard

and whistled softly, that unladylike accomplishment being one of the few in which she was proficient.

There was no sound in answer.

She went farther away from the house, looking eagerly around her through the vistas formed by the almost leafless cherry-trees. Penetrating gradually as far as the fence which divided the orchard of the Brancepeths from that which belonged to the Vicarage she stopped suddenly: the memory of the night on which she had stood there with Hubert suddenly overcame her, and she leaned against one of the wooden posts of the fence and shut her eyes tightly to keep the tears back.

A hand, large, warm, firm of touch, was placed suddenly upon hers. Harry looked up at once, and struggled violently but vainly to free herself.

The hand was Hubert's.

Finding her efforts to release her own fingers were useless, Harry tried another course of action. She suddenly ceased to struggle and confronted her captor fiercely.

"Do you intend to detain me against my will, Mr. Besils?"

"Yes. It is the least you deserve for your treatment of me last night."

He perceived as soon as her eyes met his that something had happened, something of great moment. And at once he let her hand go.

"You are in some trouble, some grief," he said, in a voice full of sympathy. "Can't I help you? Isn't there anything I can do?"

Harry began to tremble, and Hubert saw how

worn her fresh young face had, in the course of a few hours, become.

"If you can bring a dead man to life," she said, in a voice which had lost its youthfulness, "you can help. Not otherwise."

Hubert, who had already heard a rumour that the brothers had been in mischief again, was shocked.

"A dead man!" echoed he.

Harry's voice shook as she said—

"My father is dead. And—and—that is not all. But I—I have no right to trouble you. I had forgotten."

The events of the previous evening, her rupture with Lord Ambry, her encouragement of Hubert, and her final repulse when he pressed his suit, had faded from her mind, thrust out indeed by the succession of vivid shocks she had since had to sustain. Now the meeting with Hubert brought them all back, and she grew on the instant crimson with a young girl's modest shame.

Passing her hand over her hot forehead she said, in a tone the touching humility of which moved Hubert to acute compassion—

"I—I behaved badly to you, I am afraid, last night. I—I let you think I was weaker, sillier than I am. I couldn't help it. I was selfish; I wanted to have just one happy evening."

"Well, so did I. And I am very grateful to you for having let me have it. Don't worry your head about me. Now tell me: I don't want to force your confidence; but if you are worried about your brothers——"

She started violently:

"What! Have you heard? Is it all over the place already?"

"I have heard that they got into some scrape last night. But—well, I often hear that. And the next thing I hear is that they have got out again."

Harry sighed heavily:

"They won't out of this. It is ruin, ruin for us all, this time. It has killed my father. And that is only the beginning."

She was dry-eyed, despairing, quite cold in voice and manner. Nothing about her invited sympathy. Hubert was more alarmed than he allowed himself to appear.

What could he do, what could he say, in the face of this stony sorrow? If he had had the rights of a lover, he could have drawn her into his arms and whispered loving words of comfort and consolation. But her grief seemed to have bound her heart in ice; she was like a statue, cold, beautiful, impassive. Hubert dared not obtrude his own passion upon this erect, proud-eyed creature, who had recovered in a few moments from the pretty feminine impulse of confusion she had experienced on recalling the events of the ball.

She heaved a deep sigh and turned away towards the house.

"Harry! Harry!" he called in an imploring whisper, "don't go away like that!"

Just for one moment she paused, she seemed to hesitate. It was enough for Hubert. The next instant he had got over the fence and taken her in his arms.

The girl's cold composure gave way at once; the tears came, and she sobbed so violently that Hubert, in alarm, tried to check her passionate expression of grief.

"Don't, don't stop me!" she sobbed. "I want to cry, oh, I want to! It is happiness, yes, happiness after what—what I have been feeling this morning."

So she sobbed herself out, with his arm round her, his hand wiping the tears from her face. Then quite suddenly she held him at arm's length, and looking into his face with an expression of pleading sadness which wrung his very heart-strings, she said in a broken voice—

"Now go. Go, I implore you. You have given me one last happiness, for I know you love me; I thank God for that. But you have got to go away and forget me now. And I—I have got to forget you."

"No, no, Harry. You shall not forget me. You must be my wife, darling, my wife. You won't refuse the shelter of my arms now, will you?"

He was drawing her to him again. But with a face full of terror, the girl struggled to free herself from him. But he was too strong for her, and again she had to submit to his passionate kiss. For one moment he thought he had conquered the strong will, and that she would submit, like any other homeless, fatherless girl, to accept the shelter of the name and the home, the loving arms, the helping hands, of the man she loved.

But even while this thought was intoxicating

Harry's lover, the girl was steadfast in her resolve still.

"Let me go now, Hubert," she whispered, in a voice which sent a sudden chill through his blood.

"Will you promise—will you promise——" stammered he, as she drew herself away from him.

In a voice full of inexpressible sadness she answered—

"I promise—that you shall—hear from me again."

In the momentary shock which the tone of her voice gave him she had got quite free. She stood a little way from him and pressed her hands against her breast. As she did so she uttered a suppressed shriek, and the colour which Hubert's kisses had brought into her face suddenly left it.

"What is it? You are ill!" cried he.

She did not answer. She was looking with wild eyes at something which glittered in her hand. And then he recognised the necklace he had himself fastened round her neck on the previous evening.

"Oh, what shall I do with them?" she whispered.

And then she told him hurriedly the whole story of her finding them under her brother's pillow, after she had overheard the story of the robbery; how she had ridden to Croke Hall to restore them to their owner, and how she had been forced to return without having given them up.

"What shall I do?" she repeated, when she had told him the whole story. "I ought to give them back to Lord Ambry, and it is just possible, isn't it? that he would be softened a little by getting them back. On the other hand, my giving them back

would have been fresh proof against my brothers, wouldn't it?"

"Look here," said Hubert, after a few minutes spent in reflection, "will you trust them to me? I will take them over to Croke Hall, and either confess how I came by them, or not, just as may seem best for your brothers. I'm afraid, though, that if the coachman is really dead the matter will be out of Lord Ambry's hands. In the circumstances, I'm not at all sure that they are not wise to keep out of the way."

Harry shuddered. Then she glanced hurriedly around and bent her head in a listening attitude.

"Did you hear anything?" she whispered.

No, Hubert had heard nothing.

"Perhaps it is the guilty family conscience!" she said, with an attempt at a smile. "I want you to promise that you will go at once, that you will not keep those things"—and she glanced at the jewels in his hands with a shiver of disgust—"in your house a minute longer than you can help. They—they're unlucky!" she finished with a husky whisper.

"Very well. I will have the mare saddled, and will go off at once. Will that satisfy you?"

He spoke with a tender intonation; but the new fear connected with the jewels had frozen up again all the springs of affection within her. She was like a statue of terror as she stood with one hand out, motioning him away.

With many misgivings at his heart, Hubert vaulted over the fence between the orchards, and crossing the grass almost at a run, in obedience to her wishes,

disappeared behind the bushes of the Vicarage garden.

Harry stood by the fence watching him. When he was out of sight she was slowly turning to go back into the house when her attention was attracted by the crackling of branches some distance to the right. She made a dash in the direction whence the sound came. Then there was silence. But she waited, full of suspicions, and knelt down in the wet grass of the orchard behind the hedge, which was, at this point, thick enough to hide her person. And in a few seconds she heard the sound again, and this time saw something dark moving under the more distant trees of the Vicarage orchard.

Without a moment's delay she had vaulted over the hedge as neatly as one of her brothers could have done, and was giving chase to the moving object. Before she came up with the figure she knew that it was her brother Radley. He tried to hide himself from her, as he stealthily advanced, under cover of the gooseberry-bushes and pear-trees of the kitchen garden, towards the back of the Vicarage. But this progress of his was too suspicious for her to allow it to be continued uninterrupted. She stopped his further advance by a dash into the bushes which placed her between him and the house.

"Radley!" she cried, in a whisper. "Oh, Radley, I'm—I'm so glad you're here—and safe. Where are the others? Quin? And Giles? Are they here, too?"

The words died away upon her lips, for she saw that, in place of the admiring, indulgent brother of

the old days, it was with a fierce and desperate man that she had to deal.

"Curse you!" said he, hissing out the words at her between his tight-set teeth. "Curse you and Athelstan, too! You have put a rope round our necks by your interference, and your d—d new Sunday-school notions! Get out of my way, stand out of my way, I say, or I'll give you what you deserve!"

To the girl's unspeakable horror, Radley, who had evidently been drinking, raised the thick stick he carried, and held it menacingly close to her face. She did not flinch, but a look of anguish came into her eyes.

"Oh, Radley!" she cried, in an agonised whisper, "you don't know what you are doing! I'm sure you don't; or you would never raise your hand against me! Where were you going to? What are you doing here?"

Radley glared at her angrily.

"It's not safe to tell you anything," he said, sullenly. "Since you have taken to playing fast and loose with everybody, and to kissing a man one minute and sending him about his business the next, there's no trusting you. As long as we all stuck together it was all right, and we could snap our fingers at anybody; but now you two have turned so virtuous, it's ruin for all of us!"

Harry listened with a shiver. Yes, it was all Hubert's fault, all this holding out of a new ideal of conduct, which had broken the luck of the Brancepeths.

"What were you going to do at the Vicarage?" she repeated, without answering him.

"I was going to get some money to take me away from here," he answered recklessly.

"Money—from the Vicarage?"

"Well, you can get it for me, if you like. It's all up with us if we stay here. And we can't get away without money. That fool Giles was so screwed last night he can't remember what he did with——"

He stopped short, suddenly thinking that confession was indiscreet. Harry, however, knew what he meant.

"Where is Giles?" she asked.

The answer came from the lips of Giles himself, who sprang upon them even while she was speaking, with a white face and red, angry eyes. He clenched his fists as he turned to her, and drew his breath in deep gasps as he spoke:

"So it was you who stole the jewelry from under my pillow, you—you jade, was it? You who——"

Radley uttered a fierce cry, and rushed at his sister; but she sprang nimbly out of his way, and addressed herself imploringly to her eldest brother.

"Stop, Giles; you know you are saying what isn't true. I didn't steal the jewels; I wanted to save you all from the consequences of what you had done by giving them back."

"And 'giving us away' at the same time?"

"When I got to Croke Hall I found I couldn't see Lord Ambry, so I would not bring danger upon you by owning I had them. I brought the jewels back with me——"

"Give them up, then. Give them up!" cried Radley, more menacingly than ever.

"Hold your tongue, Radley," said his brother. "She can't give them up to us, for I saw her give them to that fellow Besils ten minutes ago."

"To Besils! The d— she did!"

"Oh, listen, boys! I did it for your sakes! Don't you see I couldn't let my brothers be taken for common thieves. Mr. Besils will say you took them for the fun of the thing, and that you are in great distress at the serious turn things took because of his resistance. And so you are, aren't you, boys? Oh, Giles, Giles, you are sorry, I'm sure!"

"It's no time to talk of being sorry, said Giles, impatiently. "One of the men is dead, and the shock of the beastly affair has killed my father. What's the use of talking about being 'sorry'? It is childish. We must get away, and you must get the money for us to go with."

"But where? How am I to get it?" asked Harry, trembling. "Luke Standen would have lent it me, but he's gone away, and——"

"Luke Standen! Why, he's as poor as a church mouse himself!" said Giles, impatiently. "You must get it from Besils, of course. You have only got to promise to marry him. And there's nothing else for you to do now. And he'll let you have as much money as you want fast enough."

"But, Giles, I can't, I can't!" gasped Harry.

"*You must!*"

He growled out the words at her, threatening her with both hand and eye in his turn.

"Confound the girl! Do you want to see us all hanged?" shouted a third voice in her ear.

Quin had come creeping through the shrubs and the fruit-trees and joined the group. He was in a state of abject terror, and his presence sent a fresh thrill of alarm through the rest. Radley broke out, angrily—

"Hold your tongue, Quin. They can't hang you or me. We've killed nobody."

"Oh, boys, boys, don't!" moaned Harry, as she looked round at the livid, desperate faces, and realised with difficulty that these greedy, criminal young ruffians were indeed the brothers she had loved and been so proud of. "I will get the money for you; I will, I will. Only look at me as you used to look. Speak as you used to speak. I am not a turn-coat; I have no Sunday-school notions. I am your own loving sister, and whatever you have done, and whatever may happen to you, I'll stand in with you, boys, and share the luck to the end!"

Her voice was broken, but she did not cry. Giles, the guiltiest by a chance, the best-hearted of the three by nature, just grasped her hand and nodded. The other two remained silent and sullen, and unmoved except by a new hope of safety and escape.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IT was late in the afternoon of the day on which old Sir Giles died, when Harry, having at last exchanged the riding-habit which she had worn since five o'clock that morning for a plain tailor-made walking dress, walked up the path through the Vicarage garden and rang the bell.

She had been on the watch for Hubert's return from Croke Hall, and his prolonged absence made her so uneasy that she decided to brave a meet with Mrs. Floriston, and to ask that lady whether she might wait for his return. There was no tendency to deceit in Harry's nature, and she was quite ready to acknowledge the difficulties she was in.

She had not been in the drawing-room more than a minute when Hubert's sister came in. She was more than usually dignified, more than usually cool. But there was something so touching in the face of her visitor, such a haggard look of waiting and watching in her tired eyes, that Mrs. Floriston's first words were much kinder than she had intended.

"Why, how worn out you look! Sit down. Let me give you a cup of tea."

And she put her hand upon the bell. Harry's lip trembled and her eyes grew moist. To be prepared for harshness and then to find herself treated with kindness is perhaps the worst trial which a tired

woman can have to face. She did not take the proffered seat, but shook her head deprecatingly.

"I haven't been to bed last night; that's why I'm tired," she explained, quickly.

"Ah! These dances! What won't a young girl go through for the sake of a night spent in twirling round over a slippery floor!"

"Oh, it isn't that. I—I have lost my father; I suppose you had heard that. And—my brothers have got themselves into trouble again; and—your brother—Mr. Besils—has gone to try to get them out. He won't, though; he can't; but he may do something. And I am anxious. So I want to see him. I thought perhaps you would let me wait here till he comes back. It is so dreadful—at home!"

Mrs. Floriston guessed that something must be very wrong indeed "at home" for the girl to take shelter with her. Hubert had ridden off with only the briefest of explanations that he was going as far as Croke Hall and should not be back to luncheon; and she had devoutly hoped that his mission was to promote a reconciliation between Lord Ambry and his capricious *fiancée*.

Of course she had heard of the rupture, and had herself been a witness of the outrageous flirtation Harry had subsequently carried on with Hubert at the ball. She had been illogical enough to be angry on learning that Harry had refused her brother, and was now in a terrible state of uncertainty as to what the wayward girl's intentions really were.

She disliked this wilful and capricious young person, as she considered Harry, both for having

encouraged Hubert to love her, and for refusing to marry him when she had succeeded; but the strongest feeling in her heart as she heard the girl's words was the hope that she would keep to her refusal, and not involve him in the meshes of an alliance with her dreadful family.

So her tone grew colder at once; she could not help it.

"Of course it is a very trying time for you," she said. "I had not heard of your father's death; I am very sorry for you. Your aunt, Lady Maggie, is at home, is she not?"

"Yes," answered Harry. Then, with a burst of embarrassing frankness, she added, "So are the police."

Mrs. Floriston started violently. Had the brothers, then, completed the list of their enormities by killing their own father? It did not appear improbable. Harry, who, for very weariness, had at last sunk down upon a chair, went on in a hoarse, tired voice—

"Lord Ambry was attacked last night. Of course my poor brothers were suspected——"

"Naturally," Mrs. Floriston had almost said.

"So they have come to watch the house—the police, I mean. Luckily, my brothers were all out when they came," she went on, blushing guiltily, and quite aware that her listener put the worst construction upon this circumstance. "So Mr. Besils has gone to Lord Ambry to—to intercede, at least—to explain."

Mrs. Floriston murmured something which was the very reverse of what she thought. She was full

of hope that this last outrage on the part of the young Brancepeths would disenchant Hubert with their sister, and of fear lest the girl's appearance in her present forlorn condition would revive the warmth of his feelings. If she could only get rid of Harry before Hubert came back!

She tried.

"You may be quite sure that he will do his best," she said. And then, as the tea was brought in at that moment, she purred out her next words over the cups and saucers: "Don't you think, Miss Brancepeth, that in the circumstances it would be more pleasant for you not to see my brother, but to let me bring you the result of his visit to Lord Ambry? Of course I know that you refused my brother, and no doubt you feel some delicacy about meeting him again so soon."

Harry smiled. She understood.

"I must see him!" she said, simply. "I do wish I had not got to, but I must. But you need not mind. It's bad enough for him to concern himself in our affairs at all, but it's better than if he were going to marry me. And remember you owe that comfort to *me!*"

Mrs. Floriston glanced from the girl to the fire with heightened colour.

"Perhaps your resolution will break down now," she said, with just a suggestion in her tone of the direction in which her own wishes lay.

"No," said the girl, simply. "I care for him too much. I am going away."

Then there was silence between the two ladies,

and the talk when they presently did speak was kept away from these delicate subjects.

Meanwhile, Hubert was finding the task he had undertaken by no means an easy one. He obtained an interview with Lord Ambry, who was at first cold and stiff, looking upon him as his successful rival with Harrington Brancepeth and the indirect cause of her brother's attack. Hubert quickly disabused his mind, and told him that he himself had proposed to Miss Brancepeth and had been rejected by her.

"Then we may congratulate each other," said Lord Ambry, smiling from the bed in which he was lying, propped up with pillows.

"No," said Hubert, gravely. "I would marry her to-morrow if she would let me, whatever becomes of her brothers."

Lord Ambry shrugged his shoulders.

"I wouldn't," said he, decidedly. "I've had one of them taken up already, and I hope that by this time the police have got hold of the rest. I've just heard that their father, old Sir Giles, is dead, killed by the shock of this last disgrace. So that leaves me a free hand."

"But can you swear to them? Did you recognise any of them last night?"

The answer was conclusive.

"Both the footman and I recognised Radley," said he. "And he also recognised Giles. We are not sure that there were more than three of them, though, and we can't swear to more than those two. But it was Radley who stole the jewels from my pocket."

"Well, I've brought them back to you again," said

Hubert, producing the cases and laying them on the table beside the bed. Lord Ambry stared at them and at the jewels themselves, which Hubert was careful to show him.

"They never gave them up of their own accord," said he, shrewdly.

"There they are then, at any rate. Won't this immediate restitution count with you for anything? It was the wild escapade of lads who have had too much champagne."

"It was more than that," said Lord Ambry, shortly; "they've killed one of my servants, and they would have killed me if I had not had help quickly."

"Well, it was one of the Brancepeth's that gave you that help. Don't forget that. And one, too, whom you did not recognise in the attacking party, and who swears he wasn't with them."

Lord Ambry reflected for a few moments.

"Perhaps I've been hard upon him," he admitted, coldly. "But they're all tarred with the same brush, and I suppose he was 'in' with the others. At any rate, he's before the magistrate now, and he must stand or fall by the evidence. I won't go bail for him. As for the others, if one or more of them are hanged, it's not my fault. I can't interfere with the course of the law, even if I wished."

It was clear that there was nothing more to hope for from the Viscount, and Hubert took his leave, and went in search of Athelstan.

The magistrate, after hearing the evidence of the groom, thought the case against the young man not strong enough to warrant his refusing bail. But he

fixed the amount at two hundred pounds, and Athelstan was in the very act of telling him that he might as well lock him up at once, when Hubert was announced.

He at once offered himself as bail, and thus procured the young man's release.

They rode back together to Culverley, both in the lowest of spirits.

"Are you going to marry Harry now?" asked Athelstan, after a long silence.

"She won't have me."

"Would you have her, if you could, after all this?" went on Harry's brother.

"Rather."

"Well, I think you're well out of it. Giles will be hanged, won't he?"

"I hope not."

"And the rest of us will have to pick oakum."

"Not you, I think."

"Oh, I don't know. They'll say if I haven't deserved it for this I have for something else. And my name would do it. They'll make a clean sweep of us while they are about it. And I don't wonder: it's begun to dawn upon me lately that we're nothing but a public nuisance and a private disgrace. If I had the time over again I would behave more like other people. Everybody looks askance at us, and I don't like it."

"Well, there's time to mend," said Hubert, cheerfully, and as he spoke he noticed that there was an object moving about the Vicar's kitchen garden in the dusk, and that Athelstan was not listening to

him. "I suppose you want to see if the people at the Vicar's look askance at you," he went on, good-naturedly. "If you like to get off here, I'll have your horse sent round to the 'Place.'"

Athelstan threw him a shamefaced, grateful look, and was off his horse in an instant. He only waited till Hubert was out of sight before he opened the gate of the Vicar's garden, and stole quietly in.

Alas for the poor lad's hopes! Kathleen started violently when she turned with a bunch of celery in her hand and saw his white face looking at her over the fence. He cut off her escape by coming through the little gate and standing in front of it on the narrow path.

She was looking, he thought, prettier than he had ever seen her. The fatigue and excitement of the previous night had only given her face a more delicate beauty, a languid heaviness to her eyelids. Her forehead puckered with distress, as she flushed deeply and deliberately looked away from him.

"Kathleen!" cried he, in a choking voice, "Kathleen! You are not going to turn your back upon me now, are you? Just when I'm unluckier than I've ever been before?"

No answer; not even a movement of her head. He came a step nearer.

"I haven't done anything wrong this time, Kathleen; upon my soul I haven't. What—what d—d—what confounded story have you heard?"

Again no answer. But she wheeled round suddenly, her skirts flying round her in a hoop, and tried to dash past him.

"No, no, I can't let you go like that; after"—and his voice sank to a tender whisper—"after last night!"

At last he caught sight of the girl's downcast face, stooping low to do so until the gooseberry-bushes scratched his own cheeks and caught in his moustache. She looked miserable, but she was firm. She remained standing in the wet path, stepping back a little way as he advanced, and not once raising her eyes.

"I see," said he, drawing himself up and speaking in a stifled voice; "you're not allowed to speak to me. That's it, isn't it?"

Kathleen nodded an assent, still without raising her eyes.

"But you would if you could? Tell me you would if you could?"

Again she made a sign of assent.

"You've heard everything, I suppose?"

She threw at him an interrogative glance, which told him that, however much she might know, she did not know all. Athelstan began to strip the thorns off the nearest gooseberry-bush to help him out with his confession.

"Well, I must tell you, I suppose! Everything has happened that could happen, and we're altogether ruined and done for, the whole lot of us. Lord Ambry was attacked last night on his way home from the ball, and the police are after my brothers, and the shock has killed my father. And—and I'm out on bail."

"But you had no hand in it! No, I'm sure of it!"

burst out Kathleen, clasping her hands and letting the celery slip down into the mud.

There was a little pause, in which one could have heard the heavy breathing of both of them. Then Athelstan turned round quickly, and she heard him sobbing like a child.

"Oh, don't, don't! Oh, Mr. Brancepeth, I am so sorry, so dreadfully, dreadfully sorry! I didn't know it was so bad as that. And it's shameful that they should accuse you——"

"How do you know I wasn't mixed up in it?" asked Athelstan, wheeling round so suddenly that he touched her arm with his hand before she could get back out of his way. "I've been in lots of these things before. What makes you think I wasn't this time?"

"Why, you know, you promised me, only last night!" cried Kathleen, earnestly. "I'm sure you hadn't forgotten it any more than I?"

"God bless you! You did trust me, then! You do!" cried Athelstan, eagerly. "And you are right. I wasn't in it; I hadn't anything to do with it. I'd have cut off my right hand rather than have any share in such a business after what you—what I—what *we* talked about last night. I promised you I'd reform, didn't I? Well, and I meant it. But now I shan't have a chance. They're nearly sure to take this opportunity of paying us all out together, and of ridding the county of the whole lot of us. I shouldn't mind: we've deserved it. If it were not for you! And then there's poor Giles!"

His voice dropped to a whisper. Kathleen whispered back—

"Is it true what John Tustain said, that—that—a man was—*killed?*"

Athelstan shuddered and made a sign of assent. Tears of horror and of sympathy began to fall down Kathleen's cheeks.

"Oh, but you will send him away, won't you? You won't—you won't let them find him?"

"Not if we can help it," said Athelstan, gloomily. "I'm going now to see what can be done. You—you will go on believing in me, won't you?"

"Yes, yes, indeed I will. But—don't be angry with me—I have broken my promise to papa in speaking to you: you won't make me break it again, will you?"

"It's rather hard lines, isn't it, that I'm to be treated as if I were a felon?"

"Oh, don't say that. But what can I do? I must tell papa that I have seen you, spoken to you; just to satisfy my conscience. And then he will be angry with me again."

It went to her heart to have to say this, for the poor fellow stared at the road outside with an expression of the deepest despair and despondency. Then he bent his head in sign of acquiescence without looking at her face.

"All right," he said, gruffly. "You're quite right, of course. If 'papa' said I wasn't fit for you to speak to, of course he was right. And—and I won't stay here among your cabbages and potatoes any longer; I might make them wither, might I not?"

He walked down the wet path towards the gate in a spiritless fashion, so different from his usual easy,

light-hearted manner, that Kathleen's eyes suddenly filled with tears. Her heart cried out to him, and of course her lips followed suit.

"Mr. Brancepeth, oh! how can you be so unkind?"

Now a young man's despondency is never so deep that the voice of the girl he loves, when she says the right thing, cannot dispel it in a moment. Athelstan turned rapidly round, and finding that she had instinctively held out her hands while she uttered this appeal, he seized them in his own, drew Kathleen into his arms, and kissed her again and again. Then he stood back, as red in the face as she was, and looked at her.

"There," said he, defiantly, "tell papa that! Tell him that I've kissed you, and that I will again if I get the chance. Only I shan't: I shall be picking oakum. And he may think himself lucky that they have found me some employment at last; for if it hadn't been for that I'd have married you. Yes, I would, in spite of papa!"

Kathleen was overwhelmed. She didn't know whether to smile or to cry, to remonstrate or to run away. The Brancepeths could not, of course, do their wooing or anything else like other people. And this fierce, domineering, Highland chief sort of love-making, while it took her breath away, had in it something of excitement, of charm, which this inhabitant of the quiet parsonage home found by no means distasteful. The words she at last found strength to utter were ridiculously inadequate.

"Mr. Brancepeth—" she gasped, below her breath, "I'm—I'm astonished—I'm——"

"But you're not angry?"

He bent his head and spoke in a whisper, an insinuating whisper. Kathleen glanced up at him in a restive fashion, which implied that she was struggling to be cruel and couldn't manage it.

"I—I should like to be," she answered, honestly. "And—and perhaps, if you don't go, I *shall!*"

He tried to get another kiss, but she was too quick for him. Making a wild plunge into the currant-bushes, she gained the gate by a circuitous and unexpected route, and disappeared into dim recesses of laurel and euonymus at the side of the house.

Athelstan picked up a small stick of the celery she had dropped, wiped the mud off, and put it in his pocket. Then he threw an affectionate look at the bricks of the house she lived in, and went home somewhat comforted.

CHAPTER XXV.

In the mean time Hubert had gone home to the Vicarage, and had been informed by his sister that Harry was waiting to see him. Mrs. Floriston would have liked to be present at the interview between them; but her suggestion that she and her brother should go to the drawing-room together met with a negative so decided that she began to look gloomy.

"I left her in the drawing-room about half an hour ago," said Maude, frigidly. "Of course she may be gone by this time, by the window perhaps. One can't answer for the vagaries of these Brancepeths."

"You have not been unkind to her?"

His tone made his sister thankful that she could truthfully answer "No."

When he entered the drawing-room Hubert thought at first that his sister's suggestion was a well-founded one. It was not until he was well in the room that he discovered Harry, half sitting, half lying on the high-backed sofa by the fire, with her feet touching the floor and her head half buried in the cushions. In the midst of her troubles, physical fatigue and weariness had been too much for her. Even in her slumber she seemed hardly to have lost the consciousness of her griefs, and there was something unspeakably touching to the man who loved her in the worn, weary expression of the face which

he had known so bright and happy looking. He could not bear to wake her; but even moments were precious, for the liberty, and even the life of the girl's brothers were at stake.

He went down on one knee beside the couch, and took her left hand in his. She moved at once, opened her eyes, and not at once realising the situation in which she was placed, smiled at him.

"My darling!" burst from his lips.

But the smile had already faded from her face; she sprang up with frightened eyes.

"My brothers! Have you been able to do anything?" she asked in a frightened whisper.

"Lord Ambry says the matter is out of his hands. I was afraid so. They ought to get away."

Harry sprang to her feet, snatching away her hand. Her face wore an expression which Hubert could not quite understand.

"No!" she whispered. "But—but——"

Then Hubert understood.

"Do they want—money?" he asked, in the same low voice as her own.

She had covered her face with her hands; but she moved her head in assent. She heard him leave the room and return in a few minutes. She knew what he had brought even before she looked. She was sitting on a low chair with her eyes fixed upon the floor. Hubert put a thick packet into her lap and a little heavy canvas bag.

"There's fifty pounds in gold and a hundred in notes," said he. "That will get them out of the country. Then, when they let you know where they

are, I can send them a draft for some more. For they ought not to stay in Europe: I should suggest South America for at least one of them."

"For all of us!" cried Harry, starting up, and holding the money tightly in her hands. "We'll stick together. Giles is no worse than the rest of us, poor fellow! We won't let him go into exile alone."

Hubert was for a moment struck dumb.

"But you—surely you will not go too!" he stammered at last.

"Of course I shall. I'm a savage too. I wish I'd never tried to be anything else: at least, I *almost* wish it," she added, with a strange wistfulness in her tone. Then with a sudden burst of fire and energy, she looked him full in the face with her great grey eyes, which seemed preternaturally large and dark: "You lend me this with no conditions? I may do what I like with it?"

"Whatever in the world you like."

"It is a dreadful thing to have to come to you for it."

"I am sorry to hear you say that," said Hubert, very gravely. "I had taken it as a very great proof of your friendship and confidence."

He saw that she was trembling, and his heart yearned towards her. But she steeled herself against the tenderness which she saw in his eyes.

"I am very grateful to you," she said in a guarded voice. "And I shall pay it all back myself."

"Yes," assented Hubert, gravely.

She glanced up at him rather resentfully.

"Of course you think I shan't be able to, or not

for a very long time," she said, sharply. "But you will see. I believe I can work, do things, help my brothers to make a living, if there's nothing left of the estate for us. And I don't suppose there will be."

"I never doubted your capabilities for a moment, Miss Brancepeth, and I look upon my money as well invested. For of course you will pay me interest?"

She looked at him with an interrogative frown. But he appeared to be quite serious.

"Of course," she answered, steadily. "And I thank you with all my heart."

She held out her hand. Hubert took it quietly, almost coldly, as it seemed to her.

"Shall I see you again before you go away, Miss Brancepeth?"

She shook her head. It had become suddenly difficult for her to utter a word. She was realising what this departure from her own country meant to her. He had to find the handle for her as she turned quickly to the door. In the hall she felt safer, and she turned to him again.

"I shall write to you."

That was all she said: and she did not look at his face again. But Hubert knew the struggle that was going on in her heart between the love which told her to stay and be comforted and the duty which bade her hurry away to the aid of her brothers.

And he watched her running down the path and across the lawn in the direction of the cherry-orchard until his own sight grew too dim for him to see her.

Harry had arranged with her brothers to meet

them at Blacksand Bay, about four miles off, where, she thought, they could all get a boat to take them out to a small steam-yacht belonging to one of their friends, which had been cruising about near the coast for some days, and on which they had been invited to lunch on the next day but one after the ball.

She reckoned upon her own powers of persuasion to get the owner to take them over to either Holland or Belgium; and with this start, she calculated upon getting as far away as they wished without much difficulty.

She had decided not to return to Culverley Place, as the police were watching the house, and she was afraid she might be followed. There was a path which led from the cherry-orchard through fields towards the marshes by the sea, and it was by this road that she intended to join her brothers. She had not gone many steps under the cherry-trees, however, when she was alarmed by seeing that a man was watching her from the road.

She stopped.

"Harry!"

Recognising Athelstan's voice, she beckoned him to come to her, and hurriedly told him her errand.

"Come with me," she entreated; "come and see us off. I never thought I was a coward before; but to-night I start at the least sound. It is because I am tired, I think, and because so much depends upon my getting to them safely."

"All right, I'll come," said Athelstan.

But his tone had no vivacity, his manner no alacrity. He, too, was tired, having had no sleep through-

out an eventful night. He was oppressed also, not unnaturally, by a sense of calamities still impending. He did not share Harry's hopefulness about their chances of escape, and he highly disapproved her intention of accompanying her guilty brothers into exile.

"Why, I thought," said she, in surprise, "that you would have wanted to go too!"

"What? And forfeit my bail, behave as if I were guilty, and—and throw away all chance of ever seeing——"

"Oh!" said Harry.

There was silence for a few minutes; brother and sister understood each other.

"Had you any chance, then?" asked Harry, presently.

"I don't know. But I think I had. At any rate I should like to show her that I'm not quite the scum of the earth as they tell her I am. I mean to, too!" he added, with determination.

Harry stopped short and looked up in her brother's earnest face. It was quite dark by this time, and the wind was rising and sweeping over the marshes from the sea. The tide was rolling in quickly over the mud of the shore, and just where the land began to jut out to the left they could see a boat on the beach and two or three men waiting about.

"There they are!" whispered Harry. "Now I think you had better go back. If you are not going with us they will quarrel with you and say it was your going to help Lord Ambry which brought all this down upon them."

"Oh, they say that, do they?" said Athelstan, reddening. "That settles it. They are not going to say I ran away from them."

And he stalked on at a more rapid pace than before towards the spot where his brothers were standing.

Quin was the first to recognise him, and the howl he raised at the sight of his brother gave the latter notice of what he had to expect. Giles and Radley waited in sullen silence until Harry and Athelstan came up. Then, not leaving either of them time to speak, Giles spoke—

"Well, so you've got the decency to throw in your luck with us, after doing your best to get us all laid by the heels?"

"I can't go with you," replied Athelstan, quietly, "even if I wanted to. And I don't. I've come to see you off, though; I wanted to do that to be sure you were safe."

"Safe!" echoed Radley, savagely. "And whose fault is it that we're not safe at home, instead of having to bolt for it? Whose fault but yours! Yours and Harry's. What need was there for you to interfere at all—what need, I say? If you hadn't came up, muddling about and pretending to be a hero, old Ambry wouldn't have come to in such a hurry, and would never have thought we were concerned in the affair."

"What rot!" retorted Athelstan, scoffingly. "He knew you, Radley, all the time. And both the servants recognised Giles. I've got quite enough sins of my own on my shoulders without your shoving yours on them as well."

Harry, perceiving that the passions of all her brothers were rising dangerously high, made a diversion.

"Look here, boys," she said in a whisper, thrusting herself between Athelstan on the one hand and the three guilty lads on the other, "don't quarrel now; there's no time for it. I've got some money for you, enough to take us away to the other end of the world if we liked. Let's get off as quickly as we can. Where the yacht?"

"Don't trouble your head about the yacht," said Giles, roughly. "Hand over the money and leave us to shift for ourselves. We've got about as much to thank you for as we have Athelstan."

"And as for your going with us," added Radley, angrily, "I never heard such rot. You'd only be in the way. We want the money you've brought, not you."

Giles rebuked his brother for this coarse brutality by a rough shake of the arm. By the light of the moon, which had not yet risen very high, he could see that Harry looked harassed, sad, and worn. He put his hand on her shoulder and spoke more gently—

"Look here, my dear girl, it's Athelstan who has got to come with us. The best thing you can do is to marry Besils. He'll have you, more especially as we shall be out of the way. And I believe he'll make you a good husband."

Harry drew herself away and spoke with spirit—

"And do you think I'm going to be taken out of pity like that? Not I. If you don't take me with

you, I shall throw myself into the sea and come after you; and if you won't take me in then, I shall just swim on till I drown. Oh, Giles, don't be so cruel, so hard! You know I can be of use to you, and put up with hardships, and take my share of the rough as well as the smooth with you all! You will take me, you must!"

Giles seemed to waver. Radley suddenly sprang upon her and seized her by the arm.

"All right," he said, abruptly. "Come along to the boat and wait for us, then."

And before she had made up her mind whether he was in earnest or not, he was dragging her through the wet sand and mud to the place where the boat was lying, on the edge of the water. The tide was coming in, and the boat, which ten minutes before had been lying high and dry, was now almost surrounded.

"You mean it, Radley; you don't mean to leave me here? You are coming, all of you, aren't you?" whispered she, as he and the lad in charge of the boat helped her in.

"Oh, we're coming, of course," he answered, in a cold, subdued tone. "But we've got to settle with Athelstan first."

She had no time to say anything more, for her brother was already ploughing his way back to the rest. Their voices, rising higher and higher, made the girl tremble. She had never seen Radley so bitingly cold or Giles so savage before. And Quin was like an æolian harp, ready to be played upon by any breeze that blew.

Even before Radley rejoined his brothers, the quarrel had grown very serious indeed.

"Now," said Giles, as soon as Harry was carried off, "you've got to make up your mind to go with us, and you haven't got many minutes to do it in. The evidence they can get out of you is enough to hang some of us. And we don't mean you to lie snug at home while we have to turn out at a moment's notice."

"Well," said Athelstan, sullenly, "I can't go, even if I would. I'm only out on bail."

"What on earth does that matter? Surely you've not grown so squeamish as that?"

"Well, I have; so there's an end of it!"

"Oh, no, there's not an end of it. You're coming with us, or we'll know the reason why!"

"You do know the reason why—or some of them. And I'm not coming."

"Take that, then."

He dealt at his brother a sounding blow. Athelstan, quite unprepared, staggered; but recovering himself quickly, he sprang at his brother, and wrestled with him for the heavy stick with which Giles had struck him. Athelstan was the taller as well as the stronger of the two, and he was getting the best of the tussle, when Radley, coming up from behind, reinforced Giles by dealing Athelstan a blow on the head with his fist.

"Knock him down! Kill the sneak!" shouted Radley, as Athelstan threw Giles off and squared up to his new assailant.

Quin had joined his brothers, and the three set

upon Athelstan with the fury of a pack of wolves. The odds were too great; and Athelstan, who had nothing but his fists, was soon felled to the ground by another blow from Giles's stick.

He lay on the muddy fringe of grass and reed which bordered the sea-shore without a movement, while the blood flowed freely from the wounds in his head.

Giles felt a sudden sickness come over him as he stood for a moment looking at the prostrate form of his brother.

"My God! We've killed him, I think!" he said, hoarsely.

"Let's get away," said Radley, briskly. "Here's Harry coming. We can leave her with him and get away."

There seemed to be nothing better to do than this, as Harry had handed over into Giles's keeping the money she had brought.

So as Harry, who had leapt out of the boat into the water, ran towards the spot where Athelstan lay, the other three made a dash for the sea.

"Stop, stop! Stay and help me!" screamed the girl in an agony of solicitude, as she threw herself on her knees beside the body of her brother. "You can't leave him like this!"

But they had already reached the boat, and without so much as a word of remorse or of farewell, they pushed off to sea.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"ATHELSTAN! Athelstan! Speak to me!"

The moon was darkened by a passing cloud: Harry could not see her brother's face. But she could feel the blood still trickling warm from a gash on his forehead, and she believed that he was still alive. But she tried in vain to stanch his wounds, and she moaned in her misery at the thought that he would die in her arms for lack of the help she was herself powerless to give him.

There was not a house in sight, nothing but a broken boat left to rot on the mud and a clump or two of stunted willows to break the monotonous expanse of grey sea on the one hand, grey marsh on the other.

She called for help with all the force of her lungs. At first there was no answer. The second time she called she fancied she caught a faint sound in reply. She listened; it was not repeated. The momentary hope died in her breast as she told herself it was nothing but the echo of her own cry which she had heard.

The wind, which was cold and gusty, and the sound of the sea as the tide came in, made hearing difficult: so that when at last help came in the shape of a man, he stood in front of her before she was aware of his

approach. As he went down on his knees on the other side of her unconscious brother she recognised him as Hubert Besils.

Then her composure gave way, and she fell into hysterical sobbing.

"Hush, hush!" said Hubert, gently; "this is not like you, Miss Brancepeth! Not at all like the amazon of Bredding Woods!"

Harry mastered herself by a great effort, and pointed to her brother.

"Never mind the amazon," she whispered in the weak voice her exertions and emotions of the night and day had left her. "Can you save him?"

"I hope so," answered Hubert, cheerfully. "You can trust my surgery, can't you? Give me something to make bandages of. We must stop the bleeding."

While he spoke he was examining Athelstan's wounds, which were all in the region of the head. Harry tore off a flounce from her white underskirt and folded it into bandages. While Hubert bound up the wounds Harry watched him and saw that he looked anxious.

"What are you afraid of?" she presently asked.

"Concussion of the brain," replied he at once. "We must take him back home at once and send for the doctor."

Harry then followed the direction of Hubert's eyes, and saw that his phaeton was waiting on the road at a little distance.

"Now, Miss Brancepeth, I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to mind the horse while you send the groom

over here to help me to get our wounded man as far as the phaeton."

Harry was running like a hare over the flat ground before he had finished speaking.

It was a silent, sad drive back across the wind-swept country to Culverley. Harry was oppressed by a great sense of desolation, which was increased, although she hardly knew it, by the fact that Hubert took scarcely any notice of her. Not once did he address her of his own accord, and in answer to the few questions she put to him about her brother, he spoke as briefly as possible. It was not until they had almost reached the gates of the Place that she asked him what it was that had brought him to Blacksand so late.

His reply gave her a thrill of joy.

"You," said he. "I took the liberty of watching the direction in which you went, saw that you did not propose to return to your home, and wondered what new escapade you were engaged in. I was a little reassured when I saw you meet your brother; but reflecting that two can be adventurous as well as one, I followed you until I found the road you were taking, and then went back and had the phaeton brought round. That's all."

His tone was so quiet, so cool, that Harry thanked him in a timid manner, as if not quite certain whether she ought to thank him at all for an act which he described as if it had been one of curiosity merely.

The same undemonstrative coldness was conspicuous in his manner when he said good-bye, after having helped to carry Athelstan into the house.

"Good-night, Miss Brancepeth," he said, as she

stood at the door of the hall and held out her hand. "Don't be too anxious about your brother. He is a strong, healthy young fellow, and I am sure you may hope with the best heart in the world. I will send the doctor at once."

"Thank you. Good-night. You are very, very good."

Unconsciously to herself his tone had reacted upon her; and it was in a rather formal manner that they parted.

"Never mind," thought Harry, as she went back to Athelstan's room to wait for the arrival of the doctor, "I shall see him in the morning. Of course he will come to inquire about Athelstan in the morning."

She needed this little scrap of hope to comfort her, poor girl, for the whole atmosphere of the old house was fraught with gloom. A sombre sense of the ruin of the family they had so long sheltered seemed to cling to the walls themselves. Instead of the noisy laughter of the four young men, their shouts, the cracking of whips, the barking of dogs, there was the silence of death. The servants went about on tiptoe and spoke in whispers: the old hound which used to lie beside Sir Giles's chair now whined outside the door of the room where his old master lay dead.

And in his little bedroom where he had slept since his boyhood Athelstan, the handsomest, the kindest-hearted of the baronet's four stalwart sons, was lying in a darkened room, pale, cold, unconscious, and in danger of death.

Lady Maggie was sitting by the bedside when Harry stole softly in and stood looking down at the white, still face of her favourite brother.

"Will he die, Aunt Maggie?" she asked in a hollow whisper.

"Oh, my dear, my dear, I hope not!"

"Do you? I am not sure that I do. Don't you think the poor lad would be better off if he were to die now, and escape it all? He is ruined and disgraced like the rest of us. He can't marry the girl he is fond of. He will have to earn his living shut up in a miserable office, without his horses, or his dogs, or anything he cares about. Oh, Aunt Maggie, Aunt Maggie, and I feel it is I who have brought it all upon us! It is I who have spoilt the lives of my darling, handsome brothers!"

"You, Harry!" cried Lady Maggie, in astonishment.

She glanced at the bed, but the patient heard nothing, was conscious of nothing.

"Yes. If I had married Lord Ambry all this would have been prevented and my father would have been still alive!"

Lady Maggie shook her head dubiously.

"We cannot do wrong in order to avoid possible evil consequences of doing right," she said, decidedly. "It would have been very wrong of you to marry Lord Ambry, whom you could not possibly like; and it is impossible to tell what the evil consequences of that step might not have been. Now go to bed, there's a dear girl; you are tired and you look ill."

"I must wait till the doctor comes," said Harry, faintly.

She fell into a chair, and there was silence in the room until Lady Maggie detected a change in the sick man. A little colour had come back to his cheeks, and his eyelids were quivering. Before long he looked at the two ladies, and, in defiance of his aunt's warning, tried to speak.

"I must just—say—this," said he, turning his eyes to Lady Maggie's face: "I'm sure there's a doubt—whether I shall—get over this. If I don't, tell Kathleen—tell Kathleen——" He hesitated, and frowned. "I have—forgotten," he whispered. And then he sank into a lethargic silence.

Harry was staring at him with eyes which had in them no hope.

"If only I could die too!" she murmured, as she watched her brother's face.

When the doctor came he foresaw that he should have two patients instead of one, and ordered her off to bed. He could tell her nothing definite about Athelstan at present. The wounds he had received were not by themselves likely to prove fatal, as the bleeding had been stopped in time. The more serious part of the injury was the inflammation of the brain which was likely to follow from the concussion.

Harry slept heavily, being so worn out that her griefs could not suffice to keep her awake long. But in the morning, when she attempted to rise, she found herself staggering about her room. Looking out of her window at the sound of a step on the

gravel of the drive, she saw one of the servants from the Vicarage walking quickly up to the house. In a very few moments the maid, having fulfilled her errand, went back as rapidly as she had come.

With her heart beating very fast Harry rang her bell and asked the maid who answered it if a letter or message had been brought from the Vicarage. She almost held out her hand, so certain did she feel that Hubert, since he had not come himself, had sent her at least a little note.

"She came to inquire, ma'am, how you and Mr. Athelstan were," said the housemaid. "And she said Mrs. Floriston and Mr. Besils had packed up their things and gone to London by the early train this morning."

"Gone to London!" said Harry, stupidly, with a leaden fear at her heart. "For the day, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, ma'am; they're gone altogether, I understood. She thinks they are going to Nice, ma'am."

Harry bowed her head in dismissal, and sat on the side of her little bed with clasped hands, dry eyes, and the chill of a great despair at her heart.

She had been in earnest in her refusal of Hubert; she had held firmly to her resolve that she would not bring disgrace and misfortune upon him by becoming his wife. But she had, half unconsciously, poor child, counted upon his presence, his friendship, for support in the dark times which had come upon the old house. To hear that he had taken her at her word, and forsaken her in her sore need, was too

much sorrow for her to bear in the weakened and broken state of her mind and spirits.

When Lady Maggie came to her with the news that the doctor's bulletin concerning Athelstan was hopeful, she found Harry in her dressing-gown, lying cold and unconscious on the floor.

CHAPTER XXVII.

For days Harry lay ill in bed, prostrated both in body and mind. The doctor prescribed change, and Lady Maggie made arrangements for taking the girl away with her as soon as she herself could leave her nephew.

Athelstan recovered sufficiently to follow his father's body to the grave; but the effort was made too soon, and on the day after he was again in bed with a high temperature and suffering from strong nervous excitement. The doctor wanted him to go away with his sister and Lady Maggie. He said he would give him a certificate to the effect that he was not strong enough to bear the excitement of an appearance at the adjourned inquest upon the body of Lord Ambry's coachman.

But Athelstan was obstinate: he said that it would be thought he was running away, and he insisted on remaining at the deserted old home.

By the doctor's advice, however, his evidence for the inquest was taken on commission, and he was thus able to take two more days' rest before he had himself to surrender to his bail to answer the charge of complicity in the attack upon Lord Ambry.

The young man's appearance, when he stood before the dock in the Fernsham police-court, gained the sympathy even of those who had been hardest

upon the wild doings of the Brancepeth family. Not having yet recovered the strength which the loss of blood from his wounds had caused him, with one gash on his forehead still covered with sticking plaster and only partially concealed by his curly hair, Athelstan was very pale; and his downcast looks showed how deeply he felt the shame which had come upon his family.

It was a relief, as well as a surprise, to every one to find that Lord Ambry, who appeared in person at the inquiry, was much less severe than had been expected.

Athelstan, in particular, was astonished at his change of tone. For the Viscount said, in his evidence, that he was inclined to regard the whole affair as a bad practical joke on the part of the young men who had attacked him, and who were, he felt sure, under the influence of wine at the time they made the attack. While reiterating his belief that the assailants were the Brancepeths, he now admitted that they had been only three in number, and that he had not recognised Athelstan as one of them. The footman also declared positively that not one of the attacking party was as tall as Athelstan, and he said, moreover, and this was afterwards confirmed by the indoor servants at Croke Hall, that the young gentleman's appearance showed no signs of disorder, such as must have resulted from the severe conflict which had taken place at the time of the attack.

It was very clear, long before the inquiry was ended, that the evidence against Athelstan was far

too slight for him to be committed for trial; indeed, Athelstan himself was the only person who looked surprised when the magistrate announced, amidst attempted applause from the people in court, that there was no evidence to go before a jury, and that the accused was therefore free to go.

For a moment Athelstan stared at the magistrate with an ingenuous bewilderment which brought a smile to the faces of all the people near. Then a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and a voice said, in very kindly, though pompous tones—

"Don't you understand, my lad? There is no evidence against you. And you can go."

The young man's face flushed, and the voice set him trembling.

"What, *you*, Vicar?" said he, huskily.

"Yes," said Mr. Griffith, looking at him frankly, with the very faint and weary smile which was the only sign of satisfaction his bills and his difficulties ever allowed him to give. "And I'm not ashamed to say I may have done you injustice. I don't think you are quite such a rascal as the rest."

Athelstan looked up with a little twinkle in his eyes.

"And that's not saying much, is it?"

The Vicar shook his head deprecatingly; he was not going to commit himself too far. But Athelstan felt the comfort even of this meagre admission, since it came from the lips of Kathleen's father.

He was beginning to feel the effects of the fatigue and excitement incidental to the inquiry upon a mind and body which had not yet recovered their tone.

As he passed through the magistrate's room on his way out, however, he was stopped by Lord Ambry, who held out his hand to him, and frankly said that he was sorry for the ordeal he had made him go through.

"I can't help feeling that I've behaved very badly to you," went on the Viscount, with an uneasy frown on his face that betrayed the annoyance he felt at having to acknowledge himself in the wrong. "And my doctor says the same. He told me last night that if it had not been for the services you rendered me on that night I should never have got home alive."

Athelstan, who was beginning to feel the room spin round him, and who was only anxious to reach the open air, mumbled some incoherent acknowledgment.

But Lord Ambry, whose pride was concerned in making reparation for the wrong he had undoubtedly done, persisted in following him to the top of the stone staircase.

"Now I feel that I ought to do something to compensate you for the inconvenience and—and so on, of this affair. What do you propose to do now? Is there anything I could do to put you straight?"

"There is one thing I should like to ask of you, Lord Ambry, for my father's sake as well as for mine. Don't go further in this matter against my brothers. Look, it's hard enough for them to have to be turned out, not only from the old place but from the country, too."

"Well," answered Lord Ambry, "I promise you that, *as long as they keep out of the country*, nothing

shall be done; no steps shall be taken to bring them back. I've too much respect for my own country to bring them," he added, grimly. "But, mind, I will proceed against them in the matter if ever they dare to turn up again."

"Thank you even for that promise," said Athelstan, who felt that the concession he had got was not a very valuable one.

Perhaps Lord Ambry felt this, too. At any rate he said—

"But now for yourself. I am really anxious to do something for you. It will ease my conscience. Now I would let you remain on in the old place if there were the slightest chance of your being able to make anything of it. But the estate is so heavily burdened that, to tell you the truth, nothing but making a clean sweep will ever get things straight. You see it has been neglected for years now."

Athelstan nodded.

"Oh, I know that. And there wouldn't be much pleasure in living there now they're all gone. The most I can expect is to be able to keep my head above water at something which can be done without capital."

"Well, what do you feel inclined for? fit for?"

"I don't know that I'm fit for anything, except perhaps to break horses. I do understand something about horses. But then so does every Englishman, they say."

"Well, would you like to be put with a trainer, with a view to learning enough to make you worth taking into partnership?"

Athelstan's face brightened, and then grew gloomy again.

"I should like it awfully," he said. "But if I went in for that I'm sure I should lose all chance of getting——"

"Oh? Sentimental reasons?"

"Yes. Her father's a parson," explained Athelstan, growing red.

"I can get you a secretaryship. Will that do?"

"Yes. If they're not too particular about spelling," said the young man.

"Oh, secretaryships are generally filled by men who have no special qualifications for anything," said Lord Ambry. "And I dare say you will be able to hold your own. You shall hear from me in a day or two, and I think I can promise you good news."

Athelstan looked in the face of the old Viscount with a heightened colour.

"I—I can't thank you. I don't know what to say," he said, huskily. "And I—I don't like to let you do so much for me after—everything that has happened."

But Lord Ambry, who had long wanted to get the Brancepeths' estate into his own hands, and whose love for Harry had been more an affair of pride than of devotion, had less reason to be dissatisfied with his dealings with the family than Athelstan supposed. So he was quite good-humoured in his assurances that the young man need not consider himself under any obligation. This was in fact true. For there would have been something like a scandal created in the county if Lord Ambry, after having his life saved

by one of the family whose possessions were now entirely in his hands, had left the young man to the shifts of a homeless and wandering life, or allowed him to become a mere pensioner upon some distant branch of the family.

Athelstan returned the Viscount's cold handshake with a grip which the older man was not grateful for, and staggered down into the street. He felt so ill that for a few seconds he stood swaying about on the pavement, scarcely able to see, or to decide what he should do next.

"Are you going home now, Mr. Brancepeth?" said a voice which made him start.

"I—I—I——"

He raised his hat mechanically, but the figure of Kathleen was shifting and blurred before his eyes. He felt himself falling against something, and his annoyance gave him a moment's strength. Steadying himself by a strong effort, he said, in a voice which sounded in his own ears like that of a stranger, "I'm always having to tell you that I'm not drunk. But you'll hardly believe me this time."

For answer he heard something which was half a sigh and half a sob. And then he felt himself supported by her arm. She was leading him.

"Come," she said, in a gentle voice which was almost a whisper; "I'll take you home with me. I've got the pony-carriage here. Now the step."

He could just get in with her help. And he was all unconscious of the fact that a group of sympathising people, most of whom had been in court during the inquiry, stood round and offered their aid as

Kathleen made him take the seat by her side and wrapped the rug round him. But he heard her voice again, thanking somebody.

And then he felt the little carriage move; they were driving away. At first the houses, with their old-time gables, seemed to dance by him in a bewildering procession. But when the rattling over the stones of the old town ceased, and the chaise went smoothly along the country road, he felt that the fresh, cold winter air, and the knowledge that Kathleen was by his side, were reviving him.

For the first time he looked into her face.

"Won't you get into a row with the Vicar for this?" said he, in a voice which was rather weak and shaky.

But the girl smiled, with the tears in her eyes.

"It was he who said I might bring you back," said she, blushing.

This intelligence was so startling that it had the effect of restoring him completely.

"He—said—you—might—bring—me—back!" he repeated in a firmer voice.

"Yes. I drove him over this morning. And as he had business in the town, he said I needn't wait, but that if I liked I might ask you to take his place."

"To take his place!" repeated Athelstan, who, fired with fresh hopes, was feeling the blood run once more warm in his veins. "Why, Kathleen, his place is to take care of you!"

And she suddenly felt his arm round her under the rugs.

"He didn't mean that," she said, quickly. "And if you are going to talk nonsense I shall turn you out and make you walk."

"It's not nonsense now," said he, eagerly. "I'm going to be a secretary, because I'm not fit for anything, and you've got to teach me spelling."

This announcement was so unexpected and so astonishing, that Kathleen only gasped.

"You will, Kathleen, you will, won't you?" he pleaded, looking into her eyes. "You see, dear, I've counted upon you. Lord Ambry, who's going to get the secretaryship for me, counts upon my getting somebody to help me. And I thought of you directly."

"I shall have to think about it," said Kathleen, demurely.

"Well, but you've had plenty of time for that. It isn't as if this were being sprung upon you. You've known for ever so long that I've been thinking of nothing else."

"Ah, well, to know that is one thing, and to trust in you, and to believe that you were going to make yourself respected! But it's quite another thing to marry a man who—who——"

"—who has such a bad record to wipe out?"

"No, I didn't mean that exactly. But doesn't belong to a very steady family."

"Well, won't you try me?"

"Don't ask me. Let me think about it."

Athelstan agreed to this; but as they were in a quiet country road with nobody else in sight, he kissed her "to put her," as he said, "in a proper

thinking mind." And the rest of the drive was a dream of paradise, neither saying very much, exchanging glances from time to time which would have reassured Athelstan, if her own admissions had not done so, of the place he held in the young girl's heart.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

It was the day before the sale of the furniture of Culverley Place, and the old home of the Brancepeths was "on view."

The circumstances attending the sale having aroused unusual interest in the countryside, there was a stream of people pouring all day long through the rooms; and the flock of intending purchasers was lost in crowds drawn to the house by curiosity only.

Swarms of middle-aged matrons filled the low, dark hall, and disdaining the rods and guns, the whips and hunting trophies which lined the walls, squeezed into the long dining-room, where the old silver which had been in the family for generations, the Worcester and Sèvres services which had been Lady Maggie's pride, the cut glass, the old Sheffield plated candelabra, were spread out on the oak dining-table, to be fingered, inspected, criticised.

A few gentlemen, chiefly clergymen, looked over the guns, had a last look at the drawing-room where they had seldom been guests, and then drifted out to swell the crowd in the stables.

On the first floor the ladies filled the bedrooms, pulling the clothes off the beds, prodding the pillows, shaking their heads the while with sympathetic looks,

and murmuring that it was sad, very sad that the Brancepeths should come to this!

In a corner of the inner hall, sitting well back on one of the divans, was a tall woman, dressed in black, closely veiled. She sat so still, and was in such an obscure angle of the wall, that she believed herself to be unnoticed, unrecognised. But, although nobody dared to speak to her, and although, respecting her evident intention, the sight-seers passed as if they had not even seen her, the whisper ran quickly round that the girl in the corner was Miss Harrington Brancepeth, and the chatter of the crowd gave place to silence as it streamed past her.

Suddenly there appeared above the heads of the crush of women a face which caused the tall girl in black to start. Bearing down upon her, without a glance to the right or to the left, Hubert Besils held out his hand.

"Don't stay here," he said, gently. "Come outside."

And she rose without a word, and, taking the arm he offered, allowed him to guide her through the throng out into the open air.

Here her composure broke down.

"Isn't it dreadful?" moaned she, looking with swimming eyes at the group of pony-carriages which were stabled everywhere, in the drive, on the lawn, under the trees. "Oh, to see those old women fingering poor papa's tankard and turning over the counterpanes to find out the darns! Oh, how I hate them all! I hate them!"

"Why did you come?"

"I couldn't keep away. I wanted to have one more look at the old place, and at the old things. Oh, I didn't think I cared for them!"

"Would you like to live here again, say, with a husband?"

"No. Oh, no! It tears my heart to walk through the place, remembering the time when we were all here together. No, I am glad I have to go away. And I am sorry I came to-day."

"I may tell you one thing. I shall be here myself to-morrow, and so you can tell me what things you would like to have."

He took a catalogue from his pocket. But she, with a hasty gesture, pushed it and the hand that held it away.

"No," she said, imperiously, "I cannot buy them, and I will not have them as a gift. I owe you quite enough already. I have told Athelstan about that," she added, looking up into his face with earnest eyes, "and he says he will be able to pay it all back himself in time."

"I am glad of that."

Something in his quiet tone, and in the twinkle she saw in his eyes, made Harry flush deeply.

"You think we haven't got it in us to earn money, to do anything but waste it!" she said, hotly.

"I assure you I don't think anything of the kind."

"But you are wrong," she went on in the same tone. "People are beginning to see that we are not so bad as it was the fashion to think us. Why, Mr. Griffith has almost given his consent to Athelstan's marrying his daughter Kathleen—some day!"

"Has he, indeed?"

"Yes, and Lord Ambry himself says Athelstan saved his life, and apologised for having him taken up. So you see there is some good even in the Brancepeths, after all!"

"You astonish me!"

Harry did not like the tone Hubert was taking. He seemed to be laughing at her.

"I am going in-doors again now," she said, turning away abruptly.

"Why, when it only makes you miserable?"

"I may as well be miserable there as anywhere else."

"Why be miserable anywhere, Harry?" asked Hubert in her ear, as he followed her over the grass. "Or at least, if you must be miserable, you might have the good taste not to obtrude your misery upon me just now. I want your congratulations. I am going to be married."

In spite of herself, Harry, who was a little in advance of him, stopped short for the space of half a second. Then she went on again without turning round.

"I do congratulate you," she said. "I hope you —you will be happy. Now I'm going in. I want to see whether—whether anybody is looking at—at the foxes' pates."

She hardly knew what she was saying. Hubert drew a sharp breath between his teeth.

"One moment," he said, venturing to lay upon her arm a detaining hand. "I must show you her portrait. You would like to see what she is like, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. I will—another time."

"No, you must see it now!"

He was dragging her back by main force across the lawn towards the deserted kitchen-garden behind the house. The crowd had been kept out of this by the gardeners, who had tied up the gate. Hubert coolly took out his pocket-knife and cut the cord.

"In here," said he.

And he led her in and tied up the gate again.

"Now," said he, "here is the portrait of the girl who is going to be Mrs. Besils."

Harry was losing patience.

"I don't want to see her," she said, with temper.

"But you must. I want your opinion of her. I think her a beauty. But I dare say you won't admire her as much as I do. That's only natural, isn't it?"

She said nothing, but put up her hand to her black bonnet to draw her veil a little closer.

"Look," said he.

Harry gave a sidelong glance down. And the portrait he held in his hand was a little crayon drawing of herself made by Lady Maggie when Harry was only fourteen.

"Do you think she'll make me a good wife?" asked he, in a manner of extreme innocence.

"I knew what you were going to do. Oh, I knew quite well," answered Harry, with excitement. "You need not think your trick was successful. That is not the portrait of the girl you are going to marry: it is mine."

She snatched at the picture, but failed to secure it. She was in truth infinitely relieved to discover whose

it was, although it was true that for a few seconds past she had had some very shrewd suspicions.

"It is the portrait of the girl I'm going to marry, all the same," said Hubert, quietly. "Perhaps I am going to marry her very soon, perhaps I am not. But in the long run she will drop into my mouth like a ripe pear. I don't want to hurry her; she can take her own time."

"Haven't I told you I would never be your wife?" said Harry, not violently, not so very decidedly, but with a sort of feeble defiance.

"Yes. I daresay that's one of the reasons why I'm so determined to have you. I have always been fond of a struggle for what I wanted."

Harry made no answer, and her proud attitude gradually changed to a limp and drooping one. Hubert saw that she was in no mood to make much of a fight, and he was sorry for the poor lassie's broken spirit.

"I only mean, dearest," he said, in a very gentle tone, "that I am longing for your hand to hold in mine, longing to comfort you, longing for you to come to me and make me happy."

She turned upon him a pair of eyes which were full of a passionate sadness, which yet had some gleam of hope behind.

"Then if, as you say, you are fond of a struggle, you must ask some other woman to be your wife. For I—I have no more heart to struggle, no more spirit to hold out!"

And, with the tears running down her face, she let him take her in his arms.

"Why, oh, why did you go away?" she sobbed out at last, hastily drying her eyes.

"To get rid of my sister for a little while until things had settled down; she thought I didn't mean to come back."

"And what will she say when she knows?"

"Nothing. She is a wise woman, and she will accept the situation when it is made. And now, my darling, look at this catalogue and choose your wedding presents."

And they looked at the catalogue, and at each other, until the evening mists grew too thick and the sun sank too low for them to see any more.

In a few weeks Harry and Hubert were quietly married. Only Lady Maggie and Athelstan were at the wedding. And the bride and bridegroom fled away on their travels as unostentatiously as possible.

Athelstan looked after the modest cab which drove them to the station with wistful eyes. He was installed in his secretaryship, and was proving himself by no means the incompetent person a Brancepeth might have been expected to be.

But, though he is happy in his engagement to Kathleen, now duly authorised, his heart aches for the old times at Culverley Place, and for the three wild brothers who are in exile away over the sea.

THE END.

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