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NELLY BROOKE.

NELLY BROOKE.

A HOMELY STORY.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,
(MRS. ROSS CHURCH.)

“Love is strong as death.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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1868.

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TO
J. J. M., AND E. C. M.,
IN ACKNOWLEDGMENT
OF
MUCH SYMPATHY AND KINDNESS.

“ True happiness
Consists not in a multitude of friends,
But in their worth and choice.”

Ben Jonson.

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NELLY BROOKE.

CHAPTER I.

NIGEL BROOKE FINDS HIS WAY TO LITTLE BICKTON.

ON a rainy night in August, some twenty years ago, a jaded horse might have been seen painfully attempting to drag the antiquated vehicle, to which he was attached, up the steep acclivity of an unfrequented road in Kent.

The weather had been unusually sultry for many weeks past, and a violent storm of thunder and lightning had been succeeded by an overwhelming shower of rain—rain, which, having commenced by falling at distinct intervals in large, warm, heavy drops, had culminated in a downpour, which appeared unceasing.

Although but eight o'clock, the night was already dark, for not a star was to be seen in the frowning sky; and the uncultivated country by which the road was bordered, served to make the picture still more desolate.

The hill up which the tired horse was labouring, was composed of clay, now ankle-deep from the continued rain; and the only signs it bore of being frequented by man, were the cart-ruts, into and over which the crazy coach jolted every minute. The hedges, which on either side enclosed plantations, belonging to some far distant property, had been suffered to grow tall and straggling, and the nut-bushes, of which they were principally composed, waved their unpruned branches fantastically under the combined influence of wind and water.

Presently the wearied animal stopped of his own accord, and his master, who had been plodding patiently on foot, stopped also, and patted his heaving sides. A cloud of steam ascended from the horse's flanks, whilst his loud breathing and distended nostrils witnessed his distress.

"Poor fellow!" said the man, compassionately, "you've had a mortal tug of it, but it's a'most over now."

And then he fell to throwing his arms about

and stamping his feet as he endeavoured to free himself from the clay and moisture with which he was encumbered.

A tremendous rattling at the coach-window, as some one from the inside tried to let it down, presently diverted his attention, and he joined his efforts to those of his passenger.

But the damp had caused the ill-fitting window-pane to be more obstinate than usual, and by the time his object was effected, the passenger's face expressed, to say the least of it, impatience.

“How much longer are we going to be on this road?” he demanded authoritatively; “are you sure that you know the way to Little Bickton?”

Had the night not been so dark, or had the dim oil-lantern which the coachman carried, been a little nearer to his face, it might have been seen that the question made him grin from ear to ear.

“Be I sure as I knows the road to Little Bickton, did you ask, sir?” he replied in the broadest Kentish dialect. “Well! taking it from boy to man, I suppose I've been along this road, back'ards and for'ards for better nor thirty years, and I *should* think——”

But what the country coachman “should

think," his passenger never ascertained, for at that particular moment, a fresh gust of wind blowing the rain into his face with aggravated violence, caused him to pull up the window again so summarily, that the leathern strap, rendered rotten by age, came off in his hand.

"Well, he *is* impatient!" soliloquised the coachman, whose vehicle, being the only one on hire at the town of Reddington, from which he had come, was considered in those parts as rather a rapid mode of progression than otherwise. "I wonder how much faster he expects one animal to take him along a road like this here!"

And with a chirrup to his horse which had less of cheerfulness in it than his former tone, he set the conveyance once more in motion.

Meantime, his passenger had thrown himself back on the musty cushions, with an expression of disgust.

"Three hours!" he said to himself, "three hours, if I have been a minute, doing fourteen miles in this rabbit-hutch. Had I but known my way about this wilderness, I had better have walked. How my mother would laugh if she could see me at the outset of what she termed my Quixotic expedition. Such a com-

mencement of itself, is sufficient to damp the ardour of any man, that is, if I were not sure, whatever she may say, that it is a sense of duty, and not mere curiosity which brings me here. Yet it will take a more cordial reception from my grandfather than the last one with which he greeted my poor father, to enable me to forget the discomforts I have experienced in seeking him."

And here the soliloquist, who, fresh from a luxurious life in the East, had not been used to "roughing" it, lighted another cigar, and endeavoured under its influence to forget for a while his unpleasant position.

A little more jolting and shaking, varied by an occasional stoppage on the part of the horse, brought them at last to the summit of the hill, and then the coachman, slowly mounting his box, and gathering up his reins with the satisfied air of one who has accomplished a feat of skill, set off at a sober jog-trot along the level road.

"Thank Heaven!" was the involuntary exclamation of the inside passenger, as he felt the change in the motion.

He drew his gloved hand across the window-pane, which his breath and the smoke from his cigar had completely clouded, but

he could make nothing of the surrounding landscape.

The rain was still descending steadily; the reflection of the oil-lantern, which, hung by the side of the coach-box, did duty for carriage lamps, glittered in the vast puddle through which the wheels were splashing, beyond which, strain his eyesight as he would, he could discern nothing but a black mass of space.

The hedges on either side, however, had disappeared, and from this he concluded that they were skirting a common or piece of waste land.

Presently he could distinguish lights, which seemed to gleam from cottage windows, although the atmosphere caused everything to appear misty and undefined. He became excited; he shook the window strap which he had not destroyed, with so much energy, that the window, for a wonder, responded to his efforts; the glass came down with a rattle, and the next moment his head was thrust from the open space, and his voice rung on the night air.

“Stop! stop!” he shouted to the driver, as the vehicle rolled opposite a few small houses.

“We’re a’most there, sir!” said the man encouragingly, thinking his fare’s patience was at length exhausted.

“Stop! I tell you,” was the only reply he received: and he stopped accordingly.

“I must make some enquiries for myself,” said the gentleman, as he quickly descended; “we may jog on at this rate all night, for aught I know to the contrary;” and he entered the dwelling before him as he spoke.

“Well, I *am* blessed,” remarked the coachman to the horse, “and we not a stone’s throw from the house itself.”

But the gentleman did not hear this remark. The open door which he had entered belonged to a small village shop; to one of those wonderful shops which contain everything from bacon and biting Dutch cheeses to barège dresses and bonnet-ribbons.

The window, inefficiently lighted with oil, was decorated with straw hats and children’s shoes at the top; and pudding-eggs and pickles at the bottom; whilst the doorway had evidently been the resting-place of sundry bales of coarse flannel and oil cloth, which the proprietor was just engaged in packing away.

Moreover a slit on one side of the door,

with the words "Post Office" rudely painted above it, showed that if not the only, this was the most important, shop in the place.

The nostrils of the visitor involuntarily closed themselves as he stooped his tall head beneath the doorway, and became aware of the mingled aromas by which they were saluted, but although in general fastidious in such things, to a degree, he was too eager on the present occasion to prosecute his enquiries, to be deterred by so slight an annoyance.

The master of the shop, hearing the stoppage of the fly, and noting the distinguished appearance of the visitor, quickly left his bales upon the counter, and advanced to know with what he might have the pleasure to serve him. But before the gentleman had had time to open his mouth in answer, there was the bustle of a second arrival, and a slight female figure darting into the shop, stood just before him.

With instinctive courtesy he immediately drew back, to enable her to despatch her business first, and she was so eager about it that she did not appear to notice either the action or himself.

“ Mr. Benson,” she said anxiously, “ was there no letter or parcel for us by to-day’s post ?”

At the sound of her voice, the stranger started and regarded her with interest. At first he had seen no more than that she was a woman ; now, he perceived that she was young and a lady.

But what should a delicate creature like that have to do out on such a boisterous night ? She was so lightly clad that her thin shawl and print dress were wetted through and through, and clung around her figure, whilst the small black bonnet which she wore, (hats not being in general use at that period), and the soaking umbrella which she carried, seemed very inadequate protection for her head. Yet she evidently was thinking of nothing but the answer to her question.

“ Well, Miss,” replied the shopman, not over pleased at the interruption, “ if I remember rightly, there *was* a summat come to-day. Wife,” he shouted to some one invisible, but within hearing, “ be there a letter or a parcel for the Cottage ?”

“ Hupper drawer ; left-’and corner ; hoffice side,” was the mysterious reply.

The stranger smiled, but the young girl

only looked anxiously at Mr. Benson as he examined the receptacle in question.

“Here it is, miss,” he said presently, as he delivered a small packet into her outstretched hand.

“Oh! you *should* have sent it up,” she replied in a tone of annoyance, “you know of what importance it is, and how seldom he can get any sleep without it.”

“Well, miss, I’m very sorry, I’m sure, you should have had the trouble like of fetching it,” said the man civilly; “but I’ve been out on business myself to-day, and it ain’t a night, in my opinion, to send a dog out, let alone a woman, or the wife should have took it up, sooner than disappoint you.”

“Never mind, now!” she replied hastily, “Good-night,” and gathering up her damp skirts and umbrella, she prepared to leave the shop again.

But as she passed into the doorway, she brushed against the stranger, which caused her to raise her eyes to his, and a pair of large, dark blue orbs, set in a wondering, innocent face, for a moment met his own.

The next, she had darted out into the rain and was gone, leaving him staring at the spot where she had disappeared.

“What may you please to want, sir?” enquired the obsequious voice of the shopman, rousing him from his brief reverie.

He was just going to say, “who is that lady?” when he remembered himself and his errand.

“Oh! I beg your pardon, I only wished to ask how far it is from here to the village of Little Bickton?”

“Little Bickton, sir? why this is the place,” replied the shopman in a tone of disappointment.

“Indeed! I am glad to hear it; I am much obliged to you; we have been so long on the road, that I was afraid the driver had missed his way. Do you know a family of the name of Brooke living here?”

The shopman’s disappointment could not prevent his smiling at the question.

“What, Mr. Brooke of the Farm Cottage, sir? You *must* be a stranger in these parts to ask that. The old gentleman’s been among us for years. Why! that was Miss Nelly as just left the shop.”

“Miss Nelly who? not Miss Brooke!” demanded the stranger eagerly.

“To be sure it was, sir, and the Cottage ain’t more than three-quarter of a mile further

on. If so be you're going there, it won't take you more than ten or fifteen minutes on the road."

"Thank you! thank you!" said the gentleman quickly, as he left the shop, and re-entered the coach. "Driver, go on as fast as you can to the Farm Cottage."

But the driver did not appear disposed to hurry himself.

"Oh! you've found out as I do know summat of the road, I suppose," he muttered as he leisurely set off again. "Well, I never thought I should come, after thirty years of it, to see Benson's opinion taken over mine. Don't hurry yourself," he added, apostrophising his horse with bitter irony; "we don't know our way and may be we might miss it."

He had not enjoyed the luxury of grumbling, however, for more than a few minutes, when he again heard the stranger's voice issuing a command to stop.

"Well, I *am* blowed," said the coachman, now thoroughly roused, as he dropped his reins and his whip, and his passenger opened the coach door for himself and stepped upon the muddy road.

A well-clipped hedge now ran along one

side of the highway, whilst the open common lay on the other. Beneath the hedge, picking her way home in the dirt and the darkness, the stranger's eyes had caught sight of the youthful figure which had attracted him in the little shop. He approached her readily, thinking to introduce himself, and offer her a seat in the coach which was conveying him to the house of his grandfather and hers. He meant to have commenced by telling her his name, so as to account for his addressing her, but in his nervousness, he put what is commonly called "the cart before the horse."

"I beg your pardon," he said, "will you take a seat in the fly, my name is——"

She turned round as he spoke: he could distinguish so much even in the gloom; and then with a sudden movement, for which he was quite unprepared, silently leapt over a stile near at hand, and began to run as fast as she could through the grassy field on the other side of the hedge. He leant over the stile, scarcely knowing what he did, peering after her into the darkness, but her form had already disappeared, and the sound of her footsteps even was lost in the yielding pasturage.

"Why the grass must be up to her ankles,"

he said aloud in his surprise, "it must be like walking through a pond."

"'Tis longish by this time," remarked the coachman, who had watched the discomfiture of his fare with malicious pleasure, "for they'll be taking the second crop off it shortly; but our Kentish lasses don't think twice about a foot-wetting, I can tell you."

"*This* is a young lady," said the stranger, loftily, not liking the familiar tone in which the man had spoken of his unknown cousin.

"I don't know nothing about her," rejoined the driver, "for I didn't see her face; but whoever she is, she seems to like the wet grass, as well as her own company."

"Drive to the Farm Cottage," said the gentleman, authoritatively, as he jumped into the coach again and slammed the door. The man grinned, and drove on.

CHAPTER II.

AND IS INTRODUCED TO HIS NEW RELATIONS.

MEANWHILE Nelly Brooke was finding her way to the Farm Cottage almost as fast as himself, although the road she had chosen was the longer of the two. She had put down her umbrella again, notwithstanding the shower had not abated, and she literally ran through the wet meadows, in a style which most modern young ladies would find very difficult of imitation, jumping over the ant-hillocks and other small obstacles which occasionally came in her way. As she ran, she hardly knew why she was so energetic in her flight; the stranger's address had certainly not frightened her, for she had never been insulted in her life, and knew no cause for fear; moreover, the tone of his voice had been too courteous to provoke alarm; but she felt per-

haps just a little angry that any one should have taken advantage of her being alone in the dark, to speak to her. She knew the way too well to miss it, even at that time of night, and after having traversed three meadows in an incredibly short space of time, she stopped beside a high barred gate, which communicated with the road she had left. She listened for a minute to hear if there was any sound of wheels approaching, but all was still, for the coach had passed on some time before, and was at that moment standing at the Farm Cottage door. So, she clambered with the agility of a cat to the topmost rail, threw her light form over it, and descending thence into the public road, crossed a corner of the common, which led her directly to the latched gate which guarded her grandfather's garden. As she essayed to open it, she stumbled up against something wet and rough which stood outside the wooden palings. It was only a neighbour's donkey-foal, trying to get a little shelter beneath the laurels which overhung the garden boundaries. But the girl's sympathies were roused at once. With her soft ungloved hand, she rubbed the hardy animal's nose up and down, and drew his long wet ears through her fingers.

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“Poor little Jack,” she said, kindly, “couldn’t they have put you in the shed on such a night as this. Come! let me see if I cannot find a corner somewhere for you,” and twisting her fingers in the rough mane, she tried to lead the creature through the garden gate. But little Jack, not being aware of her benevolent intentions in his behalf, resisted all her efforts to make him follow her, and she was compelled to leave him, and pursue her way alone. She ran lightly over the gravelled path which led to the back of the house, and lifting a familiar latch, found herself at once in the kitchen, where an old woman, in the dress of a servant, was busily employed over the fire, with some culinary operation.

“Nurse Aggie,” exclaimed the girl, without preface, “I want some oats, or some bread or something.”

The old woman nearly upset the contents of her frying-pan into the fire, as she turned and surveyed the dripping figure which stood in the doorway.

“Now, where have you been, Miss Nelly, and on a night like this? we’ve been looking for you high and low!”

“Never mind, nurse, I’ll tell you presently. I want some bread.”

“And what may you want bread for?”

“For Jem Locke’s little donkey, it’s such a shame; he’s left it out in all the rain, and it’s not more than two months old.”

“And you think I’m a going to let you run back in wet like this, and you, drenched to the skin already, to feed a nasty jackass that won’t as much as give you a thank you when all’s done. Then, you’re very much mistaken, Miss Nelly, you don’t go out again to-night, not for all the jackasses in the world;” and so saying, the old woman, having placed her pan on the hob, closed and locked the kitchen door, and put the key in her pocket.

“What a shame!” laughed the girl, carelessly, as she stood before the fire, and the steam ascended in a cloud from her damp clothes.

“Now, where *have* you been?” asked nurse Aggie again, as she approached her and laid her hands on her dress and shawl. “God bless my soul, Miss Nelly, why you’re drenched through and through; you must take off those things directly, or you’ll take your death of cold. And what has it been all for, I should like to know!”

“I went to fetch Bertie’s drops,” was the careless reply, “Benson had never sent them up, and he would have passed another night without them.”

As she spoke, she took the small parcel from her pocket, and placed it on the table.

“You went all the way to Benson’s, and in weather like this, just to fetch those drops for Master Robert!” exclaimed the old nurse, lifting her hands. “Well, then I say it’s a shame you should throw away your health in this fashion for such trumpery, and a shame Master Robert should let you do it. Why you’re wet to your skin, my dearie,” she added plaintively, as she placed her hand on the front of the girl’s print dress.

“Come, nurse, don’t cry about it,” said Nelly Brooke impatiently, “but help me to take off these things and get dry ones. Bertie didn’t even know that I was going, so it’s my fault if anyone’s; besides, after all, what’s a wetting once in a way?”

“You make too much of Master Robert, Miss Nelly,” grumbled the old servant, as she proceeded to disencumber her young lady of the wet clothes, “a good glass of brandy and water at night would send him off to sleep just as sure as any drops.”

“No, no! nurse,” replied the girl quickly, “don’t tell him that, these drops are what the doctor ordered for him.”

“’Tisn’t a fit night for a dog to have been out,” was the pertinacious rejoinder, “I warrant you didn’t take Thug with you, for fear he should get his feet wet!”

“Certainly not!” laughed her young mistress, “when a monster like Thug gets wet, it is so much trouble to dry him again.”

“Aye, aye,” muttered the nurse as she left the kitchen to procure a change of raiment, “he was safe and snug enough in the stable, I’ll lay, like some others was in the parlour, whilst you may take your death for love of ’em; but it’s always the way—it’s always the way.”

As she disappeared, Nelly Brooke, partially disrobed, stood gazing earnestly into the kitchen fire. Did she believe the old woman’s statement, and credit herself with less selfishness than those with whom she dwelt? Not for a moment! If her thoughts took any distinct form, it was to wonder that nurse Aggie could say anything so disagreeable.

“She always seems so cross about Bertie now,” she mused, “and to resent his helplessness as if it were an injury to herself. My poor

darling! as if any trouble could be too great which has the power to make one moment of your life easier than another."

"Why this dress, nurse?" she enquired a minute later, as the old woman put a black alpaca robe, which she usually wore on Sundays, into her hands. "You could air one of my cotton frocks in no time by this fire."

"There now!" exclaimed nurse Aggie, as she shook her head self-reproachfully, "if I haven't clean forgot to tell you that there's company in the parlour."

"Company! who is it, Mr. Weston or the vicar?"

"The vicar!" replied the old woman disdainfully; "but there it is, Miss Nelly: your coming in in that state is just enough to drive everything out of a body's head. Why! it's your cousin from the Ingies, Miss, come in a coach, and such a fine gentleman too; you must make haste and put on your frock, and go in and see him."

"My cousin! what cousin?" said Nelly Brooke, reddening under a sudden consciousness that she had already met the stranger.

"Why, Mr. Nigel, the son of your uncle what's dead in Calcutty," replied the nurse.

"I never heard of him," said the girl, "is he a tall, fair man?"

“Yes, to be sure—tall, and fair, and everything he should be, and travelled all this distance just to make your acquaintance. Come! now Miss Nelly, make haste, and go and bid him welcome.”

“I shan’t go in at all,” replied Miss Nelly decisively.

“Oh! that’s nonsense!” said the old nurse, “why, I took tea in full five minutes ago, and there’s no one to make it for them, and I’ve took in the cold beef, and was just frying up a few sausages as you came home. We must make him comfortable, you know, for he’s just come from the Ingies, where they rolls in gold, and has everything of the best.”

“I am not going in, I don’t want to see him,” reiterated Nelly, “why has he come here? who asked him?”

“Lor, Miss Nelly!” ejaculated the old servant, “I’m quite ashamed of you, why, he’s your grandpa’s grandson, the same as Master Robert, and own cousin to yourself, and what more natural considering you’ve never met, than he should wish to pay you all a visit. Blood’s thicker than water, my dear. Here’s the sausages quite ready, and I’m going to take them in, you come now along of me.”

“No! thank you,” said Nelly Brooke, seat-

ing herself by the fire ; “ I don’t wish to see him or to know him.”

She felt shy at the prospect of meeting the stranger again ; for visitors were so scarce in Little Bickton, that she had no doubt as to his being the same gentleman who had accosted her in the road. If he were her cousin, and knew her to be his, what must he have thought of the abrupt manner in which she had jumped over the stile and left him.

The nurse shrugged her shoulders, and carried off her sausages. Soon she returned with the message—

“ Master Robert wants you, Miss Nelly.”

The girl started to her feet at once, and commenced binding up her long thick hair. “ Then I must go,” was all she said. She no longer questioned the necessity of her appearance in the sitting-room : she seemed to think there could be no alternative to her brother’s request. As she left the kitchen, the old nurse shrugged her shoulders again, but she made no further comment.

The sitting-room, like all the rooms at the Farm Cottage, was low-roofed and old-fashioned ; it was substantially but dingily furnished, and everything it contained had been made more for use than ornament.

As Nelly Brooke entered it on that particular evening, she came into the presence of three men. The first her grandfather, an old stern-looking man, who, sitting apart from the others at a small table of his own, leant his head abstractedly upon his hand. He always sat thus; shading his eyes from the observation of the outer world; never a change passing over his once handsome countenance, and scarcely a word issuing from his lips, except when he was addressed by one of his grandchildren. The second, her brother; a pale, handsome youth, born in the same hour as herself, but gifted with none of the superabundant life which flowed in her own veins; for having been afflicted from his earliest years with a spinal weakness which rendered him incapable of any exertion, Robert Brooke lay stretched upon a low couch which had now been drawn to the tea-table. The third inmate of the sitting-room was, as Nelly had anticipated, the same gentleman whom she had seen in the post-office, and been accosted by in the road.

Nelly Brooke, although a lady in the highest sense of the word, was young and shy, and very ignorant of the usages of society; and as she now stood blushing in the open

doorway, hardly knowing whether to advance or retreat again, the stranger thought he had never seen so attractive a spectacle before.

“This is my sister Helena,” said Robert Brooke shortly. “Nelly, this is our cousin, Nigel Brooke, the son of our uncle who died last year in Calcutta.”

At the sound of her brother's voice, Nelly seemed to gain courage, and advancing frankly, held out her hand to the stranger, and Nigel Brooke as he took it, and gazed into her open countenance, was struck again, not so much by her beauty as by the quiet innocence of her expression. She was wonderfully like, and yet unlike her afflicted brother. Robert was his sister struck down and withered by sickness: Helena was her brother, glowing with health and strength; but the likeness extended only to their features, for whilst the girl's expression was one of cheerful content, the young man's face bore signs of a fretful and self-absorbed existence.

“We have met before, I think,” said Nigel Brooke, as he held the dimpled hand for a minute in his own.

“Yes,” said Nelly, blushing, “but I could not tell that it was you.”

“Why, when did that happen?” enquired Robert Brooke.

“Just now at the post office,” replied his sister, “I only ran down for your drops, Bertie.”

“And I had stepped in to enquire if I was in the right way,” interposed Nigel Brooke; “but I am afraid you must have got very wet,” he added, addressing himself to Nelly.

“A little,” she answered shyly.

“Poor Nell!” said her brother fondly, placing his hand upon her head as she sat down beside him. “What a dear good child you are to be always thinking of me. What should I do without you?”

She stooped and kissed him on the forehead as he spoke, and took his wasted hand in hers, and held it lovingly. It was a beautiful sight, so thought Nigel Brooke, to see these two, whom God had mysteriously endowed, with one life, but with such different capabilities for its enjoyment, wrapt up in each other. Yet he could not help remarking even then that Robert Brooke did not raise the least objection to his sister inconveniencing herself on his account, or express any anxiety as to whether she might suffer from the exposure.

As to the grandfather, he did not appear to have heard the subject of their discourse, or even to have noticed his granddaughter's entrance into the room.

"Come now, Nelly," said young Brooke, after a pause, "pour us out some tea, there's a dear girl, and let our cousin go on with what he was talking about when you came in and interrupted him."

"I was only telling your brother," said Nigel Brooke, as she took her place at the tea-table, "that my mother and I have taken a furnished house at a place called Orpington for three years, which is, I am afraid, the extent of the holiday I must allow myself."

When she looked at him enquiringly, he continued :—

"Perhaps you have heard that my father, your uncle, was a merchant at Calcutta, and on his death I was made a partner in the house. There are two principals in the business, and as we only consider it necessary for one of us to be in Calcutta at a time, we have agreed to take alternate leave to England. I shall remain at home for the next three years, and then I shall return to Bengal, and my partner will take his holiday. You understand me?"

“Yes,” she answered quietly.

“Neither my father nor mother have been to England for many years past, for—for several reasons,” he continued, lowering his voice, as if not wishing his grandfather to hear him, “but I persuaded my mother to accompany me now, for I am her only child, as perhaps you know—have you ever heard of your aunt Eliza?”

Nelly looked at her brother for an answer. “Have I?” she asked, and he replied—

“I don’t know, but I think not.”

“Never mind!” rejoined Nigel Brooke, “it is of little consequence, but that is my mother’s name, and I should much like you both to know her. You have no aunt but herself, no cousin but me, so we should be friends, should we not?”

“We *will* be,” replied Robert, confidently, but Nelly said nothing.

“When I arrived in England a month ago,” resumed their cousin, “my first thought was to pay you a visit, but there has been so little communication between our families of late years,” lowering his voice again, “that I had some difficulty in finding your address, and still more in getting an answer to my letter to my grandfather.”

“Did you write to him?” enquired the brother.

“To be sure I did, and asked his permission to visit him here. I should not have ventured to do so without.”

“He never told us,” said Robert Brooke.

“He never tells us anything,” said his sister.

“We might as well be dead, as buried here alive with him,” exclaimed the boy emphatically.

Nelly looked at him reproachfully for a minute, and then rising, took up her station again by his sofa, and placed her hand caressingly on his. He returned the caress, but repeated his words.

“It is true, Nelly! we might just as well be dead or better; we hear nothing, and see nothing, and know nothing; this place is a living grave.”

“Hush, darling,” she said tenderly.

Her brother was silenced, but he did not look convinced, and Nigel Brooke, watching them as they hung about each other, thought again as he had thought before, that he had never seen so beautiful a picture.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH THE COUSINS DISCUSS CERTAIN
FAMILY MATTERS.

MEANWHILE the old man remained in the same position that he had maintained from the commencement of the evening, moving his head for a moment perhaps, to drink the tea with which his granddaughter had provided him, but quickly resting it on his hand again with the appearance of becoming perfectly unconscious of all that was passing around him. He was not so entirely self-absorbed, however, as he professed to be, for as soon as the meal was finished and the table had been cleared by old Aggie, he rose of his own accord, and bidding the young men an abrupt "good night," left the room; and as his cousin Nelly had disappeared some short time previously, Nigel Brooke concluded that he should see neither of them again that evening. As soon as his grandfather's back was turned, Robert

Brooke desired the old servant to set hot water and spirits before them, and turning to his cousin, demanded if he smoked.

"I do in general," was the reply, "but I can dispense with it for one evening."

"But where's the necessity?" said Robert, "we'll smoke together."

"Are you permitted to smoke?" exclaimed Nigel, in astonishment, alluding to the delicacy of his cousin's health, rather than his age.

"I don't know about being 'permitted,'" replied Robert scornfully, "but I know that no prohibition would deter me; why, I could not *live* without it; there's nothing else to do in this hole."

"Perhaps, if you didn't smoke so much, Master Robert," interposed the old nurse, as she lingered for a moment beside his sofa, "you'd be better able to do something."

"You go to your kitchen, Aggie, and learn to speak when you're spoken to," exclaimed the youth, half in earnest and half in play. "That old woman brought both me and Nelly up from our births, Nigel," he continued, as they found themselves alone again, "and doesn't know the meaning of taking a liberty."

"And I shouldn't try to teach it her, Robert," was his cousin's reply, "so faithful a

servant should be regarded in the light of a friend. But I want to ask you if my grandfather always maintains the silent mood we have seen him in to-night, or has he assumed it for my benefit. It is a cold welcome, although I have no right to expect any other."

"I assure you it is not on your account," replied Robert Brooke, "for I never remember him to have been otherwise. Aggie says he was not like that when my grandmother was alive; but she died when I and my sister were still in our swaddling clothes."

"I remember it well," said Nigel Brooke, thoughtfully.

"Ever since I have known him," continued Robert, "he has been the same silent, gloomy nature; and of late years he has become very deaf, which increases his reserve. He sits as you have seen him whenever he is at home; sometimes he will hold a book in his hand, oftener, however, he appears to be simply buried in thought."

"And how does he employ himself in the daytime?"

"He takes long walks, sometimes for miles, in search of fossils and stones; the only thing he cares for is geology, and the only books he ever reads are such as treat of it."

“It must be very dull for your sister and yourself.”

“Dull? dull is no word for it! It is much more endurable for Nelly than for me, as you may suppose; she has health and her household occupations; whilst I lie on this sofa half the day, and crawl about the garden the other half—my existence is scarcely bearable.”

“But surely my grandfather takes some interest in the property. I thought there was a small farm attached to the cottage.”

“There used to be, but he has long given it over to some people of the name of Weston, who own the large farm to which the house belongs. No! he takes no interest in anything—everything is left to old Aggie and Nelly. I suppose he gives the former money occasionally, but I never see him do it. If Nelly and I had any use for money in this barren place, I expect we should find it hard enough to get it out of him. I think he has treated us very badly. We have been sheltered and clothed and fed by him, it is true, but he could scarcely have done less. We have received scarcely any education, and been allowed to make no friends, and I want to know the reason of it. I want to know what

right he has to keep us from infancy to maturity in this out-of-the-way place, without an advantage in life. I should like to call him to account for it."

The youth's eye kindled, and his pale cheek flushed as he uttered the words, and he looked even more like his sister than he had done before.

"Hush!" said his cousin, cautiously, for Robert had raised his voice, "perhaps there are more excuses for it than you are aware of. In the first place, your grandfather is very poor."

"Did my father leave no money behind him then?"

"He did not—that I am aware of," said Nigel Brooke, but he uttered the words with so much constraint, that his listener looked at him with surprise.

"Yet *your* father was rich?" he said, enquiringly.

"Not when he went to Calcutta. He made almost all his money there."

"And *my* father was the younger son?" observed Robert.

"You are aware, I suppose, that our grandfather was a clergyman," said Nigel, evading an answer, "and that, when he resigned his profession, he had little or nothing to live on."

“What made him resign it then?”

“I am no more in his secrets than you are,” replied the elder cousin, with an evident desire to relinquish the subject; “you forget that to-night is the first time I have seen him since I was a child myself.”

“Ah! *secrets*, that is the word,” exclaimed Robert, eagerly, “my grandfather *has* a secret, Nigel, which I would give worlds to discover. We have often tried to make him tell us all about our parents, but he is as taciturn on that subject as he is on all others. The only thing we do know is, that we are orphans, and that our mother died when we were born. But if a man’s life has been innocent, why should he bury himself from all his own family, and refuse even to speak of them? Why! will you believe me, when I tell you, that until you walked into the cottage this evening, neither I or Nelly knew that you so much as existed? We heard last year that our uncle in Calcutta was dead, because my grandfather thought fit to invest himself and me with hat-bands on the occasion, and Nelly with a black frock; otherwise, I daresay, he would not have mentioned it. There’s something beneath all this, Nigel, you may depend upon it.”

“Perhaps so,” replied his cousin, “but it is not crime, Robert, be assured of that; whatever you choose to surmise, don’t think that your grandfather has led any but a blameless life. Mistaken it may have been, and hard and unforgiving I know it to have been; but he has done nothing which need prevent him holding up his head before all the world. As for your not hearing of myself, it is easily accounted for. My father married early and settled in England, but a bitter quarrel arising between him and his father, when I was a lad at school, caused him to leave this country for Bengal, which he never again quitted. I was his only child, and therefore he took me with him, and I worked under him until I succeeded him in the business. At different times I have visited the Cape, Australia, and even Paris, but I have never set foot in my native country since I left it, until a month ago. Therefore, you see, it was impossible we could have met, and unlikely that, under the circumstances, our grandfather should care to revive unpleasant recollections by mentioning my name to you. But I am old enough to remember the circumstance of your birth, and my father’s quarrel with my grandfather, and I have always resolved that when we had an

opportunity of meeting, it should not be my fault if we were not friends."

And Nigel Brooke smiled kindly on his young cousin as he spoke.

"You remember our birth!" exclaimed Robert, "why, what age are you?"

"I am thirty-five."

"Indeed! you don't look like it!"

"Do I not—yet my hair is turning grey—and you?"

"I am just eighteen."

"Ah! of course, so you must be," and for a few minutes the cousins smoked in silence.

"If you can remember our birth," resumed Robert Brooke, "you must remember our father. What was he like?"

"I do not remember him," replied the other, with the same constraint he had exhibited before.

"How is that?"

"I was a boy at school, and seldom at home."

"And he and your father were not good friends, I suppose?" continued Robert, inquiringly.

"They were not, Robert, I regret to say," replied Nigel Brooke, uneasily; "but this

questioning is becoming very painful to me, pray discontinue it."

"But at least you can tell me what my father died of?"

"For Heaven's sake let us dismiss the subject," exclaimed Nigel Brooke, with strange emphasis, as he rose from his seat and helped himself to some of the spirits before him, "we have had quite enough of it for one evening; besides, I am keeping you up, Robert. Do you know that it is past midnight; rather a late hour for an invalid, is it not?"

"I don't consider myself an invalid," said the other, pettishly; "however, if you are ready for bed, you have but to ring for Aggie to show you to your room. I sit up till all hours myself, so it makes no difference to me."

"I should think it must make a difference in your health; do you experience much pain?"

"No! not unless I have been standing or sitting up for too long, and then my back is used to ache. I sometimes think if I were away from this cursed hole that I should be as strong as other men; but the want of medical advice is another of the benefits that I have to thank my grandfather for."

"I thought your weakness had been

chronic," said his cousin, "that you had been born so."

"So they *say*," replied Robert Brooke, roughly, "but I don't believe it any the more for that. However, if you are really ready, we will make a move."

"I *am* tired," admitted his cousin, "for I found the journey here rather a fatiguing one. Shall I ring the bell for you?"

Knowing that the boy could not well walk without assistance, he had expected that the old nurse would appear to conduct him to his room; but what was his surprise, on the door opening, to see his cousin Nelly on the threshold. She came in with cheerful readiness, but she looked pale, and dark rings about her eyes shewed that she had waited for the summons longer than she should have done.

"Ready, Bertie?" she asked, with a smile.

"Our cousin is, Nelly, so it's all the same thing. I suppose his room is prepared for him. Tell Aggie to bring us the candlesticks, and go before to shew the way."

She flew to execute his bidding, and returned bearing the lighted candles herself.

"I am so sorry to give you this trouble," said Nigel Brooke, as he took the one she tendered him. "I had no idea we were keeping

you up, or I should have suggested to Robert that it was time to go to bed before."

"Oh! it is of no consequence," she answered, blushing, "I always sit up for Bertie, however late he may be. Do I not?" she continued, addressing her brother as she placed one hand beneath his shoulders, and raised him into a sitting posture.

"Of course you do," he replied, "I couldn't get on without this sister of mine, Nigel! no one can do for me what she can."

He was standing now, and the curvature in the spine was very apparent, as he stooped forward, supported by her strong young arms. Yet it was evident that the burthen was too heavy for her, for the colour in her face came and went, painfully.

"You are happy in the possession of so tender a nurse, Robert," said Nigel Brooke, as he bid the cousins good-night. But the word seemed to grate upon the cripple's ears.

"You don't call yourself a 'nurse' yet, Nelly, do you?" he said, appealing to his sister.

"Oh, no," she answered, quickly, "only your sister, Bertie."

"She is more than that, Nigel," said Robert, laughing, "she is *myself*, without her I should not be."

At this tribute Nelly bent her eyes downwards, but not before her cousin had seen that they sparkled with pleasure at the praise.

He stayed in the sitting-room from a feeling of delicacy until the difficult business of getting the invalid upstairs was accomplished, and then the old nurse appeared, and offered to conduct him to his sleeping apartment. He followed her silently, thinking how strange it was that after all that had happened, he should be going to rest beneath the roof of his grandfather.

“Is there anything more, sir?” asked the woman, respectfully, when she had deposited the candlestick upon the table.

“Nothing, thank you,” he exclaimed, starting from the train of thought into which he had fallen.

A little while later he opened his door, for the night was close, notwithstanding the storm, and the cottage ceilings were low. He did so softly, for fear of disturbing his cousins or grandfather, and he paused a few minutes before he closed it again. On the opposite side of the landing a bright light streamed beneath the door of the room which he knew to be occupied by Robert Brooke, and the sweet tones of his cousin Nelly, as she

read to her brother from the Bible, issued thence in a continued murmur.

The sound seemed to chain him, and he stood there listening, until a fretful voice interrupted the reader with the words:—

“There now, Nelly, that will do for to-night. Let me go to sleep, there’s a good girl,” and the next moment the reading ceased, and the light was extinguished.

Nigel Brooke could picture to himself the affectionate caress which followed, and had just time to creep back into his own room, as Nelly issued from that of her brother.

He threw himself on the bed, but it was long before he could compose his thoughts sufficiently to allow him to sleep. He could not help wondering what it must feel like to be loved and cared for, as Robert Brooke was loved and cared for by his sister; the sensation was one which he had never known, for both his parents had been people of a most prosaic turn of mind, who thought time wasted which was passed in fondling, and words wasted which were only words of endearment. And from his earliest years Nigel Brooke had been taught that the true object of life was to make a position for himself by means of his wealth.

So the idea was a new one to him, and he could not help questioning whether, had he been reared in an atmosphere of love, he should have been a different man to what he was.

And he had not solved the difficulty when he fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV.

NIGEL BROOKE FALLS IN LOVE WITH A COUNTRY LIFE.

WHEN he waked the next morning, all traces of the storm had disappeared, and the August sun was streaming with so much force upon his face through the thin blind which shaded the window, that it reminded him of India, and caused him to exclaim: "By Jove," before he was fully awake, as it flashed across his dawning intellect that he must have overslept himself. But as soon as he had leapt out of bed and thrown open the little lattice, he guessed that he must be mistaken, and the hands of his watch, which stood at half-past six, corroborated the suspicion. The constant crowing of the cock, answered by a quiet chuckle from his hens; the hissing of geese and quacking of ducks; in fact, all the babble of the farm-yard, which seemed to arise from just beneath his window, proved it was still early morning.

His room, which was at the back of the cottage, looked out upon a kitchen garden, apparently well stocked with all the more common fruits and vegetables, to one side of which lay a meadow, and to the other a shady and most inviting nut-walk, which appeared to run right round the little enclosure, and at the sight of which Nigel Brooke proceeded to make a rapid toilet, in order that he might the sooner inspect the quiet English beauties, which had so much charm for him after his lengthened residence in Bengal.

As soon as he was dressed, he left his bedroom cautiously, and took his way downstairs, not expecting to find any of the inmates of the Cottage stirring at that hour, unless it was the old woman whom they called nurse Aggie, and until he saw the hall-door standing wide open to admit the sweet fresh air into the lower rooms, he had hardly expected even to meet her. Passing through, he found himself in the front garden, if it could be called by that name. A large oval piece of grass, which had once been a lawn, surrounded by a gravelled walk, and bordered by tall straggling laurel bushes, was all that met his eye. The grass was thick and rank from want of attention; the laurels here and there

entwined in the embraces of a huge holly-hock, almost lay on the ground, from the violence of the late storm, whilst a few of the most ordinary seedlings, such as stocks, mignonette, and balsam, which he guessed had been put in by the women's hands to redeem the place from a look of utter desolation, had shed half their blossoms on the soil they could scarcely be said to adorn.

Nothing that Nigel Brooke had yet seen or heard of the internal economy of the Farm Cottage, had struck him so forcibly as the appearance of this untidy and neglected garden.

"It is like the old man's life," he said to himself; "aimless, sapless, and forlorn; and that from the fault of others rather than himself. Well! I wish I could do something to make up for it, to him; if he will let me make the attempt, it shall not be my fault if I fail."

He turned from the scene, which under the circumstances was really melancholy, notwithstanding the sunshine with which it was enveloped, and judging that the path by the side of the house would lead him to the nut-walk he had seen from his bedroom, bent his steps in that direction. He had not gone far

before he found he would have to pass the kitchen door and window, but he thought nothing of that until he came opposite the latter, which was thrown open, and saw leaning with her bare dimpled arms upon the sill, his cousin Nelly.

Nigel Brooke started back, coloured, as if he had been detected in a crime, and then commenced to stammer some apologies for what he termed his trespassing.

The girl coloured also, but simply at his unexpected presence; she would never have dreamt of blushing for the situation, which was an every day occurrence to her.

“You are quite welcome, cousin,” she said, wishing with intuitive politeness, to set him at his ease, “won’t you come in?”

The genuine request did all that it was intended to do. Nigel Brooke refused the offer, but seated himself on the window-sill instead.

“No thank you, the morning is too lovely to spend in-doors; besides, I might disturb you.”

“You would not do that,” she artlessly replied; “but you might get a dust of flour on your coat, because I am just going to make the pastry.”

And as she spoke, she took up her position

beside a small deal table, which was placed in front of the window, and laden with the articles necessary to her occupation.

“Can you really make it?” asked Nigel Brooke with surprise, for the ladies he had been used to associate with had never been able to do anything which was of use.

Nelly’s big eyes opened to their fullest extent.

“*Really!* why no one ever touches it in this house but myself. I make all the tarts, and puddings, and pies, and all the bread into the bargain. Aggie used to do that, but Bertie thinks I have a lighter hand now, and I ought to have, you know, because I’m so much the younger. Do you like milk rolls?”

“I think I should like anything which you made,” replied her cousin, looking at her with genuine admiration.

If he had considered her charming on the previous evening, when her shyness had made her awkward, and her fatigue had made her pale, what must he have thought of her as she appeared, refreshed by a good night’s rest, and the restraint in her manners replaced by an innocent confidence. Strictly speaking, perhaps, Nelly Brooke was not beautiful; her twin brother who possessed the same features,

sharpened and refined by sickness, might have laid a stronger claim to the title, but she was better calculated to attract a man (particularly such a one as Nigel Brooke, who, having seen no English complexions for so many years, was ready to fall down and worship "colour,") than some of the most perfect faces that ever gladdened this earth. She was tall; a good deal taller than her brother when they stood together, and her figure, without being large, was full. She had two dark-blue eyes, set wide apart in a broad low forehead, which would have been as white as her arms, had it not been sunburnt; a straight short nose; and an open mouth which displayed a set of firm white teeth. Her hair, which in country fashion had been cut short across her forehead, where, from a natural tendency to curl, it hung like little tendrils on a vine, was simply tied with a broad black ribbon behind. In hue it was neither fair nor dark, but of a nut-brown, which exposure had turned rust-colour; and her eyebrows and lashes were well marked, and considerably darker than her hair. She was a woman who might have been pronounced either pretty or commonplace, according as her judges liked or disliked her, but as much may be said for every phase of beauty.

Nigel Brooke had already passed his decision in the case, and did not dream of questioning it.

He thought her simply charming.

As she commenced to dabble in the flour and milk, and butter, apparently perfectly unconscious that her print dress, and her homely occupation rendered her in the least different from other young ladies, he asked her if she were less afraid of him that morning than she had been on the previous night.

“I was not afraid of you last night,” she said, blushing, “I am never afraid of anything.”

“But you ran away very fast when I spoke to you.”

“Because you took me by surprise; I was sorry for it afterwards; I thought you might have wished to ask your way somewhere, but it was too late then. Besides I hadn’t Thug with me.”

“And who is Thug?”

“I will show you,” and shaking the flour off her fingers, she ran to the open door, and called the name in a strong clear voice. A rustle was heard coming up the nut-walk, followed by a crash through the privet hedge, and then a large mastiff, of the true English breed, rushed out, and without taking any notice of the stranger, beyond a low growl,

leapt up at the girl's figure, and laid his huge paws on her shoulders.

"Oh! he is *so* heavy!" she said as she bent beneath the weight; "but he does love his mistress so."

The fierce animal's hanging jaw was thrust against her face, and his tusks were close to her white throat. Nigel Brooke actually shuddered as he looked at them and turned his eyes away.

"So that is Thug," he said, "he is a splendid fellow, but you shouldn't let him put his teeth so close to you as that. A mastiff's temper is very uncertain."

"You don't think Thug would hurt *me*, cousin, do you?" she said, amused at the mere idea, "why, I brought him up from a little thing of *that* size," clasping her rosy palms together; "Mr. Weston gave him to me when he was only six days old, because the mother had more puppies than she could rear, and how do you think I fed him," she continued, laughing girlishly, "with a bottle; like a baby!! He's a nice baby, isn't he? go down, Thug, I can't touch you; don't you see that I'm making the pastry?" and shaking the huge animal off her, she proceeded with her business.

"So now I suppose he rewards your care of

him by looking after 'you," remarked Nigel Brooke; "but what I have told you is really true. The nature of mastiffs is treacherous, and I have heard of more than one case in which they have unexpectedly turned upon their own masters and killed them. So, do be careful. I must allow, however, that your "baby" does you credit, I never saw a more splendid specimen. I should like to have had him out shooting with me in India. Those fangs of his would look more appropriate in my mind at the throat of a wild beast, than at that of a young lady."

"I couldn't distrust Thug," replied Nelly, confidently, "he would hurt himself sooner than me; but have you ever shot a tiger, cousin?"

"Several."

"Not really?" and her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Really and truly. I will send you the skin of one, if you would like to have it."

"Oh; should I not? Fancy, Thug, the skin of a real tiger, such as I used to pretend you were. And how did you shoot them—do tell me all about it?"

The making of the pastry threatened to come to a stand-still as she turned her glowing, expectant face upon him.

“I will tell you all about it another time, Nelly,” said her cousin, quite refreshed by this unexpected burst of enthusiasm, “but it is too long a story to begin before breakfast. I hope, however, that I shall have more than one opportunity in which to tell it you. I want particularly to have a little private conversation with my grandfather this morning, do you think you can manage it for me?”

“Oh, yes! I will tell him so, and you and he can go into the front room and talk there. It is of no use hinting a thing to grandpapa; you must tell him downright, or he doesn't understand you.”

The old servant had entered the kitchen by this time, and was moving about it preparing the breakfast.

“Nurse Aggie, has Bertie's bell rung yet?” demanded her young mistress.

“No, Miss Nelly, and I can answer it when it do. Don't you disturb yourself.”

“How is your brother this morning? Have you seen him yet?” asked Nigel Brooke.

“Yes; I took him some tea an hour ago.”

“She slaves herself to death for him, sir,” interposed the old woman.

“Hold your tongue, Nurse,” said Nelly, playfully, “Bertie is always at his best on first

rising—it is the long day without occupation which fatigues him so.”

“Ah! if he did something, mayhap he’d feel better,” again put in old Aggie.

“Aggie! how *can* you speak so? you ought to be ashamed of yourself; and before a stranger too. Nothing any one could do for Bertie could be too much, cousin Nigel,” she said, turning towards him, “he is so helpless, and his life is such a burthen to him. Oh!” she continued, with an impatient gesture, “sometimes when I see him beside me, and feel what it is to be able to run about and endure fatigue, I *hate* myself for being so strong and so well—why should it have been me and not him?” and the blue eyes actually filled with tears.

“’Tis lucky for you, Miss Nelly,” remarked Aggie, “that you can’t change places with him at your will, or it’s precious little waiting on that you’d get, I fancy.”

“Aggie! I won’t listen to you any more,” said the girl in a voice of offence, as she wiped her hands and prepared to leave the kitchen, “and you may finish the pastry by yourself! Come, Cousin Nigel, we will go down the nut-walk, and I will shew you the fowls and the ducks; they don’t belong to us, I am sorry to

say, because grandpapa has given up the meadows to Mr. Weston again, but I take almost as much pleasure in them as if they did."

She pulled down her sleeves, and, followed by Thug, emerged into the open air without any covering to her head.

"Will not the sun be too strong for you?" suggested her cousin.

She laughed merrily.

"Oh, no! I never wear anything on my head except on Sundays, or if it rains. If we were to begin to wear bonnets all the year round in Little Bickton, we should be obliged to go to Reddington for them, and then what would poor Benson say?"

She led him through paths almost rendered impassable by the currant and gooseberry bushes which encroached upon them.

"Isn't it a pity," she said, "that grandpapa won't even pay a man to prune these bushes; the fruit crops are getting less every year in consequence. Aggie and I are obliged to cut them sometimes, else we should not be able to get down to the vegetables; but our cutting does more harm than good. Do you know how to prune?"

He was obliged to acknowledge that he did not.

“That’s a pity, or I should have asked you to show me how. Mrs. Weston said her man should teach me whenever I could go there; but Bertie can so seldom spare me—but I really must not let them go beyond this season.”

“Who plants and attends to the vegetables then?” asked Nigel Brooke.

“We do—that is, Aggie and I. Oh! I can do everything of that kind, my potatoes never fail, nor do any of the other things, except the celery, and I can’t manage the celery, it always turns brown at the heart. Here it is, you see; what is it, cousin? Have I banked it up too high, or not enough?”

“I really can’t tell you, Nelly. I am afraid I am not sufficiently clever to give you any advice.”

“Ah! perhaps you haven’t celery in India. I shall look at the vicar’s next time I fetch the papers. By-the-bye, to-day is Saturday, is it not?”

“It is.”

“Then I shall go this afternoon, and get him to tell me all about it.”

“Who is your vicar? and where does he live?”

“Three miles from Bickton, but he often

comes over here, and we always have one service on Sunday, unless it's very wet. His name is Mr. Ray, and he is so goodnatured. He used to teach Bertie and me when we were little children. Every week he lets Bertie have his newspapers to read, and on Saturdays I go and fetch them for him."

"And how do you go?"

"On Mr. Weston's little pony. He lends it me. The people about here are all so kind. Cousin Nigel! I've got my garden knife with me, would you mind if I cut the vegetables for dinner before we go to see the fowls?"

"Not at all—why should I?"

"Because you must help me to carry them in. Let me see, we have Irish-stew to-day, so we shall want onions and cabbages. We will cut the cabbages first; you can hold them as I hand them to you."

Stooping down, she immediately set to work, and severing three enormous heads of cabbage, their leaves all glistening with the rain of the previous evening, piled them one after another in her cousin's arms.

"I don't think I can hold any more, Nelly!" he observed as the topmost vegetable touched his nose and wetted it.

"Well, that must do then," she said, "but

cabbages go no way at this time of the year; they are almost all outside, you see."

At this moment there sounded the tinkle of a bell.

"Oh! there's Bertie's bell," exclaimed Nelly, as she threw down her gardening knife and wiped her wet hands on her apron. "I *must* go. *Please*, Cousin Nigel, just carry them into the kitchen for me, and give them to Aggie."

She preferred the request so imploringly, that he would have had no heart to remonstrate, even had she given him the opportunity, but as she spoke she darted up the garden path again, closely followed by the mastiff, and Nigel Brooke, almost hidden behind his burthen, carried the cabbages as she had entreated him into the kitchen.

He only thought as he deposited them on the table, what would some of his grand Calcutta acquaintances have said if they could have seen him then!

And yet, he felt very much in love with a country life and its surroundings, even as he placed them there.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNSATISFACTORY INTERVIEW.

THE morning meal passed much the same as the evening one had done, for both brother and sister lost their communicative powers beneath the spell of silence which the presence of their grandfather seemed to cast upon them, and their cousin felt as little inclined to talk before him as they did.

As soon as it was over, however, a glance of intelligence between Nigel Brooke and Nelly, caused the latter to follow the old man into the passage, where he had just taken down his hat and stick, preparatory to going out, and prevent his design with the words :

“ You mustn't go out just yet, grandpapa, because our cousin wishes to speak to you first.”

“ What can your cousin have to say to me ?” demanded her grandfather, turning his lack lustre eyes upon her.

“ I don't know, grandpapa, but you must go into the study, until he comes to you,” and

as she spoke, the girl, who appeared to be the ruling power in the house, although at times so sorely taxed, took off the old man's hat again, replaced his stick in the stand, and led him towards the door of the room she had indicated.

There was nothing so modern as a drawing-room at the Farm Cottage; the dining-room and the study were the only sitting-rooms it possessed, and the latter was so seldom used that it might have been dispensed with altogether.

The next minute Nelly danced back into the dining-room with the intelligence,

“I've caught grandpapa for you, Cousin Nigel, and put him in the trap, so you had better go to him quickly before he escapes again.”

He took her advice, but as he laid his hand on the study door, he felt anything but easy at the prospect of the coming interview; and when he entered the room, and found that the old man had placed himself motionless and corpse-like as usual in an easy chair, from which he did not even raise his eyes at the sound of his grandson's footsteps, his doubts enlarged to certainties.

Nothing daunted, however, at all events, outwardly, Nigel Brooke drew a seat in front

of his grandfather, so that he could not fail to see and hear him.

“I have asked for this interview, sir,” he commenced, “in order to speak to you of the letter which I had the honour to address to you here.”

“I answered that letter,” was the curt reply.

“You did; but in so cold and indifferent a manner, that it was a hard thing for me to make up my mind to accept the permission which it so ungraciously extended to visit you here. In my letter, however, I told you that my dying father’s message to yourself was an entreaty that you would let ‘byegones be byegones,’ and not transmit to his son the indifference which you had for so many years shewn to himself.”

“And from whose fault was that?” demanded the old man, suddenly roused into something like life.

“I am not here, sir, to discuss my dead father’s failings. If in the circumstance to which you allude he erred, it was on the side of what he considered his duty, and he bitterly repented the consequence of his rashness. The present question is, whether you will now do as he wished, and permit me to try and

rub out old scores, by making up to you for what you lost in him."

"What do you mean?" said his grandfather, "I do not follow you."

"I mean, sir, that I am rich, much richer than I have any need to be, and that I cannot enjoy the luxury with which my poor father has left me surrounded, whilst his nearest relatives and mine are living in obscurity. I mean that if you and my cousins will share my prosperity, you will confer an obligation on me instead of incurring one yourself, and that I believe your son will rest quieter in his grave for the knowledge that you and I are living together in amity."

The old man appeared almost touched, but he quickly repulsed the feeling.

"It is impossible!" he said shortly. "I will neither receive money from you, nor allow those children to do so. Had it not been for your father, they might have been surrounded by as many luxuries this day as yourself."

"But putting all questions of pecuniary matters on one side, sir, surely you will not refuse to visit us at Orpington. We have a house large enough to contain us all, where you shall enjoy as much quiet and seclusion as you please, and where nothing could give

me greater pleasure than to see you and my cousins for an indefinite period."

"I will not enter your house, Nigel Brooke," said the old man, emphatically; "were I to sit smiling at your board, and pledge you in your wine, the blood of three would rise up and forbid it. You have not forgotten perhaps that the blow of your father's conduct caused his mother's death. He said let 'byegones be byegones.' It is because they *are* byegones, and can never be remedied, that I *cannot* forget them, and I *cannot* forgive them."

And, rising from his seat, the old man paced up and down the room, looking more excited than any of his friends had seen him for years.

"I am very sorry to hear you speak like this, sir," said his grandson. "I had hoped that eighteen years would have softened, if not changed the feelings with which you regarded this unfortunate business."

"Eighteen years! young man!" exclaimed the grandfather, with shrill anger. "Can eighteen years give me back those whom I have lost? can eighteen years restore to those children their parents, or replace me in the sacred profession which I followed? Do you come now with the offer of your gold and your

silver, and think to pay me for what I have suffered, and seen others suffer, for your father's error? Bah! sir, you must be young indeed to think it! I will *not* eat at your board, nor enrich myself at your expense, lest the world say I took compensation at the last for what I vowed never to forgive. Let me hear no more of it! no more of it!" and he turned towards the door as though he would close the interview by leaving the apartment. But Nigel Brooke was there before him.

"Hear me for one moment, sir!" he said. "If I am nothing else to you, at least I am your son's son, and entirely guiltless myself in this matter. In justice, listen to me one moment longer."

The old man suffered himself to be led back to the chair he had quitted, though he would not re-seat himself, but remained standing by the side.

"I came to England, grandfather," said Nigel Brooke, using the name for the first time, "with but one wish, and that was, to find out my cousins, and try to make them (if not yourself) some compensation for the injury which my father inflicted on them. I was not aware of the extent or nature of that injury until he lay on his own death-bed, and told

me the story. I wrote to you—I came down to this place—filled with the same desire—the same idea—to make restitution. For yourself, you refuse my aid, even my acquaintance it seems to me, but surely you will not do so on behalf of my cousins. Putting aside all other considerations, they are my closest, and on my father's side, my only relations. I wish to be their friend, to see them grow to love me and trust in me; that some day, when they hear the truth concerning themselves they may acknowledge that whatever they lost by the deed of the father, the son would have repaid them could he have done so; even to the shedding of his blood."

He paused, overcome by the force of his own enthusiasm, and his grandfather even appeared arrested, if not touched, by his argument.

"If you will not come yourself," he continued, "let my cousins come to me; my mother will give them a welcome, if only for my sake—and she authorized me to make this request to you. You must be an old man now, grandfather, for I am thirty-five, and my father was turned sixty when he died, you cannot live many years longer, and who is to befriend Robert and Helena when you are

gone, if you separate them from my mother and myself. The boy's life is likely to be a brief one, and how is a girl to fight the world alone? I will not again ask you to outrage your own feelings by accepting my hospitality; but let me have my cousins on a visit to Orpington, and they shall tell you themselves what kind of reception they receive there!"

The old man was silent for a moment; and then he replied, slowly but firmly.

"You are right; the children may want a friend. So far then I will trust you; if it is their own wish to go to Orpington, they shall go."

Nigel Brooke seized his grandfather's unwilling hand.

"I cannot tell you, sir, how much I thank you for this permission; and as for trusting me, I swear to you this moment, that as long as I live, neither Robert nor his sister shall ever want a friend."

His grandfather looked at him in surprise.

"You seem in earnest; young man: but I have heard your father say as much on behalf of his own flesh and blood: and how did he keep his vow?"

"He thought he was keeping it, sir."

"Pshaw! let us have no more of this. If

it is the wish of Robert and Helena to visit you and your mother at your fine place at Orpington, they may do so. And I have no more to say on the matter."

With which, old Mr. Brooke turned abruptly on his heel, walked into the passage, regained his hat and stick, and left the house without another word. Whilst Nigel, thankful beyond measure that the conference was over, returned to the dining-room.

"You are alone?" he said, as he found Bertie lying on his couch with his eyes half-closed and a pipe between his teeth.

"Yes, the women are always busy at this time of the day, shaking beds, and making puddings. What a life to lead, to be sure."

His cousin thought that Robert's life for one, must be less endurable, but he made no comment on the remark.

"I have been talking to our grandfather," he said, "and have gained his consent that you and your sister shall pay us a visit at Orpington, if you feel so inclined."

"At your place?" said Robert with aroused interest.

"Yes, and I am sure you would enjoy it. Orpington is not two miles from Hilstone in Somerset, it is a pretty place; but I chose it

on account of its proximity to the meet, which takes place close by three times a week. I am exceedingly fond of hunting, indeed, of all out of door sports; but we shall have plenty of amusement indoors. My mother, I know, will do all she can to make you and Nelly comfortable and happy, and it will be a change for you, after Little Bickton. Do say that you'll come, Robert?"

"My sister shall," he said.

"And not yourself?"

Robert Brooke shook his head.

"Why not? you shall be as quiet as possible if you prefer it; and I am afraid your sister will not come without you!"

"Yes, she will, but I can't go, Nigel, thank you. You see I've been cooped up here in solitary confinement all my life, accustomed to one set of things and people, and I couldn't bestir myself now after so many years, to go amongst a lot of company, and have to sit up and behave myself, and take a part in the conversation; I should be miserable—the mere idea frightens me."

"But you shall do just as you like, Robert," said his cousin. "I will get you a wheeled chair, with which to go about the house, and I have a first-rate man, whom I have had for

years, who will attend to you as if you were a baby, and——”

“Thank you!” said the boy, looking rather affronted, “but I don’t think I quite require the attention of a baby.”

His cousin saw that he had made a mistake, and hastened to remedy it.

“Anyway, I am sure we could make you comfortable, Robert, and the more you could get about and amuse yourself, the better we shall all be pleased. There need be no difficulty about the travelling, because, whenever you are ready, I will come and fetch you myself.”

“Nelly shall go, thank you. I should wish her to become acquainted with your mother; but I would rather not move myself, at all events, this year. I may be stronger next, and more inclined for exertion.”

He often spoke in this manner, as if his complaint were curable, and it was the fault of those who had reared him, that he was as he was.

“Perhaps your sister also, will object to my proposal,” said Nigel Brooke, in a disheartened tone; for he was really disappointed at the boy’s refusal, and did not perceive that it proceeded as much from a selfish dislike to trouble as anything else.

“Not if I speak to her,” replied Robert, confidently. “Would you call her for me?”

“She may be busy,” suggested the other.

“Well, if she is, it doesn’t matter,” was her brother’s reply. And so her cousin called her name from the open door.

She came directly, all in a glow and a bustle from the exertions she had been making in turning the mattresses. But she had pulled a little sprig of geranium from somewhere on her way, and brought it to fasten into her brother’s buttonhole.

“Now, troublesome boy,” she said, stooping to kiss him, “what is it you want, make haste and say, for I am terribly busy this morning?”

“I wish to speak to you, dearest,” he replied, “our cousin wants you to go and pay Aunt Eliza a visit at Orpington this autumn, and grandpapa has given his consent, so say ‘thank you,’ and tell him how soon you will be ready.”

All the colour flew out of Nelly’s face.

“Me!—to go to Orpington—what all alone, Bertie?”

“I wish your brother to come too, Nelly,” said Nigel Brooke, “and have been saying all I can think of, to persuade him. Perhaps you will be more successful, we want you both.”

“Oh! Bertie, you *will* come!” she said, entreatingly.

“My dear Nelly, I wonder you can ask it! I am not so fond of parading my hump-back before company as all that.”

“Oh! it isn't a ‘hump-back,’” she exclaimed, almost forgetting the former subject, in her anxiety lest her cousin should believe this statement, “it is only his weakness makes him stoop so much,” and she looked at the prostrate figure of her brother as a mother might tenderly regard a stricken child.

“Well, it's next door to it then, thanks to the two old fools who had the handling of me; but that's nothing to the purpose. I can't go for several reasons, but you must, Nelly, for as many more.”

“Without you, Bertie? all by myself. Oh! I can't go away and leave you alone! who is to look after you, and attend to you, if I go away?”

“Nonsense, Nelly! Aggie can do it all as you well know; besides it will only be for a short time.”

“But by myself, darling, and to go away from Bickton and amongst strangers. Oh! I can't do it,” and regardless of the presence of her cousin, Nelly began to cry.

The act was a childish one, but her brother's

proposal had taken her by surprise, and she had been reared in so secluded and simple a manner, that at eighteen years of age she was not much more than a child.

Nigel Brooke was shocked at the result of his kind intentions.

“Pray don’t distress yourself,” he said, visibly concerned at the sight of her emotion. “I will not even ask you to go to Orpington, Nelly, if you don’t wish it. I thought it would be a pleasure; I want so much that we should all be friends, and enjoy ourselves together, but perhaps you would rather delay your visit until your brother can come also.”

But Robert Brooke was not at all anxious that the invitation to Orpington should be withdrawn. He was evidently annoyed with his sister, although he affected to pass it off.

“This is all nonsense, Nelly,” he said, “you are only pretending you don’t like it, because you want to be pressed. The best thing you can do is to go back to your bedroom, and resolve not to make a goose of yourself.”

She swallowed her tears as he spoke to her, and merely saying, “I am very sorry that I have been so foolish,” left the room according to his suggestion.

As soon as she was gone, Nigel Brooke was

beginning to beg that she should not be worried any more upon the subject, when Robert forestalled him by begging that he would leave the matter to himself.

“In reality she is as pleased as she can be,” he said, “but girls think it is the right thing to cry at everything. I will talk to her when you are gone, and write to you about it. Did I hear them say you were going to-day?”

“Yes, I promised my mother that I would be back this evening, and the fly I came in from Reddington, has waited to take me to the station again.”

And he shuddered as he recalled the drive he had had thence the evening before. Could it have been only last evening? What a lapse of time appeared to lie between this and then!

“You have a finer day for your return than you had for coming here,” remarked Robert.

“I am glad of it,” said the other briefly.

He observed at the early dinner that Nelly's eyes were very red, but had no opportunity of speaking to her alone, until the afternoon when the tread of hoofs upon the gravel path took him to the front door, and he saw her standing beside a small rough pony which was bridled and saddled much in the same fashion as are donkeys at a watering place.

“Where are you going to, Nelly?” he en-

quired, forgetting their conversation of the morning.

“I am going to our vicar’s to fetch Bertie’s newspapers,” she said shyly, for she thought she must have offended him by her ungracious reception of his invitation.

“And what papers does he lend him?”

“The ‘Times’ of the week, and ‘Public Opinion,’ and the ‘Guardian,’ and sometimes the ‘Saturday Review.’”

“Does he ever get ‘Punch?’”

“Oh! no; Mr. Ray takes no comic papers.”

“Would your brother like me to send him a few papers sometimes, Nelly?”

“Oh! very much!” and into her eyes came the old sparkle again.

“And I am to send you a real tiger-skin, am I not, since you refuse to come and fetch it?”

He had put her on her little steed by this time, and was standing by the side looking up into her face.

“You are not angry with me, cousin?” she asked softly, raising her long dark lashes.

“Angry? what makes you think so?”

“About not going to Orpington; but all by myself you see, and amongst strangers. I should feel so—so miserable!” And the mere idea of her loneliness brought the tears again into Nelly’s eyes.

“My dear little cousin!” said Nigel Brooke, taking her hand, “you shall never be asked by me to do a single thing that you don’t like. I have told your brother as much, and you must decide for yourself. But I hope you won’t look upon me as a stranger, Nelly. You must think of me as a friend. I want very much to be your friend and Robert’s.”

“Thank you!” she said gently.

“And now, as I shall be gone probably before you return, you must bid me a cheerful farewell, or I shall take my departure reproaching myself for those tears.”

She raised her eyes to his face, and tried to smile, and say she should be glad to see him again.

“That is enough,” he replied, “don’t distress yourself to make fine speeches. Some day I hope they will not be needed between you and me. God bless you!”

He released her hand, and the next minute the hoofs of the little rough pony were clattering down the gravel path. He followed her to the garden gate, and shading his eyes, looked after her as she rode away at a canter, until a turn in the road hid her slight swaying figure from his sight. An hour afterwards, he was on his way back to Orpington.

CHAPTER VI.

NELLY CONSENTS TO GO TO ORPINGTON.

THE next day, Sunday, was exceedingly hot ; Nelly Brooke had been to church at Little Bickton in the morning, and Mrs. Weston, the farmer's wife, had offered to drive her over to Cockthorp in her pony chaise for the afternoon service, but she had preferred to stay with her brother. It was now about three o'clock ; the old grandfather, with a handkerchief over his face to keep off the flies, was dozing in a corner of the dining-room ; Robert Brooke lay, as usual, on his sofa ; as usual also with a pipe between his teeth, and a tumbler of beer within reach ; the mastiff Thug was stretched beside him, and Nelly was sitting on the sill of the door which opened into the back garden, playing with little Tommy Dobbs.

Tommy Dobbs does not occupy an important position in this story, but he was quite an important personage at that time in the uneventful life of Nelly Brooke. He was the child of one

of their poor neighbours, who had been blind from his birth, and into whose sunless existence, Nelly had infused the only streak of joy which had ever lightened it. For she had conceived a great compassion for the poor helpless little creature who sat day after day, doing nothing but sun himself at his mother's door, and she had led him so often to the Farm Cottage, that he was able now to find his way there alone, and there was scarcely a day in which he did not present himself to ask for the "good lady."

So the "good lady" and he sat side by side on this Sunday afternoon, and the soft tones of her voice, as she told the child Bible stories, or a subdued exclamation of surprise or pleasure which occasionally burst from himself, were all the sounds which disturbed the heavy stillness of the day. But even so slight an interruption appeared after awhile to irritate her brother.

"I wish you'd send that brat away, Nelly, and come and talk to me," he said, fretfully.

She rose at once and took the blind child by the hand.

"Come, Tommy, let us go into the kitchen, and see if nurse Aggie has anything good for us."

Little Tommy was a favourite with old Aggie, so she had no objection that he should sit on the matted floor with the cat, whilst she, with horn spectacles astride her nose, pursued her weekly study of the Bible.

“Poor little fellow!” said Nelly, compassionately, as she turned at the door, and saw the boy’s sightless eyes, albeit he held a huge wedge of cake which she had given him, between his hands, moving in unison with her footsteps, as though he watched her departure, and then, smitten with a sudden impulse, she ran back and kissed him.

The old woman peered above her spectacles in surprise.

“Lor! Miss Nelly, my dear, are you sure his face is clean?”

“It is worse to be blind than to be lame,” said the girl with genuine feeling, as she left the kitchen again.

“That kiss wasn’t for yourself, any way,” said the old woman, spitefully, to little Tommy, as soon as Nelly had disappeared.

“Good lady gave it me,” replied the child, perfectly satisfied with the result.

“Ah! but she was thinking of *him* all the time,” muttered the nurse, returning to her Bible; but Tommy consumed his cake, and was quite happy.

“Bertie, darling, what should I do if you were blind?” exclaimed his sister, as she re-entered the dining-room, and sat down with Thug on the carpet at her brother’s feet.

“I might just as well be, for aught there is to look at in this place,” he replied.

“But think what it must be, dear, to be shut out for ever from the light of the sun, and the sight of the trees and flowers, and never to see the faces you love even in your dreams.”

“It can’t be much worse,” he grumbled, “than for a man to be chained by the leg as I am, debarred from every amusement usual to fellows of my age, and with the prospect of ending my days without a creature to care whether I live or die.”

“Oh, Bertie,” exclaimed his sister, “you will always have me!”

“I know that, Nelly, and that I couldn’t have a kinder or better sister; but a man, as he goes through life, wants something more than a sister, you see.”

“A wife,” she said, sadly. He laughed bitterly.

“A *wife*? fancy me with a wife! No! that’s what I shall never have, and can never hope to have, but I do not even possess access

to such pleasures as might help me to forget my position, and reconcile me to passing my existence alone. I have not the advantage of the veriest cur that limps through the village on three legs. I have lived the life of a dog in this forsaken hole, and I suppose I shall die the death of a dog, and be lamented for about as long a time !”

“Bertie ! pray don’t talk in that dreadful manner, remember Who sent you the trial, dear, and that it might have been worse.”

“I cannot see it !” he replied, “but perhaps it may be bettered, Nelly. You *must* go to Orpington !”

“I thought—” she said, hesitating, “I thought cousin Nigel said I could wait till you went, Bertie !”

“What he said or did not say, has nothing to do with it. You must go, for both our sakes. Now, just listen to me quietly, and I will tell you why. We have been kept in this place all our lives, without a single advantage. You have had no society but that of people beneath you in station, like the Westons, and if you miss this opportunity of leaving Little Bickton, we may both stick here for ever. You don’t suppose that old man,” indicating his unconscious grandfather,

“will live much longer, do you? and what chance have we of leaving this place after his death, if we refuse to associate with our only relatives. Nigel Brooke is the head of the family, and it will be everything for us to keep friends with him and his mother. Why, Nelly, in another year or so we shall be alone in the world!”

“Never alone whilst we are together, Bertie!” she said, despondingly. “I don’t wish to leave Little Bickton. I thought you and I would live together all our lives.”

“And so we shall, I hope; but the best chance of it lies before us now. I know nothing of my grandfather’s affairs; he may leave us penniless, and you may be obliged to earn your bread, and I to go into the work-house.”

“Oh, Bertie! Bertie!” with wide open eyes.

“It’s true, Nell, although I never thought of it so much as I have since our cousin came here. He has all the money and all the influence of the family, and he wishes to befriend us, and we shall be fools if we refuse his offered kindness. He may be the making of us both. In fact, darling, the plain truth is, that you’ll never marry as long as you stay in Little Bickton; for there’s no one here to

fall in love with you, and you must marry, Nell, some day, or I don't know what's to become of us both after my grandfather's death."

The girl started, and a sudden flush, half of shame and half of anger, overspread her features.

Nelly Brooke had, as yet, never thought of marriage as connected with herself, which was owing perhaps to the fact asserted by her brother, that there was no one in Little Bickton to urge the matter on her consideration.

At the same time, the idea, thus rudely presented, wounded her modesty. She was ashamed even before Bertie, that such an event should be talked of as inevitable; she felt as though he had torn away the veil which shrouded some sacred image, and added to this feeling was a vague sense of dread, lest what "must be" should prove the signal of parting between her twin brother and herself.

"It's nonsense to be affronted, Nell!" said Robert, after a pause, seeing that the colour had mounted to her face.

"I am not affronted, dear," she answered quietly, trying to speak in her usual voice. "But I have never thought of marrying, Bertie. I never wish to be married. I only want to be

allowed to live with you, and take care of you, all my life!"

"And that's just what I am trying to bring about," he said rudely, "but you women are so silly, you never seem to understand a man. Why! which do you think will do me most good? Dragging out my miserable existence in Little Bickton, with an old maid to coddle me, or having a jolly married sister with lots of money, and able to help me a little perhaps, and to make my life more bearable?"

"Oh! not a *little*, Bertie!" she exclaimed, turning her loving eyes upon him, "if ever I have money, it shall all be yours, dear, to do just as you will with; I should have no pleasure in it otherwise."

Robert Brooke had an idea that the prospective husband might raise a slight objection to so wholesale a disposal of his property, but to have made such a suggestion would have spoiled the effect he was producing on his sister.

"Well, in that case, I might be able to have a drive in your carriage occasionally perhaps, Nelly, or you would give me a nice Bath chair to be wheeled about in, or a spring couch to lie on, and——"

"And," she eagerly interposed, taking up the thread of his day dreams, "and you should

have the advice of the very best doctors in London, Bertie, and we'd go to some of those foreign watering-places, and try if the mineral baths would strengthen your back, and you should have all the new books to read, and newspapers every day, and just whatever you liked for dinner, and—and—oh! my darling," she concluded, in a burst of excited tears, "you should have everything that I could possibly give you."

He folded her in his arms and kissed her fondly, for he dearly loved his sister, though he loved himself the best.

"I know I should, Nelly, and that's why I want you to go and spend a few weeks at Orpington. It may be the beginning of all this, and you know none of these good things can come to pass, unless you marry, and you'll never have a chance of that, until you go into society. I don't want to see my pretty sister cooped up in Little Bickton all her life, with no one to admire her but the plough boys. So you'll go, for my sake, won't you?"

His words warned poor Nelly that she had been thinking too fast; the end had seemed so near; she had forgotten there was the dreaded beginning to go through first.

"I will go then, Bertie, for your sake," she

said, drying her eyes; "but why can't you come too?"

"Partly, because I do not think it could do me any good to move for so short a time, and partly because I dread displaying my deformities before strangers. You need have no such fear, Nelly. When I am a little stronger, perhaps, or when we come to know Nigel better, I may lose my present objections; but meanwhile, you must be my ambassadress, and prepare them to like me for your sake."

This was not his real reason for wishing his sister to visit Orpington without him. The idea that Nigel Brooke might fall in love with Nelly, had struck him from the moment he had seen them together, and he was quite aware, that not only would matters proceed much better without his presence, but that it was as well his cousin should not be daily reminded of the encumbrance which Nelly would bring with her. Added to which, was the selfish laziness before mentioned, which prevented his undergoing any inconvenience for the sake of another.

Nelly quitted her position with a sigh. She had promised to go to Orpington, therefore she supposed the question was decided, and that she really must leave home alone. She

strolled into the kitchen, and confided her trouble to Aggie with a face of woe, and was surprised that the old nurse did not regard the prospective visit in the same light as she did.

“But I am to go by myself, nurse Aggie, without either grandpapa or Bertie.”

“Lor, Miss Nelly, and the very best thing for you, I never was more pleased to hear of anything in my life—never. What a dear good gentleman now, to have come all this way just to ask you. And to stay with your aunt too. I remember her a bit in the old days; and I’ll lay she’s a real lady, as will teach you what it is to behave yourself in company. We shall have you come home with quite different manners, Miss Nelly. And as for your grandpa’ and your brother, why you’d never wish, sure, to take those two helpless creatures a trapesing after you everywhere. I’ll take good care of them, my dear, never you fear; and you must just think of enjoying yourself, and nothing else.”

Nelly shook her head dejectedly.

“Oh yes, you will, when you’ve had a taste of it, take my word for that. But when are you going? for you must have some new dresses, and a bonnet, and ever so many things.”

“Must I really?” demanded Nelly.

“In course, you can’t go to a grand house like that with only the bits of things you run about Bickton in. You are going amongst gentlefolk, and you must be dressed according.”

“Bertie, Aggie says I can’t go to Orpington without new dresses and things,” whispered Nelly, next time she saw her brother, rather in hopes that the necessity would prove a stumbling block to the carrying out of the undertaking.

But Robert said the same as Aggie.

“Of course not; who ever thought it? I shall speak to my grandfather when he wakes, and tell him you are going to Orpington, and ask him for some money for you, and then you must get the Westons to take you over to Reddington next market day, and just buy what your require.”

The magnificence of this speech inspired poor Nelly with awe, which was further increased the next morning by her grandfather calling her after him into the passage, and putting a bank note for five pounds into her hands.

“Here! my dear,” he said, “your brother tells me that you wish to go to Orpington, so you will know what this is for, and when you

have decided how soon your preparations can be completed, he will write to your cousin and make the necessary arrangements for your journey."

He was turning away without waiting for her thanks, when she caught him by the arm, and said a few grateful words. He gazed at her earnest eyes for a moment, and then stooped and kissed her broad, open brow.

"Bless you, my dear!" he ejaculated in a trembling voice, "you are very like your mother. I wish you could have been content to stay here; but perhaps 'tis all for the best. Be good, my dear, and be happy—happier than *she* was—happier than *she* was," and so murmuring he left her.

She longed to tell him that she was quite contented, and had always been so; but she feared to contradict what her brother might have said. So she walked back into the dining-room silently.

"Bertie! only think," she said, as she reached it, "a whole five pounds! I have never had so much money in my life before. What *shall* I do with it all?"

To her unsophisticated innocence, that dirty, patched, and scribbled-over country

note appeared an almost exhaustless mine of wealth.

“It’s little enough,” responded her brother, “why didn’t the old fellow make it ten! I wonder what he does with all his money. Sleeps on it, I suppose, and we shall have the trouble of ripping it out of his mattress after he’s dead. I wish he’d give me five pounds though, I know what I should have done with it.”

“What?” demanded his sister eagerly. His manner of speaking of her grandfather annoyed her, because she loved the old man, and did not believe that he was any richer than he appeared; but she did not show her annoyance. Nothing ever had the power to come between her, and her love for her brother.

“What would you buy with it, Bertie?”

“Scores of things; first and foremost though, half a dozen bottles of Cogniac to keep my spirits up and some good tobacco. This of Benson’s is trash.”

“But would it—would the Cogniac be good for you, Bertie?” she asked doubtfully.

“As good as anything else; a man must have something to drink, and this beer is poison; and next, I’d get some pickles and

sauces to make old Aggie's eternal hashes and stews go down; and after that I'm sure I don't know—books perhaps or papers—anything is acceptable in a place like this, where there is nothing to do."

"Don't you think you could draw, Bertie, if you tried?" said his sister timidly, "you often scribble faces on the margins of your books."

"I don't wish to try," he answered with indifference.

"Or carve wood as Mr. Weston's sons do in the winter evenings. Mrs. Weston has such pretty brackets which they gave her last Christmas. I wish I could think of some occupation which would amuse you, Bertie."

"It's of no use thinking about it, Nelly, it's part of the curse of not being within hail of a town or any civilised place; however, what's the good of talking? It would have been very different if I had been born or brought up like other men. Fetch me a glass of beer, there's a good girl, and don't forget to show nurse Aggie how I like my bed made before you go. It never feels the same when she has had the handling of it, and by-the-by, have I had my usual number of pillows the last few nights?"

“Just the same, darling, because when cousin Nigel was here, he had the one off my bed.”

“Well, my head is much too low all the same; I suppose the feathers want repicking, or something of the kind: however, never mind! I must endure it.”

She fetched him the beer, and went and pulled the only pillow off her own bed, and added it to those on his, and sighed whilst she did so, thinking what a hard lot her brother's was, and how unfair it seemed that in this world, some should have so many things to make them happy, and others so few.

Her love blinded her to the fact that her brother's disposition would have rendered him a joyless and discontented creature, in any station to which it might have pleased God to call him.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW NELLY SPENT HER FIVE POUNDS.

As soon as Robert Brooke had extracted his sister's promise to go to Orpington, he wrote to his cousin, and two days afterwards, there arrived a letter for Nelly from her Aunt Eliza, containing a very courteous if not a very cordial repetition of her son's invitation: and at the reception of which, the poor child lost her last hope, if she yet entertained any, of escape from the ordeal before her.

The only thing left to be done was to ask Mrs. Weston to take her to Reddington on the next market-day, and help her to choose her new things: a request which was no sooner made than granted.

Mrs. Weston had occupied a better position in the social scale than that from which farmer's wives are usually selected. Originally, the daughter of a hard-working curate, she had been sent forth into the world at an early age to earn her own bread as a second-rate

governess, and after twenty or more years of ceaseless drudgery, had been grateful at the age of forty, to exchange the sparingly extended hospitalities of her employers for a home of her own, although the warm circle, and plentifully spread board, did belong to a bluff and uneducated farmer. Mr. Weston was a widower when she married him, with four half-grown sons; and although he had a vast respect for "learning" himself, he had entertained some doubts at first, how a "lady" would get on with his rough uncultivated boys. The boys themselves may not have been free from a similar fear; but if so, it was soon dispelled. Mrs. Weston entered her new home with a full desire and intention to do her duty there, and from the first day that she had been mistress of Little Bickton Farm, she had never betrayed that the manners or customs of its inmates were different from such as she had been used to see. Insensibly, her superior education had refined and elevated the little circle of which she was the acknowledged head, until the neighbours wondered to see Farmer Weston's boys so different to what they used to be; and even the boys themselves (not to mention their father) were sensible of the improvement in their condition,

although they were scarcely aware of how it had come about. But, in their rude way, they had grown to love their father's new wife dearly, and "mother" was always sure of the best fruit in summer, and the warmest nook in winter, as well as the ready confidence and sympathy of her husband and his children. And so Mrs. Weston was happy; she had suffered too much from neglect, privation, and unkindness during her youth, not to appreciate the love and comforts of home which were showered upon her now, and she desired no better lot than to be mistress of the farm, and no higher pleasures than its multifarious duties afforded her. She had been an invaluable friend to Nelly Brooke, notwithstanding that Robert had mentioned her contemptuously as "beneath" them in station, for until she had come to Little Bickton, the girl had run about as wild and untamed as any colt upon the common. It was Mrs. Weston who had taught Nelly how to embroider, and do fine needle-work: it was she who had given her lessons upon the old cracked pianoforte, which she had imported with herself to the farm, and in which she believed, as an instrument of worth: it was she also who had sent the girl such books as she possessed,

and encouraged her to read and remember them.

It is quite true that Farmer Weston, too shy to take courage from his wife's example, still addressed her as "Miss" or "Miss Nelly," and that his lads never spoke to her at all, but sheepishly slunk away whenever she made her appearance; still, some of the happiest hours that Nelly could remember, had been spent at the farm, and she had become so accustomed to the state of things which reigned there, that it seemed quite natural that Mrs. Weston should address her as an equal, whilst the farmer and his sons spoke to her as if she were a superior.

On the morning on which her friend had promised to take her to Reddington, Nelly, arrayed in her alpaca dress and little black bonnet—her precious five pound note safely stowed away in her pocket—tripped gaily over the patch of common which divided the Farm Cottage from the farm. She was not in the least reconciled to the idea of going to Orpington; but she greatly anticipated a whole day spent at Reddington, and especially a day spent in the laying out of a five pound note, for she was not free from her sex's inherent love of shopping, and she had had too little

money at her own disposal, during her lifetime, not to feel the full independence, not to say importance, which attached to her now. So she went singing on her way, and almost forgetful of the purposes to which her purchases were to be applied.

When she reached the farm, she found the double-bodied phaeton which Mr. Weston had bought in honour of his second bridals, with its stout cob attached, already standing at the door, and her friends waiting her on the threshold. In a few minutes they were all three snugly packed away, and going at a fast trot down the hill to Reddington. The farmer and his wife were both seated in front, whilst Nelly occupied the back seat, but Mrs. Weston managed to turn her figure round, so that they could maintain a conversation all the way. She had heard, of course, of the reason for the intended purchases, and was almost as interested in the subject as Nelly herself, particularly as the farmer and she had privately agreed that the funds provided by old Mr. Brooke, were quite inadequate to the probable requirements.

“Now, Nelly dear,” she said as soon as they were fairly started, “we had better decide upon what you intend to buy before we reach

Reddington, and then we shall know what shop to go to, and lose no time."

Reddington had been the last place in which Mrs. Weston had lived before her marriage, and she was therefore well acquainted with all its resources. Nelly coloured—

"I have hardly thought about it yet," she answered, "but I know that I want a good many things. Aggie says I must have a new dress for Sundays, and a muslin one for the evenings: and then she thinks I can wear this one every day, if I get some nice collars and cuffs. But I am afraid I can't do without another bonnet, Mrs. Weston; and I have only one pair of kid gloves."

She might have added, "And I need boots and shoes, and under-linen; and almost everything necessary to a young lady's wardrobe;" but, with all her grand ideas concerning the amount of goods to be purchased with a five pound note, Nelly knew it would not buy everything, and she had other uses for it floating in her brain.

Mrs. Weston looked rather grave.

"That is a good deal, Nelly, to come out of five pounds—but——"

"But surely it will buy more than *that*," exclaimed the girl, with a look almost of alarm,

“because if not, I must do with only one dress.”

“If it will purchase all you really want, my dear, it will be sufficient,” replied Mrs. Weston; “but we can hardly tell how far it will go until we ask the price of the materials.”

Yet Nelly did not appear satisfied; more than once before they had reached Reddington, she asked her friend if she did not think a single morning dress would be sufficient to take with her; or if she might not continue to wear her print frocks if she bought some pretty collars and cuffs to go with them.

“Mr. Weston—what is the price of a bottle of Cogniac?” she suddenly demanded, as they were nearing their destination. The farmer laughed.

“You are not thinking of laying in a stock of French brandy, Miss Nelly, to take with you—are you now? That’s a queer article to be found in a lady’s trunk.”

“Not exactly, but they want some at home.”

“Well, the best is, as far as I know, about seven-and-six the bottle; not that we use much of such up at the Farm.”

“Seven-and-six!” exclaimed Nelly; “oh! that’s very dear.”

“More than your grand-papa would like to give for it, I am sure, Nelly,” said Mrs. Weston.

“ But if he wants a little brandy to keep in the house for medicinal uses, a good British answers all the purpose, and is much cheaper.”

“ I don't think ‘good British’ would do,” replied Nelly, shaking her head with an air of disappointment.

The farmer and his wife wondered since when old Mr. Brooke had grown so fastidious about his brandy; but they made no comment on the remark. When they reached Reddington, and Mr. Weston having put up his horse and phaeton at an inn, strolled off to the market-place, leaving his wife and her young friend to their own devices, Nelly grew terribly restless. She asked the most frivolous of questions: wanted to know which was the best grocer, and the best tobacconist in the town, and stopped to gaze in at the window of every bookseller's shop which they passed, appearing altogether to be in so unsettled a state, that Mrs. Weston was forced to remind her that an important business like choosing dresses and bonnets was not to be got over in a minute, and that if she wished to discharge it properly, she had better accompany her at once to the draper's. But when there, Nelly Brooke did not appear to know her own mind better than before. First, she consented, on her friend's

advice, to have a barége dress ; but as soon as she heard that it was a material which required trimming, she changed her mind, and listened to a suggestion from the shopman, that as black silk could be worn perfectly plain, it would certainly be the most suitable dress for her purpose. But, to her dismay, the silks came to four and five pounds a piece ; and when a cheaper description was placed before her, she tossed it on one side, declaring she would rather have a good alpaca. The alpacas were immediately on the counter :—

“ Must I decide at once ? ” said Nelly, with a comical look of distress on her face.

Mrs. Weston smilingly replied that of course she could do as she liked, but the morning was going, and she must remember that she had several other articles to look at.

“ I want some collars and cuffs, if you please, ” she said to the man in attendance. The dress pieces were pushed to one side, and boxes of collars and cuffs produced. Nelly chose half-a-dozen of the very plainest sets.

“ Won't you have some a little more 'dressy' ? ” whispered Mrs. Weston. But she shook her head, with the rejoinder, “ I hate 'dressy' things. ” The shopman stared : he had not been used to hear such sentiments from the

lips of the Reddington young ladies. At last, after a good deal of persuasion and indecision, and deep calculation, Nelly Brooke decided to purchase a black alpaca dress for the morning, and a white muslin for the evening, which, together with a few minor articles which were urgently necessary, ran away with more than two pounds of her money.

“But where are the trimmings, my dear?” said Mrs. Weston, with a look of surprise at the omission.

“I do not wish for any trimmings,” replied Nelly. “I have never worn any in Bickton.”

“But it will be so different where you are going to, my dear,” urged her friend. But the girl was resolute; she stowed away the change of her five pound note in her little purse, and declared that she had purchased all that was needful.

“Remember, I have to buy a bonnet still,” she said, “and, I am afraid, a pair of boots—oh, no! I must do without the boots” (looking down at her own). “These are pretty good, and I shall only be there for a few weeks.”

“But why should you not purchase yourself boots, my dear,” asked Mrs. Weston; “your grandpapa intended you to spend the money on your clothes, and you have two pounds ten left.”

“Yes! but I want several other things,” was the mysterious reply.

The bonnet and a pair of shoes were chosen and paid for; and then Mrs. Weston announced her intention of taking Nelly to dine at the inn where the horse had been put up, and where her husband promised to join them. The inn was in the centre of the town. For a few seconds before she reached it, her attention had been diverted from her young friend by some bustle in the street, and when she turned to speak to her, she found, to her astonishment, that Nelly was gone. At first she thought they must have missed each other, and was hurrying back the way she came, when the farmer joined her, and set her mind at rest.

“So you’ve lost Miss Nelly,” he said, laughing. “I saw the little jade in a grocer’s shop hard by, and made sure you were close beside her, but she told me she had given you the slip, and that I was to hasten after you, and say she wouldn’t be more than ten minutes.” And accordingly in about that time she did join them, laden with parcels, breathless and brimming over with excuses.

“Oh, Mrs. Weston! I hope you won’t be angry at my leaving you; but I saw something in a shop which I so much wanted; and I did

not think it would take me so long." And having entered the inn with the farmer and his wife, she deposited her parcels, five or six in number, upon the table.

"Why, Nelly, what are these?" demanded Mrs. Weston, as she took them up and examined them.

"They are only pickles, Mrs. Weston, and sardines, and some olives—Bertie is so fond of olives—and I wanted to get him a few things of this sort before I started: they are not to be procured, you know, in Bickton. Now, I have only the tobacco to buy, and I shall have quite done." And the girl's face expressed more pleasure as she contemplated her pickles and sauces than it had done over any of the ribbons and laces in the draper's shop. Mrs. Weston, knowing how unselfish was her nature, guessed the truth concerning what Nelly affected to term her commissions, yet she took an opportunity when the farmer was absent to say:

"If these things are for the housekeeping, Nelly, you had better let me pay for them, my dear, or your ready money will run short. Your grandpapa can repay me at any time, you know." But the deep colour which flew to the girl's face, and the look of anxiety with which she begged to be allowed to have her own way in the matter, silenced whilst it convinced her.

“Don’t say anything about it, dear Mrs. Weston,” she entreated; “it is the only pleasure I have in the money, and I have bought everything I want now—everything.”

After dinner, they went into the town again, and there Nelly really had her way; first flying into a shop to ask the cost of some new book, and coming out with a look of disappointment at its “unheard of price:” then discoursing knowingly to the tobacconist on the proper quantities and qualities which were needful to make up the mixture which Bertie loved; and rashly investing seven and sixpence of her remaining coin on the “loveliest little briar-root pipe” she had ever seen: anon, purchasing in a moment of excitement an air pillow, which she was sure was “just the thing” for her brother’s back, and which completely swallowed up the remnant of her little fortune. Not till the air pillow and briar-root pipe were fairly in her possession, did she remember that not one book, or one bottle of cogniac, were numbered amongst her treasures.

“Oh! I wish I had thought of that before,” she exclaimed, with a look of annoyance, to Mrs. Weston. “This pillow is charming, and so is the pipe, but I think perhaps dear Bertie would have liked the brandy best.”

“If the brandy was for your brother, my dear,” was the grave reply, “I think it is just as well you have not procured it. It would soon be gone, you know, and the cushion and pipe are much more useful, and will last for a long time.” And so Nelly was comforted with respect to her presents for Bertie, and her only remaining regret was, that she had been so unkind as to forget to keep a few shillings to expend on a keepsake for little Tommy Dobbs.

“Poor little Tommy,” she said; “he will miss me so much: I should like to have left him something to comfort him during my absence.”

Even this want was supplied, for after the phaeton had been laden with her treasures, and she was once more jogging homewards, kind Mrs. Weston put a small parcel into her hands.

“A musical toy for little Tommy, my dear, which you must give him from yourself. He cannot see, and so I thought the best present for him was something he can *hear*.” And Nelly thought, as she received it, that now there was really nothing in the world that she could possibly want. The farmer insisted upon driving her up to the cottage door, and seeing herself and her purchases safely deposited at home—and never did a more radiant creature burst into that dull parlour than did Nelly

Brooke on her return from Reddington. She carried in her parcels one after another, and piled them on the table: she would not stop to eat or drink or disrobe herself, before she cut the strings asunder, and displayed all her treasures before the admiring eyes of Bertie and old Nurse Aggie.

“There! Bertie—what do you think of that—and that—and that,” she exclaimed, as she pulled the papers successively off bottles of pickled onions, walnuts, and gherkins; off the olives and the sardines, and the Harvey’s sauce; and produced the “lovely” briar-root pipe, and the big packet of tobacco; and blew out the wonderful air cushion, till she made herself look like an inflated cherubim. Her brother was delighted, as he had reason to be, and, fortunately, forgot all about his wish for the cogniac, whilst he declared she was a darling, and a “jolly little briek,” and they were the most acceptable presents she could possibly have bought him, etc. And she listened to his thanks with sparkling eyes, and watched his undisguised pleasure with rapture.

“But where are your own things, Miss Nelly?” now demanded the old nurse, in tones decidedly sour; “what *I* want to see, is your new dresses, and bonnets, and what-nots, which

are to make you smart for your visit to Orpington."

"Patience, Nurse, patience!" cried the girl gaily; "you shall see everything in time." And she proceeded to unpack the other parcels.

"Is them all?" said old Aggie, in a dissatisfied tone, as the plain-looking pieces of alpaca and book-muslin, and the linen collars and cuffs, and the sandalled shoes and the grey kid gloves, came into view.

"No! here's my bonnet, Nurse! isn't it a beauty?" said Nelly, as she displayed a fragile erection of tulle and flowers; one of the stock of the summer past, which had been left on hand.

"Well! I call it just trumpery," said the old woman indignantly; "and it appears to me that you've spent all your money on pickles and such like trash, instead of on the articles for which 'twas given you. But I might have guessed 'twould be so, if I hadn't been a fool;" and grumbling to herself, she went back into the kitchen.

"Never mind what she says, darling!" said Nelly, stooping to kiss her brother; "I've got everything that I want, and no one can have more; and I *am* so glad you are pleased with what I bought you."

And for the next few days she sat steadily down to cut out and stitch and gather, feeling all a woman's keen satisfaction, in making the alpaca, and muslin, and other materials, answer the purposes for which they had been bought, and without one feminine regret for the ribbons and laces which had transformed themselves into briar-root pipes and pickles.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. BROOKE GIVES HER OPINION OF THE MATTER.

ORPINGTON CHASE was not a house which had been taken and furnished with a view to being re-let. It was part of the family property of a gentleman whose wife, being threatened with consumption, had been advised to take up her residence abroad for the next few years, and her husband had let the Chase sooner than leave it in the hands of servants. He had advertised more for a tenant who would take every care of the property, than for one who would pay a high rental, and Nigel Brooke, fresh from Calcutta, with his pockets full of money and every intention, with all necessary prudence, of spending it, seemed just the man to take a pride in keeping up the appearance of the Chase. So it had been handed over to his charge for three years, certain, with the proviso that a regulated number of gardeners and game-keepers should be kept on the premises,

to look after the plantations and preserves by which they were surrounded.

The inside of the house was fully in keeping with the outside; it was everything, in fact, that gentlepeople who wished to live in the country and maintain a certain style could desire; although Mrs. Brooke, with her grand Calcutta ideas, was wont to speak rather disparagingly of it than otherwise, and hint that it was nothing to what she had been accustomed to in India. Nigel Brooke had more than once, in conversation with his grandfather, mentioned the house as his; and although it was not often that he so betrayed himself, he spoke the truth. His mother had been left very well off at his father's death, but the bulk of the property had descended to him; and by this disposition of his wealth, the late Mr. Brooke had shown a confidence in his son which was well deserved.

Nigel was not a man who would see his mother want a single luxury which his money could procure her. At the same time, he was past the meridian of his youth; if he ever married, he felt it must be soon; and he was grateful to the foresight which had not left him dependent, in such an event, upon the generosity of a capricious woman, nor made his mother's

death the signal of his own emancipation from the necessity of work. It was he, then, who had taken the Chase, and was responsible for its maintenance ! but he would not have done so, had Mrs. Brooke not promised to continue to live with him there until he should be married or return to India.

On the afternoon on which Nelly Brooke was expected at Orpington, her aunt was sitting alone in the library, when her son entered the room.

Nigel was a great contrast to his mother ; in fact, he was so utterly unlike her, that no stranger would have taken them to be even related. He was a tall, slight man, with remarkably fair hair, which he wore cut close to his head ; and with the exception of an almost colourless pair of moustaches, his face and chin were clean-shorn. He had grey eyes, a well-shaped nose, and a mouth which most people at first sight pronounced cold, on account of a propensity which it had of looking more sarcastic than it felt, but which, in reality, hid a greater depth of feeling than is possessed by the owner of many a pouting rosebud pair of lips. He was very like what his father had been, and, through him, bore a family likeness to the old man at Little Bickton.

His mother, on the contrary, was a very small woman, active and light, with dark hair and eyes, and Jewish features—a woman who, beneath the ordeal of an Indian life, had become perfectly incapable of doing anything for herself, and only knew how to use her tongue and her feet. Moreover she constantly offended the fastidious eye of her son, by employing too many colours in her dress, and these not well assorted. On the present occasion she was magnificently attired, but the fawn-coloured silk, laden with purple velvet trimmings, which her chilly nature had caused her already to adopt, was not in unison with the point-lace cap streaming with rose-coloured ribbons, nor the set of malachite with which she had adorned herself. Nigel had already seen her in this costume, yet his brow contracted even in his haste, as it again met his view.

“Is the carriage round, mother?” he asked quickly.

“I suppose it is, Nigel, if you ordered it,” replied Mrs. Brooke, in a tone which did not betoken pleasure at the question; “but I really cannot see the necessity for your going to the station yourself to meet your cousin. You have offered your escort once, and it has been refused; surely that is sufficient.”

Nigel Brooke had volunteered to meet Nelly at Reddington, and bring her the whole way to Hilstone, but both she and her brother had justly thought that this was too much to accept from him, and had declined on the score that Mr. Weston had promised to see Nelly into the train, and put her under the care of any lady who should be travelling the same road.

“This is quite different!” he said impatiently; “it would be a sorry welcome to let the poor child arrive at the station and find nothing but an empty carriage to meet her.”

“Well, from all accounts, they did not even pay you *that* compliment when you went to see them,” remarked his mother spitefully.

“Mother, you are ungenerous! You know that it is out of their power to show any one such an attention: what they *could* do they did.”

“Aye! and you call your grandfather’s reception of you doing what he could, I suppose; to say nothing of the reception he accorded your offer to help himself and your cousins—if they *are* your cousins—the old savage! But in his best days he was as churlish as a bear.”

“He has had great provocation to become savage,” said her son with a sigh; “and though no one could regret his decision more than I

did, I do not know whether, under similar circumstances, I should not have said the same myself."

"You are infatuated about these people," exclaimed Mrs. Brooke; "I told you what you need expect before you went to see them, but you would not take my advice. Still, I should have thought that having performed what you considered a duty, and had your kindness flung in your face again, you might have been contented and let matters rest there."

"I shall *never* be contented," replied her son emphatically, "until I feel that I have in some measure repaired the injury my father caused them by his rashness. Had he left a debt unpaid behind him, you would have been the first, I hope, to urge me to do what was right. Cannot you see that this is a higher, a more sacred obligation than any mere money matter could be?"

"Oh! that is very fine talking, and sounds very well, my dear Nigel," replied his mother, affecting to smile at his enthusiasm, "but if you thoroughly examine the case, you will find that your sense of honour is a very quixotic one, and leads you unnecessarily astray. The real truth being that your poor dear

father, very far from injuring these young people (who were not even in the world at the time), was fighting in their mother's cause, when he deprived them of a father who I am quite sure was not worth having. It was just a chance: either he or his opponent must have fallen, and had it turned out otherwise you would have been the sufferer. Besides, at that time, no one thought anything of duels; they were matters of daily occurrence, and the world would as soon have thought of blaming the survivor for surviving, as for not having missed his man."

And Mrs. Brooke passed her cambric handkerchief over her mouth as though living and dying were subjects of equal indifference to her. Her son bit his lip, but showed no other sign of annoyance.

"Whether he were right or wrong, mother, I have no wish to argue. I trust he thought he was doing right for his own sake, but that cannot atone for the great misfortune which followed his act. The fact is indisputable; that he deprived those children at one blow, of both their parents; and that my firm intention is, as far as in me lies, to supply the loss to them."

Mrs. Brooke started at the energy of her

son's words, but she attempted to pass off the action by saying,—

“I think you can hardly consider how much your sentence seems to imply, Nigel.”

“It cannot imply too much,” he answered readily, “and I should wish you entirely to understand me on this point. I have sworn before God, mother, and in my grandfather's presence, that whilst I live, neither Robert nor Helena shall ever want a friend, and when I took that oath, I fully meant, by the help of Heaven, to keep it.”

“Well, I confess I hardly thought your sense of obligation would have carried you quite so far as that, Nigel,” remarked his mother, turning away to hide her chagrin.

“Wisely or not, it did so, and therefore I have now no choice even if I wished it. The question is, mother, will you receive this young girl kindly, and as a lady should be received, for my sake, or shall we have to quarrel about it?”

He spoke gently, but his voice was very firm. Mrs. Brooke tried to evade the main point of the question.

“As to receiving her like a lady, Nigel, I should think my worst enemy could never say that I was ignorant of the rules of society. I

who have entertained at my table the wife of the Governor-General of India, to say nothing of—”

“Yes! mother,” interposed her son, “but the reception due to a Governor-General’s wife is just what I do not wish you to extend to my poor little cousin. Remember that she is almost a child, fresh from the country: strange to everything and body here, and that this is the first time she has ever left her home. Come, mother, promise me you’ll welcome Nelly kindly for my sake, and not frighten her out of her wits with any grandeur or formality,” and as he spoke he stooped and kissed his mother on the forehead. Mrs. Brooke was mollified at once: she was not an ill-natured woman, she was only terribly jealous of, and up-in-arms against anybody in whom her son appeared to take an interest.

“Well! well!” she said as she shook out her streamers again, “if you are really bent upon meeting the girl, you had better go at once, for the train is due at five o’clock. But don’t forget, Nigel, that dinner is at seven, and that the Johnstones are coming.”

“I thought we were to be alone to-night,” he said with a look of vexation.

“It’s only the two girls and their brother:

I could not avoid asking them, for they almost begged me to do so. If Helena should be very tired after her journey, I can send up her dinner into her own room."

"Oh! I should not think she would require that," was Nigel's remark as he left the room.

"Tiresome little creature!" ejaculated Mrs. Brooke, as the door closed behind him, "I daresay she will be more trouble than a dozen fine ladies put together; these rustics always are, with their rawness and their ignorance, and their eternal blushing. However, perhaps Nigel himself will get sick of her after a time. It's a new scheme of his, and he is always very hot after the last idea."

Nigel Brooke did not spare his horses on the way to Hilstone station, yet he did not arrive there much too soon, for the expected train came puffing alongside the platform a minute after he had reached it. He had no difficulty in discovering his cousin Nelly, for her expectant face was pressed against one of the windows, filled with an expression which was half fear and half curiosity, until she caught sight of himself, and then it changed to unmitigated pleasure.

The poor child had cried so much, and seen and thought so much since Farmer Weston

had placed her in the train at Reddington that morning, that Little Bickton already appeared drifting far away from her, and the face of her Cousin Nigel, till so lately that of a stranger, was transformed into the face of a friend.

“How kind of you to come and meet me,” she said, when he handed her out upon the platform.

“Did you think I would allow you to arrive here all by yourself?” he answered, as he drew her hand within his arm. Even then he observed how many of the passengers, busy with their own belongings, still found time to turn round and gaze again at the fresh, innocent face, which looked so gratefully into his. Her luggage having been extricated from the mass, Nigel drew her away from the crowded station; and in another minute they were driving together towards Orpington Chase.

“You have been crying, Nelly!” said her cousin, as he scrutinised her features. The girl blushed as if she had been detected in something wrong.

“I couldn’t help it,” she said, humbly; “it wasn’t much, but I am very much obliged to you, Cousin Nigel, and to Aunt Eliza, for asking me to stay at Orpington.”

“Don’t tell a story, child,” he answered, playfully, “you are not obliged, at least at present; but I hope you may be, some day. You must remember, it’s for Bertie’s good, as well as for your own.”

“I do remember it,” she said, ingenuously, “for Bertie told me so, and I mean to be very happy, cousin,” with a slight quiver in her voice.

“Whilst your heart is away at Little Bickton?” he said, laughing.

But the charge was not denied.

“I will try to do everything to make Aunt Eliza like me,” she continued, doubtfully, “and if I am stupid, you must tell me how.”

“You must try to do nothing, Nelly, but just be yourself, and my mother will be sure to love you for your own sake,” and then he turned the conversation, and spoke to her of Thug and old Aggie, and anything which he hoped would prevent her thoughts dwelling upon the coming introduction.

But as the carriage drew up at the hall door of the Chase, and he took her hand to help her to alight, he felt how she was trembling.

“Nelly, I thought you were never frightened at anything,” he said, reproachfully, as he lin-

gered with her for a minute in the long corridor which led to the library.

“Only a little,” she whispered. But she seemed such a child in comparison with himself; and so lonely, except for his countenance and protection, that his whole heart went out to her, and he felt as though her fears were a reproach to him.

“But there is nothing to be frightened at, my child, even for a moment,” he said, earnestly. “Nelly, you are in my house now, and if ever you have a fear unallayed or a desire ungratified, it will be your own fault.”

She looked up in surprise at the warmth and energy of his assertion. But there was no mistaking the sincerity of the gaze which met her own, and a thrill of gratitude for her cousin's kindness passed through her bosom even as his hand was on the lock of the library door.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIRST EVENING AT ORPINGTON CHASE.

BUT the dreaded introduction was not so formidable after all. "Aunt Eliza" was alone, and although she did commence the acquaintance by dropping a curtsy to her orphan niece, which would have been much more suitable to the reception of the wife of a Governor-General, a look from her son caused her to change her manner almost immediately, and advancing to meet Nelly, she took her hand and kissed her, and enquired how she had borne the journey, in a fashion which, if not very affectionate, was at least free from formality. And Nelly, to her own surprise, felt no intimidation after the first few seconds. She had been reared in such obscurity, that she had had no opportunity of testing her powers of self-assurance, and was agreeably disappointed, after a short time, to find that she could answer her aunt's questions concerning herself and her brother with as little shyness as

if she had been talking with her cousin Nigel. The latter knowing that the two women would become much more familiar if he were absent, now rose saying—

“ Well, mother, having delivered my cousin Helena into your charge, I will take a little stroll before dinner.”

A slight look of alarm passed over Nelly's face as she heard that the protection of Nigel's presence was to be withdrawn from her; but as Mrs. Brooke took the opportunity also to rise, and say, that in that case she would shew her niece to her room, she had no time to allow the feeling to gain ground.

She followed her aunt out of the library, and up the wide, carpeted staircase with its polished banisters, and along the upper corridor, which corresponded with that below, and at one end of which was situated the bedroom which had been prepared for her use.

“ This is your room,” said Mrs. Brooke, as she ushered her into it, “ and I trust you will find everything comfortable. I did not order a fire to be lighted, as people's ideas about heat and cold in this climate, seem so to differ; but if you have been used to one, my dear, pray order it.”

“ I have not been used to one,” said Nelly,

simply, although she felt inclined to smile at the notion of a fire in her bedroom in August.

“And I have given orders for Pinner, the upper housemaid, to attend to your bell. Ah! here she is,” as a smart and rather pert-looking servant-maid entered the room. “Pinner, this is Miss Brooke, and you will see that she has everything she requires during her stay with us.”

“Certainly, mem,” replied the maid.

“And as Pinner is here to look after you, I don’t think you will require me any longer;” and so saying, Mrs. Brooke left the large room with the forlorn little girl sitting in the centre of it, without having once bid her welcome to her house, or expressed a wish that she would be happy whilst there.

But though Nelly was forlorn, she no longer felt any fear. This beautifully furnished room was very different from what she had been accustomed to; and this smart attendant with a lace cap on the back of her head, not at all like old nurse Aggie; but her soul was not one to be intimidated by the sight of fine furniture, nor the pertness of servant-maids. Although from her birth she had been poorly clothed and surrounded, she had always maintained the inherent sense of being a gentle-

woman ; and that Pinner should be better clad than herself could only surprise her ; it had no power to make her for a minute permit the woman to address her but as a servant should address a lady.

Consequently when she pertly asked—

“ Have you your keys, Miss ? for if so, I had better lay out your things,” Pinner was amazed by the new comer, whom she had rightly taken for a poor relation of her mistress’, turning round upon her calmly, with the answer—

“ If you have uncorded the box, that is sufficient ; I can unpack it myself.”

“ But you had best let me do it, perhaps,” debated the maid, “ for you’ve got your ’air to dress, and it don’t want more than half-an-hour to the dinner-bell now.”

Familiarly as Nelly Brooke had been brought up with her old nurse, she had never been spoken to by Aggie in such a tone as she now heard from the pert menial before her. She turned her head, and regarded Pinner with eyes full of solemn surprise. There was something in the look which awed the woman.

“ Will you please to ring then, Miss, when you wish me to fasten your dress ?” she added more respectfully.

“I do not want you to do anything for me, thank you,” said Nelly. “I have been accustomed to wait upon myself, so you can go;” and thereupon the housemaid departed in high dudgeon to inform the servants’ hall that she “never see such *hairs* as the rubbige giv’ her self—never.”

Meanwhile Nelly unlocked her box, and placed her modest wardrobe in the chest of drawers, and shook out the folds of the muslin dress she was about to wear. It looked very fresh and simple, and pretty, on this first occasion of its introduction to the world; almost as much so as herself, although the only ornaments she possessed to wear with it, were a few black velvet bows. When she had well brushed her luxuriant hair, and coiled it in thick plaits round the back of her head, as old Aggie had told her it would be right to do when she got amongst the “gentlefolk,” and had further adorned herself with the new dress, Nelly quite started to see her reflection in the long pier glass with which her bedroom was provided. She had not thought she could look so “nice;” “pretty” would have sounded too presumptuous a word to use with regard to herself; but she certainly looked “nice,” or would do so, were she not

so brown. She wished Bertie could see her; only just for a second! And at that moment the thought of her brother even had not the power to bring more than a flash of pain with it, for what with the bustle and novelty of the situation, the girl was experiencing more excitement than she had ever done before, and as yet it left her no time for being miserable. But with the clang of the dinner-bell came the idea of finding her way into the library again, alone, and with it a slight return of her first shyness. Still she knew it must be done, and as a preliminary step peeped furtively out of her bedroom door. What was her relief to see the tall figure of her cousin Nigel at the other end of the corridor, pacing up and down like a patrol, and evidently waiting for some one. She almost ran towards him, with the request—

“Oh, cousin! will you let me go downstairs with you?” which made him smile.

“Why—I was only waiting for you, Nelly! I thought you might be puzzled, at first, to find your way about the house alone.”

“How very kind you are to me!”

The remark was made in perfect good faith and without the least idea of coquetry, and Nigel Brooke thought, and truly, that in the whole

course of his five-and-thirty years of life he had never met with such an unsophisticated bit of innocence as his cousin Nelly, before. When his mother saw him enter the library with the girl upon his arm, she slightly frowned.

The dinner-bell had rung for more than five minutes, and the Miss Johnstones, in pink gauze dresses, had been eagerly watching for his appearance three times as long, and he had kept them all waiting in order to bring in that country chit in book-muslin. But Nigel Brooke cared nothing for his mother's frowns—if he noticed them. He introduced his cousin to the other young ladies, and then without relinquishing his hold of her, presented his other arm to the elder Miss Johnstone, and begged the brother to take in his younger sister with Mrs. Brooke.

“It is not quite the right thing, I know,” he laughingly said, as he led the way to the dining-room; “but as we are only two gentlemen to four ladies, I can think of no better arrangement.”

His mother thought it would have been better if he had taken both the sisters, and left his cousin to go in with herself, but she knew her son too well to say so.

As Nelly Brooke had not as yet been awed

by any of the unusual grandeur of the Chase, neither had the appearance of a dinner, such as she had never seen before, handed to her by the most consequential of serving-men, any power to affect her.

She had read of instances in which people fresh from the country had been ready to sink into the earth with confusion at the mistakes they made when they found themselves sitting for the first time at a well-appointed table, and it was the recollection of some such tales that had made her imagine that she should never learn how to behave herself when she mixed in society, and exaggerate the misery and strangeness which she should feel on going there.

But although she was very silent, and never spoke except when she was spoken to, it was of her equals she was shy, not of her inferiors. With respect to the dinner and the domestics, she was as perfectly at her ease as if she had been carving a leg of mutton for Bertie and her grandfather, and old Aggie had stood by to hand the plates. She just took what she fancied, and rejected what she did not require, and when her aunt, thinking she was bashful, remonstrated with her, on refusing so many

courses, she answered without the least hesitation :

“Thank you, Aunt Eliza, but I am no longer hungry. I am not accustomed to eat so much at dinner.”

And although the Miss Johnstones, who had partaken of everything which had been handed to them, smiled visibly at such a comical idea, Nelly did not perceive that the smile had been provoked by what she had said, and remained quite free from confusion.

The dessert was placed on the table ; and after a while, Mrs. Brooke with a glance which included the three young ladies, rose from her seat.

Nelly had not comprehended the meaning of the look, but of course she could not mistake the action, and she rose also, but before she left the table she bent her head over it, and with folded hands said a grace to herself ; which ceremony had been gone through at the commencement of the meal, but omitted at the removal of the cloth.

The act was unusual : but it was scarcely entitled to be called a breach of manners, and the girl herself did it as a matter of habit, without once thinking whether it was right or wrong. But as she raised her head, she per-

ceived that she had made a mistake. The Johnstones were audibly tittering; and Mrs. Brooke had her handkerchief to her mouth; though the two young men were simply regarding her with interest; for it is proverbial that careless men have always more respect for religion than careless women. This time Nelly did colour; but it was from fear lest her aunt and cousin should be annoyed at the display of her ignorance, and she glanced towards Nigel imploringly.

“Thank you, Nelly,” he said, kindly, “you have reminded us all of our duty: I will not forget it to-morrow.”

At these words the Miss Johnstones suddenly ceased their giggling, for they had a great desire to please the master of the Chase.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” replied Nelly, blushing still deeper at the idea that her aunt might think she did, “but I am so used to it, that I scarcely thought what I was doing—was it very stupid of me, Aunt Eliza?” she whispered to Mrs. Brooke, as she found herself by her side in the drawing-room.

“Not stupid, my dear, exactly,” replied her aunt, rather touched by the anxiety displayed in the childish appeal; “but rather unusual, perhaps: however, I have no doubt my son

will pronounce the grace at its proper time, to-morrow ;” and with this assurance, poor Nelly was obliged to rest contented.

The Miss Johnstones were what is termed “fine girls, who played and sang very brilliantly, and dressed very low, and set their caps very decidedly at the son of their hostess. They were loud in their admiration of everything at the Chase, including its master, and when the gentlemen entered the drawing-room that evening, Nigel Brooke found them seated on a sofa, one on either side of his mother, loading her with caresses and flattery, to which she appeared readily to respond. The sight seemed to displease him, for he crossed to the further end of the room, and sat down by his cousin, with his back towards the group on the sofa.

The short spell of loneliness to which Nelly had been subjected between the time the ladies had left the dining-room, and this when Nigel joined her again, seemed already to have had its effect on her spirits, for her cousin found her more silent than before, and read her dejection in her looks.

In order to amuse her he fetched several volumes of the “Art Union,” and proceeded to show her the plates. But though she ad-

mired them very much, they did not divert her melancholy. The slight ridicule which she had incurred had sent her thoughts back to Little Bickton, where everything she did was right, and set them dwelling on the many doubts and fears which she had entertained about paying this very visit. She almost broke down at a print of the "healing of the cripple by the Apostles, at the gate called Beautiful," because, she said, it so reminded her of her brother.

"I wonder what dear Bertie is doing now," she whispered, with a woe-begone face, to her cousin, as something very like a tear glistened in the corner of her eye.

"Smoking his pipe, I daresay," he replied cheerily, "or having his tea, or wondering, on his part, what his silly little sister is doing towards keeping her promise to try and enjoy herself."

She smiled at his suggestion, but it was a very sad smile. Nigel seemed afraid of what might follow it, and looked about him in search of a diversion. In another minute he had jumped up and asked the elder Miss Johnstone to sing. The young lady was only too eager to oblige, and warbled "Why do I weep for thee?" with great emphasis, whilst he devoted

himself to turning over the leaves of her music, with a view to giving Nelly an opportunity to recover herself. As soon as her sister had concluded, the other Miss Johnstone sat down, and rattled off the last new waltzes with considerable brilliancy. The attention of Nelly was diverted from Little Bickton; she was really fond of music, and the pretty melody attracted her, so that after a while she left her seat, and drew nearer to the piano. As soon as the waltzes were concluded the young ladies both addressed her at once, begging that she would "favour" them with a song.

"I do not sing," she replied, gently.

"Then will you play something?"

"I do not play either," she repeated.

"Good gracious, child!" said her aunt, sharply looking up from some netting, over which she was considerably puzzling herself; "what *do* you do?"

The querulous tone nettled the girl, and she answer bluntly, "Nothing."

"Oh! indeed!" remarked Mrs. Brooke, with her eyes still on her work; whilst the young ladies and their brother laughed; and Nigel said, with indignation, albeit he tried to appear careless of the matter,

"That is not the case, Nelly; you can do

many more things than most young ladies—as you know very well.”

“ Ah ! but not things to *amuse* people with,” she answered quickly. “ I have told you that I never play the piano before any one but Bertie or Mrs. Weston.”

“ Oh ! never mind, it is not of the slightest consequence,” said her aunt, “ I have no doubt that Miss Johnstone will be kind enough to favour us with another song—You are both so clever, my dears,” addressing herself exclusively to the sisters, “ that I wish you would see if you could help me with this netting—I am afraid I have got it into a sad bungle ;” and she pulled away at her silk as she spoke.

“ Oh ! pray don’t apply to me, dearest Mrs. Brooke,” exclaimed the elder, holding up her hands in mock alarm ; “ I am the naughtiest, laziest girl possible for needlework, and never touch any ; just ask my sister if I am not telling the truth.”

“ Well, you know I am just as bad !” returned the other, as if the confession were rather meritorious, “ and really now-a-days, what with one thing and another, I can’t understand what time people find for needlework. And I never did any netting in my life, dear Mrs. Brooke, or I should have been

delighted, I'm sure." And she skipped off to the piano again without even enquiring into the nature of the difficulty.

"It's very provoking," sighed poor Mrs. Brooke, as she looked round with an air of helpless distress. "I thought I was going on so nicely, and then Mrs. Chamberlain asked to have the foundation which she had lent me, back again, and so I had to cut my netting off it, and it has not looked right since. I often think I will never try to do a piece of fancy work again, for servants are so provoking, they are of no use at all in a case like this."

"May I try to help you, aunt?" said Nelly, timidly.

"My dear! I do not suppose that you can understand anything about it—this is mere idle work."

"I know how to net," she replied, quietly. She took the tangled web from off her aunt's foot, and examined it. "You have not yet picked out the stitches which you cut off," she said presently, as she proceeded to remedy the mistake.

"But they won't come out; the knots are so hard," urged Mrs. Brooke.

"Not if you pull them, the right way, aunt!

—Look—just as I do—if you touch the knot on this side it loosens at once, but if on the other, you will only fray the silk and draw it tighter.”

“Well! that’s wonderful,” exclaimed Mrs. Brooke, peering at the operation through her spectacles; “and could you set it all right, my dear, without a foundation?”

“Oh! yes!” replied Nelly, smiling; “but if you can spare me your mesh and needle, I will make you a foundation in half an hour.”

“And where did you learn this art?” asked her aunt, looking at the girl as she worked, with almost as much curiosity as if she had seen a donkey begin to net.

“Is it an art?” said Nelly, laughing, the first time Nigel had seen her laugh in his mother’s presence—“we don’t call it so at Little Bickton; for every child there can make nets for the cherry trees, and that is the only use I have seen it put to.”

Mrs. Brooke was much more gracious in her behaviour towards her niece after she discovered that she had been accustomed to do all kinds of needlework, both plain and fancy; for she was an indolent useless creature herself, and she fancied it might be very convenient—since she must entertain a raw girl

from the country for so many weeks—to have one who could occasionally help her in such little difficulties.

She spoke nearly as often to Nelly as to the Miss Johnstones during the rest of the evening, and dismissed her to her bedroom, with an embrace which was almost affectionate.

But neither the cordiality nor the kiss had any power to comfort Nelly when she found herself once more alone. The excitement was over then, the novelty was fast dying away: even the presence of the officious Pinner had been withdrawn; and there was nothing left in the middle of that big, luxurious bedroom, but an apparently heart-broken girl, crying for her home and the friends with whom she had lived from her infancy. She told herself it was foolish, and weak, and wrong; she knelt down and repeated her innocent prayers, and prayed to be made contented and grateful; still the tears would rise as she pictured her darling Bertie toiling up the cottage staircase with no one to help him but old Aggie, of his going to bed without any one to read or talk to him, and falling to sleep (if he *could* sleep, so Nelly silently argued) without his sister's good-night kiss. She imagined every contingency that could possibly occur during her

absence from her home; of how her grandfather or old Aggie might be found dead in their beds; or Bertie—even Bertie—but no, that thought was too dreadful even for a surmise, and Nelly shuddered at, but could not entertain it. So that, whilst her grandfather and old Aggie were making “night hideous” with their snores, and Bertie, under the influence of a stronger potation than usual, which he had taken advantage of his sister’s absence to procure, was also buried in a deep slumber, poor little Nelly was crying herself to sleep from a sheer sense of loneliness and fatigue, and repeating again and again with an attempt at self-comfort, “For *your* sake, Bertie! it is for your sake, darling. I will remember that it is for your sake, and try to be contented.”

She was sounding the key-note of her life.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. BROOKE CHANGES HER OPINION.

WHEN Nelly entered the breakfast-room on the following morning and found that her cousin Nigel had taken his breakfast an hour before, and was gone out shooting for the day, she thought him almost unkind. He knew that he was the only person at Orpington with whom she felt at all at her ease, and he had promised if she would go and stay there, that he would be a friend to her. And this was what he called being a "friend," leaving her the very first day all by herself with her Aunt Eliza, who did not make her appearance until it was nearly noon, and whose whole attention from that time appeared to be occupied with receiving her visitors, and trying to decide how she should have her next dresses made and trimmed.

But Nigel Brooke was neither unkind nor unwise in pursuing the course which he had chosen. He was very anxious that his mother

should take a fancy to his cousin Nelly; and he was aware that Mrs. Brooke was a woman of most capricious temper, who conceived violent likes and dislikes without any visible cause for the people with whom she was thrown in contact, and he knew that the less interest he appeared to take in his cousin, and the less anxiety he betrayed that she should make a favourable impression at the Chase, the more likely was her aunt to be gracious to her. So he took especial care to absent himself from home for the first few days after her arrival, and leave her to make her way alone, and on the fourth day he was rewarded for his circumspection by Mrs. Brooke waylaying him in his private room of her own accord, to make the following disclosure:—

“ My dear Nigel, that little cousin of yours is a perfect genius. I had no idea when I first saw her what a deal of cleverness was concealed beneath all that shyness. How could I have guessed it, you know? But she can do *everything*. Why, yesterday morning, when that stupid maid of mine, Prout, was fussing and fuming over the fit of my new black velvet jacket, pulling it first this way and then the other; and I am sure the amount of stuff that woman must have wasted

in the cutting out alone, no one could calculate ; I'm sure, Nigel, short a time as I have been in England, I have often and often regretted the tailors in Calcutta, for they never
——”

“ Yes, yes, mother,” impatiently interposed her son, “ but never mind the Calcutta tailors now ; finish your story about Prout.”

“ Well, let me see, where was I ? Oh ! yes, to be sure—well—in comes your cousin to ask me a question ; and positively she saw what was wrong in a minute. I was just saying to Prout, ‘ It will never come right, Prout ; perhaps you'd better cut out another,’ when ‘ Oh ! yes it will, aunt,’ says Helena, ‘ if you will let me make a little alteration here ; it only wants sloping at the shoulders ;’ and she took the scissors out of Prout's hand, unripped both the seams, took in quite half an inch under the arms, sloped the shoulder, and there was the jacket, fitting as nicely as possible. ‘ And now Prout,’ she said, ‘ you have only got to cut it down more in the throat, and I think you will find it come right.’ You should have seen Prout's face, Nigel. I was so pleased, because the creature's last place was with a countess, and whenever I find fault with her, she tells me how she gave her ladyship

entire satisfaction. Well, I have not finished about your cousin's cleverness yet. In the afternoon we drove to Hilstone, and I bought some macaroons. You may remember how fond I used to be of macaroons in Calcutta. I was telling Helena all about them, and how I should never get any in England to taste like those they used to have made at the mess of the 110th; these confectioners' macaroons seem always so dry and hard; never imagining that the child would remember it, and what do you think? This morning at luncheon time, cook sent up some made *just* as I like them, so soft and sticky, that I had to wash my hands directly after eating them, and I should be almost ashamed to tell you how many I did eat. Of course I was delighted, and sent at once to know where she had got the recipe; when your cousin told me that *she*, that chit, Nigel! only fancy! who has never been out of Bickton (or whatever they call the place), in her life before, *she* had written it out and sent it down by Pinner yesterday evening, with a request that the cook would try it and see how I liked it. Oh! I was perfectly enchanted with the girl! Such thought, my dear, such prudence! there are very few girls now-a-days who know what a macaroon is

made of; but Helena tells me that she always makes the pastry at home, and has tried her hand at all kinds of recipes. Why didn't you tell me she could do all this before, Nigel? I had no idea it was *this* kind of girl you wished me to invite to the Chase; but I really don't think you men know or care what a woman can do: it is all frippery, and finery; and outside show with you, and if a girl has not a pretty face, you ask no further about her. And poor Helena is certainly not *pretty*: that is to say, she has fine eyes and hair of course, but no style, which is everything after all. But we can't be perfect in this world, that is positive!"

Perhaps Nigel Brooke was not entirely of his mother's opinion respecting the amount of beauty possessed by his cousin, but he ventured no remark upon the subject. She had been running on so fast and continuously in her new-born enthusiasm for Nelly's merits in the dress-making and cooking departments, that she had given her son no opportunity either to second or refute her assertions; and he would probably have chosen to remain silent if she had.

He saw that the spell was working, and was satisfied to maintain neutral ground until

his mother's sudden fancy for his cousin should have developed into something steadier and stronger. So he only smiled and said:—

“I am very glad indeed to hear that you are likely to find Nelly an agreeable companion, mother: for I do not think any kindness you may shew her will be thrown away.”

“Agreeable, my dear Nigel! she is positively charming, and if she goes on at this rate, I'm sure I don't know what I shall do when she leaves the Chase. I have been worrying myself about it all this morning, and I was thinking just now, how delightful it would be to have her to live with me altogether. You are sure to marry, you know, Nigel, before you return to Calcutta; in fact, you *must* marry, you should look upon it as a sacred duty, and though I am sure your wife will be everything that is desirable for the station she will fill: beautiful and accomplished and of high birth, and so on; yet she can never be to me what a girl of *this sort* could be; it would not be suitable that she should, and even if she were, you will soon be off to Calcutta again and take her with you. And in that case I feel I should like to have Helena to live with me and be my companion,

you know. There she would be; always ready to look after my things, or to accompany me anywhere: to take all trouble off my hands in fact, so that when I have considered about it a little longer, and seen a little more of the girl's abilities, I shall just tell her of my plan. It would be *rather* a change for her, Nigel! would it not, to leave Bickton for good and take up her abode with me? Poor dear child!" and she looked at her son, evidently expecting him to endorse her sentiments, and approve of them:

But Nigel Brooke was silent. He had winced terribly under this last proposal of his mother's, and when she had alluded to the chance of his marriage, and spoken of Nelly as a girl of *this sort*, he had felt as though some one had suddenly run a knife into his flesh. The thought of this contented, home-loving, and free child of the country being pent up for life as the companion of his frivolous mother, would have struck him with dismay, had he not known that it could never be. But he was anxious not to turn all Mrs. Brooke's sympathies in the other direction, by opposing her cherished plan. So after a pause he replied:—

"I daresay such a companion, if she proved

all that you imagine, mother, would be a great comfort to you, but you must remember that Nelly is very young, and that as yet you have seen but little of her."

"Ah! that is just the way with you men, Nigel, you are one as suspicious as the other; however, I do not choose to share your doubts about your poor little cousin. I am sure that she would prove all that I could desire."

"But she has her grandfather and brother to look after at home, remember! What would they do without her?"

"Oh! if it were absolutely necessary, I might manage to wait until the old man is dead: he can't live very much longer, surely! and as for the cripple, couldn't we get him put into an asylum, or somewhere? I am sure it might be managed."

At the idea of Robert Brooke quietly consenting to be packed away in an asylum for incurables, in order that his sister might become companion to her aunt, Nigel laughed outright; but he only begged his mother not to mention such a thing to her niece.

"Nelly scarcely believes that her brother is incurable," he said, "and the twins are very much attached to one another, so pray do not hint at such an idea as an asylum for him."

When my grandfather dies, I have no doubt that we shall be able to make arrangements for my cousins to leave Little Bickton, and take up their abode near us; but meanwhile, mother, you leave me out of the question altogether. You are determined that I shall marry, or be got rid of in some way."

"Because you are *sure* to marry, my dear," she replied.

"Perhaps I should be, if it depended wholly on my own wishes, but how are you to control those of the beautiful and accomplished young ladies from amongst whom I am to choose a wife. Such a girl as you desire to have for a daughter-in-law may prefer somebody better for a husband than a middle-aged Calcutta merchant."

"What nonsense it is of you, Nigel, to talk in that manner! *Middle age!* why you are hardly in your prime yet."

"What with grey hairs in my head?" he asked with a laugh.

"Grey hairs are nothing—all the young people have grey hairs nowadays, and particularly such as have lived for any time in India. You are only just thirty-five, and you have an income which will justify you in picking and choosing as you will."

“Yes! if I wanted to *buy* a wife—but I don’t; I would rather *win* one.”

“And you would find no difficulty in that either, Nigel. A handsome, sensible woman, such as *I* trust you would choose, one not too young, and who knows what the world is, would be the very first to appreciate the advantages of a marriage with a man like yourself, who is able not only to make a place for her in society, but to keep it.”

“Yes! that all sounds very easy,” said Nigel Brooke, “but, unfortunately, mother, it too often happens in marriage that what would be most suitable for a man is not most pleasing; we old fellows on the road to forty are apt to attach as much, if not more, charm to the innocence and simplicity of very young girls than we did at twenty; and as the fancies of extreme youth do not generally correspond with ours, we are also apt to have our honourable proposals rejected to our faces, which makes us vow never to try our luck again. So I think there is just as much chance of your having *me* for a companion for life as Miss Helena Brooke; and I think I am entitled by birth (not to mention several minor considerations,) to the first preference.”

He spoke so playfully, that his mother

answered him in the same strain, and told him he was a great goose, and it was of no use to argue with him. And then she turned the conversation back again to Nelly.

“But now *do* tell me, Nigel—what shall I buy for her? I want to make her a nice present. I have given her two of my evening dresses and the brown silk which Prout spoilt in the making the week before last, and that pair of carved bracelets which your poor father sent for from China for me—(I never cared for them, you know, they are so unbecoming,) but I want now to get her something *really useful* from Hilstone. What do you think she would like best?”

“Don’t you think you have given her sufficient for one day?” he answered quietly. “Nelly is not used, I fancy, to receiving many presents.”

He could not bear the idea of his mother having given her dresses which had been worn for however short a time, and dreaded lest the girl’s pride should be hurt by such an offering. But Mrs. Brooke was in one of her “giving” humours, and would not be reasoned or persuaded out of a tithe of her intended generosity.

“Dear me, no! They were nothing—mere

trifles—I want to give the child something much better—something that shall be really serviceable. Now, Nigel, don't be disagreeable, but tell me just what you imagine she would prefer.”

He was pleased with the marked change in his mother's sentiments concerning his orphan cousin, and although he knew by long experience that her fancies were as fickle as the wind, he saw no good to be attained in the future by checking her kind intentions in the present. And so he considered for a moment, and then said :

“If you are determined upon loading Nelly with benefits, mother, I think a riding-habit and hat would be the means of affording her the greatest pleasure during her visit to us ; for I know that she can ride, and I could easily have a side-saddle put on the little grey, and take her out sometimes with me. There is to be a grand coursing match on the downs on Friday week ; and the meet will be a very gay scene.”

If he had proposed that his cousin should take lessons on the tight-rope, Mrs. Brooke would have acquiesced in his desire. She was just in the humour to grant him, or Nelly anything.

“Of course, my dear boy, that will be just the thing, and some gloves besides—and a neat little riding-whip. I will order her a complete riding outfit the very next time we go into Hilstone. Indeed I see no reason that we should not do so this very afternoon. It is not four yet, and we shall be back in plenty of time for dinner. Ring the bell, my dear, and order the carriage at once. I will go and find your cousin and desire her to get ready to accompany us.” And accordingly Mrs. Brooke did search out Nelly, and take her off to Hilstone there and then, and have her measure taken for the most expensive riding-habit that the town could furnish.

To say that Nelly was indifferent to the pretty things which her aunt now showered upon her, would be to paint her as an immaculate creature, which she was very far from being. She greatly admired the Chinese bracelets which Mrs. Brooke thought so unbecoming; she was in raptures about the new riding-habit and hat, and could scarcely believe that they were really to be hers; and her pride even was not offended by being asked to accept the three dresses which had been her aunt's—though in the latter case, perhaps, the difference of age and the close

relationship which existed between the donor and receiver, served to cover any little feeling of annoyance which might otherwise have arisen at such an offer.

But although she valued the gifts, and still more the kindness which prompted their bestowal, Nelly was not happy at the Chase. She appeared more cheerful and like herself as the days went on, but it was because they were going on, and each one brought the hour of her return to Little Bickton nearer. Although never formally agreed upon, it seemed to be tacitly understood by all parties that the term of her visit was to be a month, and when nearly half of that time had elapsed and her cousin Nigel ventured to rally her upon the improvement in her spirits, and the falseness of her prophecies with respect to her certain misery at the Chase, she disappointed him greatly by the open confession that she couldn't help feeling happier now because she should so soon see Bertie again. Indeed, whatever they did to please or amuse her, she appeared to Nigel visibly to pine after her brother. She wrote to him every day: she alluded to him in almost every other sentence; she never seemed to be able to keep her thoughts away from her home for

more than a few minutes at a time; and it was sufficient to mention the name of Little Bickton to be certain of at once enchaining her attention.

And the cheerfulness which she managed to maintain was chiefly owing to the letters which she constantly received from her brother, and in which he never failed to urge her to do all she could to ingratiate herself with her relatives, and to pave the way for the ultimate comfort and respectability of herself and him. And so she toiled on, day after day, to make herself agreeable and necessary to her aunt, in hopes of securing his welfare, as she would have cheerfully worked in the mines or the galleys, with the same incentive.

She was quite a little slave to Mrs. Brooke at this period, running her errands and unpicking her work, although the elder lady imagined she was bestowing a great benefit on the girl by employing her thus honourably; and that all that Nelly did for her was amply repaid by the many additions she had made to her scanty wardrobe, and the amusements to which she had taken her. And Nelly herself thought nothing of the little attentions which she rendered; for she had been used to sacrifice herself for the good of others, and

cherished some very old-fashioned notions respecting the duties of relationship.

Yet her aunt never gave her any present but she questioned whether Bertie would admire or care to possess it before she decided to keep it for herself, and Mrs. Brooke never lavished caresses or praises upon her niece, without Nelly reminding her that her twin brother was far better worth loving, and far better worth praising than herself.

And so vehement was Mrs. Brooke's short-lived admiration, that she was almost prepared, during its continuance, to believe, as well as to affirm, that she was as ready to love Bertie as she was his sister.

CHAPTER XI.

NELLY MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

THE new riding habit and hat were ready some days before they were required, and Nigel Brooke having had a side-saddle fitted to the little grey, found that a few hints as to the most approved method of mounting, and holding her reins, were all that was required to transform his cousin Nelly into a first-rate horsewoman, for she already possessed the two great requisites to that end, namely, courage and a firm seat, and from the time that her paraphernalia was complete, she accompanied him daily in his rides.

The day of the coursing match, to be held on the Downs, rose gloriously, and a gayer assemblage than Nelly had ever been introduced to before, met her view, as, mounted on the little grey, and escorted by her cousin, she arrived upon the scene of action. All the private carriages which Hilstone could boast (Mrs. Brooke's amongst the number) were

drawn up on either side of the starting point, whilst equestrians of all sorts, from the burly squire, followed by a train of boys and girls mounted on rough ponies, and the farmer astride his clumsy cob, to all the gentlemen of the Hunt, accompanied by their wives and daughters, and most of the officers from Hilstone Barracks, were scattered here and there in groups upon the Downs.

The tenant of Orpington Chase, although he had not been amongst them for more than two months, was already well known, and as he conducted his cousin to the spot from which she could best watch the running of the greyhounds, greetings assailed him from every side. The eye-glasses of the Hilstone ladies were in great request as Nelly, her face glowing with exercise and excitement, rode past their carriage windows, and the surmises which broke from them relative to the exact connection which existed between Mr. Brooke and the young lady to whom he seemed to be paying so much attention, were as various as the criticisms which they passed upon her personal appearance.

There was no less curiosity manifested amongst Nigel's male acquaintance with regard to the name and residence of the attrac-

tive-looking stranger; but the more they gazed after Nelly, and whispered to one another concerning her, the more pleasure did her cousin appear to take in refusing to gratify them, and he guided her in silence through the groups of horsemen, and the battery of the ladies' glances, until he brought both their steeds to a standstill beside his mother's carriage. There he would have passed on, if he could, but Mrs. Brooke had already caught sight of them, and addressed her son by name. She was reclining, a mass of feathers and flowers, on the luxurious cushion of her chariot, flirting, or making believe to flirt, after the fashion of some old ladies, with a good-looking man, who was resting both his arms on the sill of the open window, and talking to her in an easy and confidential manner. As he perceived who was his mother's companion, Nigel Brooke's brow contracted, although there was nothing in the gentleman's appearance to justify such an action; on the contrary, with respect to looks, he was gifted rather above than below the average, being a handsome man of the middle height, with a graceful figure, dark eyes and hair, and large well-kept whiskers. As soon as Mrs. Brooke ejaculated her son's name, he rose from the

lounging attitude he had assumed, and stood upright, and the next minute she had introduced him to her niece.

“ My niece, Doctor, Miss Brooke: Nelly, my dear, Dr. Monkton, of Hilstone. Nigel, Dr. Monkton and I have come to the conclusion that we were very foolish not to bring some ‘ tiffin ’ with us on to the Downs, for if they don’t begin the coursing soon, we shall be compelled to go without one or the other.”

“ The fresh air of so elevated a spot is calculated to provoke a keener appetite than usual ! ” said Dr. Monkton, addressing himself to Nelly. On being introduced to her, he had left the side of her aunt’s carriage, and approached her horse, and as he spoke, he laid his hand upon the animal’s neck in a manner which struck Nigel Brooke as being far too familiar on so short an acquaintance.

“ Yes ! ” said the girl, shyly.

“ You are new to Orpington, Miss Brooke, are you not ? ”

“ Yes ! ” she replied again, and nothing more.

She had not liked the ordeal of glances through which she had already passed ; for she was unaccustomed to admiration, and was too apt to imagine that people only looked at her because she was awkward, or countrified,

or in some manner differed from themselves. But that had been nothing to what her bashfulness now suffered as Mrs. Brooke's friend fixed his large dark eyes upon her face, and kept them there.

"Are you likely to make a long stay?" he enquired.

"No! I am soon going home again!"

"Have you yet visited Hilstone?"

"Yes; with my aunt."

"But I mean, have you inspected its historical relics and antiquities. Perhaps you know they are very numerous. There is the cathedral, full of the bones of early Saxon kings; and the college, founded by the famous Bishop Thomas of Tallow-wick, and the fortified gates, which were held during a siege of several months. You will not think of leaving Orpington, I hope, without paying a visit to spots which possess so much interest."

"No!" said Nelly, mechanically.

She had never felt so stupid or so unable to converse with any stranger before, for the whole time he had been speaking of the kings' bones and Thomas of Tallow-wick, Dr. Monkton had not once removed his admiring gaze from her features. She had twisted on her saddle, and looked down on the ground, and

up into the clear blue autumn sky, but the knowledge that those piercing eyes were still occupied in scrutinising her, made the colour in her face become deeper every moment, until her cheeks were burning. Nigel Brooke, who had also been attentively watching his cousin, noticed her confusion, and approaching her in the rear, managed, with great dexterity, to tickle, unperceived, the flanks of the little grey, which caused it immediately to step about, to the imminent danger of the doctor's toes.

“Excuse me, Dr. Monkton,” he said, coldly, “but you are fidgeting my cousin's horse by coming so near. He does not always display the best of tempers when he is touched by a stranger. I think, to prevent accidents, that I had better stand between you!” and, suiting the action of the word, he brought his chestnut alongside of the little grey.

Dr. Monkton may or may not have understood the hint which had thus been given him, but Mrs. Brooke took her son's word all in good faith.

“Oh! my dear Nigel,” she exclaimed in a voice of alarm, “I hope there is no chance of Nelly's horse becoming restive. Look there, now: the dogs are just off, and everybody is

pressing to one point. Suppose the grey should get fidgety at being kept standing, and begin to kick or anything—so close to the carriage, too—I should be terribly frightened, I am sure I should scream—and then dear Nelly might be thrown!”

Nelly smiled at the very uncertain prospect which her aunt's fears had conjured up, and was about to expostulate with her, concerning it; but her cousin Nigel at once took advantage of the supposition—in order to get her away from the proximity of Dr. Monkton.

“Well, so she might, mother; and I think we had better move on a little, and come back to you by-and-bye. What do you say, Nelly?”

Nelly was quite agreeable; for the idea of moving on was as grateful to her as to himself; and so they soon left the carriage behind them, and were cantering along the short turf of the Downs together.

“Such a sweet girl, doctor!” exclaimed Mrs. Brooke, as that gentleman resumed his original position at the window; “very simple and timid, and unaccustomed to society, you see, but still such a sweet girl.”

“I am sure of it!” said Dr. Monkton, fervently, “your niece, I believe you said?”

“Yes!—well, that is, my niece by marriage,

but such little distinctions make no difference to me. She is a charming creature—so clever—you can have no idea of the cleverness of that girl—and very much attached to me—very grateful, I may say;” and Mrs. Brooke simpered behind her handkerchief as if the benefits wherewith she had loaded Nelly, were indeed subjects for gratitude.

“Miss Brooke does not live with you?” said Dr. Monkton, enquiringly.

“Well, not at present,” replied the lady, with an air of mystery; “but there is little doubt that she *will* do so; when I am alone again, you know: when my son is—married.”

“Is Mr. Brooke’s marriage then a settled thing?” said Dr. Monkton, with a look of interest proper to the occasion, “may I be allowed to offer my congratulations?”

“Oh, no, Doctor!” exclaimed Mrs. Brooke, flapping her handkerchief at him in playful reproach, “you gentlemen run on much too fast. It is not by any means a settled thing yet, but I think we may confidently say that it *will be*.”

“And then Miss Brooke will live with yourself? She will be a charming companion, I am sure, and have a charming home.”

Mrs. Brooke sighed, and tried to look inte-

resting and benevolent. "Of course there will be great advantages for the dear child, in such an arrangement, but we do not intend even to guess which of us will have most reason to rejoice at the change—we shall be like mother and daughter, and that is all."

"Or like sisters, you should rather say," exclaimed the doctor, gallantly, "I think there are very few people who would not be only too happy, under the circumstances, to exchange places with Miss Brooke."

Meanwhile the cousins were talking together in a very different style.

"Nelly, do you like that man?" Nigel asked abruptly, as soon as they were out of hearing of his mother and Dr. Monkton.

"What, that gentleman who is with aunt?"

"Yes."

"How could I like him, cousin, when I only saw him for a minute?" she asked, with surprise.

"But his appearance, his way of talking?"

"I hardly noticed either; but I don't think I quite like him altogether."

"Do you think you could come to like him?"

"No," she said, blushing.

"Do you want to see him again, Nelly?"

At this question she laughed outright.

“Oh, not at all, Cousin Nigel, I was so glad when you asked me to come away.”

“And so was I, when you consented. The fact is, right or wrong, I hate that fellow, and I think he knows it.”

“Who is he?”

“One of the Hilstone doctors,” replied her cousin, “my mother *must* have a doctor wherever she goes, she is never happy unless she has a finger-ache or a tooth-ache, and some one to walk in every afternoon and ask her how it is going on. She would not let me settle to take the Chase, until she had been introduced to all the doctors in Hilstone, and found if there was one to suit her. And Dr. Monkton is just the sort of man she likes. He knows how to flatter her, and will swallow any amount of flattery in return; so they spend their time in mutually complimenting each other.”

“Is he clever?” asked Nelly.

“I suppose he is, or he would not be an M.D. so soon. I know the Hilstone people think a great deal of him, and he thinks a great deal of himself; but I am glad to say I have had no occasion for his services. Look, Nelly. There is the second couple of dogs off. Lord Ribstone’s ‘Zephyr,’ and Mr. Brown’s

‘Fly.’ What splendid runners! They are neck and neck. We must have a pair of gloves on these. Which will you bet on?”

But Nelly had no pleasure in the sight before her. There was no affectation in the feeling which made her turn her eyes the other way, and refuse to watch the poor hare as it doubled again and again to evade its pursuers, and made frantic leaps in the air in its wild endeavours to escape the doom before it. It was not affectation which caused her to close her eyes and bite her lips to prevent an exclamation of horror bursting from them, as the shrill scream of the captured animal, so like that of an infant, rung upon the air, and the sigh of relief with which she welcomed the announcement that it was all over, was pure and genuine as herself. Nigel Brooke could not fail to remark, that from a burning red, his cousin’s cheeks had turned quite pale; and he asked her if watching the sport was unpleasant to her, and if she would rather go home.

“Oh! would you take me?” she said, quietly. “Are you *sure* you would not mind it, cousin Nigel, and that you won’t think me very foolish; but to tell the truth, it makes me feel quite sick.”

He looked at her as she spoke, with as

much admiration as Dr. Monkton had done, but there was nothing in the gaze of his calm, grey eyes, to call an extra blush into her face.

“We will go at once, Nelly,” he replied, “I am glad you don’t like to watch it, I should have thought less of your kindness of heart if you had ; I hardly know what I was about to bring you here.”

And they turned their horses’ heads towards the spot where they had left Mrs. Brooke’s carriage, with the intention of telling her they were about to leave the Downs. But before they reached it, they were met by Dr. Monkton, who was mounted on his own steed, a showy hunter. As he approached Nelly Brooke, he raised his hat to her.

“Pardon me, Miss Brooke, but I am commissioned by your aunt to tell you that she has already returned home. She found the air so cold, and the time between the matches so prolonged, that she became tired of waiting. She hoped that you and Mr. Brooke would join her at luncheon.”

Nelly made no answer to this address, but looked at her cousin Nigel.

“Thank you,” he said, curtly, “we will do so.”

“Are you returning to the Chase now?”

continued Dr. Monkton, still looking at the young lady.

“I believe so,” she replied.

“Then, perhaps, you will allow me the pleasure of riding by your side so far,” he said, turning his horse’s head, and bringing it alongside of the little grey.

She blushed, and half bowed acquiescence, for she scarcely knew what else to do, although she felt that the proposal was not calculated to please her cousin.

Nigel Brooke reined up his chestnut fiercely on the other side, as though questioning the doctor’s right to accompany them; but as he could think of no possible objection to the arrangement, he could only shew his disapprobation by his silence.

Thus, the conversation on the way was not a lively one, as Nigel took no part in it, and Nelly’s answers were chiefly monosyllabic, and as soon as the gates of the Chase came in view, Dr. Monkton, again raising his hat, galloped off in the direction of Hilstone.

The cousins found Mrs. Brooke rather tired and rather cross from having waited too long for her luncheon, for she was a lady who was easily put out, if anything went wrong in the gastronomic arrangements, so Nigel walked

off again as soon as the meal was over, and did not make his reappearance until the dinner was on the table.

The next afternoon they were all three walking abreast in the garden, when he thus addressed his cousin:—

“Nelly, did you not have a letter from your brother, this morning?”

“Yes,” she replied, with a sudden glow which always rose to her face at the mention of her brother. “Yes, cousin Nigel, and he says grandpapa has not been so well as usual lately, and that if he does not get better soon, he would wish me to return home.” And the girl smiled at the anticipation, even whilst she sighed for the cause. Nigel looked grave.

“I am sorry for that,” he said, “but it is probably only the change in the season which has affected him. Old people generally feel the setting-in of autumn and spring.”

“Oh! my dear, it is most likely nothing at all,” exclaimed her aunt. “Don’t think twice about it, just an old man’s fid-fads; we are not going to lose you any the sooner for that, I can tell you.”

Here Nigel interposed, as though to cover the heartlessness of his mother’s speech.

“Why I mentioned Robert, Nelly, was,

because I wish to make him a present, and to consult you about it. What should you say to a Bath chair, in which he might easily be wheeled about. Would it not enable him to take a great deal more exercise in the open air?"

How the girl's eyes sparkled at the mere idea.

"Oh! cousin, it would be just the thing, it is the very thing we have always longed for. I could wheel Bertie out in it, could I not? He would be able to go with me in all my walks. I could wheel him up to the Farm, or to the vicar's. You don't know how strong I am. Oh! cousin!" and in her gratitude and pleasure, Nelly seized the hand of Nigel Brooke in both her own, and then dropped it as if it had been a hot stone, as the impropriety of the proceeding broke upon her mind.

Mrs. Brooke could not see the girl's delight without some degree of interest; but she thought a present that was to cost forty or fifty guineas was rather too lavish to be expended upon a place like Little Bickton.

"*You* to wheel a gentleman about out of doors, my dear?" she said to Nelly with well acted surprise. "I am afraid that is scarcely the occupation for a young lady.

Has your brother never tried walking on crutches? I should have thought a nice pair of crutches, Nigel, the best thing to send to your poor cousin?"

Nelly's brief enchantment seemed to be dissolving.

"Bertie is so—so—sensitive," she said timidly. "I could hardly explain to you what he feels about himself—but he has always had such a horror of walking about on crutches."

"A horror! my dear? well I call that sinful in any one who has not been blest with the use of his legs. However, here comes the doctor! and we'll just ask him what he thinks about it."

And to the disgust of Nigel—and the dismay of poor little Nelly, who greatly disliked having her brother's affliction spoken of before strangers—Dr. Monkton was really to be seen advancing to meet them on the gravel path.

"Doctor, you have just come in time," exclaimed Mrs. Brooke as he saluted the party, "though what made you guess we should want you this afternoon I can't think."

"Sympathy, my dear Mrs. Brooke, sympathy," replied the handsome doctor, shewing

all his teeth: "but for whom may I be required—not for yourself, I am sure; nor for Miss Brooke, if I may judge from her bloom?" bowing towards Nelly as he spoke.

"Now be quiet, you naughty man," said the lady of the house with infantine vivacity, "you are here, not to pay compliments, but to give us your advice; my niece, here, has a brother: a twin brother, who is greatly afflicted—deformed in fact—"

"Aunt," said Nelly imploringly.

"Well, my dear child, it is the case, and my son wishes—very properly I am sure—to make his poor cousin some sort of a present, a remembrance! didn't you say so, Nigel?"

"Have it your own way, mother," he said, carelessly, but with a look of intense annoyance.

"But we differ slightly as to the species of offering which would be most acceptable—most useful I should rather say—to a cripple. Nigel proposes a wheel chair—but in my opinion, as he has no one to push him about in it, a good pair of crutches would set the young gentleman more at liberty. They make crutches so beautifully now, doctor, don't they?"

"But my brother is not a cripple," said

Nelly boldly, although she felt very much inclined to cry, "he can walk about alone, though not for any distance, and I am afraid he would not use crutches."

"But they would enable him to walk far," persisted Mrs. Brooke. "There was a man, I remember, who—"

"May I enquire the nature of your brother's complaint?" said the doctor, interrupting Mrs. Brooke without any ceremony, and addressing himself to Nelly.

"He was born so," she began in a very low voice, "we are twins; and he was born a weakly baby, and I a strong one. He could not sit upright until he was four or five years old—and he has laid on the sofa half his life since then. His back is very weak—and so is his health altogether, but he is *not* deformed—no more than I am," she concluded indignantly.

"A spinal complaint, I presume? Is there no curvature?" enquired Dr. Monkton with increased interest.

"I suppose there is, but he stoops, so we can hardly tell. If he tries to hold himself upright it hurts him."

"From what Miss Brooke tells you," now interposed Nigel, "you may suppose that an

easy Bath chair would be the most appropriate conveyance for my cousin. He has not as yet possessed one, and in consequence, has taken very little out-door exercise."

"I should think you could scarcely choose anything more useful," replied the doctor, "but perhaps you know that there are several varieties of invalid chairs, some are made expressly for—"

"What, doctor, and don't you approve of crutches then?" came as a last appeal from Mrs. Brooke; but he went on with his sentence.

"Some are made expressly for the convenience of persons suffering from the weakness under which, I conjecture from the account Miss Brooke has favoured me with, her brother labours. It would be a pity, if you decide upon purchasing such an article, that you should not procure the best and easiest of its kind. There are several hand-carriages of the sort you require, now in use at Hilstone, most of which I have myself chosen for my patients, and I shall be most happy to shew them to you whenever you like to come over for that purpose."

"You are very obliging," replied Nigel Brooke, who did not like to receive coldly an offer which was apparently made in good faith.

“Why should you not all drive over together?” continued Dr. Monkton, turning to Mrs. Brooke. “If you and Miss Brooke will only consent to overlook the discrepancies of a bachelor’s establishment, and to take luncheon at my house, I shall be charmed to entertain you there.”

At this, Mrs. Brooke, who had been rather hurt at her favourite’s disregard of her opinions, plucked up her spirits again, and readily agreed to the proposal.

“Why not, indeed! I think it would be delightful, and can answer for Nelly, as well as myself, only you can never call yours a bachelor establishment, doctor, whilst you have your good sister to live with you and look after you.”

Dr. Monkton bowed.

“But just at present,” he said, “my sister happens to be away, and therefore it will really be the meal of an anchorite to which I must invite you—what day may I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you?”

“Will the day after to-morrow suit you?” asked Mrs. Brooke, quite eager for the promised visit.

“Any one day which suits yourself,” he said, “therefore we may consider that a settled

thing," and then the conversation turned upon other subjects, and no more was said about the Bath chair, or Nelly's absent brother.

Nigel Brooke did not half like the prospect of a luncheon under Dr. Monkton's roof, but he could think of no possible objection to raise against it. Nelly never gave the matter a thought after it was once settled; but she could not so easily drive that other old familiar subject out of her loving little heart.

"He is not deformed, is he?" she asked anxiously of Nigel, as soon as they found themselves alone again.

"Deformed!—who?—Bertie?—of course not!" exclaimed her cousin, starting out of a reverie, "but I say, Nelly, do you care much about going to this luncheon at Hilstone?"

CHAPTER XII.

NELLY AND NIGEL HAVE OCCASION TO "MAKE IT UP AGAIN."

BUT whether Nelly cared, or did not care, or Nigel approved or did not approve, made no alteration in the fact that the plan of the luncheon was a settled thing, for Mrs. Brooke had decided that it should be so, and when she had set her heart upon an object she was apt to make it disagreeable for such as did not readily adopt the same views concerning it as herself.

Yet, notwithstanding that she had encountered no opposition to her wishes in the present case, she was not in her best humour on the day she had engaged that they should visit Dr. Monkton at Hilstone. And the circumstance which had had the power to ruffle her temper was a very slight one. On the morning in question, she had been lavishly praising her niece, as was her wont at that period, in the apparently dull ear of her son. He had

listened patiently to a lengthy tirade on Nelly's abilities and tact, from his mother, wondering to himself the while how much longer her enthusiasm on the subject would last, when he was roused by Mrs. Brooke giving an impatient stamp with her foot as she exclaimed :

“ Really, Nigel ! you are beyond all bearing. Here have I been telling you that this sweet creature is of the greatest comfort and use possible to me, and that I want you to bestir yourself and make some arrangement for her living here altogether, and you sit with your eyes on the ground as if you did not hear a word I said, and look almost as interested as if I had been speaking of a cookmaid. I really don't believe you ever give a thought to your cousin or me, or any one but yourself !”

The injustice of the accusation stung Nigel Brooke into answering with greater warmth than he would otherwise have done.

“ You are quite mistaken, mother,” he said quickly, “ if you imagine that I am blind to Nelly's merits, or rate her virtues any lower than you do. Perhaps it were better for me if I did. But I simply think she is one of the most charming and loveable little crea-

tures I ever came across, and that she is far too good to become a mere companion to you or anyone. I hope we shall live to see her happily married, and above the necessity of earning her bread in that capacity or any other." And without waiting for an answer, Nigel Brooke had hastily left the room.

His reply had taken his mother completely by surprise. That *she* should praise her niece to him, however extravagantly, was nothing, in her own opinion, but that her son should so fully and openly acquiesce in all she said, was quite a different thing.

And she felt it the more because she could not reasonably find fault with it even to herself. She had invited, nay, urged Nigel to join her in pronouncing a verdict upon his cousin, and his ideas had merely corresponded with those which she professed to hold. He may have agreed simply from a desire to please her, and yet the remembrance of his kindling eye and energetic manner seemed to deny the supposition. She could not forget also that he had called Nelly "the most charming and loveable creature" he had ever come across, and that sentence alone was sufficient to rouse Mrs. Brooke's jealous temper for the rest of the day.

So that the drive to Hilstone was not a very lively one, and Nelly feared that her aunt could not be feeling well, she was so unusually silent and undemonstrative.

Hilstone was a "city built on a hill, which could not be hid," but it was approached from Orpington on its highest side, so that Nelly had thought, when she first drove down its principal street, that it was almost as perilous a descent as that of one of her own Kentish hills. It was a very old town, with intricate thoroughfares, and many of the upper stories of the shops and houses projected so far beyond the houses that they darkened the street and suggested the unpleasant idea to a stranger that they were about to tumble over. Sometimes the pavements were so narrow that two persons could not walk abreast on them, and more than once the carriage left daylight behind it altogether as it passed through an archway formed by connected buildings.

Nigel spoke to his cousin of everything they passed which he thought might interest her, because his mother lay back on the other side of the carriage with her eyes shut, and refused to make any remark of her own accord. But soon after they had entered the town, they turned into the street in which Dr. Monkton

lived. All the streets in Hilstone were named after old saints, and this one was called St. Bartholomew's. It was so narrow that two vehicles meeting there, could not have passed each other; and when after skirting a dead wall, the carriage finally stopped before the front of a tall red-brick house, which stood on the pavement, and had all its windows closed with shutters, Nelly thought that she had never seen a dwelling before which looked so cheerless and uninviting. But the outside of Dr. Monkton's house was only a proof of the old saying, that "appearances are deceitful." As soon as the wheels were heard to stop, the door with its quaint knocker and handle was thrown open, and there stood their host, bowing and smiling in a hall which for size and decorations might have vied with that of the Chase.

Mrs. Brooke recovered her equanimity at once; she skipped down the carriage-steps and into the house like a girl, and immediately fell into raptures with everything she saw there. As soon as Nelly, followed by her cousin, had joined her aunt, Dr. Monkton led them through the hall into the dining-room, where luncheon was already spread, and which opened with glass doors on to the lawn

of a garden such as is seldom seen in the midst of any town but a cathedral one. A grassy lawn, bright, smooth, and even as it could be, surrounded by a wall of fifteen or sixteen feet in height and completely covered with ivy. Three or four ancient walnut and mulberry trees stood at various intervals about the grass; and everything was so solemn and so still, the place seemed so shut in from the outside bustle of traffic, that the few gay geraniums and other flowers which brightened it, appeared almost out of place, like knots of coloured ribbon on the serge dress of a nun.

“It is like a church,” said Nelly, as she stepped outside the dining-room window and stood on the gravelled terrace, and listened to the cawing of the rooks in the cathedral yard; “it is all so quiet—it almost makes me hold my breath: I feel as if I were in the garden of a cloister.”

“And so you are, Miss Brooke,” exclaimed the doctor, who had heard the remark, “or rather, in what was so! My place was not exactly a nunnery, but it was a sort of dower-house for the aged and infirm nuns who had become past their work.”

“What a number of them must have died here,” said Nelly; “I should always fancy I

saw their ghosts flitting about in the moonlight."

"What absurd nonsense you do talk, child!" said Mrs. Brooke, testily. "I am sure there is nothing about Dr. Monkton's house to remind one of anything so unpleasant. You quite give me the shivers with your fancies."

"Let us go into the dining-room, my dear madam," interposed the doctor, gaily, "and see if luncheon cannot dispel them. Miss Brooke is not the only person who has pronounced my house gloomy on a first acquaintance; but I cannot permit it to be thought so to-day, at any rate. It is a festival for a lonely bachelor when two such ladies as yourselves condescend to grace my humble board," and conducting his guests to the table, he set them down to a capital repast, at which they were waited upon by two men servants. Dr. Monkton always chose to speak disparagingly of himself and his belongings, but in reality, he was remarkably well off, had an excellent practice, a comfortably furnished house, and everything about him conducted in good style. The only thing required to complete his establishment was a wife; but as he was known to be on the look-out for one, it was supposed that the

deficiency would before long be supplied, and meanwhile it afforded an immense deal of innocent excitement to the young ladies of Hilstone.

But although the luncheon was excellent, it did not soothe the troubled spirit of Mrs. Brooke as it should have done; for as soon as the doctor was satisfied that her temporal wants had been attended to, he devoted himself to her niece, and the fact that Nelly did not seem to appreciate his attentions, was no alleviation to her aunt's sense of neglect. Dr. Monkton had to speak more than once before he could recall the girl's wandering thoughts to the dainties which he placed before her: her eyes were oftener fixed upon the paintings with which the walls of the room were adorned, than on the face of her host: and her mind occupied with the luxurious couches and arm chairs which furnished it, than with the topics which he urged on her consideration.

But before the meal was ended, Dr. Monkton by chance hit upon the magnet which should hold the attention of his young guest. He was speaking of the carving of a little frame which had attracted her notice.

"It is the work," he said, "of a young man who has lost the use of his legs. By-the-bye,

Miss Brooke, has your brother a fancy for any employment of the sort?"

She turned towards him directly, and began to speak of Bertie, and what he did, and did not do, and how distasteful occupation appeared to be to him, on account of his weak health, his sister fondly surmised. The doctor took advantage of the point he had thus gained. He commenced to speak earnestly to her on the subject of her brother's affliction, told her of similar cases in which he had seen the sufferers completely restored: asked whether galvanism had yet been tried with him, or chemical baths, or several other means, by which he said that spinal disease had been arrested or cured. Nelly became excited on the subject, to her of greater interest than any other in the world: she talked faster and better than either her aunt or her cousin had heard her do before: she gave Dr. Monkton every particular she could think of, her eyes danced and her cheeks grew rosy, and her mouth was wreathed with smiles, as he answered almost everything she told him with the renewed assurance that he saw no reason that her brother should not eventually be restored to health.

"Time will be needed of course," he said,

“and all the more because the attempt has been delayed, but I should have no doubt myself of the ultimate issue. I wish I had him here,” he added, leaning back in his chair, and slapping his hand upon his knee. “What advice has he had did you say, Miss Brooke?”

Then she repeated the name of the old village doctor, who was not bound by the parish to visit Little Bickton more than twice a week, unless he were urgently summoned, and to whom alone had the sight of poor Bertie’s crooked back ever been submitted.

Dr. Monkton was too politic to make any remark upon what he heard: he did not even shake his head, but he reiterated his wish to have Mr. Robert Brooke under his own care, which after all was saying as much as he could. But this animated conversation between the doctor and Nelly did not appear to possess much interest for either Nigel Brooke or his mother. The latter fidgeted about on her chair, and coughed audibly, and leant her elbow on the table, and looked up at the ceiling or anywhere in order to shew that she was bored.

Nigel pursued a different course. He was only too eager to watch the interchange of looks which was going on between

his cousin and their host ; it did not bore him, but it made him angry. He chose to mistake Nelly's bright flashing eyes, and glowing cheeks, which his reason might have told him only flashed and glowed for Bertie, for the signs of an incipient flirtation ; for a flirtation with the doctor, with the man he so much disliked, and a mixed feeling of jealousy and malice made him interrupt her once, when she was describing her brother's lassitude, to say :—

“ I think you can hardly attribute all Robert's helplessness to his ill-health, Nelly. You should tell the doctor that he refuses to do even what he can.”

“ But in cases of this sort,” remarked Dr. Monkton blandly, “ the patient is often oppressed with a sense of such perfect incapability, that it almost amounts to the possession.”

“ That may be,” replied Nigel Brooke ; “ but it is not the case with my cousin. He is able to undergo slight exertion, and he knows it, but his disposition is naturally indolent, and the best thing that could happen to him in my opinion would be to be *forced* to do things for himself. You must not believe quite all that Miss Brooke tells you of him.”

Nelly looked at her cousin in surprise. Hitherto, he had always spoken so kindly, so affectionately of Bertie, that she could hardly believe that the words she had heard had fallen from his lips. But there was no mistake about it. Nigel was looking more sternly at her than she had ever seen him look before, and his mother was smiling furtively as though to second his opinion.

For the first time, the little country girl dared to feel angry with them both: she turned away quickly, and re-directed her attention to her host, whilst he, perceiving that her cousin's remark had not pleased her, hastened to deny his belief in it.

“It requires a professional knowledge of such complaints, Mr. Brooke, to be qualified to pass an opinion on them. No one but a medical man can be prepared to judge how far the brain and capability of action may be affected by such a weakness as Mr. Robert Brooke suffers from. However, as we appear to have finished luncheon, I propose, if agreeable to all parties, that we take a little stroll round my premises, when I shall be able to shew you one or two specimens of the wheeled chairs to which you alluded during my last visit to the Chase.”

He rose as he spoke, and conducted his guests into the garden, where he exhibited all his floral treasures to them, as well as the invalid carriages which they had expressly come to see. Nigel Brooke and Dr. Monkton spoke further together concerning the convenience of this, or the lightness or durability of that make; but all that they said was uttered in a very business-like and formal manner, whilst Nelly and her aunt lingering behind or beside them, never exchanged so much as a single word. The girl was brooding, not sullenly, but with deep pain, on the careless way in which her cousin Nigel had spoken of her beloved brother; and the elder lady was reflecting on the terms her son had used concerning her niece, that morning; and what he could possibly have meant by them. As soon as the gentlemen had said all they had to say to one another, Dr. Monkton returned with his old assiduity to Nelly's side, and she almost welcomed him there. He was the only one who had made excuses for Bertie's foibles: the only one who could trace his faults, as she did, to his inherent weakness. Besides, he had suggested the hope that her brother might even now be cured; and Nigel—cousin Nigel, whom she had begun to look upon as so dear

a friend, had treated the idea with indifference; had even seemed as though it were distasteful to him. Nelly's eyes grew dim with unshed tears, as this latter thought struck her mind, and brought keen disappointment with it. Even then she would have gratefully returned to her old faith had her cousin showed the least sign that he regretted what he had said. But Nigel Brooke, on the contrary, held quite aloof from Nelly during the rest of the afternoon, permitting Dr. Monkton to monopolize her attention, whilst the few syllables which he uttered were solely addressed to his mother, and he took an early opportunity to suggest that it was time they returned to the Chase. Mrs. Brooke was not unwilling to gratify her son; she also had been disappointed of her day of pleasure, and welcomed the prospect of its close. The drive back to Orpington was even less lively than the one from it had been. The elder lady appeared still more gloomy and dissatisfied than she had been in the morning. Nigel Brooke preferred to return on the box of the carriage, and Nelly was silent and utterly miserable, though she could hardly say why. She could hardly define which of the day's incidents had so greatly disappointed her; everything had

happened just as she had anticipated, and the hope which Dr. Monkton had communicated to her respecting her brother, should have raised rather than depressed her spirits. And yet she sat crouched in her corner of the carriage, only longing for the hour of bedtime, and still more for the day when she should return to Little Bickton and try to forget her visit to Orpington, and everything connected with it.

After such an afternoon, and with such companions, dinner could be nothing but a solemn ceremonial, and the quiet evening which followed it something worse. Nelly would have given anything to be able to creep away in silence to her bed, but she was still too shy to suggest anything so opposed to the ordinary routine of the Chase, so she sat still, busied with some work for her aunt, and sighing over her disappointment the while. At last, however, the legitimate hour arrived, and she rose to bid Mrs. Brooke "Good night." Usually the latter preceded her along the corridors, but on this occasion she presented her cheek to Nelly in ominous silence, and let her go.

Nigel was out of the room at the time, and Nelly was congratulating herself that she should escape a second formal leave-taking,

when, as she placed her foot upon the upper corridor, she met him about to descend.

“Where are you going to, Nelly?” he inquired.

“Bed!” she said, laconically.

“Already! is it so late as that?” and he looked at his watch. “Just ten o’clock! well, you have lost no time—where is my mother?”

“Down-stairs in the drawing-room. Good night, cousin Nigel!” and Nelly essayed to pass on.

“Stop a moment, Nelly—are you in so great a hurry? Or are you ill?” as he caught a fuller view of her face.

“I am not ill, thank you; I am only tired,” she replied.

“Tired; what not with that fascinating doctor’s talk, I hope. I think it would take a great deal of that to tire you, Nelly?”

“You know nothing about it!”

“You appeared wonderfully pleased with it, to-day, any way.”

“Did I, cousin? It is more than I was with everyone’s!” she answered with a flash of spirit.

“I could have told you that—only it is not generally considered polite to neglect one’s friends for a stranger.”

“I was not aware that I had neglected anybody.”

“You gave no one else a chance to say a word to you.”

“You had a chance, cousin, and good use you made of it; speaking against my poor Bertie.” She moved on a little further as she said this, for the tears had risen to her eyes, and she did not wish him to see them. But he followed her until she stopped before her own bed-room door.

“Nelly! don’t be angry with me! I didn’t mean to vex you, but the truth is, I cannot stand the impertinence of that fellow Monkton, and it drove me mad to see him monopolise you so. As for speaking against poor dear Robert, you know I am almost as anxious to serve him as you are. Make it up again, dear child—will you not? Remember what an old fellow I am, almost old enough to be your father, and don’t be hard upon me!”

She was only too glad; too thankful to make it up. She had a lighted candle in one hand, but she placed the other confidingly in his, and shewed him a countenance which was bright as ever, under the influence of his words. At the same time, another figure had

appeared at the further end of the corridor, and stopped on perceiving them.

“You old enough to be my father, cousin Nigel! Oh! what nonsense!”

The girlish surprise which accompanied this remark was better calculated to soothe his ruffled feelings than any tribute to his worth or intellect could have been, and as he answered it, his face became almost as radiant as her own.

“But it is true, Nelly, nevertheless—I am so much older than you are, that you must forgive me if I do not always make myself so agreeable to you as a younger fellow might do.”

“I should not like you younger, cousin Nigel!” she said, ingenuously.

“Ah! I am all very well as a guardian or an adviser, but what would you say if a man as old as I am were to ask you to be his wife, Nelly, eh?”

The words were playful, but the tone was so earnest, that it belied the words, and as he waited for her answer, his breath came short and quick.

But he waited in vain; Nelly made no reply, unless the blood which mounted to the very parting of her hair, could be taken for one.

“You would tell him to go about his busi-

ness, and look out for a woman of twice your age, wouldn't you, Nelly?" he urged.

"I don't know," she said slowly.

"Well, good-night, my little cousin, then; go to bed and dream of your answer."

"Good-night, Cousin Nigel!"

He took her hand again, and then the impulse seemed irresistible; he stooped down and kissed the innocent face which she had turned towards him.

It was the first kiss that any man, except her brother and grandfather, had presumed to offer her since her childhood. Nelly lingered a moment from sheer surprise, and then, without a word, darted into her room, and closed the door behind her.

Nigel Brooke just ejaculated her name, as if it were an entreaty for pardon, and then saying to himself "God bless her!" turned to retrace his steps.

Advancing to meet him, with an air of indescribable injury, he beheld his mother!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WIND SHIFTS ROUND TO THE ORIGINAL QUARTER.

MIDWAY in the corridor they encountered one another. Mrs. Brooke's spare figure was shaking with her rage, and her sallow complexion looked livid by the light which she carried. Her son at once guessed the reason of her perturbation, but he refused to appear to notice it.

"*Well!* Mr. Brooke!" she ejaculated, with trembling lips.

"Well, Mrs. Brooke!" he repeated, professing to take her words in jest, "I suppose you are going to bed?"

"I am going into my *bed-room*," she replied sternly, "where I request you will give me a few minutes' conversation."

Nigel smiled grimly, and shrugged his shoulders, but he followed her, nevertheless.

The bed-room was well lighted and warmed, and Prout, the lady's maid, was in attendance.

But Mrs. Brooke dismissed her at once with an order to wait until the bell should recall her. The woman noticed the dark look of her mistress, and the haughty bearing of her master, and departed to inform her fellow servants that they were going to have a "row" in the house, as sure as her name was Prout. As soon as she was gone, Mrs. Brooke threw herself into a chair, and cast her piercing eyes upon her son, who remained standing, leaning with one arm upon the mantlepiece.

"Pray what is the meaning of all this?" she at length demanded, finding that Nigel would not be the first to speak.

"Of all what?" he repeated. "I have followed you here, mother, at your own request, but you can scarcely expect me to provide the conversation as well as the company. Please to be more explicit."

His coolness irritated her.

"You know what I mean as well as I do," she said. "I wish to learn what is the meaning of the endearment which I have just seen pass between your cousin and yourself?"

"The *meaning!*" said Nigel, with a smile. "Well, I suppose the meaning is that Nelly has a sweet little face, and I kissed it. Nothing so wonderful in that, is there? We are

cousins, after all ; and it is rather hard upon a man if he cannot sometimes take a kiss from a pretty girl without being brought to book about it. It's what everyone does who has the chance."

"But are you like 'everyone' in this respect, Nigel? Tell me that," said his mother. "I have known you as long as anybody, I suppose, and it is the last thing I should have expected of you. Are you a 'kissing' man? are you one of those who will run after any woman, be she barmaid, chambermaid, or lady, so long as she has a face which happens to coincide with your idea of what is pretty?"

"No! indeed! I hope not," replied her son, laughing. "I have never been accused of being catholic in my attachments yet, and I am afraid it is too late to begin now, even had I the wish to do so."

"Then, if such is your true opinion," rejoined Mrs. Brooke, with renewed asperity; "what, I again ask, is the meaning of the kiss which I saw you give your cousin Helena? On your own confession, such an act from you means more than it would from another man."

"You are putting very home questions, mother," replied Nigel gravely, "and such as I should be quite justified in refusing to

answer, and you are, moreover, if I mistake not, doing the worst thing you can for your cause. You are forcing me to search my heart for the solution of a question which otherwise I might have been content to leave unanswered altogether. What, if after self-examination, I should tell you that the feeling which prompted me to kiss Nelly when I wished her good-night, is likely to prove a stronger one than I had yet given it credit for?"

"I should say you were a fool!" exclaimed Mrs. Brooke, quickly.

"Thank you," was the quiet reply.

"I should say you were mad, Nigel—idiotic—insane. It would be the act of a madman to permit yourself to fall in love with a girl whom you can never marry."

"And why not? I am independent, I believe, and my own master!" At these words Mrs. Brooke's jaw dropped, as if she had been suddenly smitten with paralysis.

"Why—should you—not marry—Helena Brooke? Good Heavens! you must be mad already to ask the question. Have you forgotten her birth, her parentage, everything connected with the misfortune of her being?"

"I have forgotten nothing, I wish I had.

Not her birth, or her parentage, they are atoms in the scale ; but the miserable fact as yet unknown to her, that my father caused the death of hers."

"Atoms in the scale!" repeated Mrs. Brooke, who always tried to emphasize her arguments by echoing her opponent's words. "Those are what you call 'atoms,' are they? You, who might marry anybody, who have a right to expect blood and beauty and intellect in exchange for the noble fortune your poor dear father left you! to think of throwing yourself away upon a girl from the country, uneducated, unrefined, and——"

"Hush, mother," said Nigel Brooke, firmly, "take my advice, and do not say a word of Nelly that you may have reason hereafter to repent. As to the want of formation in her character, and education in her herself, I think it is not many days since I heard you affirm, that her natural cleverness more than atoned for all deficiencies of that sort. Her beauty is undeniable, at all events in my eyes; and her blood is the same as my own."

"It is *not* the same as your own," commenced his mother. "*I* brought no taint of shame with me to——"

"I choose to consider it so," said her son,

coolly interrupting her, "and could my cousin be induced to accept me for her husband, it would prove no obstacle to our marriage. But I greatly fear, that not only have her thoughts never turned in that direction, but that I am far too old to succeed in guiding them there. Nelly is a child compared to me."

"Of course she is," replied Mrs. Brooke, only too glad to take up another line of reasoning, "why she is young enough to be your daughter. You will be thirty-six on your next birthday, and she is just turned seventeen. The mere idea is preposterous!"

Nigel smiled again, almost contemptuously.

"I was thirty-five last month, mother, and Nelly was eighteen a short time previously, though it certainly makes little difference to our argument. I *am* too old for her, there is no doubt of that."

"Seventeen years between you," said his mother, in a voice of ridicule, "a well-assorted pair truly. Why you would be an old man, whilst she was still a young woman, with all the idlers of her acquaintance dangling after her. An enviable position to be placed in, certainly."

"I should not be afraid of that," he returned, warmly, "if Nelly accepted me of her

own free will, she would be as staunch and true as myself. If perfect sincerity is not written upon her face, the world does not contain it. But I would not take the promise of any woman, unless I thought the happiness of her life depended on it, and I have no hope that I should be able to make that of so young and innocent a creature. Were I to ask her she would only refuse me, and then I should have broken up the sweet friendship which I may hope to claim from her now," and Nigel Brooke sighed, for he had come to think, during the last half hour, that to be friends with his cousin Nelly, was not enough to satisfy him.

"Oh, dear! if you are bent upon the matter, I don't think you need in the least fear a refusal," sneered his mother, from her arm-chair. "I have no doubt Miss Helena would be ready enough to take you for the sake of your money alone, and you could scarcely expect a girl of that age to marry you for anything else. It would be a fair barter, you know; youth and (what you consider) beauty on one side, and a good establishment on the other; 'exchange is no robbery;' and I have little doubt but that her brother, and even her amiable old grandfather, who is too proud to

eat a dinner at your expense, would be the first to urge her not to neglect so eligible an opportunity of settling herself. Why, the girl's fortune would be made by it; she would be a fool indeed to refuse such an offer only on account of the vast difference in your ages, when she may reasonably hope to outlive you and marry a second time. She would never be so absurd," and Mrs. Brooke leant back in her chair, and affected to laugh heartily at the mere notion of such a contingency.

Nigel bit his lips until the blood started to the surface. His mother (and she knew it well) could not have chosen a better method to turn him from his contemplated purpose, than impressing on him the idea, that in the event of Nelly accepting him as a husband, he could never feel quite sure whether she had done so for himself or for his money. He could not believe that the reasoning which Mrs. Brooke had used, held good with respect to his cousin; he could not think, but that, were he so bold as to ask her if she loved him, he must be able to read the truth in her eyes—and yet—he knew that women were born actresses, that the most simple of their sex were able, on occasions, effectually to hide their feelings; and that wealth, and all the

luxuries which wealth brings with it, were a great temptation to the poor. And as he remembered this, his spirit fell, and he almost wished his money bags were at the bottom of the sea.

Mrs. Brooke perceived the change that was taking place in his feelings; he was viewing the prospect of such a marriage in a new light, the light she had placed before him, and she rejoiced at her success. It did seem to strike her, although the fact had not escaped the notice of her son, that, in her anxiety to prove to him the absurdity of his present wishes, she had advanced as evidence, a reason exactly opposite to that which, but a few days before, she had tried to instil into his mind. Yet, in this she was not unlike many female casuists who are not, on the whole, remarkable for the perspicuity of their arguments.

“Well, my dear, I hope you are thinking better of it,” she said, more amiably, after a pause, during which Nigel had remained with his head leaning on his hand, gazing thoughtfully into the fire.

“Thinking better of what,” he said, rousing himself, “of the probability of Nelly ever growing to love me? No, I am thinking worse of it, thanks to your suggestions.”

“You will think still worse of it if you do not act upon them, Nigel,” was the reply.

“I should like to ask, in my turn,” he said, looking his mother full in the face, “what has happened to alter so entirely your opinion of my cousin. Ever since she has been under this roof, you have done little else than assail me with stories of her incredible talent, usefulness, and sweetness of disposition. Two days ago, she was, in every respect, so charming, that you were quite upset because I could not immediately write to ask my grandfather to permit her to take up her permanent abode with you; to-day, when an opportunity presents itself, by which you might legitimately keep her always by your side, you cannot find terms sufficiently strong in which to couch your disapprobation of a closer connection with her. What does it mean? What has Nelly done? or in what respect is she different from what she was the day before yesterday? Can you answer me that?”

Mrs. Brooke's faded cheeks grew quite rosy under the fixed gaze with which her son now regarded her; she saw that she had got into a difficulty from which she could scarcely be extricated with credit to herself; and it was unpleasant to have those searching grey eyes

of Nigel's bent so scrutinisingly upon her features whilst she was thinking of a good reason to give him for the change which her sentiments had undergone. But the case was a hopeless one, and she was compelled to be contented with telling the truth.

"She has done nothing particular, that I know of, Nigel, except that I scarcely approved of the very forward manner in which she went on with the doctor this afternoon, but that is not, perhaps, to the point. She is a very good girl in many respects, very useful and obliging, and so on ; but she is anything but what I should have expected my son to choose for a wife."

"In fact, the poor child would make a very good companion for yourself, a species of slave to fetch and carry, and be bullied whenever you had no one else to vent your temper on ; but she is not good enough, with all her clever and affectionate and guileless disposition, for me to love, and cherish, and protect from all tyranny. She would be too independent, in such a position, to please you or serve your purposes."

Mrs. Brooke's quick temper could not stand the tone of sarcasm with which these words

were uttered ; she fired up again, and spoke as angrily as she had done at first.

“ I decline to argue with you any more on the subject. I am not qualified to refute coarseness, or untruth.”

“ So be it,” said her son carelessly, changing his position as if to leave the room. “ I was not the one to commence the argument, please to remember.”

“ And you will please to remember on your part,” she retorted fiercely, “ that I totally decline to lend my countenance to the continuance of any such familiarities as I witnessed this evening between your cousin and yourself. If you choose to fly in my face ; to refuse to give up the absurd notion you appear to have conceived ; or to permit Helena Brooke to return to her proper home and associates, I shall leave the house, and then you will be compelled to part with her.”

“ Not for long, though, unless by her own desire,” returned her son, with eyes which flashed almost as much as her own. “ Don’t you try any tricks of that kind, mother, unless you wish to see me married, and my house closed against you as a home within the next month.”

“Then will you promise to give up making love to this girl?”

“I will promise nothing! I shall do just as I think fit,” replied Nigel Brooke haughtily.

“You defy me, Nigel!” exclaimed his mother.

“Not at all, mother! but I claim at thirty-five to act on my own responsibility, and particularly in a matter of this kind. You have driven me to speak my mind to you, so you may as well understand at once, that from this night the conduct I may pursue towards my cousin Helena will be regulated solely by her own wishes.”

And without further parley he left the bedroom. Mrs. Brooke looked after him for a moment, and then burst into tears.

She had been defeated. She knew that whether her son proposed to Nelly or not, thenceforth her own reign in Nigel's house was over.

CHAPTER XIV.

“WHAT COULD HE MEAN BY IT?”

BUT meanwhile, what interpretation did Nelly put upon the kiss which she had so unexpectedly received? The rest of the poor little country girl was sadly disturbed by it. At first she had felt nothing but astonishment at the liberty which had been taken with her: then remembering her own age and that of her cousin, she grew terribly ashamed of the proceeding as she questioned what Nigel himself would think of her for having permitted him to embrace her so quietly: but when the latter feeling had had time to subside, and her cheeks had somewhat cooled down, under the consoling thought that she could not possibly have prevented it, she began to wonder what on earth could have made him dream of doing such a thing!

What could he mean by it?—he had said he was old enough to be her father, but he had no right on that account (so Nelly argued

with herself) to treat her like a child. But next, the doubt, whether, after all, it *was* treating her "like a child" crept into the girl's heart, and freshly suffused her cheeks with crimson.

Some may say it was a great deal of fuss to make about a very slight thing, and had Nelly Brooke been reared in a town, or lived twenty years later, she might not have thought so much about taking a kiss from her cousin. But it has been mentioned before, that from her childhood until that time, no man except her grandfather or brother had ever offered to do more than shake hands with her, and the strangeness of the proceeding startled her almost as much as the proceeding itself. She did not conceive it possible that her sex could ever give or accept kisses without bestowing a second thought upon the action. To her, it bore far too deep a significance for that. For a woman—a real grown-up woman—to accept such an attention from a man without remonstrance—appeared in Nelly's unsophisticated eyes almost like confessing that she cared for him. And why on his part should a man offer such a tribute to any girl on whom he had no natural claim, unless he wished to tell her that she was dear to him?

These questions puzzled the simple little heart, and wearied the unphilosophical brain, long after both should have been hushed to rest beneath the influence of sleep. It was not often that Nelly's healthy vitality refused to submit itself to nature's nurse, but in the present instance it was many hours before she could compose herself, and with the first beams of the morning she was wide awake again, with that tormenting question still rapping at her heart;—" *What* could cousin Nigel have meant by it?"

Had cousin Nigel himself been appealed to in the matter at the time of its occurrence, he would probably have answered, that he didn't know; but the interview he had subsequently had with his mother had considerably altered his feelings concerning it. Her searching questions and premature opposition, had acted as a forcing-glass to his budding affection, and what over night had appeared but as the tenderest of plants, was a full grown tree in the morning. He also had lain awake, thinking over each trait which he had observed in Nelly's character, during the four weeks of their acquaintance; of the unselfishness, the candour, and the generosity of her disposition; and had arrived at the conclusion that if he

could really win such a loving, innocent heart for himself, he would be the very luckiest of men. Not that he had forgotten or overlooked the horrible suggestions which his mother had made relative to the great attraction he possessed in his fortune; but Nigel Brooke was a sensible man; he was not one to be deceived, or blinded, or led completely astray, by the assertions of anyone. He could see that his mother's surmises might have some truth in them; but he determined that he would himself be the judge of his cousin's motives, by her actions. A woman who cared only for the wealth of the man she consented to marry, might conceal her real feelings, and feign affection for him so long as he did not put the question openly to her; but there were few faces so brazen, Nigel fancied—and Nelly's certainly was not one of them—that they would permit their owners to tell a direct falsehood on so important a subject, and not betray themselves. So he resolved that Nelly should decide the matter; and he would regulate his own actions by her future conduct towards him.

But though he had settled all this very comfortably with himself, and though he was thirty-five years of age instead of eighteen,

Nigel Brooke did not feel much more brave at the idea of facing his little cousin at the breakfast table that morning, than she did at that of meeting him.

Whilst Nelly was blushing at her own reflection in the looking-glass, and failing at least half a dozen times in dressing her hair to her satisfaction, as she wondered what cousin Nigel would say when he first saw her, or whether he would remind her by his looks of the dreadful thing which had happened overnight—he was recklessly casting aside collar after collar, which he had spoilt by attempting to fasten with his hot nervous hands, whilst he hoped, by Jove! he hadn't frightened the dear little girl by what he had done, and wished, by George! that he had thought of asking her permission first.

Meanwhile Mrs. Brooke, who appeared at that time to be the one of the three who most needed pity, lay in her bed and refused to rise at all, declaring she was ill. She was very apt to be taken ill when she was in a bad temper, and to keep all the curtains drawn and her face from the light, and to refuse to speak to anyone. This ruse of hers was rather a convenient one for her friends, and it would be a happy thing for all families, if their ill-

tempered members would follow her example, and make a point of retiring to their rooms directly they found a fit coming on.

So Mrs. Brooke, smothered in bed-clothes, and sulky as she could be, ordered buttered toast and tea into her own apartment, and sent a message to her son, to the effect that she was too unwell to appear at the breakfast-table; a piece of news which he was sufficiently unfilial to be rather glad to receive than otherwise.

The first morning-bell had sounded, and Nelly, who had just commenced to pull down her hair again, hastily stuck in the remaining hair-pins, and knew that, right or wrong, it must remain as it was, for she had still to complete her dressing; and her aunt Eliza, although very unpunctual herself, was extremely particular that no one else in the house should be so.

At that moment, Pinner's tap sounded at her door.

"Come in!" cried Nelly, and the woman entered with a letter in her hand.

"Just come for you, Miss, by the morning's post. Let me fasten up your dress whilst you open it."

Pinner had become very attentive, not to

say servile, in her behaviour towards Nelly lately; but it is not to be supposed that the favour in which the young lady appeared to be with Mrs. Brooke, and the prospect of her soon quitting the Chase and leaving half-crowns behind her, had anything to do with the change.

“Thank you!” said Nelly, taking advantage of the servant’s offer.

The letter was from Bertie, and she was more anxious to read it than usual, because she had expected to receive it the morning before. As she glanced down the sheet of paper, she was surprised at its brevity; but by the time she had mastered its contents she was both surprised and miserable. It ran thus:—

“MY DEAREST NELLY,

“You must return home *at once*; my grandfather is no better, and nurse Aggie cannot attend to both of us. Start as soon as you receive this letter, and come *alone*; remember you are not to accept the escort of Nigel Brooke, or any other Brooke. Had I known half what I do now, about them, you should never have entered their house.

“Your affectionate brother,

“BERTIE.”

And then he seemed to have thought better of sending her so curt and unsatisfactory a letter, for he had added a postscript to say :

“Don’t worry yourself about what I have written, and don’t tell anybody about this letter; it is nothing concerning you, and you shall know all when we meet. But do not lose an hour after you receive this. You will travel home very well, the same way you went; and when you arrive at Reddington, if there is no fly to be seen at the station, go to the George Inn and tell them to turn out theirs for you.”

Nelly read the short epistle over and over again, but she could make nothing of it excepting that Bertie had heard something dreadful of her aunt and cousin, and was very angry about it.

But what could he have heard ?

Pinner reminded her that the second bell had rung, but her head was swimming with the shock and surprise, and even her aunt’s probable anger seemed to dwindle into a thing of no consequence beside it.

“Aren’t you well, Miss ?” enquired the maid, as Nelly with scared and puzzled features sat down upon the bed.

“ I feel rather giddy, Pinner. I think the morning must be close. Please open the window and leave me alone for a minute, and I shall soon be able to go down stairs.”

When she was by herself she took her brother's letter from the envelope, and read it over again. “ Had I known half what I do about them, you should never have entered their house.” What could Bertie have heard, and who could have told him? Surely, no one had been so cruel as to set him against cousin Nigel, who had been so kind and generous to her and him!

And then the girl turned sick with the sudden but absurd fancy that in some miraculous way her brother had come to the knowledge of what had passed between Nigel and herself the night before, and smiled at her own folly before the sickly feeling had died away. Yet what could it be? and how was she, when the news of her sudden departure had been broken to her aunt and cousin, effectually to reject the offers of assistance by which she felt sure it would be followed, without betraying the reason for her refusal? She felt so frightened at the mere idea of the task before her, that had Nigel not waited for her appearance, breakfast would have been half over before

she descended to the breakfast-room; and still she had not learned her lesson. Yet she did not dream either of betraying her brother's confidence, or neglecting to comply with his wishes, for from their infancy Bertie, though in a loving way, had been her tyrant and ruler, and as she had come to Orpington obediently at his command, she would leave it in like manner.

Nigel Brooke, who, on finding that Nelly was so unusually late in making her appearance, had attributed her unpunctuality to a distaste to meeting him again, was still walking up and down the room when she entered it, looking out of the windows and into the fireplace, and wishing he had been shot before he had scared her with his impetuosity. But there was something besides fear in Nelly's face, and her cousin perceived it at the first glance. It was the indecision as to what she should say to him, mingled with the constraint natural to anyone with such a task in prospect, which imparted to her the appearance of coldness, for which her cousin gave her credit. But so far from feeling cold towards him for his conduct of the evening before, the news she had just received occupied her thoughts almost to the exclusion of that which had so

troubled them previously, but which, under present circumstances, she would hardly have had the heart even to resent.

“Is Aunt Eliza not down yet?” was her first enquiry as she timidly dropped the hand he proffered her.

“No!” replied her cousin, the expectations with which he had anticipated her entrance being considerably damped by the formality of her salutation, “she is not well this morning, I am sorry to say, so we must go to breakfast without her.”

They sat down, one on each side of a large round table: and when the servants had solemnly provided them with tea and coffee from the side-board, and the dumb-waiter laden with a relay of dishes had been wheeled to Nigel’s side, they found themselves alone.

Nelly finished one piece of toast, and then another, resolving within herself each time that the disappearance of the next morsel should be the signal for her to tell her cousin of the letter she had received, but at the end of her breakfast she was no nearer the completion of her object. A few commonplace remarks had passed between them, but nothing more, and then Nigel Brooke rose from

the table and stood with his back to the fireplace.

It was always the first move towards breaking up the breakfast party. Nelly saw that the moment was come for her to speak, and after all, it was easier to tell him than his mother. So in a very dry husky voice she commenced.

“Cousin Nigel!”

“Well! Nelly,” he said expectantly.

“I am going home to-day.”

“Going home! what do you mean?”

“I have had a letter from Bertie by this morning’s post, and he wishes me to return at once: grandpapa is ill and I am wanted.”

“Oh! my poor child, I am so sorry,” exclaimed her cousin with genuine concern, “not only that the old man is suffering, but that your visit is to be cut short by it. But is it so very urgent, Nelly? are you sure that they cannot spare you for a few days longer?”

She shook her head.

“Bertie says I am to go *at once*,” she repeated, “that I am not to lose an hour, I am afraid poor grandpapa must be worse than when he last wrote.”

“But it is a long journey for you to take on so short a notice, Nelly. Surely to-morrow will be time enough.”

“I must go to-day if I can,” she replied, “I have very little to pack, you know, and Pinner promised to put up my things whilst we were at breakfast. Which is the earliest train by which I could start?”

“If you *must* go to-day (though I cannot see the necessity for it, Nelly,) there is a train leaves Hilstone for Reddington at noon. But I cannot let you go alone: I shall take you home myself, so you had best see my mother and ask her advice on the subject.”

But at the mention of his providing himself as escort, although she had fully expected it, Nelly turned quite pale.

“Oh, no! Cousin Nigel! indeed you must not go with me, I can very well go alone. I came here all by myself, you know; and if you will only let me have the carriage to go to the Hilstone station in, I shall get on very well.”

“What nonsense!” he exclaimed, “I will not hear of such a thing. Your coming here was a very different affair. We expected you and sent to meet you, and Orpington is only two miles from the station, but your brother cannot even be certain that you will start to-day, and if he were, who has he to send to Reddington to wait for you? You will arrive

there late in the evening, and be stranded, fourteen miles from your home, and perhaps unable to get a conveyance to go on in. It would be madness, Nelly: perfect folly! what could you do by yourself at night, in a strange town? I consider that you are under my care, and I cannot permit such a thing! so pray do not propose it again. Whenever you go back to Little Bickton, I go with you."

Nelly leant back in her seat in despair. What could she say which should appear at all reasonable, to turn him from his purpose.

After a moment's thought, she rose, and going up to her cousin's side, said firmly:—

"Cousin Nigel, you *cannot* go with me to-day, I do not wish it."

"And why not, Nelly?" he asked quickly; "tell me the truth."

"There is nothing to tell," she replied nervously, "excepting that I do not *wish* you to go with me, I must go home to-day, but I must go alone."

"Will you let me send a servant with you as far as Reddington?" he asked, a sudden suspicion flashing on his mind. She, on her part, imagining that if she agreed to this proposal, the other would be dropped, acquiesced eagerly.

“Then it is *my* presence which is unpleasant to you, Nelly?”

She drooped her head.

“Tell me the truth, child,” he repeated almost fiercely as he seized her hand, “tell me the real truth, and put me out of pain. Is it *I* only to whom you object as a travelling companion?”

“Yes!” she answered, in a very low tone, but the one word was enough for him.

At that moment, notwithstanding his belief in her sincerity, he was almost ready to suspect that the story of her having received a summons to Little Bickton was merely an excuse to rid herself the sooner of his presence. As the idea struck his mind, a chill ran through his frame, and he released the hand which he had taken.

“I have made a fool of myself,” he said in a pained voice. “Forget what has passed between us, Nelly, and let us be friends still.” And then with affected indifference he continued:—“I might have guessed that my presence at Little Bickton would be inconvenient just now, when my grandfather is so ill; I should be stranded at Reddington myself, and have no more idea what to do than you would, but the maid Pinner shall travel with you,

and see that you procure a proper conveyance to Bickton. She can sleep at Reddington herself, and return to Hilstone to-morrow. Would you mind seeing my mother about it at once, or shall I pave the way for you?"

"I can do it, thank you," she said, sadly. After having given her cousin Nigel such a wrong impression of her feeling respecting himself, the wrath of her aunt Eliza seemed a very little trouble, yet she hardly knew what else she could have said to him.

But to Nelly's surprise, Mrs. Brooke did not appear to be half so angry or put out at her news as she had anticipated. It still wanted ten days of the date when she had always intended to return home, and her aunt had repeatedly informed her that she should never be able to part with her when the time came. Instead of which, she listened to her niece's faltering narrative of the letter she had received, and the necessity for her immediate return, without once interrupting her with objections or regrets. The fact being that Mrs. Brooke, who was conscious that she had not deserved much in this instance at the hands of Providence, was wondering to herself by what lucky chance her wishes for Nelly's departure should have been so miraculously granted.

“I shall take home the lace jacket and the muslin cuffs, and collars I am embroidering for you, Aunt Eliza;” poor Nelly said, with quivering lips, “and send them you as soon as they are finished; and I am very much obliged to you for all the kindness you have shown me, and I shall never—never forget it,” concluded the girl, in a burst of tears.

“There, there! my dear!” said her aunt, with an affected attempt at comfort, “I am quite sure you will not; and any time will do for the collars and sleeves. You needn’t hurry yourself over them, for I daresay you will have enough to do with your poor sick grandpapa.”

“Yes,” sobbed Nelly, “and if it wasn’t that grandpapa is ill, and poor Bertie is so helpless, I wouldn’t have thought of leaving you so suddenly—particularly as I am of use to you; but they have no one to do anything for them but old Aggie, you see—and Bertie wants so much attention, and——”

“Oh! yes! my dear; I understand it all, perfectly,” replied her aunt; “of course you could do nothing else but go to them, it would be very wrong if you did not. Old people are soon gone, this weather—the least thing will take them off—and you might never see your

poor grandfather again, if you delayed to return."

At this supposition Nelly's fears gained the upper hand of her distress.

"Do you really think he can be so ill as that?" she asked, with frightened eyes; "Have you heard anything, aunt Eliza? Did they write to you as well?"

"Write to me, my dear!" said Mrs. Brooke, pettishly; "who should write to me? I thought you said, yourself, that the old man was worse."

"Well, I think he must be worse," said truthful Nelly, her sudden alarm allayed by her aunt's reply, "else Bertie would have given me a day or two to prepare for my journey in, but he particularly begs me not to lose a moment."

"Of course; and you would be very wrong to do so: and perhaps I had best say good-bye to you at once, as you must have some arrangements to make before starting, and my head aches sadly. Good-bye, my dear; you can write to me after a few days, and let me know how your grandfather goes on—and please tell one of the servants, as you go out, to send my son to me."

The news of Nelly's intended departure

had almost cured Mrs. Brooke of her ill-temper, particularly as she guessed from the girl's dejection, that nothing satisfactory could have passed between her and Nigel. She even felt equal to seeing the latter, and trying to patch up their quarrel of the night before.

Nelly, on the contrary, left the bedroom sobbing bitterly. She was glad to go home—poor little soul—but she was very grateful for all the kindness which she had experienced at Orpington, and it went to her heart to think she was about to leave her friends in so sudden a manner, and that it would not be long, perhaps, before they knew what her brother had told her in his letter. What would they think of her? how ungrateful her aunt Eliza would say she was, and how unworthy of all the pretty presents which she had given her; and cousin Nigel, who had taken her out on horseback, and done all he could to give her pleasure—what kind of return would he consider this, for the kindness he had shown her?

When she reached her bedroom, she found that Pinner had already been informed that she was to accompany her to Reddington; and that another servant was employed in packing and cording her box. Nothing was left for Nelly to do but to bathe her swollen eyes, and

put on her walking apparel ; and her arrangements had not long been completed when a single knock at her door, and the words in her cousin's voice—"Nelly, the train starts at ten minutes to twelve, and the carriage will be round in five minutes"—told her that her connection with Orpington Chase would soon be severed.

She followed her luggage downstairs, and took her seat mechanically upon one of the hall chairs. As soon as the carriage wheels sounded on the gravel drive, the door of the breakfast room, which was just opposite, opened, and her cousin Nigel appeared

"What ! are you here, Nelly ?" he said, reproachfully. "You need not have grudged me the last five minutes !" and holding out his hand, he led her to the vehicle.

She was to travel as far as Hilstone station, alone, for the trunk was in the rumble, and the maid preferred to sit on the box with the coachman, so the cousins' farewell was exchanged in privacy.

"God bless you, child," said Nigel Brooke, even more paternally than usual ; "I would have gone as far as the station with you, only I know you would rather I did not."

She tried to murmur something about being

“obliged” and not “being ungrateful,” but he scarcely caught the meaning of her words.

“Don’t cry, Nelly!” he said, entreatingly; “it’s over now, and I didn’t mean to vex you. Remember me to Bertie and to the old man, and let us know of your safe arrival—and—we shall meet again some day soon, shan’t we?—Drive on, Saunders!”

Then, as the carriage commenced to move, he ran by the side of it, for a few yards, as he hotly repeated, “don’t cry, my *darling*, for heaven’s sake.”

And though Nelly did not take his advice in so far that she cried quite as much on the way home as she had done on the way there, she could not help recalling to herself the strange expressions that her cousin Nigel had used to her that morning, and wondering what they meant.

CHAPTER XV.

NELLY'S WELCOME HOME.

BUT though Nelly Brooke both distressed and perplexed herself about what had occurred at Orpington Chase, all the way to Reddington, as soon as she arrived at that very dull and second-rate country town, which, on account of various changes and delays, was not until six o'clock the same evening, she forgot her trouble in the magical thought that she was so near her home again. The solitary fly was luckily in waiting, and as she was the only passenger who had to travel beyond the town, she had no difficulty in procuring it; and Pinner, finding that she could return to Hilstone by a night train, prepared, after a good tea at the George Inn, to take advantage of it, as she had received orders to do.

So Nelly set off, as her cousin Nigel had done some weeks previously, to traverse the fourteen miles of hilly country which lay between Reddington and Little Bickton, in a

vehicle which never exceeded its five miles an hour even on level ground. But the girl's feelings with respect to the necessary inconvenience and delay greatly differed from what his had been. She was as impatient, it is true, indeed far more so, but it was the impatience of love and not of temper.

Her feet once more upon Kentish soil, and her face set in the direction of home, her eagerness to gain it became almost beyond her powers of endurance, and her only wonder was how she had managed to live so long away from it. She grew sick with her longing, as she sat a prisoner in solitary confinement in the Reddington fly; and as soon as they came to the first hill, and the driver descended from his box in order to ease the horse, his passenger jumped out also, and expressed her intention of walking by his side.

"Don't you do that, miss," said the man, thinking the act was prompted by compassion for his animal, "he'd carry half-a-dozen of such as you, and not feel it. I shouldn't do it myself on a dry night like this, but I likes to stretch my legs occasionally."

"And I like to stretch my legs, too, Thompson," replied Nelly, who knew the driver by name, "and I am so impatient to get to Bick-

ton, that I feel as if I couldn't sit in the fly whilst it goes so slowly."

"You've been away for a goodish spell, Miss."

"Three weeks last Thursday, Thompson, and it has seemed like three months to me. I should never be contented away from Bickton. Have you been there lately?"

"To Bickton, Miss? well, no! I can't say I have, not since I drove that strange gentleman back from the Farm Cottage to Reddington. He *was* a quick-tempered one, to be sure."

"Was he?" said Nelly, timidly.

"Well, I put him down as such, Miss, least-ways on the road there. But there was a mortal sight of wet that night, there's no denying. He was a deal more sociable as we returned, and asked a mint o' questions about the place and people."

"Have you heard any news from the Cottage lately, Thompson?" was her next inquiry. "My grandpapa has not been well. That is the reason I am returning home to-day."

"Well, now," exclaimed the man, "that's strange, sure-ly, I'm a talking to the granddaughter of old Mr. Brooke, ain't I, Miss?"

Nelly replied in the affirmative.

"I did hear a summat about him last

market-day, though 'twas a mere chance that it reached me. I was cleaning my horse in the stable-yard, when in come farmer Weston and another gentleman. 'How's the old gentleman at the Farm Cottage?' says one. 'Mortal bad,' says the other; (that was farmer Weston you know, Miss); 'we all think he's a-going.'"

The man looked round at Nelly as he made this communication, as though he had said the most ordinary thing possible, and was startled by the expression in her face.

"Oh! Thompson, can it really be true? They never told me he was so ill as that! Pray drive me home as fast as ever you can, and I'll give you half-a-crown for yourself."

Nelly was in a position at the moment to make this offer, for her cousin had taken care that his mother should supply her little purse with money before she started. But the genuine distress so visibly pictured in her face touched Thompson to that degree, that he shook his head to intimate that he refused to take the bribe.

"I'll take you to Bickton as quick as ever one horse can do it, Miss, and I don't want nothing over my fare for it. I'm real sorry I told you anything to make you uneasy, and I

daresay it was only the gentleman's talk after all."

But this latter consideration had little effect in soothing poor Nelly's fears, and she spent the rest of the journey in miserable suspense, conjuring up so much evil that might have happened to each of the beloved inmates of the Farm Cottage during her absence, that she forgot everything but her ardent desire to meet her brother and grandfather and old Aggie again, and assure herself that they existed to welcome her.

Orpington Chase, its inhabitants and its troubles faded away in the distance, and home filled her thoughts to the exclusion of all else. In fancy she ran a dozen times into the old familiar passage, and burst into the sitting-room, and threw herself into the arms of Bertie, lying on his sofa, and saw her old grandfather dozing in his arm-chair, only looking a little paler than usual, and presently waking up to assure her it was her absence which had affected him, and that now she had returned he was himself once more; or the scene darkened, and she thought she might have to knock again and again for admission at the Cottage, and that at last old nurse Aggie would come down to the door, with

stealthy tread and a solemn face, and she would hear that her grandfather was lying upstairs dead and stretched out upon his bier. How would such fanciful fears affect an excitable and affectionate girl as she sat alone in a fly in the dark for nearly three hours, for it was nine o'clock before she reached Little Bickton? Joined to the slowness of her progression, and the solitude and suspense she was enduring, they affected Nelly to such a degree, that she seemed to turn to stone beneath their influence, and by the time the wheels of the fly grated before the Cottage door, she had scarcely strength to leave it. But, as they invariably do in such cases, events turned out very differently from what she had anticipated. The front door was opened simultaneously with that of the fly, and Bertie making sure of her arrival, had crept into the passage, followed by nurse Aggie with a lighted candle. With a cry of exceeding joy, the girl sprung to the ground, and took her brother's wasted form into her arms, and pressed it to her bosom. Although in reality not altered from the moment when they parted, how pale and thin he looked in her loving eyes. She thought he must have shrunk to half his size since she had seen him

last. But he was there, her Bertie, her brother, her second self; the face she had loved from infancy was pressed against her own, and the powerful reaction could only end in tears.

“Oh, Bertie! Bertie!” she sobbed, as they clung to each other, “how glad I am to see you, darling, how thankful I am to be at home again!”

Bertie was not altogether unaffected on his part, for his dependence on his sister had made him strangely feel her unaccustomed absence, though the mysterious clinging sympathy which is supposed to connect most twin children, seemed in this case to exist on her side alone. He kissed her fondly, and did not seem impatient of her tears, though he tried to draw her away from the scrutiny of the coachman and the nurse.

“Come with me, dear!” he whispered, as he led her into the dining-room. “I felt sure that you would come to-night. We ought never to be separated, Nell, we can’t do without each other; we should have been born with a ligature between us, like the famous Siamese twins.”

“Oh, I wish we had,” said the foolish girl, smiling in the midst of her tears; then as

they entered the sitting-room, and she caught sight of her grandfather's empty chair, she continued anxiously, "But how is grandpapa, Bertie?"

"Oh, he's all right," said her brother carelessly.

"All right, darling?"

The tone of surprise recalled Robert's wondering fancy, he remembered the letter he had written to summon his sister home, and in a different tone, continued, "That is to say, he has had a bad cold, and not been well otherwise for the last fortnight, but he is no worse than he was. His illness was not the real reason of my desire for your return, Nelly, as you must have seen."

"Yes, but let us talk of that presently, darling," she said, with a sigh, as she prepared to lay aside her walking things, and help old Aggie in the disposal of her luggage. The next ten minutes passed very boisterously. The mastiff Thug nearly went frantic when he was made aware of his mistress's arrival, and leapt at her with sufficient violence to throw her down, in his clumsy endeavours to give her a hearty welcome; and the old nurse, although much less vehement, was hardly less demonstrative in her delight at regaining "*her*

child," as she always called Nelly, in contradistinction to her brother.

"Ah! it's a sight for sore eyes to see you again, Miss Nelly, for we've had a bitter time of it since you been away, I can tell you," she said, as the girl followed her into the kitchen.

"That I'm sure you must, nurse, and there hasn't been a day that I haven't wished I were back again to help you. It will be quite a treat to shake up the beds again, and to make pies and puddings as I used to do, and to leave off playing at being a fine lady. Being a fine lady, and doing nothing but sit in the drawing-room or drive in a carriage, doesn't suit me at all, Aggie, I have often and often longed to be back again amongst the cabbages, at dear old Bickton."

"Well, you've got your wish then, you see," replied the old woman with a touch of discontent in her voice, "not that but what I think sitting in a drawing-room fitter for you than helping such as me with the house and kitchen work. But 't isn't the work, Miss Nelly, as I complain of, I've worked hard all my life, and that you know, but I like to have a bit of thanks when all's done, and that's what I've

never got from anyone since I lost sight of your bonny face, my bird."

"Do you think grandpapa is really ill, Aggie?" said Nelly, anxious to change the subject.

"I don't think nothing about it, I am sure on't," replied the old woman. "When a gentleman of that age takes to his bed, it isn't a good sign; and he's been close to his for the last week."

"Hasn't the doctor been sent for?" exclaimed Nelly, in alarm.

"No, he haven't," replied Aggie, sturdily.

"But why not, Aggie?"

"That's more than I know, Miss Nelly; all I can say is, now that you've come home, I hope you'll have things your own way, for they have been in a queer way since you left. Quarrelling here, and loud words there, and bad language used; I never heard the like of it since I lived in this house afore, and I don't wish to hear it again. If you want the doctor for to see your grandpa, Miss, you'd best ask Master Robert's leave, for he's master here now, or I'm quite mistaken."

"I'm grieved to hear you speak like this, nurse," said Nelly, sorrowfully, as she laid her hand on the old woman's withered arm.

“ You know that I have always loved you and been grateful to you.”

“ Bless you, my darling,” replied Aggie, as she turned and kissed the blooming cheek of her nurseling, “ you’ve always been everything that’s good to all of us, and that we know well enough. But now, go you into the parlour again, or perhaps Master Robert may be put out; and I’ll send you up supper as soon as ever it is ready.”

“ Let me help you, nursesey.”

“ Not I—not on this first night, Miss Nelly—for all the world. It will be up in five minutes at the latest.”

“ Can’t I see grandpapa this evening?”

“ Well, I don’t see the use, my dear; he’s fast asleep, and your going in might rouse him. Best leave that till to-morrow morning.”

“ I think we should send for Mr. Bumble to see grandpapa, Bertie,” said Nelly, as she re-entered the dining-room.

“ Very well, dear,” he replied, “ do what you please, I have waited for your return to settle everything of that sort. If the old man wants looking to, you had better write to Bumble.”

The supper tray now made its appearance, and Nelly, with Thug close beside her—with

his huge head thrust lovingly into her lap, sat down to it in solitary state. "Won't you have some supper, Bertie?" she said to her brother.

"No, thanks; for I am not used to eating at this hour, you know."

"Nor I," replied his sister, smiling, "and I feel too happy to be hungry, though I ought to be."

But as she pronounced the words, "*Nor I*," which brought back the habits of the Chase to her recollection, she suddenly remembered that the reason for which she found herself at home, was as yet a mystery to her; and the expression of her face changed so rapidly, that her brother exclaimed:—"How now! what's the matter, Nell?"

She had forgotten it till that moment, she had been so occupied with Thug and old Aggie, with her grandfather's illness, and the delight of meeting her brother again, that she had entirely forgotten to ask him why she had been so unexpectedly recalled; and what it was so dreadful that he had heard against their aunt and cousin, that he regretted she had ever entered their house.

"Bertie!" she gasped in her eagerness. "You have not yet told me why you sent for me to come home. Oh! I *was* so astonished

and surprised, and I didn't in the least know what to say to them at the Chase about it. I think—I am afraid," she continued, falteringly, "that I quite offended cousin Nigel this morning by refusing his offer to accompany me home."

"All the better if you did!" replied Robert Brooke, rudely.

"But, darling, tell me what it is, what can have changed all your feelings regarding them, and made you so angry about my going there. I did so for your sake, Bertie."

"You had better take your supper first, Nelly, for you will have no appetite afterwards, I can tell you."

"Oh! but I *must* know," said the girl in a piteous tone, as she left the table and knelt by her brother's side. "Bertie, dear, do tell me, for they have been so kind to me all the time, and your letter made me so unhappy."

"*Kind* to you," repeated Bertie in a voice of contempt. "Yes! and well they may be. But if Mr. Nigel Brooke, or his fine lady of a mother, imagines that a few palavering words and a few old rags, from them now, will wipe out the irreparable injury their father and husband did us, they are vastly mistaken. I hope you said good-bye to them once and for ever, Nell, for you will never see them again."

At this she called out so loudly that old Aggie ran from the kitchen to see what was the matter with "*her* child," but trotted back again upon hearing the plaintive words which followed the exclamation.

"Never see them again, Bertie—never see Aunt Eliza, who has been so very kind to me—or cou—cou—cousin Nigel again? Oh! you cannot be in earnest: you have heard something that is not true. It is all a mistake, dear: depend upon it—and when you find it out you will be sorry you spoke of them like this."

"It is not a mistake," said the young man excitedly, "it is as true, Nelly—as that I wish to God, we had never been born."

"Bertie, Bertie, darling, don't look like that: speak to me—tell me what it is—you cannot think how horrible is this suspense!"

He had risen from the sofa now, and was standing whilst she still clung about his knees.

"Well! if you will know it," he exclaimed loudly, "here it is, and if you can tell me afterwards that you still care to sit at the board of Nigel Brooke and eat his bread, and accept his favours, you are not my sister, and I will not own you as such. *His father murdered ours!*"

CHAPTER XVI.

ROBERT BROOKE TELLS HIS SISTER HALF THE TRUTH.

THE sound of the word "murder," is sufficiently awful at any time, but particularly when it is used in connection with anyone belonging to ourselves.

Nelly Brooke, as she heard it, rose slowly from her kneeling position, and dropped, white and trembling, on the sofa, which her brother had just vacated. For a moment neither of the twins spoke to each other.

"Well! what do you think of it?" then demanded Robert, breaking the silence.

"I cannot believe it!" she answered, in an awe-struck tone.

"But it is true, I tell you; true as gospel."

"*Murdered* him," repeated Nelly wonderingly, "murdered his own brother! it is impossible."

"You may call it what you please," said Robert Brooke, "I call it murder. It is suf-

ficient for me to know that Nigel Brooke's father challenged mine, and shot him down like a dog, whilst his opponent fired in the air. I wish he hadn't: I wish he had shot him through the heart, the cowardly cur."

"But why did they fight?" asked Nelly, "for what reason?"

At this question, the face of her brother changed. He visibly showed his discomfiture; and it was not until she had repeated it that he sulkily replied:—

"The cause signifies little: the fact remains."

"And does he, does Cousin Nigel, you think, know of this?"

"The name of the man you speak of, Nelly, is Nigel Brooke, and don't let me hear you call him anything else again: he is not your cousin nor mine, and never shall be."

"We are the children of brothers," she said in refutation of Robert's assertion, but he did not appear to hear her words. "We must be cousins since our fathers were brothers," she repeated after a short pause.

"Men who call each other out for the purpose of being shot at, are not entitled to the name of brothers," he at length replied, "but it little matters what our actual relationship

to this man may be—were it twice as near, we never could be otherwise than strangers.”

“But who told you of this dreadful story, Bertie?” she demanded, half hoping that her brother might have gathered it from some questionable authority.

“My grandfather,” he said curtly.

“What, grandpapa! *He* says that one of his sons killed the other. Then it must be true! Oh! how shocking, how terrible—” and overcome with the idea of her unknown father lying bleeding and dead by the act of his own brother, the girl covered her face with her hands.

“Now! what would you say to going back to Orpington Chase, and joining in their pleasures, and partaking of their luxuries, Nelly?” enquired Robert in a voice which was almost triumphant.

“I don’t wish to go back,” she said shuddering, “I never wish to leave home again, but, Bertie, it was not our cousin—I mean, it was not Nigel Brooke’s fault that his father behaved so cruelly. Surely he had nothing to do with it. Is it always to prevent his being kind to us, or caring for us?”

She thought afterwards that she had never seen her brother look so angrily at her in his

life, as he did when he turned towards her now.

“Are you regretting the leeks and garlic of Egypt?” he cried. “Do you wish to keep up the acquaintance of the son of your father’s murderer; the son of the man who made us what we are—orphans, aye! and worse than orphans; looked down upon, poverty-stricken, obscure: who feathered his own nest and left his child independent, whilst the children of the man he murdered, remain without a friend in the world?”

“But he tries to make it up to us, and you refuse to let him,” she said, bold in her attempted defence of those who had been kind to her, though timid as a dove, generally speaking, in opposing any assertion of her brother’s.

Robert Brooke looked at her with the greatest contempt.

“Bah!” he said, “it is of no use talking to a girl; they have no ideas beyond their dresses and bonnets! Have you no sense of honour, Nelly, no sense of justice, no sense of what is right and consistent to do?”

“Oh! I hope I have, Bertie,” she said, earnestly, “but perhaps you have not explained it sufficiently to me. Tell me all, the

whole truth, just as it happened, and I shall better understand it."

"The whole truth, as you call it, is simply that my grandfather and I, being left alone together for the first time in my remembrance, have talked more to each other than we ever did before. We have had one or two very stiff arguments, I can tell you, Nelly, and the old gentleman made himself more disagreeable than I had given him credit for being able to do."

"You didn't vex him, Bertie darling, did you?" said his sister anxiously.

"I didn't give him any cause to be vexed, which is as much as I can answer for. I only told him what I had intended to do for some time past, that I insisted upon hearing the whole story of the circumstances attending our birth, and the death of our parents. I asked him to account for his having kept us in this place all our lives, without proper associates or advantages; and I asked him what provision he had made for us, and what he intended to become of us after his death."

"And what did he tell you, Bertie?" she demanded breathlessly.

"He told me that which I wish I had died before I had ever heard," returned the young man gloomily.

“Don’t say so, dear, it can’t be as bad as that,” she said caressingly, as she moved nearer to his side. “If we are orphans, Bertie, we have each other.”

He turned at the loving words, and kissed her eagerly.

“My dearest sister,” he exclaimed, “if I hadn’t known you were coming back to Little Bickton and would miss me, I would have cut my throat the day I heard it!”

“Bertie, you frighten me! tell me the whole story.”

“The whole is very little, Nelly, but it is painful enough to tell—when I have finished it, don’t ask for it again. Nigel Brooke’s father was a merchant—ours was an officer in the army. They had a serious cause for quarrel, but one which might have been in some measure atoned for, if it had been settled in the right way. Instead of which, Nigel Brooke’s father followed ours to Malta, where he had gone with his regiment, and when there insulted him so grossly that he had no choice but to accept the challenge with which the indignity was accompanied. They met: and as I have told you, the one was shot like a dog, whilst the other escaped without injury. We were not born at that time, Nelly, but

two months afterwards we entered the world, worse luck, and our poor mother, who had drooped ever since the shock of our father's death, quitted it. And that's the whole affair."

"Poor mother," sighed Nelly, "and she was so young too, Aggie says, only eighteen, just our age now."

"Never mind that," replied her brother, "she's far better where she is, and I for one feel glad to think she is quit of all her trouble. But had our father lived, things might have been very different. I could never have forgiven the hand which took his life."

"Nor I," said Nelly softly, "but he is dead too now."

"But his wife—do you imagine that his wife might not have exerted her influence over him, had she so chosen? why! even his son was nearly a man at that time."

"Men do not often consult their wives and children when they are going to do a wrong thing, Bertie."

He stamped his foot impatiently.

"You aggravate me, Nelly—you are trying to defend this man and his mother, when you should feel the same loathing for them that I do."

“ I am sorry I aggravate you, dear Bertie. No one could feel more shocked and horrified at what you have told me than myself; and were our uncle still alive, I—”

“ Were he alive,” interrupted her brother eagerly, “ lame as I am, I would not rest night or day until I had searched him out and called him to account for my father’s death; but since he is passed my reach, I will not admit his son, the man who is reaping the benefit of a murderer’s success, to my friendship, not even to my acquaintance. I will not receive him here, nor go to see him there: nor will you either, Nelly, if you wish to keep my affection. Had I known the other day, when he entered these doors with his hypocritical palaver about the ties of relationship, and his wish that we should all go and live with him at Orpington, who he was, and what he was, I would have struck him in the face before I had taken his hand in friendship. And do you think I would have permitted you to go and visit at the Chase, and accept their presents and their flattery, and their fine dinners, and horses and company, if I had thought that they came from the wife and the son of your father’s murderer? Of course, I would not! I hope you’ve not brought any

of the fine things they gave you home with you, for I will burn and destroy every one of them if you have. They are the price of blood, the handsome reparation which they are trying to make in exchange for your father's life. Have you many of them? tell me the truth, for I'll cut up your whole wardrobe if you don't."

"Very few, dear Bertie, really very few, and I will send them out of the house to-morrow if you wish it."

"I do wish it; I had rather you went in rags all your days, than wore that woman's gifts. Give them away or throw them away, as you choose, but don't let me see or hear of them again."

"And don't let me hear that man's name either," he continued after a slight pause; as exhausted with the excitement he had undergone, he threw himself upon his sofa, "or a word about the Chase or your doings there: it is a sufficiently sore thought for me that you have ever been in their house. What could my grandfather have been about to consent to it? He must be in his dotage."

"But if they write?" said Nelly nervously.

"If *who* write?"

"Aunt Eliza or cousin Nigel."

"Let them write."

“But the last thing they said, Bertie, was to beg me to let them know of my safe arrival, and they sent a servant with me, all the way to Reddington, and it will seem so very—so very ungrateful—after all they’ve done for me, particularly if they don’t know the reason.”

“Leave me to tell them the reason,” replied Robert, ominously. “If a letter comes for you, *I* will answer it, and I’ll warrant you do not receive a second.”

Then he perceived that his sister was crying, and made an impatient gesture at the discovery.

“It is all so very, very miserable,” she said apologetically, “it has been such a dreadful mistake from beginning to end.”

“It is not too late to remedy it,” returned Robert, “unless you are sorry to come home again.”

This suspicion from Bertie was agony to her ; she cast herself by his side and implored him not to think so for a single moment.

“Darling,” she exclaimed, with all the fervour of her nature, “you are everything to me, and you know it. You cannot think how often, since I have been away, I have lain awake and cried because I had not bid you good-night, and could not go to sleep without it. I could not live without you, brother. I

did not like to appear ungrateful and indifferent to them ; but nothing is anything to me in comparison with you."

"I know that, Nelly," he replied, as he returned her caresses, "and we must continue to be everything to each other now. All my fine dreams of leaving Bickton for a more lively place, have passed away, and here we will remain for the rest of our lives ; won't we ? A loving old maid and bachelor, if not a very jolly one. But I think I have stayed up as long as is good for me, dear, for I feel quite tired. Will you help me up to bed ? It will be heaven to feel your soft hands about me, after old Aggie's bits of horn."

All idea of supper had been long repudiated ; and the chops and potatoes which the old nurse had laid in, expressly for the welcome of "her child," were as cold as they had been before she placed them on the fire ; and so Nelly rose, and winding her arm round Bertie, they passed in the old, loving fashion, out into the passage, and up the narrow staircase.

At the sound of their footsteps, Aggie came out from the kitchen.

"Well, you've been a long time making up your minds for bed, I'm thinking ; and it's a pity, Master Robert, that you didn't let your

sister go before this, for she must be main tired with her journey. Let me tend your brother, this evening, my dear. I've done it often enough lately, and go you to your own room, for you must be nigh worn out."

But Robert would not hear of an exchange, and his sister seconded his refusal.

"I've had more than enough of your handling, thank you, nurse," he said, laughing, "not to be thankful for a change when I can get it, and Nelly wishes to go with me, don't you, Nell?"

"Of course I do, darling. Do you think I would let anyone attend to you to-night but myself. I am too happy to be able to do it."

"He's a selfish creature," soliloquised the old nurse, as she returned to the kitchen, "and always were, for I mind when they were babes together, he'd invariable take the cake or the sweetie from her mouth and put it in his own. And she smiling at him all the while. As she always have smiled. Bless her! There's more good in her little finger than there is in his whole body."

Poor Nelly, what with her varied emotion, and her long journey, was indeed, sadly tired, but her affection hardly permitted her to feel so. Her eyes were swollen and painful, and

her head ached, and so did her legs, but she would not omit one single minutia of her brother's toilet. She even took the trouble to do many little things for him that he was quite able to do for himself, but for which he generally, when he could, enlisted his sister's services; and when at length he stretched himself upon his bed and said: "I haven't felt so comfortable since you left me, Nell," she was amply repaid for all her fatigue.

"I must read to you, Bertie, before I go," she said, taking up his Bible, "I suppose you have been obliged to do that for yourself since we have been parted?"

"Yes," he replied, rather hesitatingly.

"But you have not moved the marker, dear!" she exclaimed, as she opened the book. "I know that because I have been reading the same chapter every night, as we agreed to do; oh! Bertie, you don't mean to say you have not read it at all?"

"Well, if you must know the truth, Nell, I am afraid I haven't," he said, though reluctantly; "but it's such a bore you see—and—don't look so vexed, puss, because I couldn't help it."

"Never mind, darling," she answered, quietly. "I will read to you now."

She finished the portion and then rose to bid him good-night. As she took him in her arms, he seemed so dear to her, and so fragile a creature to be everything she possessed in the world, that a sudden impulse moved her to exclaim :

“Bertie, let me say my prayers here for to-night, let me kneel by the side of your bed ; and put your hand in mine, and we will say our prayers together,” and as she spoke, she sunk upon her knees, and buried her face upon her brother’s hand.

What Robert Brooke prayed for, was best known to himself, but Nelly’s prayer was all for patience under the trial which had come upon her. For it was a trial, and destined to be a heavy one—though as yet, she guessed it not.

But when her prayer was concluded, she was enabled to go quietly to her own room and compose herself to rest without shedding any more tears for the estrangement which must thenceforth exist between herself and her friends at Orpington Chase.

CHAPTER XVII.

NELLY HOLDS A VIGIL WITH THE VICAR.

NELLY's first thoughts upon waking the next morning, were for her grandfather, and her first visit was paid to his room, where she was shocked to find him strangely altered from what she had seen him last. Mr. Brooke, within the memory of his granddaughter, had always been a spare, withered old man; but his skin had not worn the appearance of parchment which it did now, nor had he ever, with all his taciturn and unsociable habits, displayed such extreme languor as seemed to have come over him with his illness. Nelly would not have been surprised to find him very irritable and unpleasant; but it startled her to see that neither the fact of her unexpected return, nor anything she said, had the power to rouse the least spark of interest in the old man's breast. He was lying on his side when she entered the room, vacantly

gazing at the streaks of light which the morning sun was painting across his window-blind, and appeared to notice neither her entrance nor the kiss with which she saluted his un-lifelike cheek, unless raising his dim eyes for a moment to her face might be termed such.

“ Well, grandpapa !” said the girl, cheerfully, as she drew a chair towards him, and sat down by the bedside, “ are you not surprised to see me home again ?”

The old man looked at her for a moment, and then said enquiringly :

“ You’ve been away, my dear ?”

“ Now, I do think you might have invented a better compliment to pay me on my return than that, grandpapa,” replied Nelly, pretending to pout. “ Here have I been flattering myself all the time that you missed me terribly, and I can see that you are not quite sure whether I have been in the house or not.”

But the pleasant tones did not provoke any corresponding cheerfulness from Mr. Brooke. He sighed once or twice, and then turned his eyes away from Nelly’s face in the direction of the window blind.

“ Will you have the blind drawn up ?” she asked, observing his action. “ It is a beautiful

bright morning, and it will make your room less gloomy."

But he only shook his head with an air of complete indifference.

"I was sorry to hear you had caught so bad a cold, grandpapa," recommenced Nelly. "How did you manage it?"

"I don't know," said the invalid languidly.

"You are so used to getting wet when you are out for one of your long walks, that it could scarcely be that," continued the girl. "You don't mind a wetting at all, do you, grandpapa? Where do you feel it most, in your throat or your chest?"

He did not answer, and she repeated the question.

"Were you speaking, my dear?" he said, at length.

Nelly's patience was nearly exhausted, but she managed to make him understand that she was asking for particulars of his illness.

"I'm sure I don't know," was all the satisfaction she gained from her perseverance, and with a face of alarm she flew down to seek old Aggie in the kitchen.

"Aggie! I am certain that grandpapa is *very ill indeed*; I never saw anyone so changed in my life. His skin is as yellow as a guinea,

and he doesn't seem to understand anything I say to him. How long has he been like this?"

"He has been ailing on and off ever since you left Bickton, Miss Nelly, and before that too, though you young ones didn't see it. But I don't think he is so very changed in appearance, poor gentleman, as you seem to imagine. You must remember that you haven't seen him for better than three weeks, and we notice a deal after absence, that we think little of when it's going on in the same house with us. But your grandpa *is* ill, Miss Nelly, as I told you last night, and what's more, it's my belief he'll never be any better."

"Oh! don't say that, nurse!" exclaimed the girl with a look of genuine distress. "What would become of Bertie and me if poor grandpapa was to die and leave us alone? I will write a note to Mr. Bumble at once, and when Jem Locke comes round with the milk, you must tell him to take it to Mrs. Weston, and ask with my love if she will send it to Cockthorpe for me. I am sure she will if she possibly can."

"And why don't you run up to the Farm yourself with it, Miss Nelly? It's a rare fine morning, and I guess Mrs. Weston will be

longing to have a sight of you, and to hear all you've been about."

For a moment Nelly looked undecided, but then she shook her head :

"No, nurse, don't tempt me ; Jem will carry the note quite safely, and there's more than enough to be done in the house as it is. I am sure grandpapa should not be left alone, either you or I must sit in his room. As soon as I have written the note for the doctor, I will go up and see after Bertie and him."

"You've a thought for everybody before yourself," said old Aggie, as she looked after her with an admiring gaze. "Alone, aye ! that's what you'll both be before long, sure enough ; but whilst there's a bit or a sup remaining, you'll not let the other want, *I* know."

Nelly wrote her note ; let out Thug for a scamper, to accompany him in which, down the dear old nut-walk, was a sore temptation to her ; and then, filling her apron with wood and paper, seized a scuttle of coals in the other hand, and proceeded upstairs to lay and light a fire in her grandfather's bedroom.

"The days are chilly now, Aggie, although they are so bright," she said as she did so, "and I am sure grandpapa will be more com-

fortable with a good big fire. It will cheer him up and make the room look less dull."

"Let me do it for him then, my dear," interposed the nurse, trying to wrest the scuttle from her hands, "you'll blacken your fingers so."

"Not a bit of it," said Nelly, successfully resisting the attempt, "you mind your own business, Aggie, and get ready a nice cup of chocolate for him. Why! I wonder how many times in my life before my fingers have been black. But, nursesey," as a sense of humour struck her, "only fancy! suppose Aunt Eliza could see me now, what *would* she say?"

And Nelly laughed, although the laugh was turned into a sigh before she was half way up the stairs, as she remembered how little chance there was of her ever shocking or pleasing "Aunt Eliza" again.

Soon the new-made fire was crackling and burning up the wide chimney of Mr. Brooke's old-fashioned grate; and the invalid actually turned his eyes towards the bright flame with something like interest at the unusually cheerful sight and sound which had found its way into his dreary room.

Then Nelly examined both the patient and his bedclothes, and came to the conclusion that

a couple more blankets would be very acceptable to him, and that it was absolutely necessary that hot-water bottles were at once applied to his clay-cold feet. When she had flown up and down stairs a few times more, in order to make the necessary arrangements to carry out her design, she asked the old nurse if the cup of chocolate was yet ready.

“It is ready, Miss Nelly, and a nice piece of toast besides; but I’m afraid you won’t get him to take it. That’s the worst sign about your grandpa, Miss, to my mind. He has hardly eaten anything for the last week. However, it won’t be wasted, for Master Robert likes a cup of chocolate in the mornings, better than tea.”

“Does he?” exclaimed Nelly; “then make another, please, nurse, for I mean grandpapa to take this one, whether he likes it or no!—I’ve warmed him *outside*, and this will warm him *inside*, and then, you shall see, he’ll be all right again.”

“The sight of you is enough to warm anyone, without fires, my bird,” said the old servant, as she prepared the second cup of chocolate according to her young lady’s bidding. When it was ready, she placed it on a tray,

and went to seek Nelly in her grandfather's bedroom.

"Not that it will be needed for Master Robert," she thought, as she did so; "but Miss Nelly shall drink it instead. I don't see why everyone is to be waited on, saving herself."

But what was Aggie's astonishment on getting upstairs to find that old Mr. Brooke had suffered himself to be raised upon his pillows, and had already consumed half of the cup of tempting hot chocolate and several of the thin strips of crisp, brown toast, with which his granddaughter had served him.

"Bless my soul," exclaimed old Aggie, as she entered the doorway and set down her tray upon the nearest table from sheer surprise; "here's a transfiguration — I never could have believed it, if I hadn't seen it, not upon a Bible oath."

The room certainly did appear to have undergone a considerable change, although it was but a touch which it had received here and there, from Nelly's affectionate fingers. The blind was now drawn completely up, and the October sun, bright but subdued, streamed mildly in at the window before which had been placed a small table from the sitting-room,

with a vase of variously-coloured chrysanthemums on it, and a few of the old man's favourite books and fossils. In the grate, the crackling flame had given place to a warm, glowing fire, and what was of more importance a faint colour from renewed heat already tinged the face of the dying man. For Mr. Brooke was dying, and the two women who tended him knew it, although they had not done more than hint the truth to one another.

Leaving the nurse to attend to her grandfather's wants, Nelly took Bertie's chocolate into his room with her own hands, and waked him from sleep with a warm, loving caress.

The day wore on; but the parish doctor did not make his appearance. Old Mr. Brooke, though certainly revived for a time by the prompt attention of his granddaughter, had again sunk into a languid, half-waking, half-sleeping condition, which was evidently begotten of extreme weakness. The afternoon had already reached its prime, when Nelly suddenly entered the dining-room, and addressed her brother:

“Bertie, darling, could you spare me for an hour or two?”

“What for?” he demanded. “You are not going out, Nelly, surely. It is very cold this

afternoon; more like December than October."

She walked over to the fire-place, and commenced making up the fire.

"It is cold, darling, and you feel it all the more from taking no exercise. I cannot say I anticipate going out myself, but I think it is necessary. Charley Weston has just brought me a note from his mother. Mr. Bumble was out when the messenger reached Cockthorpe this morning, and no one knew where he had gone, or how long he would be: they could only promise to give it to him when he returned. But Charley says that Locke is going to drive the tax-cart over to Reddington this afternoon, and if you can spare me, I will get a seat in it as far as Bickton Proper, and go and speak to Mr. Ray about grandpapa. I am really very much frightened about him, Bertie; I am sure he is very ill indeed, and so is Aggie."

"I don't believe it," replied her brother; "a heavy cold always makes a person feel drowsy. And what good can Mr. Ray possibly do him?"

"He will come over here, and talk to him, and comfort him. I am sure he will if he is

not otherwise engaged, and you know he is grandpapa's greatest friend."

"And how are you to get back again, Nell?"

"I shall walk."

"Walk three miles, on an afternoon like this; why it will be dark before you return."

"So it has often been before, dear Bertie, when necessity has taken me from home. One cannot think of such little things as cold and darkness, when sickness is in the case."

He had often and often known her to go on far less important errands for himself, in far worse weather, but Robert Brooke was apt to overlook sacrifices which were made for his own benefit.

"Why can't you go on Mrs. Weston's pony—if you must go?" he next demanded.

"I asked if I could have the pony, but he has gone with the cart for firewood."

"Would not a note to Mr. Ray answer all your purpose, Nelly? Locke could easily leave it at the vicarage."

"I don't think it would, dear, or I should have proposed it. In the first place Locke does not pass the vicarage—it would be quite a quarter of a mile out of his way; and secondly, I do not wish to give Mr. Ray the

trouble of coming here to-night, unless he thinks it necessary himself; and I am afraid I could not explain everything to him in a note as I could by word of mouth—I'd better go and see him. May I not go, darling?—Won't you let me?" she concluded, as she leaned over her brother's couch, and looked coaxingly in his face.

"I suppose I must, if you are bent on it," he answered, rather sulkily.

"I will not stay a minute longer than is necessary, Bertie. I shall not be gone more than two hours, I hope."

"I think it is rather hard I should have to give you up the very first day," he grumbled.

"Oh, Bertie! and it is hard to go," she said, flying back to the sofa she had quitted. "But Mr. Bumble may not be here, you know, even by to-morrow morning, and the vicar may be able to tell us what is best to give grandpapa, or to do for him. He is very clever about sickness, and the poor people say they would as soon take his physic as the doctor's. And I would leave you for nothing less, dear, would I?"

And she smiled at him, trying fondly to provoke a smile in return. But in vain; none appeared.

“Well, if you *are* going, you had better go at once,” said Robert Brooke. “I hope you’ll enjoy a drive in an open tax cart, on a day like this—it’s more than I should.” And he shrugged his shoulders, expressive of the cold, and his wonder at his sister’s determination.

But Nelly, sending Charley Weston as an advance messenger to the farm, wrapped herself up as warmly as she could, and ran across the common to her friend’s house. The drive in the tax cart was certainly a very cold one; to say nothing of its being exceedingly dull, for of course Jem Locke was not in a position to speak to the young lady he was driving, unless he was spoken to; and his only idea of politeness was to edge himself as far away from her, on the seat, as he could, so that there should be no possibility of his velveteen suit coming in contact with her woollen dress. He had received strict orders from his mistress to drive Miss Brooke right up to the vicarage gates, therefore she was spared the quarter-mile which she had intended to walk.

Mr. Ray, fortunately, was at home; and his wife and daughters were delighted, as they always were, to see Nelly, and would have kept her at the vicarage for the evening had she not looked alarmed at the mere proposal.

But as soon as she had made the state of her grandfather known to him, the vicar expressed his determination to walk back with her, to the Farm Cottage, at once. He had heard nothing of Mr. Brooke's illness; and reproached himself bitterly for having permitted business, during the previous week, to interfere with his usual visit to Little Bickton. He looked very grave as Nelly detailed the old man's symptoms, and said that the doctor had not yet seen him.

"But how is that, Nelly?" he asked as they walked quickly together in the direction of her home (for the vicar's stable was a very modest one, and he only kept one horse for his own riding). "What were your brother and old Aggie about, not to let Bumble know sooner of your grandfather's illness?"

"I hardly know," replied the girl, "I saw the change in him at the first glance, but Aggie says it would be more apparent to me after an absence, than to those who watched him daily. But she knew that grandpapa was not well, for she told me so as soon as I arrived."

"She waited, I suppose, for the ruling power of the house to return before she ventured to do anything; eh, Nelly?"

“I don’t know, sir, I’m sure ; but they are very foolish if they wait for me in a case like this—grandpapa might have died before I came back.”

“Ah! you should never leave them, Nelly ; that’s the truth : the Cottage is like a boat without its rudder, when you are away.”

“I never wished to go,” she replied, “my brother and grandfather settled it all for me.”

“And how did you enjoy your visit?”

At this question and several which followed it, poor Nelly was sorely discomfited ; she would have dearly liked to have told Mr. Ray, who was her earliest friend and teacher, all her perplexity concerning Orpington Chase, and its inmates, and to have asked his advice on the subject, but she dared not, without first consulting Bertie. So her answers were constrained and given with hesitation, and the vicar came to the conclusion that the country girl’s visit to her grand relations had been anything but a pleasure to her.

“They looked down upon her, I suppose, poor little soul!” he mused. “Well, it’s only a foretaste of what the world will give her by-and-bye.”

When they arrived at the Farm Cottage, and Mr. Ray had seen his old friend, he liked his

appearance so little that he expressed his wish, if they could give him a bed, to remain at Little Bickton all night, or at all events until the doctor had been and given his opinion of the case, and dispatched a message to the vicarage to that effect, and a second note to Cockthorpe to urge Mr. Bumble at all hazards to come as soon as he received it. He directed Nurse Aggie to feed her sinking master with small portions of arrowroot and brandy whenever she could get it down his throat, and to keep up the animal heat as much as lay in her power. But it was almost too late even for these last offices; no amount of flannel and hot water now appeared capable of restoring the circulation to those death-cold extremities: and the drops of arrowroot and brandy oftener trickled down the outside than the inside of that fixed and passive mouth.

After the first bustle of their arrival, Mr. Brooke did not appear to know either Mr. Ray or his granddaughter; and by the time that night had again closed in, he did not unclose his eyes when spoken to, and his breath could scarcely be discerned with the aid of a looking-glass.

“He is *much* worse since this morning,”

whispered Nelly in a tone of alarm to the vicar.

“I fear he will not live to see another,” was the ominous reply.

Meanwhile, old Aggie having been made cognisant of Mr. Ray's opinion of her master's condition, wandered listlessly up and down the staircase, wringing her hands and whimpering as she thought it right to do, although she did not feel any great concern at the impending event, for “after all,” as she said to herself in the kitchen, “'tis only what may be expected when folks have nearly lived to count their ninety year.”

And Robert Brooke smoked his pipe in the dining-room, giving it as his opinion that they were making a great fuss about nothing; that in all probability his grandfather would be walking about as well as ever that day week, and it was a great bore that Nelly couldn't sit quietly with him for a minute together, but she must run upstairs again to ask how the old man was going on.

Yet, long after Robert's pipe had been put out, and he had had his supper and been attended to his bed, and nurse Aggie, although she professed to keep a watch by her dying master, had sunk back in her cosy armchair

by the kitchen fire, and fallen fast asleep, Nelly and the vicar sat together in the old man's room, holding a vigil which would have been altogether silent, except for the light sound of the girl's footfall as she occasionally crept up on tiptoe to the side of the bed, or for Mr. Ray's whispered enquiry as she returned, "How is he going on?"

The friendly vicar sat on one side of the fireplace with his bible in his hand, sometimes trying to read a few verses by the dim light of the shaded lamp: oftener, gazing thoughtfully into the fire as he mused upon the life which was fast ebbing away without giving a sign that it had any hope of being eternally renewed, whilst Nelly, seated on a stool upon the hearthrug, leaned her head upon her hand and tried to picture the earthly future which was looming for Bertie and herself.

The long night passed at length, and the grey autumn dawn broke coldly. Nelly shuddered as she attempted to build up the waning fire without making a noise, and the vicar rose from his seat and stretched himself silently and shivered in unison. Then he blew out the candle which burned yellow in the morning light, and stepped up to the bed-

side and examined the invalid long and earnestly.

“Shall I warm up the arrow-root again?” asked Nelly, presently. “Do you think it will be of any use?”

He did not answer, but went to the window and pulled up the blind in the sick man’s face.

“Will not that disturb him?” inquired the girl, anxiously. “I wish the doctor would come—how is he going on, Mr. Ray?”

He was not going on at all. He was gone!

Robert Brooke did not awake that morning till after his usual time. He yawned, and turned himself in his bed, until he was so fully roused that he felt certain it must be past his hour of rising, and rang his bell impatiently, to ask the reason of the delay in his sister’s appearance.

She answered the summons at once, with eyes that bore evidence of weeping, but with the same sweet smile on her mouth with which she always welcomed her brother.

“Can’t I have my tea, Nell?” he inquired, with an air of injury.

“Yes, dear! of course—directly. I had not forgotten it—but poor grandpapa——”

“What of him—is he worse?”

“Oh! Bertie,” she exclaimed, with her arms about her brother’s neck, “he is dead—he died this morning, and we have only each other, darling, to love and live for now! But I wish,” added Nelly,—her thoughts naturally falling back into the channel which they had occupied for the last two hours,—“I do wish he had seen the doctor first.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

NIGEL BROOKE WRITES A LETTER TO HIS COUSIN.

IT was on a Tuesday evening that Nelly had returned to her home. Old Mr. Brooke died on the Thursday morning, and the vicar remained at the Farm Cottage, with the brother and sister, until the doctor had called and given his opinion respecting the cause of their grandfather's death. Mr. Bumble was a cheery, rosy little man, who had slapped Nelly and Robert as often as he had kissed them, and given them sugar-plums with one hand while he pulled out their teeth with the other. But he had always taken a sincere interest in the twin children and their grandfather, as did everyone who knew them, and he was greatly shocked and annoyed on arriving at Little Bickton at nine o'clock that morning, to find there was no longer any need for his advice or services.

"It was not my fault, I can assure you," he

said apologetically to Mr. Ray, who met him with the news. "I was called out fifteen miles the other side of Cockthorpe, yesterday morning, to a premature labour; and I had two messengers sent after me before I could leave that place, to summon me to a couple more cases of the same description going on in my own village. It's always the way with women; they are the most provoking creatures in the world: as soon as one of them falls ill every female in the same condition follows suit. I never come in from a labour, but I expect to hear that the cat's kitted during my absence, and the dog has got another litter of puppies. But, God bless my soul, sir! this has been very sudden, surely; very sudden, indeed. I never entered my own house from the time I left it, till this morning, and the first thing I saw was your note, and that of Miss Nelly; and I just swallowed a mouthful of breakfast, and was off again immediately. But I had no idea it was so serious as this. How long had the poor old gentleman been ill? What has Miss Nelly been about not to send for me before?"

"Nelly has been away from home," replied the vicar, "and the boy is as you know rather careless on such points, and I fancy that the

old woman is getting past her work. It is an unfortunate thing that it should have happened just when the girl was absent. The only fact of any consequence, which I can gather concerning Mr. Brooke's illness, is, that he appears to have caught a violent cold when the weather changed about a fortnight since, and that after a few days he took to his bed and gradually sunk. But no one seems to have thought him seriously ill, until Nelly returned and saw him."

"Ah! I understand," said the doctor, significantly; "inflammation of the bronchial tubes and rapid decrease of the vital power in consequence—it's a common cause of death in old people: I daresay I could not have prolonged his life beyond a few days, even had I been called in at once; but that is no excuse for the neglect—no excuse whatever."

On viewing the corpse, Mr. Bumble saw no reason to alter his opinion; and after Mr. Ray had said a few affectionate words of comfort to Nelly and her brother, he left the cottage in company with the doctor, promising to see them again on the following Sunday, when he would make all the necessary arrangements for the interment.

Consequently, for the next two days, the

orphans were left alone, and very sad days they were, at least for one of them. Dull and monotonous they must have been in any case, but since the conversation which they had held on the night of her return, there had sprung up a slight barrier to that perfect sympathy which hitherto had existed between Nelly and her brother, which, without decreasing her idolatrous love for Bertie, had power to mar the pleasure of their intercourse. During the short period of her grandfather's illness, she had not had time to give more than a passing shudder to the dreadful history she had then learned, or a regret to the coming quarrel which she saw her brother was determined to have with Nigel Brooke. But, now that the motive for action was withdrawn, and there was nothing to do but to sit beside Bertie's couch in the darkened room, her first opinion regarding what he had told her, returned in full force.

It was not that Nelly thought less than Robert did of the terrible way by which their father had met his death; on the contrary, her feminine nature recoiled from the mere mention of blood; and she was fully aware that the fact that Nigel's parent had shed that of hers, must and ought to make a

difference in the intercourse between their children. Whether this necessity would blight her future happiness, the girl as yet knew too little of her own heart to stop, or wish to stop to inquire. What most troubled her affectionate nature was that Bertie should act ungratefully, and wish to make her appear to do the same, towards the people who had been kind to both of them. It might not have been judicious or right of her cousin Nigel, under the circumstances, to attempt to renew a connexion which had been dissolved for years; but Nelly was sure that he had done it for the best, that he had wished to do them good and not evil, by coming down to Little Bickton, and inviting them to Orpington Chase. She did not desire, or, at least, she knew that she ought not to desire (which seemed all the same thing) to hold any further communication with her aunt and cousin; but she did wish (and in this she felt there could be no wrong) that the resolution at which Bertie and she had arrived, might be told them with as little offence as possible.

She had little, during these two days, to divert her mind from this topic. Her friend Mrs. Weston would have been only too pleased to have come and spent part of that lonely

time with her young favourite ; but although she loved Nelly dearly, there had always existed a species of silent antagonism between Robert Brooke and the mistress of the Farm, and she feared lest an offer which the sister might have gratefully accepted, would be resented by the brother as an act of interference. So she contented herself with writing Nelly little sympathetic notes, which Charley daily delivered, and in which she earnestly begged her to let her know if there was anything in which she could be of use to her in the present emergency.

Nelly answered the notes kindly, denying the want of any assistance, and then returned to her seat beside her brother's sofa, to ponder in what words she could best bring him round to think about Nigel Brooke as she did herself. She was no coward ; with all her sweetness of disposition and fear to offend those she loved, she was brave where the truth was concerned, and she would rather have made Bertie angry than have permitted him without remonstrance to act in a manner which was unbecoming. Many people in this world get the credit of having very sweet dispositions, because they are simply too indolent or too

craven to stand up for the right when they both know and see it.

Nelly Brooke was not one of these; had she been, the whole tenour of her life would have been changed. Her spirit was naturally high, and her soul rebelled against anything which was unjust or ungenerous. She could see her own faults and those of others plainly enough, and the reason why she succumbed in everything to a brother so infinitely inferior to herself, was because her overwhelming love, whilst it could not entirely blind her to his failings, made her willing to bear all things from him and for him.

Love ruled her spirit, and through love Bertie ruled herself; and a few months back she would probably have submitted without a murmur to his decree touching her future treatment of her aunt and cousin.

But, for the first time in her life, there was rising in her heart (though unconfessed) a tiny rival in her affection for her brother, and the infant feeling had sufficient strength to cast out fear.

And so, as time went on, and no mention was made of the necessity of letting Nigel Brooke know of his grandfather's death, Nelly determined that she would remonstrate with

Robert, however cross he might be with her, before she let him offer such an indignity to one who was now the head of the family, as to permit him to learn the news from a foreign source. An opportunity for broaching the subject soon presented itself to her, for on the Saturday morning old Aggie put a letter into her hands, in the address of which she had no difficulty in recognising the bold firm writing of her cousin Nigel. It was dated from London, and had been written two days previously.

“ MY DEAR COUSIN NELLY,

“ I only waited in Hilstone long enough to see Pinner return, and to hear the news that she had safely started you on your road to Little Bickton, before I came up to town to see about Bertie’s bath chair. I hope that the fly did not break down before it reached the Farm Cottage, but if it did I am quite sure that your loving little self would have walked all the rest of the way, and felt no fatigue until you were in Bertie’s arms again. However, doubtless before this you have sent my mother the whole account of your journey, and I shall hear it from her on my return. I trust you found your grand-

father better, and that he will soon be well enough to spare you to come back and pay the Chase another visit, and bring Bertie with you. The little grey will fall sick else, for want of exercise, for no one is to be allowed to ride him until you return. I call him 'Miss Nelly's horse' now, and have told the groom to get him a new set of clothing for the winter, that he may not disgrace his mistress. But I am forgetting the chair, which is really a great beauty, and which started by rail for Reddington to-day. I could not ascertain at this end by what means it is to be transported from Reddington to Bickton, or I should have given orders for its being forwarded, but doubtless there is a carrier between the places who will call for it if you desire him to do so. Give it, with my love, to Bertie, and tell him I trust it may afford him a few, if not many pleasant hours. I think he will approve of it. It is like the one lined with blue cloth, which you so much admired the day we lunched at Dr. Monkton's, and has a hood, and glasses to shut down in front in case of rain. Let me know of its safe arrival. I had it carefully packed, and hope it will not get scratched in the transit.

“ Good-bye, my dear Nelly, with love to you all, not forgetting Aggie and Thug.

“ Believe me, your affectionate Cousin,

“ NIGEL BROOKE.”

On the perusal of this letter, so friendly and informal, Nelly reddened with alternate pain and pleasure. Her heart melted at the knowledge of her cousin's promptitude and generosity, and at the thought that it must all be wasted; but it quailed at the remembrance of what Bertie had said, that he would try by his presents to pay them for their father's blood. Had Nelly been a coward she would have thrust away this letter or destroyed it, or at all events delayed the confession that she had received it until a few days later. She might easily have done either of the three, for it had arrived early in the morning, and before Bertie had risen from his bed. But her justice told her that, in whatever spirit, it should be answered, and with the intention of urging that fact upon his consideration, she carried it straight into her brother's room.

“ Bertie, I have just received this letter from Nigel Brooke, it concerns you more than myself: shall I read it to you?”

“No! put it in the fire: I have no wish to hear it!”

“But you must hear it, darling,” she said firmly, as she seated herself on the edge of the bed, “it is a letter which requires an answer and deserves one.”

And without further parley she read it aloud from beginning to end, during which proceeding her brother made no remark.

“Now, Bertie! what answer am I to send?” she asked as she refolded the paper.

“I will have no answer sent at all.”

“But the bath chair will be at Reddington by this time, Bertie, and we must take some notice of its arrival: such a beautiful chair, too (if it is like the one he mentions) with the easiest springs, and cushions, and all lined with cloth: it cost forty-five guineas, I know, at the very least; and if you choose, you can unscrew the handle, and fix in shafts for a pony or donkey. It was just the thing for you, Bertie, and it would be such a comfort: and it must be lying at the station at Reddington now.”

“Let it lie there then!” he said angrily, “it shall rot there before I will lift a finger towards its removal. Have I not told you

already, Nelly, that I will accept nothing from the hands of this man, and neither shall you."

"But, surely I must let him know of your determination, Bertie. You see that this letter was written in perfect ignorance of your feelings respecting him."

"Not of your own, I suppose?" said Robert sneeringly.

"Of *our* feelings, darling, I meant," replied Nelly, reddening under the inference. "You know we always think together, and I trust it will never be otherwise; but it would be worse than ungracious, it would be really unfair not to let Nigel Brooke know that we have no intention of using his gift, we must give him the option of sending for it again, Bertie: it is too valuable a thing to be left to spoil unclaimed at a railway station."

"He has no lack of money," said her brother curtly. "He can well afford the loss."

"But, dearest, if you do not wish to make use of it yourself," she continued, but stopped short on seeing Robert rise into a sitting posture on the bed.

"Do you want to keep up a correspondence with this man?" he asked, eyeing her suspiciously, whilst his lips turned pale with passion.

The idea that had once before crossed his mind that his cousin might take a fancy to his sister, returned upon it in that moment.

“You don’t mean to tell me,” he added quickly, “that he has had the shame, the audacity to make love to you?” but the look of offended pride which Nelly turned upon him, forbade his continuation of the subject.

“You needn’t look at me in that way, Nell,” he said more quietly, “I hardly supposed he had, but why do you think it necessary to plead his cause in this fashion? Do you wish me to accept his gift—the mere offer of which I now feel to be an insult—and to say ‘thank you,’ to him prettily, and to remember each time I use it, that it is a love token from the son of my father’s murderer? You seem to me to think vastly little of what I told you the other night. What right has that fellow to address you in those familiar terms, or indeed to address you at all? You appear altogether to overlook the fact, that at the time Nigel Brooke visited us, and extracted a promise from me that you should go to Orpington, he was cognizant of what we have only just learned. He had no right, being in possession of the truth, to take that promise from me. I consider that he inveigled

you to the Chase under false pretences, and were he to enter here this moment, I should have no hesitation in telling him so. Notwithstanding his fine speeches, he looks down upon us like the rest of the world, and thinks, I suppose, that anything from *his* hand is good enough to throw to such paupers as we are. But I'll have none of his charity or his commiseration, and he shall find that out before long," and seizing the letter which his sister held in her hand he tore it into pieces, and passionately threw it away.

Nelly's blue eyes had opened wider and wider with astonishment as her brother proceeded with this outburst, but at his last assertion which she knew to be so utterly unfounded, and the violent act which accompanied it, the surprise in her face faded away and gave place to a look of indignation.

"For shame, Bertie," she said warmly. "You are very unjust. Nigel Brooke has given neither of us any cause to say that he looks down upon us. Besides, why should he? and what do you mean by saying 'like the rest of the world.' We are very poor, I know, but that is no reason we should be despised."

At these words her brother appeared to

think he had made a mistake, for he coloured as he replied :—

“ *You* may consider it no reason, Nelly, but the longer you live, the more you will be convinced that it is. However, Mr. Nigel Brooke shall not be the one to give you your first lesson. No wonder we never heard his name mentioned before we saw him ! My only surprise now is, how my grandfather could ever have given him permission to enter these doors. If he hadn’t been an old fool, he——”

“ Oh ! hush, hush, darling,” cried Nelly, no less shocked than alarmed at her brother’s continued vehemence, for agitation was at all times hurtful to him, “ remember that he lies dead in the next room to us, and, poor old man, I daresay he did it for the best. We are commanded to forgive, Bertie, as we hope to be forgiven.”

“ I shall never be forgiven at that rate,” he muttered, sinking down again upon his pillows.

“ Yes, you will, dear ; you will come, some day, to see all things in a different light. Meanwhile, don’t think I desire to oppose your wishes, Bertie, in any way. I never have yet, you know, and it is not likely I should begin

now. Not that I think you are acting right or fairly in this matter, but——”

“I don't care what you think,” he interposed, rudely.

“But as a question of business. Is it not your part to let Nigel Brooke know of poor grandpapa's death? He was his grandfather, remember, as well as ours.”

“It is nothing to me whose grandfather he was,” replied her brother. “Nigel Brooke doesn't hear it from me.

“Then may I not write a little note, Bertie,” she said, persuasively, “not to cousin Nigel, but only to aunt Eliza, just to tell her the bare fact of grandpapa's death and the resolution to which we have come, and nothing more? You can read it, darling, of course, and see all that I say, and I will make it as cold and formal as you please,” and she twined her arms about Bertie's neck, and laid her soft cheek coaxingly against his own. But he shook her off with a denial and an oath, such as she had seldom heard from his lips before. Nelly was frightened, not so much at her brother's violence, as at what it might portend. A vague dread began to assail her mind. For the first time in her life, she asked her heart if it were possible that there could ever be

less love between Bertie and herself than had existed since their infancy; less perfect sympathy between her soul and the twin soul (so much dearer to her than her own), which had left Heaven at one breath together.

“Oh, God! forbid it!” she cried, when she had regained the sanctuary of her own room. “Anything but that, anything in the world rather than coldness, or distrust, or blame, should come between my darling and myself.”

So nothing more was said at that time about the letter or about the words which it had caused; though all Nelly's affectionate assiduity failed to rouse her brother from the sullen silence into which he fell after their discussion of the morning.

CHAPTER XIX.

AND RECEIVES A GRATEFUL ANSWER.

ON the following day, however, which was Sunday, the subject was renewed, though not between themselves. It was the turn for afternoon Church at Little Bickton, and when the service was over, Mr. Ray walked into the dining-room at the Farm Cottage, where he found the twins sitting together in the dusk and talking by the firelight.

The vicar had kindly taken it upon himself to make all the necessary arrangements for Mr. Brooke's funeral; not only because he was an old friend of the family, and knew Robert to be too helpless to take any part in business, but because he was aware of the contents of the will of their late grandfather, and that he had been named guardian to the brother and sister, in case of their not being of age at the time of the old man's death. He now came to inform them that he had fixed the funeral to take place on the following Wednes-

day, and that all that was needful should be ready by the same time.

“You are so kind to us, Mr. Ray,” said Nelly, placing her little hand in the vicar’s; “I don’t know what we should have done without you.”

“Don’t begin to praise me too soon, Nelly,” he replied, smiling, “you don’t know how stern I can be, when I choose; perhaps you are not aware that your poor grandfather has named me in his will, as your guardian.”

“Has he? I am so glad,” she said, quietly, leaving her hand in his. Though, had there been a better light in the room than that afforded by the fire, it would have been seen that Bertie’s features did not show the same contentment at the news that hers did.

“Besides,” continued Mr. Ray, “I have not done everything for you, Nelly, as you seem to imagine. There is still much to employ both Robert and yourself, and there will be still more after the funeral. You must let your friends know of the date on which it is fixed to take place. Of course you have already apprised your cousin, Mr. Nigel Brooke, of his grandfather’s death?”

He glanced towards both the young people as he put the question, but neither of them

answered. Robert kept his sullen eyes fixed upon the fire, and Nelly's cheeks grew hot, and she dared not raise her face.

"Have you yet heard from your cousin, Robert?" then enquired the vicar, addressing the boy more particularly. "Will he be down to the funeral?"

"I don't know," replied Robert Brooke.

But Nelly could not bear an evasion, even from her brother, and she added softly: "We have not told him of it, Mr. Ray."

"Not told him of it!" echoed the vicar, in his astonishment; "why, my dear children, what have you been thinking about?—here is Sunday already, and no post out until to-morrow afternoon. Did you forget it, Robert?"

"No! I did not forget it," was the unwilling reply.

Mr. Ray was annoyed at the boy's uncommunicative manner, and when he next spoke, it was, for him, rather sharply—

"Then you have been very wrong to neglect such a duty; for Mr. Nigel Brooke is the first person who should have been informed of the event. I doubt now whether a letter will reach him in time. The idea of the funeral taking place without the presence of the head

of the family! It is extremely irregular: he ought to be the chief mourner."

"I daresay it will take place just as well without him," said Robert Brooke.

But Mr. Ray could not forget the negligence of which, as he imagined, the brother and sister had been guilty, and reverted to it several times during the remainder of his visit. When he rose to go, he said to Robert—

"You will be sure and write to your cousin, to-morrow, if you please, and beg him, if possible, to be here by Wednesday. I wish now we could put it off till Thursday, but I am afraid we shall not be able to do so, as the men come from Reddington. If you cannot write yourself, Robert, mind that your sister does so. Nelly! I depend upon you that this is not forgotten again."

Robert Brooke grumbled out something in reply to this friendly injunction, but it appeared so unsatisfactory to the vicar that when he had gained the dark passage, whither Nelly had followed to help him on with his great coat, he turned towards her, and searchingly asked:

"Nelly, my dear, will Robert write that letter to your cousin?"

She answered him in so low a tone, and

with so much trepidation in her voice that his suspicions of something wrong were confirmed.

“I don't know, Mr. Ray—indeed I don't know, but I hope he will.”

“But what makes your brother so unwilling, Nelly? Is it obstinacy, or does he dislike his cousin? Some one must write, and if he does not, I will.”

“Oh! I wish you would, Mr. Ray,” she whispered, anxiously. “I am afraid Bertie won't; and that's the truth. There's a quarrel between them; not exactly a quarrel, though—a kind of misunderstanding—and I fear it will never be set straight. It is not right, is it, to be hard and unforgiving, and especially at a time like this?”

“It is never right, my dear child; it is wrong at all times, and in this case, as far as I can see, it is absurd and most impolitic. But cannot you write to your cousin, since Robert will not?”

“He won't let me,” she answered in the same low voice, “and I can't vex him, Mr. Ray—I would rather do anything than vex him.”

“You spoil him altogether, Nelly,” said the vicar: “however, I will write myself. Let me see, what is the address — Orpington,

Somerset—is it not? It would be of little use speaking to your brother now; I can see he is in no fit state to be argued with, but if Mr. Brooke cannot attend the funeral (which I fear is impossible), he will be sure to come to Bickton afterwards, and then I will enquire more particularly into the quarrel, and see that matters are explained between them.”

And without waiting for Nelly’s thanks, Mr. Ray hurried out of the front door into the fog and mist of the autumn evening.

The vicar’s communication left Bickton Proper on the Monday afternoon, and did not reach the Chase until the same time on Wednesday, for it was two days’ post between the places.

Mrs. Brooke, who was daily expecting her son back from London, tossed the letter on one side amongst several others which were awaiting his return, and was startled by the exclamation which burst from his lips as he opened it, sitting by her side on the following day.

He had not been home many minutes, but she had already treated him to a dissertation upon the wicked ingratitude of her late guest, in not having written to properly announce her arrival at Little Bickton, or to thank

them for the hospitality she had experienced at the Chase : and had been considerably nettled by Nigel attempting to excuse his cousin's apparent neglect, on the supposition that her grandfather's illness might be more serious than she had anticipated, and have fully occupied her time.

“Nonsense! I don't believe it in the least,” Mrs. Brooke was in the act of saying; “I always thought there was something sly and artful about that girl; she made so many professions——” when she was interrupted by her son holding up an envelope for her inspection, as he exclaimed :—

“Good gracious, mother! when did this arrive?”

Mrs. Brooke did not at all like being disturbed in the midst of her speech, and she answered in a tone of offence :—

“I am sure I do not know, Nigel: yesterday afternoon, most likely, or the day before, but Henderson can tell you better than myself. Why is it of importance to ascertain?”

“Because it is from the clergyman at Bickton, and contains an explanation of poor Nelly's misdemeanours. He tells me that my grandfather died last Thursday, and was to be buried yesterday; so perhaps you'll forgive

the poor child for not writing now. But, only fancy my not being at the funeral. I am so sorry ; I wish I had been at home when this arrived."

"You could not have reached there in time, if you had been," replied his mother, without expressing the least concern at the news, "so it is just as well you were not. It was a wretched day, and those country churchyards are the most dreadful places for catching cold. Shall we have to go into mourning, Nigel?"

He looked at her with disgusted surprise.

"Of course we shall ; what are you thinking of? Not only ourselves, but the whole household—do you forget he was your husband's father? And please see about it at once, for I shall go to Bickton myself, to-morrow, and probably bring back my cousins with me!"

At this intelligence Mrs. Brooke looked aghast, but after the discussions which she and her son had already held on the subject, she dared do no more than look. All she ventured to remark, was,—

"You cannot possibly go to-morrow, Nigel, because you have arranged to meet Mr. Pooley here on Saturday."

This was true, and, moreover, Mr. Pooley

was a man of business connected with the house at Calcutta, for Nigel Brooke to speak with whom at that particular juncture was of the utmost importance to the firm. Remembering which, he admitted at once the necessity of the delay, but chafed under it much more than his mother liked to see.

“So I have!” he exclaimed, in a tone of annoyance, “and I cannot put him off either, or I would write and do so by to-night’s post. I could run down to Bickton by the last train on Saturday, after I have spoken to Pooley, but I particularly asked him to stay with us until Monday, and it won’t do to offend him. How extremely annoying—I would give a hundred pounds it should not have happened so.”

“I really think you are making rather too much of it,” said Mrs. Brooke. “The funeral is over, you see, and it is not your fault that you did not attend it. You can write to the parson, and to your cousins, if you think it necessary, and tell them so; and appoint a time to visit them next week. Your presence there now can be of no use, and might be thought an intrusion.”

“I am not afraid of that,” replied Nigel, “but I cannot bear to think of those poor chil-

dren left there by themselves. I want to hear what the will said, too, and how my grandfather has left them; they may be penniless for aught I know; and lamenting together over their prospects, not half believing all that I have said, respecting my desire and ability to help them."

"You can surely communicate your disinterested intentions by letter, Nigel, as effectually as by word of mouth. I have no doubt that your cousins, (from what I have seen at least of Helena's disposition) will be ready enough both to believe and accept them."

"So I will," he answered, as, roused by her sarcastic tone, and the slur cast on poor Nelly, he rose to leave the room; "I will write at once, and assure Robert and his sister that I am ready to share my fortune with them to the last penny."

Full of this generous intention, Nigel Brooke penned a letter to his cousin Robert, in which after expressing his regret at not having seen his grandfather again, or even been able to pay him the last respect of being present at his funeral, he proceeded to offer him and his sister all that he had told his mother he should do. He gave him his reasons for not being able to go to Little Bickton

till the following week: asked him to appoint the day most convenient to themselves for receiving him there, and begged him, if in want of money before that time, to draw on himself to any amount. He trusted that both he and Nelly would thenceforward look upon him as their elder brother and best friend, and concluded his letter in these words:—

“Were all the circumstances of our lives, my dear Robert, as fully known to you as some day they must be, you would acknowledge that I, of all men, have the best right to offer you assistance, and you to accept it from me.”

It was a letter calculated to melt the heart, and soften the rancour of most people, even had the writer been a personal enemy, and it reached the one to whom it was addressed, at a moment when he should have been most open to conviction.

It reached Robert Brooke, so short a time after the earth had closed over the last survivor of the principal actors in the great quarrel of which he chose to call himself the avenger, that he might have consented, without any great humiliation in his own eyes, to bury the hatchet with his grandfather. But his mind had sunk into so morbid a state, that

the reception of Nigel's letter only seemed to have the effect of hardening him. He chose to mistake the offers of kindness which it contained for charity: the expressions of sympathy for pity; and the insolent pride of his warped understanding prompted him to make a bitter requital for his cousin's generosity.

He never shewed Nelly this letter, and although she knew that he had received it, their last words upon the subject of Nigel Brooke and the cutting suspicion by which Robert had then wounded her sensibility by ascribing her interest to a warmer feeling, were fresh in her memory, and her pride forbade her to revive anything so unpleasant.

Knowing how much kindness the writer had always expressed towards them both, she guessed what the letter contained, and trusted that Bertie's good sense and good feeling (in which she, of all the world, alone believed) would lead him to answer it as he should.

But she trusted too much.

The youth sat down with a pen dipped in gall, and obeying no dictates, but such as the obstinate enmity he had conceived for Nigel Brooke dictated to him, wrote back such a reply as no *man* would have dared to send another.

It was a letter, so utterly unjust, so insolent and defiant, that it needed to be seen to be believed. In it, he recapitulated all that he had said to Nelly, with the addition of much which he had purposely avoided telling her ; he informed his cousin that he knew all ; accused him of attempting to deceive and wishing to insult them, and told him that if he ever presumed to offer them money and presents again, he would find both flung back into his face.

He heaped abuse upon the memory of his dead uncle and grandfather, and finished by desiring never to meet his correspondent again, in terms such as few men could forgive or overlook.

It was not only the letter of a headstrong and irascible boy, although the writer might well have been termed such ; but it contained so much bitter truth mixed up with its exaggerated grandiloquence, that it became too serious a matter to be passed over with a mere smile of contempt.

CHAPTER XX.

NELLY AND BERTIE ARE LEFT TO THEMSELVES.

WHEN Robert Brooke had finished the composition of this letter, he took good care that it should not meet his sister's eye. He was afraid of Nelly : afraid, not of her angry remonstrance or blame, but of her coaxing caresses and tearful persuasion. So he bribed a little village boy to carry it to the post-office ; and never even mentioned the fact of its having been written. But Nelly knew all about it, just as well as he did, and giving her brother credit for a virtue which he did not possess, ascribed his reticence on the subject to the fact that the letter he had received had altered his opinion concerning his cousin, and that he was shy of confessing so sudden a change of mind even to herself.

His answer reached Nigel Brooke just as he was making preparations for starting on his journey to Little Bickton. To accurately describe the effect which it had upon him, glow-

ing as he was with the most ardent generosity, is next to impossible. Iced water poured, without warning, on a heated and feverish frame is the nearest simile which physical nature can produce. At first, he could scarcely believe but that his eyes were playing him false, but when after many a perusal, he was convinced it was no trick that had been served him, his spirit shudderingly recoiled from the ingratitude contained in every line. For a moment he asked himself if it were possible that Nelly, who looked so innocent, and appeared so affectionate and true, could be accessory to such a cruel insult, but in the next, he had acquitted her. He thought he had reason to believe that she would be averse to any tenderer attentions from himself than such as a cousin might offer, but he could not distrust the guilelessness of the nature which she had so frankly displayed to him, or believe her capable of countenancing any unworthy method of rejecting the friendly aid which he had proffered her brother.

And then, after the first shock and disappointment were over, the natural sequence to such feelings under such circumstances set in, and Nigel Brooke grew terribly angry; he forgot how often he had himself maintained

that the brother and sister had more reason to shrink from than cultivate his acquaintance; he forgot that if his own sense of the injury his father had inflicted on them was deep, theirs must needs be much deeper; everyone is thus apt to forget his former assertions and resolutions when he is wounded to the quick. Right and wrong seemed suddenly to change places in his opinion as he gazed on the written insult which Robert Brooke had sent him.

It would have been hard to bear such truths from anyone with equanimity, but it became doubly so when they proceeded from the lips of a mere lad, whom he had designed to lift from a lowly and obscure position to one of luxury, if not distinction. His offer had been, indeed, as his cousin expressed it, flung back in his face again, and with a violence which almost stunned him. "Who is this insolent boy after all?" he angrily asked himself, "that I should care two straws whether he lives and dies at the expense of his parish, or not. My sense of honour and duty must really be as chimeric as my mother tells me, if an ignorant youth like this can see through the vain absurdity of my offers, and threaten to strike me in return. I will concern myself no longer

about either of them. From this hour we will remain as unknown to each other as we were three months ago."

But even whilst this thought passed through the mind of Nigel Brooke, he knew that it could not be. He knew, let others scoff as they would, that he had voluntarily imposed a sacred duty upon himself, and that no ingratitude, or insult, or rebuff could justify him to his own conscience in altogether deserting his orphan cousins. He remembered that he had registered an oath before high Heaven, that as long as he lived, neither Robert or Helena should ever want a friend in time of need; and he felt that that time, sooner or later, must come. As Nigel Brooke recalled this, all that was best and loftiest in his noble nature came back to his aid, and the anger of which the wayward epistle before him, was really unworthy, dispersed before it like the morning dew. He rose from his seat, (he had been alone when he received the letter,) and wiping off the cold sweat which passion had caused to gather on his brow, felt that his better self had conquered, and that he could treat Robert Brooke's insulting missive with the contempt which it deserved.

"After all, I am certain Nelly has had

nothing to do with this," so ran his thoughts, "and I could not be so ungenerous as to let her suffer for her brother's faults. She will have enough to bear, as it is, poor dear child! Ah! if I had been but a few years younger; but I have made a vow not to think of that again. It is just as well I saw no more of her, for this business would have put a stop to it, if nothing else had;" and with a deep sigh Nigel Brooke resumed his seat and began to consider what was the best step for him to take in the matter. But the first thing he did was to tear Robert's letter into fragments and throw them into the fire.

"I am not likely to forget it," he thought, as he moodily watched them burn; "but I will not keep it before me as a constant reminder of the lad's folly. He will come to see it in that light himself before long, and then he will be thankful to learn that I destroyed the mad effusion the same day I received it." His next idea was, not to postpone his contemplated journey, but to go to Bickton Proper, and speak to the vicar about his cousin's extraordinary behaviour. But a few minutes' consideration made him reject this project as useless. Nothing that Mr. Ray could say to convince Robert Brooke of his want of reason

in attempting to visit the sins of the father upon the son could undo the insult which he had voluntarily written. He might yield to persuasion so far as making an unwilling and humiliating apology for his rudeness was concerned, but such a concession was not what Nigel required. He had wished and asked for the free and confiding affection of both his young cousins, and it had been refused him on the part at least of one of them, with so much contempt and abuse, that a formal reparation, founded on no conviction of the injustice of such a proceeding, could never heal the wound which it had inflicted.

Besides, Nigel Brooke was not aware if the vicar of Bickton knew of the cause for quarrel between Robert and himself. He thought most probably that he did not, for he had written to him simply in the character of a friend of his late grandfather, and the stories discreditable to the fame of a family are usually the last to be discussed beyond its immediate circle. All that he did know concerning Mr. Ray, was that by old Mr. Brooke's will he had been nominated guardian to the brother and sister, for Robert had mentioned this circumstance in his letter, adding, as proof that they needed neither protection nor assist-

ance at their cousin's hands, that by the same will, Nelly and he had been left very comfortably off, and were perfectly able to maintain themselves.

To seek an interview with Robert Brooke after the indignity which his father's name and his own had so lately suffered at his hands, was out of the question. Nigel was ready enough to forgive his cousin, but he felt that when a reconciliation took place between them, the first advances must come from the other side. Whenever the hand of friendship was extended, however late, however unwillingly, he would not be slow to accept it. Meanwhile the only course to be pursued, consistent with his dignity, was to hold aloof from the inmates of the Farm Cottage.

And he hardly knew what he could say on the subject, even to Mr. Ray. The vicar might be, probably was, a most estimable man, but he was a stranger to him, and without entering into all the miserable and disgraceful details of the case, it was impossible that Nigel Brooke should make him understand how far his cousin Robert was justified, not only in rejecting his offered kindness, but in insulting him into the bargain. And this

he had no intention of doing. He sickened to recall the rude handling which his father's misdeeds had already undergone in the letter, the contents of which, though now reduced to a few white ashes in the grate, were still vividly impressed upon his mind; and he resolved, that since no discussion could do away with the fact of their committal, or the consequences they had left behind them, he would thenceforth preserve a filial silence on the subject. The only conclusion at which he arrived, was that he could do no better than rest quiet until the following morning, before which time he should have decided in what terms to address the guardian of his cousins.

But when, at length, after much thought and battling with himself, Nigel Brooke rose to leave the study, his face was so pale from the annoyance he had passed through, that his mother at once noticed the alteration in his appearance.

“Good gracious, Nigel!” she exclaimed, as he entered her presence, “what have you been doing to yourself? Are you ill?”

“No! Do I look so?” he enquired, with a ghastly smile.

“Look so! I should think you did. Why! you are as white as a ghost.”

“I have a headache!” he said, wearily, “I have had much to worry me this afternoon, and I feel tired.”

“Nothing wrong in Calcutta, I hope, is there, Nigel?” asked Mrs. Brooke, anxiously, as her son threw himself into a chair.

“Nothing in the world, mother! in fact, the house is in a more flourishing state than usual.”

“Then what has annoyed you? Do you still intend to go to Bickton by the early train? You had better put off your journey for a day or two, if you do not feel well.”

“I intend to put it off, mother. I think it is not improbable that I may do so altogether. I find that my grandfather has appointed a guardian for my cousins in the person of the vicar of the parish, Mr. Ray, the same gentleman who wrote to me to announce the death; and he appears quite capable of doing all that is required in looking after their interests.”

“You have heard from Bickton, then, which of them wrote, the brother or Helena? I think it is most extraordinary that I have not received a letter from that girl! How has the old man left them off?”

“Very comfortably—so Robert writes—

and quite independent, but he does not mention if they will continue to live in the Farm Cottage or not." As Nigel said this he tried to speak unconcernedly, but the sound of his voice betrayed that he was acting.

"You are keeping something from me," said Mrs. Brooke, curiously, "there is more in the letter than that. What answer do your cousins send to your grand offer of sharing house and home with them?"

"Why, what answer could they send?" he said, with a careless laugh, as he attempted to evade her question. But the next moment he felt it would be useless to try to do so. Before long, his mother must learn the decision to which Robert Brooke had arrived, and it was not worth his while even temporarily to deceive her. She would be sure to speak her mind about it at any time, and he might as well hear all she had to say at once, and have it over.

And so, changing his tone to one more serious, he continued—

"It is vain to attempt to hide anything from you, mother: it is true that there was a great deal more in my cousin's letter, and much to vex me. He must be a very headstrong and unthinking lad, or he would not

venture to commit his first impulse to paper as he evidently has done."

Mrs. Brooke laid down her work upon her lap, and extended her hand.

"Let me see the letter!" she said eagerly. But her son only smiled at her in a curious manner in reply.

"Let me read it, won't you?" she repeated, and then he said:

"It is out of my power, for I have already destroyed it."

"Then I am sure it must have been something *very bad indeed!*" exclaimed his mother, with an air of disappointment, as she returned to her employment, "if you could not even shew it to *me*. What did the boy say? He surely does not think little of the offer you made him?"

"So little, mother, that he refuses it altogether both for Nelly and himself. He rejects both my assistance and my friendship; and can you guess for what reason?"

At this intelligence, Mrs. Brooke was secretly overjoyed, for the thought that her son might bring both his cousins to live at the Chase had been a sore trouble to her. She had no more desire now to receive Helena than she had Robert. The flimsy enthusiasm which she

had conceived for the girl when she found she was useful to her, had all evaporated directly she had occasion to fear that she might prove a rival in the affection of her son. Mrs. Brooke wished Nigel to marry; but not to fall in love. Many mothers advocate the one idea, who cannot bear even the thought of the other. And she had dreaded the return of Nelly to the Chase, and the love scenes which she foresaw would ensue, and the thought that the little country girl would be mistress then, and her crippled brother a life pensioner on Nigel's bounty, and she—herself—would be nothing! So she was greatly pleased to learn that there was the prospect of a coolness between her son and Robert Brooke; and though she had grown too politic to shew her pleasure openly, there was an expression of content mingled with the serious look which she immediately affected, which did not escape the notice of the man who sat opposite to her.

“Can you guess for what reason?” were the last words which Nigel had addressed to his mother, and as he pronounced them he looked her in the face.

It had been part of Mrs. Brooke's later scheme to magnify rather than ignore the cause of quarrel between her husband and his

father, and maintain that it was an insuperable barrier to anything like a thought of marriage between the cousins. So, true to the line of argument which for convenience' sake she had temporarily adopted, she would not permit herself to express any curiosity at her son's question, but languidly replied :

“ For *which* reason, you should rather say, Nigel ! No ! I really cannot. There are dozens, as I have always maintained, against anything like an intimacy between ourselves and that unfortunate branch of the family.”

Her son's lip curled visibly.

“ You have a wonderful facility for changing your opinions, mother ; one for which, at this moment, I could almost envy you. I wish I could forget some of my own as easily ! My cousin's avowed reason for refusing to accept any assistance at my hands, is because my father's were stained with his father's blood. He has learnt his own history, and this is the result.”

“ And a very proper result, too,” affirmed Mrs. Brooke. “ I did not give the young man credit for so much sense and right feeling. There is no doubt that the unfortunate circumstances under which his father met his death *ought* to make a complete gulph between

you; it is not natural that you should be friendly together, and I don't think that the world would think it decent."

"Hang 'the world,'" was the quick rejoinder. "Do you mean to tell me that that fact is to raise up so high a barrier between my cousins and myself, that we shall never be able to grasp hands over it; that because the fathers sinned against each other, the children are to carry on the feud, and that we are to be strangers from generation to generation?"

Here Nigel Brooke left his seat, and as he hurriedly paced the floor, continued:

"No! I do not believe in such a creed, and I will not sanction it. If Robert chooses to think so, and time does not open his eyes to the folly of which he is guilty, I suppose that our future intercourse must, of necessity, be limited; but my opinions are unchangeable, and whenever he alters his, he shall not find me backward in fulfilling the promises I have made him. If not for his own sake, I would do it for Nelly's, and my dead father's."

"Well, I think you are perfectly infatuated, Nigel, as I have often told you before," replied his mother, "it was all well enough, perhaps, when the young people were willing to carry out your design, but now that they have in-

sulted you by actually refusing your friendship, I think you might hold yourself higher than——”

“Don’t say *they*, mother,” he exclaimed, interrupting her, “this letter is Robert’s work ; Nelly has had nothing to do with it, of that I am assured.”

“Of course you are if you wish to be,” replied Mrs. Brooke, with a sneer, “but that is no proof of the assertion. You have always said yourself, that Helena is everything to her brother ; that she can advise, or direct, or persuade him, as she will, and yet you consider it likely that he would write an important letter like that without her knowledge. The idea is absurd. If the boy knows his own history, you may be sure the girl knows it too, and it is not one calculated to please a woman, I suppose, more than a man. Depend on it, that Helena wrote that letter. I do not mean with her own hand, but that her brother wrote it from her dictation ; and, in my opinion, it is no more than you need have expected.”

“I never thought of that,” said Nigel, arresting his footsteps for a moment, whilst a look of keen distress passed over his face. “I hope she didn’t. But, no ! I won’t believe it ! Nelly is too amiable to cherish any such vin-

dictive feelings as that letter displayed ; still less to counsel their being written with the purpose of wounding one who has been kind to her."

His mother smiled incredulously.

"Believe and hope what you choose, my dear Nigel ; but I fancy I know a little more about Miss Helena's amiability than you do. It is very easy to appear amiable when you are pleased ; but I have always thought there was something very strange and underhand about the sudden manner in which she left us, and the excuses she made, and——"

"Mother, pray let us talk no more upon this subject," said Nigel, moving towards the door. "I daresay I may never see Nelly again, but I will not believe that she is anything but what is perfectly sincere, and if I did," he added, in rather a lower tone, "I would not hear it, even from you."

This suspicion of his mother's had the power to wound him deeply, for a doubt of his girl-cousin seemed to him worse to bear than all that had gone before it ; not because he entertained any hope of winning her love, or even of having the opportunity of trying to do so ; but simply because he had considered her the freshest and most innocent creature that had

ever crossed his path, and he could not bear to part with his ideal. The next morning's post took his letter to the vicar of Bickton. It was curt and formal, but after a long night of painful consideration, Nigel could think of no means by which to make it otherwise. After thanking Mr. Ray for letting him know of his grandfather's death, and detailing his reasons for not having been present at the funeral, he went on to state that, as he concluded the vicar was aware of the sentiments which his cousin, Mr. Robert Brooke, had expressed towards himself, he would not be surprised at his declining to visit Little Bickton, now that the occasion for his presence was over. But as he understood that Mr. Ray had been legally appointed guardian to his cousins, and that, as head of the family, he considered himself naturally so, he trusted that the vicar would let him know, should any occasion arise for which his assistance might be required for them, and would not be refused. Which, being followed by a few commonplace civilities, closed the epistle.

It reached Mr. Ray at a time when he was anxiously expecting to hear from this rich cousin of his orphan wards; for having been told of his grand promises on their behalf, by

the late Mr. Brooke, he waited to know what intentions he might have regarding them, before he bestirred himself to make any arrangements for the future.

When Robert Brooke had written that his sister and himself were left comfortably off, and needed assistance from no one, his pride had led him to greatly exaggerate the truth. His grandfather had had nothing to bequeath them beyond a couple of thousand in the funds, which produced an income of about seventy pounds a year for their mutual support.

The cottage in which they had lived, had not even been his own, although the furniture was; and poorly as the twins had been fed and clothed, and educated, the necessity of doing so, had made many a hole, since their birth, in the old man's principal.

But there were still some years of the lease under which Mr. Brooke had rented the Farm Cottage, to run, and as soon as Mr. Ray thought it advisable that they should try and dispose of it, the Westons came forward with an offer which seemed as though it would suit all parties.

Mr. Weston's eldest son James, who was engaged to be married, had been trying for

some time to get a house near his father's farm, in which he held an interest, and the cottage was said to be the very thing he wanted.

“And then, as he would take his brother Tom to live with him,” Mrs. Weston eagerly explained to the vicar, “I could let Nelly and Mr. Robert have the three rooms which the young men used to occupy at the other side of the Farm. They are part of the old house, you may remember; and are divided from the kitchen and parlour by a passage, so that they can be quite private if they wish it; Nelly could put her own furniture in there; and Aggie would, of course, have every use of my kitchen. And as to the rent, Mr. Ray,” said the kind matron, whilst a tear twinkled in her eye, “I don't think either Mr. Weston or myself are likely to come down very hard upon such young creatures, left alone in the world.”

For since, up to that period, nothing had been seen of the rich cousin from Orpington, and neither Nelly nor her brother would give any reason for his non-appearance, it had already begun to be indignantly rumoured about Little Bickton, that his grand promises had all been moonshine, and that the orphans were to be left to depend on themselves.

“I am sure of that, Mrs. Weston,” replied the vicar, “and if nothing turns up to prevent it, I do not see, since they refuse to take up their abode at the vicarage, that Robert and Helena could do better than accept your kind proposal.”

The something floating in Mr. Ray’s brain, as likely to “turn up,” was, of course, an offer on the part of Nigel Brooke to provide a home for his orphan cousins, for this parley took place before his letter had been received.

The vicar had suggested that in case of their remaining in Bickton, the twins should go and live with himself, but Robert had emphatically refused to be dependent on any one, and notwithstanding his sincere desire to act generously towards the grandchildren of his deceased friend, Mr. Ray thought of his own large family, small house, and limited income, and was very thankful that his offer had been declined.

As soon as Nigel’s letter arrived, the vicar carried it over to the Farm Cottage, and in his capacity of guardian begged Robert Brooke to afford him an explanation of its contents.

Then ensued a somewhat stormy scene, during which Nelly learned for the first time

of the correspondence between her brother and cousin, and its results. It was in vain that Mr. Ray argued and remonstrated: he had no authority to do more, and nothing that he could say had power to shake the young man's dogged resolution, or to cause his opinion to swerve one inch towards his guardian's. The whole miserable history of the duel and its consequence (which it appeared the vicar had known for years) was recapitulated, and various dark hints were thrown out, respecting some other mystery which Nelly could not understand, but the mere allusion to which made her brother's brow lower, and his fist clench.

She was a passive hearer and spectator of all this: she could not lift her voice against Bertie's argument, and in favour of the descendant of the man who had so cruelly slain her father; especially, since the one was poor and had no one to love him but herself, and the other was rich and surrounded by friends and luxury. She could not know in what bitter language Bertie had insulted his cousin before he called forth that cold refusal to see them again, which the vicar held in his hand. She had thought her cousin Nigel would have been more generous and forgiving, but

whether disappointed in this particular or not, it mattered little: there was but one course open to her for the future: to cling to her brother.

What could she say when appealed to by her guardian to reason with Bertie on the folly and ingratitude of his conduct, but that, whether right or wrong, she must abide by his opinion?

What could she do, when Bertie himself, enraged by the continued discussion, and her silent disapprobation of his sentiments, dared her to choose at once between him and his wealthy cousin, who would doubtless dress and feed her as well as his mother's lady's maid if she asked for it humbly: but throw herself into his arms and beg him in a voice choked with tears, never again to speak of her preferring anyone before himself?

When the vicar rose to leave the brother and sister on that occasion, he had come to the conclusion that the sooner he saw their furniture moved into Mrs. Weston's rooms, and themselves comfortably settled there, the better. He wrote a short answer back to Nigel Brooke, in which he informed him that having had an interview with his wards concerning the letter which he had the honour to receive from him,

and found that they were as resolute as himself in desiring that no further communication should take place between Orpington Chase and Bickton, he supposed there was nothing more to be done but to thank Mr. Brooke for his offers of assistance, and to express regret that anything unpleasant should have occurred between his young relations and himself.

It was a very polite note, and intended to be harmless, but it terribly upset Nigel Brooke, absurdly so, indeed, when the tenour of its predecessor is taken into consideration. The use of the pronoun "they," which the writer had so naturally adopted, was sufficient effectually to destroy the rest of his correspondent for many nights after he had first seen it stare upon him from the paper.

It was true then, his mother's surmise was correct, and Nelly had closed her warm heart against him as soon as ever she heard the story of his father's error. But though the knowledge affected him more deeply than all that had preceded it, it could not make Nigel think less of the girl with whom he had passed so many pleasant hours; with whom (he could not help confessing it) it would have been better if he had never met.

It made the crime of his father's revengeful act swell in magnitude, and assume more glaring colours than it had done before, for how great (he argued) must it have appeared in that poor child's eyes, if the mere recital could at once change all her feelings towards those whom she had been ready to love.

But Nelly's self did not suffer for what her supposed resolution cost her cousin. Unconsciously, he had set up her image on the highest pedestal of his heart, and Nigel Brooke's nature was of that lofty kind, that nothing his idol could thereafter do, would depose her from her place. He might mourn, in her, the fallacy of human nature, but she would still remain for him the most worshipful of created beings; for he was a man to love once and for ever. But the pain which he experienced at the reception of the vicar's letter, containing that obnoxious pronoun, was not sufficient enlightenment to make him seriously own that his affections were entangled by the attractive qualities of his little, country-bred cousin. He knew that he had been on the brink of danger: but, as yet he believed, that the pain he felt in parting with her, however sharp, would prove as brief as their in-

timacy had been. So he only said to himself with a sigh :

“ I suppose it was inevitable that estrangement should arise between me and that man’s children, and it has only happened a little sooner than it would otherwise have done. And if I had gone on associating with Nelly much longer, there might have been great sorrow in parting for both of us. How the dear little girl blushed the last evening she was here, when I questioned her as to what answer she should give if a man as old as I am, asked her to be his wife. My wife ! that fresh, wondering-eyed creature, the world would laugh I suppose, and justly, at the idea of such a marriage. Well, my oath remains, whatever has passed away, and I feel it as binding on me now as when I took it.” And then he added, slowly and musingly : “ Poor little Nelly, fancy, our not meeting again ! Well,” rousing himself with an effort, as he experienced an unaccountable burning sensation rising behind his eyeballs, “ God bless her sunny face, wherever it be ; and help me to forget it as best I may.”

And, at the same hour, in that far off country village, Nelly was doing the only thing for those who had been kind to her, which she

felt she could do, without violating the sacred duty she owed her brother.

She was kneeling with folded hands beside her simple bed, and praying for her aunt and for her cousin Nigel.

END OF VOL. I.





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