

IN THE SWEET  
SPRING TIME





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IN THE SWEET SPRING-TIME.

VOL. I.



# IN THE SWEET SPRING-TIME

A LOVE STORY.

BY

KATHARINE S. MACQUOID

AUTHOR OF

“PATTY,” “DIANE,”

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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PROLOGUE.



# IN THE SWEET SPRING-TIME.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THREE FRIENDS.

IT was growing dusk; the day seemed tired of the dry heat that had been burning into it since the sun had got above the tall tree-tops, and when he sank into the bank of clouds on the range of hills to the west, light faded more quickly than usual, and a sudden stillness made the evening appear later than it was.

From these high hill-tops a broad stretch of land came gradually downwards; first it was waste interspersed with fir-woods and oak copses, yellow with coming age; nearer to the road were meadows divided into squares by hawthorn-hedges, a dull olive now, but

variegated in places with the paler green of honeysuckles; nearer still was an immense stretch of corn-land, making a golden border to this yellow road. The corn was very golden where the shocks still stood leaning one against another as if they too were faint and weary with the long day's heat; the largest half of the field whence the corn had been already carried was paler and tawnier in colour.

Through this stubble a few women, their heads covered by sun-bonnets, moved in a bent, slow fashion; every now and then one stooped, and then stuffed the ears she had gathered up into the bundle in front of her apron. These gleaners were the only occupants of the field which, ten minutes ago, had been full of reapers; but these had emptied their beer-cans, had piled the last shock on the top of the over-filled waggons, and were only just out of sight in the road that bordered the great corn-field.

“I tell you what it is, Martha—those gleaners arn't got any wits, else they'd follow the carts, and gather the droppings, and what the hedges snatch, as the loads go along.”



The speaker was a square-shouldered, bright-faced boy about ten years old; he stuffed both hands to the bottoms of the pockets of his corduroys, shut his firm lips tightly, and frowned with disapproval in the faces of his two companions. One of these was a lad about five years older than the speaker; he smiled at the little fellow's indignation; but the third, a girl, looked grave.

"Yes, it is a pity," she said, in a sort of hushed voice—hushed, but not sweet; it had perhaps a tone of suppressed harshness; "but, Oliver, why not go and tell the women about it; 'twould be kind in you; they'll be thankful, I'm sure."

The girl was very tall; she did not look more than thirteen, though she was a year older, her thin arms had hung straight by her side, but now she clasped her long hands appealingly as she looked down in the little boy's face.

Oliver shook his square head, and his shoulders too.

"You're as soft as they are, Matty; they're

too dazed to take advice——Hallo!—hark!”

He stopped, and stood listening, his face full of singular intelligence. Till now all had been peaceful—the women’s figures stood out picture-like against the cool green sky. There had not even been the lowing of the cows or the tinkle of a sheep-bell to break the stillness. The whirr of a beetle now and then as it struck against the hedge, thereby rousing the honeysuckle blossoms to a fuller gush of sweetness, and Oliver’s loud, firm voice—these sounds that moved the warm air had been all; but now a noise—a hum first, and then a harsh grating—filled the air. The sudden noise had made Oliver turn round and face the road, his handsome young face full of eagerness. Nearer and nearer came the grinding sound; something surely was pounding, cutting its way through the stones on the road; lumbering, too, as if the work was hard, and yet it was a very different sound from that made by the slow-moving corn-waggons; nor was this something going at such a snail-like pace.

Louder and louder grew the noise, and Oliver’s face grew more full of awful expectation, and

then a strange sight presented itself to the wondering eyes of the children. On the other side of the road the meadows went on sloping downwards to the bottom of the valley, and then rose up with wooded sides to a vision of pale blue outlines said to be the Sussex downs. Into this quiet solitude with no large grouping of houses to indicate human presence, into this great space of nature there came lumbering along the road something that looked like a monstrous beetle, red and blue, with a brazen head, crunching, grinding, and seeming to cry out with some inward agony, as it puffed forth a faint blue cloud of steam.

Two of the lookers-on backed into the hedge. The strange awe in Oliver's face had spread through him; he neither spoke nor moved, but stood rooted to the spot, his eyes devouring the engine.

As the thing lumbered by, disturbing all the stillness, a blot on the peaceful beauty of the landscape, the boy drew a deep breath. "Where are you going to?" he shouted to the driver. The grimy, smoke-stained man did not even turn his head.

“Gilding,” he said, and on the engine went lumbering and grinding, and off scampered Oliver in its wake.

The elder lad roused out of his silence.

“What is he at?” he said. “It is folly to go after a steam-engine.”

The girl looked at him with a puzzled face; but in a minute the puzzled look vanished, and she smiled.

“Don’t you trouble about Oliver, Maurice, he’s always right. You see how mother trusts him, and he never comes to harm. Oh! yes, he’ll be all right.”

Maurice had a long, thoughtful face, with sweet brown eyes; he raised his dark eyebrows and shook his head at Martha.

“Your mother knows best, of course, but I should say a fellow only ten years old ought not to go wherever he chooses. He’s gone quite the opposite road to home. We had better follow him a bit.”

Martha smiled gratefully.

“It is very kind of you,” she spoke shyly, one shoulder higher than the other, without

looking at her companion, "but Oliver is all right; he guesses the engine men will stop at the public down at the bottom of the hill—that's Tringer's, where those gleaners are going." She nodded towards the line of women now filing slowly into the road; some of them with bundles carried in front, others with one bundle poised on the head, and held there by a strong brown arm, while the other hand clasped a second bundle tied in the apron. All looked brown, and wearied with hard work in the heat of the day that was only just done.

"All right, we'll go to Tringer's," Maurice said, and the girl followed him along the stony road—only a few paces, and then she quickened her steps, and walked beside him.

She was tall, with the lank, unformed growth of a girl who promised to be above the common height; fair skinned, but for some freckles, with large and singularly green eyes, her face was too narrow and thin, but still it was interesting, there was so much restrained expression in the eyes and delicate mouth, with its thin lips; she had a rosy colour, too, or she would have looked

white, for her hair was a rich deep red, golden at the edges, and lying in thick straight masses across her forehead. Her sun-bonnet partly hid her features, but she had evidently walked faster, so as to be able to watch her companion's refined, melancholy face. The melancholy was plainly more a trick of expression than a habit of mind, for when, in a few minutes, he began to smile, he looked so bright, so mischievous even, that it was impossible to associate sadness with Maurice Penruddock.

“Martha,”—the smile broadened into a merry laugh,—“how you do spoil Oliver! I believe you think he's a sort of oracle.”

Martha blushed, and frowned, and twisted her fingers together nervously.

“I don't know what ‘oracle’ may be, but I shan't spoil him. Oliver's too good to be spoiled. Mother says he's so clever that he's sure to be all right; he's got a wonderful clear head; he's such a sensible little chap.”

Maurice laughed again.

“I ought to know it by this time; you've said the same thing to me every Saturday since

I've known you, and that's why I say you'll spoil Oliver. You are besotted about him, Martha, and you'll never open your eyes."

He did not turn his head to look at her, but she looked at him from under her sun-bonnet, not with any vexation, but with a kind of conviction, as if she felt the truth of his words, and yet could not accept them. They walked on silently for some minutes.

"You ought to know," at last Martha said; "you are cleverer than I am, and, of course, you've had more teaching—and besides, you are different altogether."

A flush came on the boy's face.

"I wish you would not talk nonsense, Martha," he said, quickly. "You are clever enough yourself; if you had said I must know better because I'm a man and you're a girl, there would have been some sense in that."

The girl drew herself up; her cheeks were scarlet. Maurice looked round, struck by her silence, and saw the flaming face.

"What an odd girl you are!" he said. "What has vexed you now?—you must know

I could not ever mean to vex you, Martha."

He was vexed himself, and he spoke abruptly. The girl's heart swelled with pain; she pinched her fingers till she hurt them.

"It isn't you I mean," she said. "I'm thinking of that fine parson's wife—I hate her!"

Maurice turned round impulsively, but there was a look of weariness in his face.

"I say, Martha, don't you think we'd better enjoy our holiday?—what's the use of sulking over old grievances?"

He smiled as he ended, and the smile took the sting out of his words.

"I've done," she said, "and I don't mind, except for mother; it's hard on her to be scorned, and it isn't an old grievance either."

Maurice did not answer; he looked annoyed, and he began to whistle. He knew that Mrs. Parrat, the wife of the clergyman, who was preparing him for Eton, had expressed herself strongly about his friends, Martha and Oliver, and their mother, but this had happened two years ago. Though he was then only thirteen,



Maurice Penruddock had been separated from his parents so early that he had learned to think and act for himself. His father and mother were still in India, but he wrote at once to his guardian, Mr. John Venables.

“There are some kind people here,” he said, “who live close to Deeping, a blind woman and her two children—very simple people, but quiet and well-mannered—and they would like to have me on half-holidays; Oliver and Martha are younger than I am, and I am sure I can learn no harm from them, and I find the country very dull on half-holidays.”

Mr. Venables had lately placed his ward in the country for health's sake, after keeping him for some years at school in London. He was an old bachelor, very fond of amusement, and he thought Maurice ought not to be dull on half-holidays. Major and Mrs. Penruddock were in India; it would take too long to write and consult them, so he took the easier course—he wrote to Maurice, and gave him leave to visit his new friends, telling him to show the letter to Mr. Parrat. All this had happened two

years ago, and the lad was surprised that Martha should refer to such an old story.

“Mrs. Parrat means all right,” he said, as they walked on; “she can’t help being silly.”

Martha pulled at her bonnet-strings as if she meant to pull them off; she drew her head up.

“Mrs. Parrat met mother and me yesterday, and she took no notice,” she said, harshly.

“Oh!” Maurice gave a kind of groan. “She did not know you, most likely, and she’s only a silly woman. I should not have thought you would have cared for the notice of a silly person, Martha. Why, where on earth has Oliver gone to?”

The road, which had sunk between high yellow banks, topped with withered gorse and brown brake, opened suddenly on a triangular bit of common on the left, stretching upwards to a crown of dark fir-trees. The high banks ended here, and the road parted into two, one way going straight forward, arched over by trees already painted with autumn tints; a narrower path on the left fringed the com-

mon, and took its way up the slope, and beside a small group of cottages; the sign of the "White Horse" before one of these houses, and a black board over the door of another with white letters, told that Timothy Cruttenden was a licensed dealer, and showed where the inhabitants bought food and drink.

"Do you think he'd go inside?" Maurice asked, as they climbed the hill towards the "White Horse."

"No, that he wouldn't—he's given mother his word on it—he's never seen the inside of a public since he was six." Martha spoke with quite unnecessary emphasis.

While they lingered, the landlord came out with a long pipe in his hand.

"Good evening," Maurice said, and Martha noted, admiringly, that he bowed, and that the publican acknowledged the salute; "has a young boy been here just now, Mr. Tringer. You know Oliver Burrige."

Maurice spoke rather haughtily—he felt annoyed—it seemed to him that Oliver ought not to give so much trouble.

“Yes, sir,” the man said, respectfully, “he was here not long ago neither, but he’s gone along on the engine to Gilding,” and he pointed with his pipe; “he got the soft side of the driver to let him get on.”

“To Gilding! How on earth is he to get back to-night?” Maurice frowned.

“Bless you, sir, the little chap’ll come all right—he told me to say as he’s all right if anyone asked—he’s bent on seeing the engine at work—it’s a corn cutter, or something o’ that—I know the driver well. Joe’s a chum of mine, and he said he’d bring the young ’un back all right—he’s an inquiring young blade—”

Martha pinched her lips together and stood twisting her fingers.

“Don’t you be afeard now, he’ll do all right.” Mr. Tringer nodded his head, and took a huge pull at his pipe. “I could not but laugh. The little chap was so bent on riding with the engine—he’s desperate sharp on machines, he is.”

Maurice frowned again.

“Good evening,” he said, and then he walked away; not down to the road, but up to the fir-

wood. "It's a great deal too bad," he said, when they reached the entrance of the wood. "Oliver wants a good flogging. I don't believe there's any discipline at that Grammar School."

Martha first turned red, then she pressed her lips together and looked at him wistfully.

"I only mind that you should be put out," she said, in her hushed tone. "Oliver's all right. No harm'll come to him."

"Well, I say he's all wrong. What will your mother say!" Maurice said, impatiently, as he strode along over the brown carpet of fir-needles. "You'll be tired, Martha," he said, looking over his shoulder. "I beg your pardon for going on so fast. We can rest here a few minutes, and yet be back in time."

She seated herself without a word, her hands in her lap, her head bent forward so that her face was hidden by her sun-bonnet. She was happy again, for she felt that Maurice was sorry he had spoken crossly, and that he was satisfied to stay here with her all alone.

"Martha," he said, suddenly, in a changed voice, "shall you miss me when I go away?"

She raised her head and gazed at him, growing pale. There was vivid alarm in the stare of her eyes.

“Go away! where?” she said, in her harshest voice.

Maurice looked away, and hit the ground beside him with a stick he had pulled from the hedge below.

“Well, you knew I couldn’t stay here always; and, after all,” he spoke coolly, “you won’t miss me as I shall miss you—you and Oliver have got one another.”

She made a hasty movement and raised her hand; then she suddenly checked herself.

“One person can never make up for another,” she said, so sadly that the harshness left her voice. “You and Oliver are different.”

Maurice gave a rueful smile.

“Well, then,” he said, discontentedly, “you always say he’s perfect, so of course I’m just the opposite, if I’m different. It isn’t fair, Martha; you are more my friend than anybody is,”—such a loving stress on the words,—“and you care nothing for me compared with Oliver.”

He got up and went and stood against the red bole of one of the trees. Overhead was the purple-green canopy of pines, and behind, hanging like a weird transparent veil, in their intricate crossings and re-crossings, were thin branches brown and dead.

Martha was struggling with herself; she did not speak or look round. She longed to tell Maurice how much she cared for him—how dull her life would be without him; but her sorrow was dumb, and she was vexed; she thought also that Maurice cared too little for Oliver.

Maurice stood waiting; he had battled with his own reserve to make this appeal, and Martha cared nothing for it; she was, perhaps, thinking him a muff, and laughing under the shade of her bonnet. All at once he moved on through the wood. Martha got up to follow, and then she stood still.

“If he is really sorry about going away, he’ll come back to me now,” she said.

But Maurice went on and on, till she feared to lose sight of him. Martha began to repent. He might be going away very soon,—perhaps

this was his last Saturday at Deeping. Had he meant those words for good-bye?

“I can’t run after him,” she said, sorrowfully. “I can’t change my mind like a baby; besides, I know I can’t speak—I feel choked like.”

She set her face and pressed her lips hard, and without her will her fingers kept on twisting nervously together.

Maurice looked round at a turn of the path, and he saw Martha standing where he had left her, her head drooped forward. She seemed to feel his gaze, for she raised her head and looked at him, and then, irresistibly drawn, she went a few steps forward. At this Maurice came back, and they met about half way. In the journey to meet him, the choked feeling had loosened, and Martha could speak.

“Are you in earnest—are you really going away soon?” she said, in a low voice.

The boy thought her eyes looked very sweet: the dry intenseness had fled, and they were full of soft dark green light.

“Yes—I was always going; you knew that well enough. What is the use of such a foolish



question?" he said, angrily. He was angry with Fate,—with all that took him away from the dear pleasant rambles and worshipping companionship; he had not known how close he and Martha had grown to one another till the call came to divide their friendship.

"But, you are only fifteen—you can't have done schooling yet," she said, doubtfully.

Maurice laughed.

"I'm only just going to begin real school," he said. "I'm going to Eton. It isn't school I dislike, but I don't want to go from here." He wanted to say, "leave you all;" that he meant this was out of the reach of Martha's thoughts.

"You will come back here sometimes, won't you?" she said, wistfully.

"I hope so;" but the words raised a dim foreshadowing. Maurice felt, without realising, how changed life would be for him when he had really been to school.

"I,"—he cleared his throat,—“I wanted to tell you sooner, but I knew you would be cut up. A letter came from my guardian a few days ago; he says I am to travel about with

him a few months before I settle down regularly, and I am to go to London on Monday."

He brought the words out with an effort. He looked at her, and their eyes told each other what their tongues could never have accomplished: they both so shrank from the chance of tears. Martha's eyes were sombre with despair, but his were so sad that her pride at least was soothed.

"Monday," she said at last; "so soon!"—then, after a pause, in a heart-wrung voice,—“I wonder what the weeks will be like when there are no Saturdays like these at the end of them.”

Maurice could not say anything to comfort her; he felt very sad, but he felt guilty, too, that his longing for school was going to be appeased.

“Let's say good-bye here,” he said; “whatever happens, I'll not forget you, Martha.”

She stood like a statue; he had meant to kiss her cheek, but he hesitated; he shrank from offering what she might not like; so he held out his hand instead.

Suddenly she roused, held his hand with

both hers, and then a deep passionate sob burst from her, and she hid her face on his hand.

Maurice patted her shoulder gently. "Dear old Martha, you'll not forget me; give me a kiss," he whispered, "and say you won't forget me."

She raised her head and he kissed her, but she did not give him back his kiss: she was too much ashamed of her sob.

"You'll soon forget us, I know," she said, keeping her eyes on the ground. "You'll find plenty of friends more like yourself." She loosed his hand. "You're the only friend I ever had, and I'll never take another," she said, bitterly, and she turned her head and shoulders away.

Maurice did not understand her mood,—his heart was very full,—it seemed to him that, if Martha would only be sad and gentle, the parting might be less wretched; these strange moods of hers had often tormented him.

"Don't be angry with me, dear," he said, tenderly; "you may be sure I'm sorry enough to leave you and Oliver."

He spoke as if he were an elder brother, in a manly, protecting tone. All Martha's hardness fled. She hid her face in her hands, and again her voice was choked with a sob.

"No, no, not really sorry, or you couldn't say it so easily; you'd feel like a bit of hard stone."

She gave him one long sad look, and then, suddenly beginning to run, she went away fast through the wood.

Maurice started off in pursuit; but, at the sound of his following footsteps, Martha turned and waved him back with such an imploring gesture that he stopped.

"I'll get leave to go and say good-bye to-morrow. I'm half an hour late as it is; poor little thing, she *is* cut up."

When Martha reached home, she was overwrought by her parting from Maurice, and so ashamed of the betrayal of her own feelings, that she was very silent,—she forgot all about Oliver.

His habits were eccentric, and the blind mother took no heed of his absence till bed-

time ; then Martha roused up and told her the story of his journey to Gilding.

Mrs. Burridge's lips trembled as she listened to Martha's assurance that the child was all right.

"All right," she said, "I hope so, but he's over-venturesome, Mattie, he wants a man to guide him ; if Maurice now would talk to him a bit more it might be a good thing ; I'll ask him."

"Maurice is going away," the girl said, sullenly, and after that she hardly spoke again till bed-time.

Next morning, as she guided her mother to chapel, she was unusually quiet, and, even when they came slowly back through the warm sunshine, she answered no word to her mother's talk on the road, nor did she tell the blind woman, as she often did, about the wild flowers or butterflies that brightened the walk, for the cottage was some way out of Deeping. Dinner-time came, but Oliver did not come back, and, when she had settled her mother in the easy-chair, Martha went and sat in the little strip of

garden beside the cottage. She had not been there long when she heard the click of the gate-latch, and there were Maurice and Oliver.

Martha turned crimson ; she felt compelled to sit still, but her brother ran forward, and hid her face in his hearty hug.

“Come along,” he said, eagerly ; “come and say good-bye to Maurice ; he’s going to London to-morrow ; he has not long to stop, and he wants mother.”

“I’ll find mother, and tell her.”

Martha was glad to run away indoors.

The blind woman was looking towards the door ; she had heard Oliver’s voice.

“Mother,” Martha said, “come and say good-bye to Maurice ; most like we’ll never see him again.”

Maurice was at the door, and he heard her.

“You must not believe Martha, Mrs. Burridge.” He spoke so kindly to the widow, so gently, as he took her hand. “I shall not see you again this year, I daresay, because I am to travel about with my guardian, and then to have some ‘coaching’ in London, before I go to

Eton in January ; but you may be sure that some day I shall come back like a bad half-crown. I suppose Oliver will be such a great man one of these days that we shall all be proud of him."

He shook the blind woman's hand, and then held out his hand to Oliver. Last of all he said good-bye to Martha, but no one looking on could have told how sorry the lad really felt. Martha's stolid quiet helped him, and he turned from the gate with a smile on his face, Oliver walking beside him to the very door of the vicarage.

"Martha," said Mrs. Burridge, "you need not fear—we shall see the dear lad again ; he isn't one to forget friends."

There was no answer. Martha had stolen away, and she was lying face downwards on the floor of the room above, trying to choke back the agony which was tearing at her heart.

"Gone!"—that was all she said, and it came more as a smothered groan than a spoken word.

## CHAPTER II.

## TWO GO OUT INTO THE WORLD.

YEARS have gone by, and Maurice has never come back to Deeping. He wrote at first at tolerably regular intervals, but when he went to Eton his letters became rarer and briefer, and after a while he ceased to write. Martha's heart ached sorely as months went by and no answer came to her last letter. "I don't wonder," she said, "it was so dull and stupid," and then, with a heavy sigh, she gave up the hope of hearing from him.

In one way his silence was a relief; his letters had been very precious to her, and she had been very proud of receiving them; but it had been a great effort to answer them,—to write as she thought anyone so grand as Maurice now was ought to be written to.



“He was always different from us,” she said; “he was always a gentleman; and, now that he lives among his equals, he must shrink from us, and wonder how he could ever find sympathy with such quiet, ignorant people. It is not pride in him, Oliver is so wrong to call it pride; I know better; like will cling to like; and I for one could never blame anyone for caring for refinements. I always knew that our friendship could not last.”

But though she tried to soften it to herself, Martha missed Maurice more than Oliver did. The lad loved his sports far better than his lessons, and the difference in their age had prevented Maurice from caring to play with him; nor had Maurice shown much sympathy with Oliver’s darling amusement of making what the elder boy had called cardboard toys. Through the long dark winter evenings Oliver had cared little for books. He would sit silently apart at a little table by himself,—the other table shook so; he said,—and there, with thoughtful eyes and eagerly-parted lips, he would spend hour after hour making, by the light of one candle, mimic

machines copied from drawings in some engineering journal. He sometimes showed his work to Martha, but he never sought her advice, and, when she blamed or suggested, he smiled and shrugged his shoulders, as if to say that the subject was beyond her comprehension.

While Maurice had been at Deeping, this favourite occupation had somewhat lost its fascination, for each Saturday Maurice had brought some fresh interest into the little family circle,—sometimes a newspaper, which he lent them, and news besides of what was happening in London and throughout the country, and also about any change in European politics, for both Martha and Oliver, young as they were, took a deep interest in such subjects, and Martha was keen on any question likely to affect the working classes.

Except a few old men, the elders of the chapel, the Burridges had made no acquaintances at Deeping. Oliver had plenty of school acquaintances, but was too pugnacious to be popular. The mother's blindness prevented her from seeking friends, and she said she was too old to strike fresh roots,—she had left all the

friends she cared for in the far North when her husband died. Martha's extreme shyness and silence being set down to pride, she was, much to her relief, left to herself. But though this tall silent girl seemed, to outsiders, proud and apathetic, she was full of thoughts. At present her absorbing idea was to help as much as she could the poor around her. Her blind mother took up much of her time, but she could leave all household matters to a servant who had lived with them from childhood, and could get some hours in the week to teach sewing and reading in the cottages near her home.

She idolized Oliver as much as ever, but the lad began to find his home-life dull, and pined to see more of what was going on in the world. Martha had grown even more silent since Maurice went; and, though the boy loved his mother and sister, the monotony chafed him.

Just at this time one of his schoolfellows lent him a book,—the lives of celebrated engineers,—and this so fired the boy's imagination that he could think of nothing else. But Oliver was fifteen now, and he had been brought up in too stern a school of self-denial to dream of

acting on impulse. Instead of going to his mother with his eager hopes, on the next half holiday he asked if he could see the head-master of the Grammar School.

The master was going out for an afternoon's fishing, but he had long had his eye on Oliver, and, spite of the complaints of his form-master for want of application, he believed him to be one of the brightest boys in the school, if he could only be brought to give his mind to study. "Just a fellow to distinguish himself at the University, if he would but work hard enough to get a scholarship," he had said to an under-master, only a few days before. So now he deferred his fishing, and looked with kindly eyes at the bright-eyed, intelligent face, so full of impulsive eagerness.

"What is it I can help you in, Burridge?" he said; "have you made up your mind to try for one of the scholarships? I hope so."

Oliver smiled proudly; he thought the short-lived fame of winning a scholarship, and, after it, the privilege of spending his mother's slender income at the University, very pitiful aims com-

pared with the dazzling future he had been dreaming of.

“No, sir, thank you; but I’ve been reading this,”—his blue eyes glowed as he pointed to the book under his arm, and he put it into the hand the head-master held out for it. “I want you to tell me, if you please, if it costs money to become an engineer, and if it is a business at which one makes money quickly.”

The master smiled; he looked at the book, and then at Oliver. He had heard about the boy’s card engines, which had formerly been the wonder of the school, and, as he read the name of the book, he guessed what was working in his scholar’s mind. He told him plainly how much it would cost to give him the training he required, and then he saw a cloud come over the eager face.

“That’s enough, sir, thank you,” said Oliver, stoutly, though the disappointment had almost forced tears to his eyes; “it’s out of the question for me,” and he turned away.

Something in his manner touched the master.

“Do you mean, Burrige,” he said, “that

you asked me this because you want to begin to earn your own living?"

Oliver's eyes grew bright at once.

"Yes, sir; but I have no money to spend, and I want to save my mother's. I want so much to earn money that, so long as I have to do with machinery, I don't much care what I have to do."

The master sighed. Here was a lad who might have added to the laurels of Deeping Grammar School, and who was eager to sink all his Latin and Greek to earn a small salary and live among machinery; but he honoured Oliver's motive, and he now understood his self-denial.

"I will see what I can do for you," he said. "Shake hands, Burridge;" and Oliver went home with a heavy heart.

He managed, however, to keep his disappointment to himself.

At the end of a month the head-master sent for Oliver.

"I have found you a post," he said, "as junior clerk in a large mill in Yorkshire, the property

of my own cousin. I do not know if you will like it; but do you care to try?"

Oliver looked up, speechless with happiness; then his tongue loosed.

"Thank you heartily, sir," he said. "I can never forget it. Please may I go and tell mother?"

"And tell her," the master called after him, "I will call on her to-morrow and tell her all about it."

The blind mother sat silent while Oliver told his story.

"Let me go, mother," the boy pleaded. "I may never get such another opening."

She hesitated; she had not realised her son's growth.

"Stay with us some while longer, Oliver," she said, "you are too young yet to face the world."

"Mother," the lad said, and he took her withered hand gently, and, after kissing it, laid it on his own head, "feel how tall I am; I'm not little Oliver now; I'm gone fifteen. I should never do much more at Latin and Greek

if I stayed ever so long at school, and I want to earn some money for you and Martha—I want to work, and I want to see what's going on, and what's doing, and I shall never learn anything in a hole like Deeping."

The mother sat and cried silently, but Martha came to Oliver's assistance.

"Let him go, mother," she said; "it serves me right for being such a dull companion for him. Why should he waste his time here with us?—he'll be a great man if you give him the chance now. Maurice said so."

Mrs. Burridge yielded, and Oliver went away and left Martha alone.

Very soon his letters threw a new and vivid interest into the girl's life, and she found it a pleasure to answer his letters. She often thought that, if her answers to Maurice's letters had not been so short and dull, he would not have ceased to write. Now Oliver's letters became longer as time went on; by-and-by each letter told of some fresh success gained by the determined, ambitious boy; it was now a rise in his salary, and then he had invented some im-



provement in a wheel; next he had been asked to stay with one of the partners. Oliver's star was plainly in the ascendant; and he often sent money and presents to both mother and sister. His progress seemed magical to these secluded ones, and even to the few friends who came to hear the wonderful letters read aloud. There was so much life and power in them, and the young writer had such belief in his own success.

“And that,” said one of the elders to Mrs. Burridge, as they walked home together one Sunday after Meeting, “that is half the battle of life.”

Martha held her head higher than ever; she was so proud of Oliver.



BOOK I.

SPRING.



## CHAPTER I.

## LADY MARY PENRUDDOCK.

**I**N a house in a quiet street leading out of one of the sunny squares near Bayswater, Lady Mary Penruddock lay stretched on a sofa, propped by pillows. Her skin was yellow, and she was evidently very thin, but she did not look so much of an invalid as her attitude suggested. There was a glow in her bright dark eyes, and an animation in her face, which spoke of health and energy. But when she rose from the sofa, and walked to the window, her movements, though singularly graceful, were slow and languid, as much out of harmony with the fiery impatience in her dark eyes, as the sleek repose of a panther is with its sudden spring.

“Maurice is too provoking,” she said; then,

looking down at the white wrapper she wore, "and he knows I never dress till he comes."

A sharp ring at the street door announced her son's arrival, and then Lady Mary gathered up her long skirt and moved towards the door.

Maurice Penruddock came in, and looked surprised. His face was not much changed, but he had grown into a tall, very distinguished-looking man, who, not precisely handsome, at once attracted notice by his appearance.

"Not ready!" he said, with a sweet, bright smile. "It is just three, and the carriage was ordered then."

"Dear Maurice," she raised one long, supple, yellow hand, so smooth-looking that it might have passed for an ivory carving, "will you never learn my habits? I never sit ready-dressed. Your dear father always knew that nothing would induce me to undertake such a trial both to strength and temper. Besides, I never sit, as you know, when I can possibly avoid doing so, and how could I lie down in a silk gown? You are quite too foolish, dear." She patted his arm as she passed, with so pleasant a smile

that Maurice felt he must certainly be wrong for not having come home half an hour before the time she had herself fixed for him.

Quite half an hour passed before his mother came down, very exquisitely dressed, he thought, not with such absolute submission to fashion, but with a harmony and fitness that showed how thoroughly she knew the most effective way of garbing her very remarkable face and figure. Lady Mary had never been beautiful, but her wonderful dark eyes, her intensely expressive face, and the gliding, almost cat-like grace that accompanied every movement and every attitude of her tall, lithe figure, had always secured her admiration, and even now, though she had a son nearly thirty years old, she was so well preserved, so very interesting in appearance, that many men would pass by younger women to talk to this elegant, languid Lady Mary Penruddock. Maurice thought his mother charming. She had not been long in England, and he put down all her eccentricities, as he called them, to her long absence in India.

They drove for some time in silence, enjoying

at first the freshness of the air in the park, and the long stretches of view between the vast tree-trunks in Kensington Gardens; but when they took to the road again, the wind was rising, and the dust with it. Lady Mary looked restless and discontented.

“Are you quite sure these people are well off?”

“Yes, I believe so. I was told they do everything well,”—Maurice smiled,—“and that they have a charming house, and no children, only the nieces I told you of.”

She shook her head, and smiled compassionately.

“Dear Maurice, do you believe in appearances? You a barrister, too! Of course people who have girls to marry must keep up an appearance. Do you know if these girls have any money of their own?” she said, with an anxious look.

“I have not a notion,” he said; “but as Mr. and Mrs. Venables have no children, I suppose, as these girls live with them, they will leave them all they have.”



“You are so like your dear father, Maurice. He always believed the best of everyone. How do you know that these people don't live on an annuity, and that they have nothing to leave?”

Maurice laughed again.

“Your imagination travels fast,” he said. “I hear the Miss Ralstons are very nice, and I hope to make their acquaintance. Please remember I have never seen them, nor have I made any calculation about their money value—my dear mother, you need not be anxious—I am not a marrying man.”

His mother wrinkled the bridge of her nose, a way she had when her notions of good taste were offended—she thought it would have been so much better if her son had taken her hint without seeming to understand it.

“Your dear father and I,” she said, “were very young and extremely imprudent when we married—but then, of course, your dear father was badly advised in investing his money—I ought to be much better off. No, you cannot marry unless you marry money, dear Maurice,

—but you are sure to do that—you can command it—I only wonder you have been allowed to remain single so long.”

“Mother! Why do you underrate your sex—do you really believe that the idea of marriage is always in a girl’s mind with respect to all the men she talks to?”

Lady Mary’s nose wrinkled visibly.

“I was thinking of you, dear, not about girls. It seems to me that you may marry whom you choose, if the girl has no other attachment—I am not afraid that you will do anything foolish or romantic—I do not even tell you that you are very handsome, but you have that sort of appearance that girls find irresistible—you ought to be marked ‘dangerous’!” she said, with a little laugh.

Maurice shook his head—his ideal of his mother had been created and worshipped during three years of separation, and her outward refinement helped his strong affection to continue this worship—but such talk as this tried his faith, and made him sometimes wonder whether women were not, after all, silly. Mean-

while, Lady Mary, who had originated the idea of this visit, knit her delicate eyebrows and decided that if she had known earlier of the existence of these two nieces she should not have cared to renew her acquaintance with Mr. Venables.

Next moment she was smiling to herself at the remembrance of an ancient tenderness which she was persuaded Mr. Venables had felt for her.

“Dear me,” she said, aloud, “how long is it since we went to India—about twenty-nine years—do you know, Maurice, I can scarcely realise that I was a full-grown woman then—and yet I must have been ;” this was said softly, with a little flush that vastly became her.

“I can quite picture you, mother, at that age.” Maurice gave her an admiring glance. “I do not fancy you have changed very much.”

She frowned again, but she smiled directly after.

“I was not yellow in those days, dear boy,” she said. “Tell me, is Mrs. Venables pretty still—I heard she was a beauty when she married.”

“I have not seen her. I met Mr. Venables at dinner, in the winter, and he asked me to call at The Elms. When he heard you were coming home he said, ‘Ask Lady Mary to come with you,’ but, till we met again, yesterday, I had almost forgotten the matter.”

“He was a great friend of mine once,” said Lady Mary, softly, and she sighed.

At this Maurice looked grave again; these little sillinesses came as a cloud between him and his mother, or rather, his idea of his mother. He was not yet familiarised enough with her to laugh at her foibles, or to exert any of the small tyrannies which sons who have never been separated from their mothers exercise as a part of the affection they bear them—tyrannies which date so long back, and which have grown so slowly, as to seem a part of home-life, and which are only strange to eyes outside that circle of sympathetic links which shuts in and keeps from wandering into space the atmosphere of family love—an atmosphere which to be serene and free from clouds must be the result of growth—a growth, it may be,

of opposite natures side by side, with the fusion which love causes for ever at work.

Lady Mary's eyes fixed pensively on the carriage wrap which shielded her skirts from the dust.

"He was very handsome before he married," she said, "always dressed well, and sang in a charming way." She looked at her son expressively. "I used to play his accompaniments; your poor father liked to listen to him." And then she dropped her eyes with another little sigh, and Maurice found himself wondering whether the sigh was for his father, or for the singing of Mr. Venables.

"He's a little round man now," he said, "full of vivacity, with very good eyes; he talks about his wife as if she were a remarkable woman."

"Ah!"—she shrugged her shoulders slightly—"a strong-minded woman, very likely; he used not to care for that sort of person, but then in nine cases out of ten, as life will teach you, dear, it is the woman who marries, and the man who is married—very likely it will be so with you."

“Perhaps,” he smiled; “however, I have no intention of marrying—now I have got you, mother, I don’t seem to need a wife.”

His mother shook her head with a slow, graceful movement, and she gave a little incredulous smile that just showed the very pretty regular teeth that made her look so much younger than she was, though something about her lips seemed out of harmony with the teeth, and gave a slightly artificial cast to the face.

They had just reached a green shaded by tall trees; on two sides were old-fashioned red brick houses, each with its garden stretching out behind, and nearer the road was a small pond, the resort of some grey ducks, which, even at this distance from Hyde Park Corner, appeared to be thorough Londoners; they looked as if a week in the country would have brought some snow to their feathers.

But the carriage stopped, before it reached the pond, at a gate which at length broke the monotony of the long line of a fine old brick wall overhung by trees which had bordered the highway.

When the gate was opened, a small lodge showed green with climbing plants, and beyond it a freshly-gravelled carriage drive, bordered by tall pines. But an old man, with a high-bridged, thin nose, who had opened the gate, announced pompously that no one was at home—not even the master.

“You see, sir,”—he stepped forward in front of the servant, and, coming forward to the carriage, addressed himself to Maurice—“missus and master’s gone to Brighton for a few days to fetch Miss Louise home from school, and Miss Ralston, she’s away too.”

Lady Mary’s face was full of languid vexation. “Very tiresome, after coming so far!” she murmured.

“Drive on to Putney Bridge,” said Maurice; “let us have a blow on the heath;” then, laughing, “You see you are spared anxiety on my account, mother, for the time.”

“I’m sure they’ll be very sorry,” said the old man, as he looked at the cards Maurice gave him.

## CHAPTER II.

## EARLY SPRING.

IT was one of those days immortalized by old Æsop; the wind and the sun were each trying who should have the best of it, thereby rendering the outdoor life of mortals extremely uncomfortable, for the wind was as dry and as cold as a bit of crystal, and the sun made the weight of winter wrappings intolerable. The larger forest trees, though their delicate tracery of twigs and branches had thickened with swelling buds, showed no trace of green; they evidently did not trust the sparkling sunshine, but the more venturesome lilac-trees had put forth plenty of bright green leaves, drooping now, and brown at the edges, as though fire had scorched them.



As the sunshine spread over the broad river, its glitter seemed cruel, for the keen wind rippled the water into tiny wavelets, metallic in the sharpness of their curves. There was none of the soft stillness of genial sunshine—the sweetness of spring-time had not come. Nature seemed to flutter and shiver with dread of what the keen wind might be bringing on its wings; even the grassed edges of the flower-beds looked cold as the bitter wind swept over them. Some golden daffodils and blue hyacinths on the lawn bent their heads shyly towards the rich brown earth, as if in regret for having started up so early in the season; for February had been temptingly warm, and the denizens of the gardens had been misled by its genial delusion, save and except the aforesaid old forest trees, the monarchs of the lawn. The lawn was large, and the turf on it velvet-like, with a slope down to the river, and planted here and there with groups of fine evergreens, chiefly of the pine tribe. Among the huge planes with their pale stems and the massive elms, here and there came a black-barked laburnum or a drooping

beech, and, glimmering like a fairy plant among the rest, rosy almond blossoms seemed to float on the air, so invisible were the dark stems.

At this time of year the old-fashioned red brick dwelling-house, called The Elms, that stood in these grounds, showed through the leafless tracery which in summer hung a green screen before it. Looking back at it across the lawn, a winding yellow carriage-drive showed itself, with grass on each side, and stately Wellingtonias alternating with graceful hemlock-trees with a brown carpeting below them. The garden looked more formal here and far less charming than it did from the terrace beside the river. There, on the farther side of the broad stretch of glittering water, an old grey church tower seemed to guard the scene; it was, however, much warmer in the drive—the tall fir-trees did not shiver and rattle as if they had teeth that chattered with the cold, and, moreover, their solid blocks of greenery fenced off the blasts of wind that grew keener as the afternoon wore away; as yet the orange-tips on the firs showed no tender green needles within.

Two girls had been walking rapidly up and down on the gravelled terrace near the river, so much taken up with one another's talk that neither of them had thought of seeking shelter, though their faces bore witness in different ways how sharp the cold air was to their delicate skins.

The youngest was fair-faced and blue-eyed, and taller than her sister by several inches : the wind had made her a full-blown rose-colour. She looked a bright, springlike maiden ; the wind, too, had blown clusters of her sunny hair up against the fur edge of her cap. She looked slender, spite of her fur wrappings, or she might have stood to-day to a painter for one of the maidens of the Valhalla ; except that the face was too dainty and quiet, it was only just a sweet daily-life face. Perhaps her warm, rose-tinted skin made her sister's pale cheeks more pallid. The wind could not play with Gyneth Ralston's hair as it had played with her companion's sunny waves, for her dark locks were smoothly braided, though a few straggling bits had yielded to the violence of the wind and straggled into her eyes, and over her little pink

ears. There was nothing matter-of-fact in this face; there was rather that strong contradictory aspect more often seen in a man than in a woman. The forehead and eyes were full of thought and repose, while the rest of the face at times looked made for sparkling and saucy changes of expression. The mouth was larger than her sister Louisa's, but Gyneth's was a good mouth too, though its character varied considerably, and the short upper lip was sometimes very mocking. Her chief charm lay in her eyes; they were lustrous and dark, not of a uniform tint, for different emotions seemed to call out different hues in the green-grey ring round the pupil, nor was their lustre uniform; there was no monotony of bead-like brilliancy,—a sure token of hardness in a woman,—both the brightness and the expression seemed to come from within, and not to lie sparkling on the surface; moreover, the eyes were so fringed by long dark lashes, that they were often veiled when the heavy eyelids were cast down. They were cast down now as she thought over her sister's words.

“Do you know, Louy,” she said, thoughtfully, “I suppose it is because I never went to school; but you are eighteen and I am twenty-four, yet you seem to me more—grown-up, I suppose the word is, than I feel.”

“You dear old innocent,”—Louisa Ralston slipped her hand under her sister’s arm and pinched it as much as the thick shawl Gyneth wore would let her,—“don’t you see that for the last six years, ever since dear mother died, you have been living with people much older than you are—you have been the youngest in the family, and so you have been petted and made a baby of; whereas at school, for some time past, I have been one of the elders, and I can tell you most of the girls used to come to me for advice.”

Gyneth looked up at her blooming sister, and a bright sweet smile shone out of her face.

“How delightful—you shall be eldest, Louy. I am glad you are wise—I always like to have everything planned and ordered for me: it saves so much trouble, and does not take time from other things.”

Louisa opened her blue eyes in puzzled wonder; they were not large or expressive, but they were pleasant, benevolent eyes, and suited exactly with her rosy skin, and fair, wavy hair, and capable serene face.

“You used not to mind trouble, Kitty,—at lessons, I mean.”

Gyneth laughed.

“You have only been at home, dear, a few hours; you will soon find out my selfishness. Of course I took trouble with my lessons; they rank with the ‘other things’—they brought me knowledge and credit; but one gets no credit by devising one’s own summer and winter dress, or by planning visits and such things; and, if you will take charge of all these small worries, I shall be delighted.”

Louisa looked inquisitively at her sister.

“Shall I choose you a husband too?” she said, saucily.

Gyneth looked up in sudden surprise, but Louisa was not even smiling.

“You said something about this just now, Louy, and that was why I said you made me

feel so young. Aunt Venables and I look at marriage differently from you: we think it should be the outcome of real love, and that it takes its own time for coming—it should not be aimed at as the whole purpose of a young woman's life."

Louisa laughed heartily and clapped her hands.

"Oh, that's capital; think as you please, but you will not alter facts. Nonsense, Kitty,"—she looked into her eyes,—“you don't expect me to believe that you have never thought about getting married.”

Gyneth shook her head; she looked mockingly at the earnest young face.

“I did not promise any confidences,” she said; “but I think a good deal about love, and I have plenty of lovers—old Reuben and Rollo and Fairy. Uncle does not love me so well, because I am not quite tall enough, and because I read too much.” A mortified look had come into her sister's rosy face, and her eyes threatened tears. “Don't be vexed, dear; do you think, though you are so much younger,”—Kitty

patted the hand within her arm,—“that I should not have told you if such an important event as an engagement had come into my life.”

Louisa stopped short; up went her eyebrows, and her young forehead wrinkled itself with lines.

“You perplexing girl! Just now you seemed to despise such things; you said that marriage need not be the aim of a girl’s life.”

“Yes, and I do say so. I shall have to expound some of my theories to you, I see, but it is much too cold to stand still; meantime, let us go and get the dogs and run races; my nose feels as if the wind had cut a bit off it.”

“It is the only part of your face that has any colour except your lips; race me to the end of the walk, you look frozen, Kitty darling.”

Off they ran, their skirts flying in the wind, their heads bent low to shield their faces. Gyneth Ralston, or Kitty as she was called in her home circle, had no chance against her sister’s longer legs; they stopped at the end of the walk nearest the house, breathless and panting, and now



they had changed looks: Louisa was pale and her sister was beautified by the rich bloom on her cheeks.

“Now you are like yourself, Kitty.” Louisa looked approvingly at her sister. “When I arrived and saw how white and blue you looked, I began to think I had told stories at school, for I was always telling the girls about my pretty sister.”

“You little goose,” but Kitty smiled lovingly. “I had been waiting at the gate for you, and I suppose I got chilled by the time you came.”

“Ah!” Louisa sighed, “that is one of the things I envy in a man; a man does not get chilled, he does not need to muffle himself up at this time of year, as we are obliged to do. Only just now I was envying those men as they shot by in the eight-oared cutter. Fancy you rowing in a jersey to-day, Kitty; it would simply kill you. I should not care to have to work like a man, but I do envy him his freedom and his strength.”

Kitty looked amused.

“I don't fancy men think about getting wives as you say girls think about husbands. I don't

envy a man's strength. No, Louy, the part of his life I envy is his education. No one is afraid that a man will grow too clever; he may study and dream out ideas as much as he pleases till they grow into original discoveries, and he only gets praise."

"My dear Kitty, a man like that would be simply a bore." Louisa's fair face was puckered with trouble. "Don't say for a moment you could love an inventor; he would be simply horrid. I know the kind of man: boring one with his plans, or, if he hasn't been successful, full of talk of what he might have become if the world had but appreciated him. Our writing-master at school was a genius according to his own account, a man who had brought himself down in the world by inventions, and so had to teach writing and arithmetic. He was so wrapt up in himself and his own ideas that he had no manners at all. Oh, Kitty, don't tell me you are in love with a genius."

Kitty had walked faster while her sister poured out her exordium; her head was slightly raised and she looked very grave.

“Dear Louy,” she said, “I am not in love, as you call it, with anyone, but I must tell you that I see already that you and I have different views of love. I can’t preach, and I don’t want to say that I am right and you are wrong, but love is to me a very serious subject, not to be talked of in a light or common-place way.”

Louy screwed up her little mouth; she began to think that her chance guess had hit the truth, for Kitty was rarely irritable.

“Have you many acquaintances about here, Kitty?”—she spoke in a changed voice, though the wily young puss did not move her eyes from their close study of her sister’s face. “In three years you ought to have got quite a nice circle round you. Do you have garden parties, I wonder?—you have never told me in your letters anything about this, Kitty.”

Kitty smiled. “No, dear, we have people to dine,—I’ve often mentioned them in my letters,—but I never thought of a garden-party. Oh, Louy dear, the trouble would be enormous.”

Louy held up her head with a smile of superior wisdom.

“ You poor dear Kitty! and so, for fear of a little trouble, you let these two old people mope you to death. If I am to take charge here of all the vanities of life, I must do as I choose about parties, so we’ll have a garden-party as soon as the leaves are out. Won’t it be jolly!” she said, with a hop skip and a jump that suited her happy face exactly.

“ You shall do just as you like, dear,”—Kitty’s eyes glowed with fond admiration of her sister. “ You are like summer sunshine. I am sure uncle will do all you please——”

A sudden “ Oh !” from Louisa stopped her.

## CHAPTER III.

MR. OLIVER BURRIDGE.

GYNETH followed the direction of Louisa's eyes and she saw a gentleman coming towards them from the drive.

"Who is it?" her sister asked.

"Some one I was just going to speak of—Mr. Oliver Burridge. How do you do?"—she held out her hand, and, as the new-comer came up, she introduced him to her sister.

He looked at Louisa keenly, almost sternly; perhaps he could not help this, for his natural expression was stern and determined. His features were regular and sharply cut, and he had a square, well-shaped head. He was certainly handsome, the chief characteristic of

his face being truth and manliness, and the determined expression of his well-cut mouth harmonized with the strength of his square shoulders and the rest of his figure. His brown red skin, his tawny beard, and deep bright blue eyes seemed to overflow with health and energy.

“Good day,”—he spoke very abruptly, and his bow was stiff and abrupt. His whole manner suggested that he thought some one very much in the wrong, there was such a want of geniality about it.

Kitty looked shyly at her sister, but Louisa was smiling at Mr. Burridge.

“Your uncle is out, I suppose,” he said, in a softened voice. He turned round to Kitty so as to get his face out of Louisa’s view.

“I hardly know; what do you think, Louy?”

Louisa’s youthful wisdom had put her, as she imagined, at once in possession of a secret. She smiled with protecting significance. “I will go and see, Kitty dear,” she said; and she went.

Perhaps there is nothing more irritating than to feel misunderstood and managed all at once

by an affectionate relative, and Kitty's delicate eyebrows drew together and made a line between them. She looked up and found Mr. Burridge staring at her with a very earnest expression.

"Shall we walk up and down a little," he said. "I really don't care to see your uncle; if I think of anything special I should like him to know, I will tell it to you. So that's your sister, is it! She's not a bit like you."

"No, she is much younger, but she has all the wisdom I want; she is really wonderful for her age."

"Is she; I don't care about very wise or wonderful women. Well, don't spoil her. I daresay she thinks enough of herself."

A flush rose on Kitty's face, and she walked on faster towards the house.

"Shall we not take a turn on the river terrace?" said Mr. Burridge.

"If you please, though the wind is rather high there. I am sure you will like Louy when you know her. I think her a very perfect creature, and I don't care to hear her found

fault with," she said, with a gentle dignity that suited her face exactly.

He gave her a long admiring gaze, but she did not see it. With her head thrown a little back and her chin slightly raised she walked on, looking straight before her; her sister had vexed her and now she was offended with Mr. Burridge. She admired this man's talent so much that she had forced herself to ignore the roughness he showed to others: for to her he had hitherto been gentle and deferential.

"Aunt is right," she thought, "she always is right; she said that as he got to know us better, and as restraint wore off, he would become familiar; he is odious to-day."

They had reached the river walk, and still neither of them had spoken. Oliver Burridge was too deeply interested in gazing his fill at the charming face beside him to seek for interruption, but now a cloud spread over it and Kitty began to frown again.

"Is anything the matter?" he said; "you are very silent to-day, and you look put out."



“I—I have been talking a good deal before you came, with my sister.” She looked wistfully towards the house as if she wanted to be still talking with Louisa.

Oliver flushed crimson.

“I am sorry I came,” he said. “I see I am in the way. Are all our talks to be at an end, Miss Ralston, because your sister has come home? I feel jealous of her already.”

Kitty thought he was joking, but when she looked up she saw that he was really annoyed.

“Are you not unreasonable?” she said. It was a part of her nature that she could not bear to give pain, and she forgot Oliver’s rudeness in the thought of having wounded him. “You are so clever, you must know better than I do, that any new idea so fills the mind that for the time it refuses space for any other thought—you know how much I have enjoyed talking to you;” she looked up, with a sudden reproach that somehow filled him with delight. “You must remember Louy is my only sister, and the very sight of her rouses up a crowd of past memories, to say nothing of the looking forward

in the life we have to-day begun together ; remember, I have never yet had a friend so near my own age, and there is all the new joy of a first feeling."

" Ah !" a kind of smothered groan burst from him. " I have never had a friend at all," he said, bitterly.

" You have a sister ?"—she looked at him inquiringly. His manner was strangely altered : he seemed at once to be sad and irritable.

" Oh, yes, I have a sister, and such a woman as there are few like, if any ; but she is of little use as a friend. She is too much of an echo—or—" he said, with a forced laugh, " too much like the pool in which Narcissus used to look. I doubt if she has any thoughts of her own—poor Martha !"

Kitty felt jarred. " I should like to see her," she said ; " you have taken a cottage for her, near here, have you not ?"

" Yes, while I am kept dawdling about business in London. You are very kind ; but I am afraid you will never meet. Martha is so shy, and—well, it must be said—awkward, that she

shrinks from strangers ; and yet I feel sure you would like her.”

“I am sure of it. But are you sure you quite understand her? Men sometimes make mistakes about women. Suppose my sister and I call on Miss Burridge—she must be lonely by herself all day. If she does not like us, she need not return our visit.”

Kitty spoke simply, but Mr. Burridge flushed with mortification.

“You’re very good, I’m sure,” he said, in a harsh, suppressed voice. His voice had a trick of seeming under control, as if, unless its owner held the rein tightly, it could say very rude things indeed. “But Martha is not quite such a Yahoo as that; if you call on her she will return your visit, Miss Ralston.”

Kitty felt snubbed; she longed to ask how she had given offence, and yet the angry light in her companion’s eyes warned her against such frankness; besides, had not her aunt always cautioned her against becoming intimate with Mr. Burridge. Only—and here Kitty went off into a dreaming fit, which completely

quieted her temporary annoyance—perhaps her aunt did not quite appreciate his talent—it was so wonderful; and Kitty gave a little sigh, “Genius is always difficult to understand,” she thought.

She roused to find Oliver speaking to her, and this thought of his genius showed in her eyes as she looked up. There was an admiring reverence in them which touched Mr. Burridge.

“I am something like Martha.” He laughed uneasily, for the admission pained him. “I am awkward, too—I don’t mean in the way she is awkward, poor girl,”—he drew himself up with a shy self-consciousness that looked like vanity—“but I say things awkwardly, I suppose partly because my mind is otherwise occupied.”

Kitty looked interested; she thought he was getting into the vein of talk she liked to listen to.

“You mean,” she said, with an earnest air of attention that made her seem yet more attractive to Oliver, “that your best thoughts are always with your work; but tell me, when you have carried out all your ideas, what will you do?”

He raised his hand as if to stop her words.

“What a woman’s question that is!” And then, seeing her shy blush—“No, indeed, you have not vexed me, only you made me think how a woman flies all round a subject while a man feels that he has only mastered one side of it. To begin with, I have never satisfied myself yet in the working out of an idea. This one may do better than the others—I cannot tell. I hope it will, for its profit will be large in the way of saving labour.”

“Well, then, what have you to fear? I feel sure you will succeed.”

She spoke eagerly. A flush spread over Oliver’s face; he looked down into the sweet earnest eyes of the girl, and he seemed as if he was going to speak; he turned away his head and sighed. He walked on faster for a few moments, then he said,

“I wish I could think so, Miss Ralston. No, that’s not it; I do think so, and if all depended on me, I would succeed.” He spoke so powerfully that Kitty felt there could be no doubt of his victory. “But other plans have failed

before mine, and not from their own fault either; there are so many things to be considered—the incompetency of workmen, the dislike to innovations among manufacturing hands. Why,” he went on, warmly, “with this improvement in the machinery there would not be many northern firms who could compete with ours—we must carry all before us.”

“It will be a glorious triumph for you,” she said, softly. “How much more glorious to have made this invention than to reap the profit it will bring!”

He gave a short laugh.

“Well, I don’t know that—the profit will be very pleasant and useful.”

“Oh, Mr. Burridge,” she said, earnestly, “I am sure of it; if it had only been done for money, you could not have felt the same enthusiasm in doing it.”

“I’m not at all sure of that.” He laughed at her enthusiasm.

She shook her head at him.

“It seems to me,” she said, “that to anyone capable of creating an idea, and of working it

out, the very faculty, or rather its exercise, must bring happiness. It must be the sort of happiness a mother feels as she watches the growth of a little child—it must absorb and concentrate in itself all other interests of life.”

“It did once, true enough,” he said, abruptly. “While I was thinking it out, I could not get my thoughts away from it—I used to dream of it. I was living alone then, so I could shut myself up with any special thought or puzzle I wanted to master; sometimes I went on for days before daylight came on the matter, and then it all seemed so simple that I felt what a blockhead I was not to have seen it before.”

While he spoke, he became transformed; all the hard self-restraint had left him; he was so carried away by his subject that perforce he carried his listener with him.

“I should like to see your plan,” she said; “but then I am so hopelessly ignorant of machinery that I should never be able to see its superiority over any other.”

“I daresay not, but I could explain it.” He looked pleased. “Look here, Miss Ralston, I

can let you see the working drawings. I don't care to talk about this matter, but I am to show the drawings to your uncle one day; he takes an interest in my plan, and he is very kind in giving me advice about the best way of managing the legal part of the business."

"Yes, he told me, and he said he was certain of your success. How soon shall you know the result?"

She asked with so much evident interest that again Oliver Burridge flushed, and pressed his lips tightly, as if to keep in words that tried to get spoken.

"That's the part of it that is hard to bear," he said; "the confounded uncertainty—I beg your pardon, Miss Ralston, but the delay irritates me, and keeps my whole life at a standstill; that is to say, I can't know what I want to know above all things," he said, with emphasis, and a softening in his voice, which had, when he began to speak, gone back to its old harshness.

Kitty was just going to say, "You mean about your idea;" she looked up, and the



expression in Oliver's face checked her. She did not read it rightly even then ; she thought his words referred to some private business, of which she was ignorant, and that he wished to check her questions, and yet she felt puzzled—it was one of the points of interest to her in Mr. Burridge that he often puzzled her. Ever since his first visit to The Elms, two months ago, she had always felt puzzled after he went away ; and now, as he held out his hand, and suddenly said good-bye, having given no previous warning that he meant to leave her, she was as puzzled as ever.

“Will you not come indoors ?” she said.

He held her hand a moment, and looked down earnestly into her eyes ; there seemed to be a question in his, and she coloured slightly. He let go her hand.

“No, thank you ; I will see your uncle to-morrow or next day. I have no more time now.”

He raised his hat and left her, hurrying his departure because in the distance he saw Louisa coming back.

Louisa came up to her sister with a sort of

dancing step, and Kitty started out of her puzzle.

“Oh!” said the soft, purring voice, “I’m so sorry I disturbed you, darling—ahem!”—Louisa gave a discreet little cough.

“You did not disturb me—I was only thinking about Mr. Burridge,” Kitty said, very simply, and looked at her sister, but at the mischievous significance in those blue eyes she flushed, sorely against her will.

Louisa laughed pleasantly, and put her hand into her sister’s arm.

“Come indoors at once, you dear old impostor,” the merry girl said, “and tell me all about it. What is he?—who is he?—is he rich or poor? Of course he is delightful, but he is not quite tall enough. You know I adore giants; he is certainly handsome, if he would look a little less stern. I thought he would find me *de trop*, so I went. You have had a jolly talk. Why are you frowning, Kitty? There’s no use in denying it any longer; come indoors like a good child and be kissed. I’d kiss you now, if that gardener’s boy was out of the way. Oh, I am so pleased!” and she skipped about.

Kitty was growing angry in her efforts to check her sister's nonsense.

"Louy, do be quiet!" she said at last. "I cannot tell you how I hate joking, and you are so much mistaken. Mr. Burridge is a great friend of Uncle Charles's. I like him because he is so very interesting in his talk, and he always leaves me something to think about when he goes away."

"Of course he does—heaps of nice things," Louisa said, triumphantly.

"My dear child, that is all," said Gyneth, and she looked so fearlessly into her sister's eyes that the young lady felt herself at fault.

The rule at school, in such a case as she had imagined, had always been for the teased girl to look blushing and foolish; but, though there was certainly an accession of colour on her sister's usually clear pale face, it seemed to be brought there by anger rather than by any confusion.

Louisa did not say any more till they had both reached a room leading out of the inner hall on the right, as they came in by the glass

door at the back of the house. Ever since the two orphaned sisters had come to live with their aunt and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Venables, this room, built out beyond the house itself, and reaching almost to the conservatory, had been given up to their sole use. All their special treasures were here; the pictures their mother had painted when she was young, feeble as works of art, but very highly prized by her children; her special work-table, and their father's writing-table, and sundry other bits of old furniture, made the room look quaint and original. On two sides the walls were covered with bookshelves; the third was occupied by a fireplace, in which a fire of beech-logs was blazing, a grand pianoforte, and a harp; and on the fourth side, a sofa and spinning-wheel, an embroidery frame, some easels, and among all this a table, with a row of shelves above it, both table and shelves covered with old china, which had belonged to the mother whose loss had been so keenly felt by her children. About the room were a few comfortable chairs, some small old-fashioned tables, a smaller sofa, and a

portfolio-rest, and in one corner was a little cupboard, the half-open door of which showed that it held paint-brushes, tubes of colour, and other requisites for art, neatly arranged.

As soon as the sisters were fairly in the room, Louisa put both arms round Kitty and kissed her.

“Don't be vexed with me, darling Kitty,” she said, in a petting voice that irritated Kitty. “‘That is all,’ is it?—well, and enough too. I am younger than you, but I know all about the sort of thing, and I think your symptoms are quite unmistakable. ‘He is very interesting, and he always leaves you something to think about.’ It's all right, dear.” The distress in her sister's face touched the young wise-acre. “Kitty dear, I'll not say another word of teasing if you will tell me the history of this gentleman, and how you became acquainted with him.”

Kitty walked away to the window, and stood looking out for a minute or two, quieting herself. She was vexed, and she was disgusted by what seemed to her a low tone in her sister.

She had never been to school, and she feared school had spoiled Louisa ; it was sad that this very young girl should see a possible admirer in every man who spoke to her sister. Presently a smile came on the disturbed face ; Kitty left the window, and flung herself into a long low chair in front of the cheerful fire. Louisa came and sat on the floor beside her.

“I will tell you,” Kitty said, “but I want to say something else first. We must always be good friends, Louy, but, to keep so, we must understand one another’s characters. I don’t think I am difficult to live with, but the one thing I crave for in life is freedom. I detest petty restraints—I don’t mean those natural restraints which belong to the state of life one is born to. I am not an emancipated woman yet, at any rate, so you need not look alarmed, Louy ; but I must do as I choose without being criticized or forced into a special groove. I like Mr. Burrige extremely, and yet I am not at all what you call ‘in love’ with him. It will spoil all the freedom of our friendship if

you mean to tease me whenever he comes. Do you understand me, dear?"

Louisa was not at all convinced; she did not answer this protest; she only said,

"Do tell me something about him!"

Kitty felt disappointed; she had made an effort to say so much, and it seemed as if she was not understood.

"Mr. Oliver Burridge," she said, gravely, "has been for some years in a great Yorkshire manufacturing house; he is a genius—at least, uncle says he is—and he has lately made some improvements in machinery which uncle says will make the firm with which Mr. Burridge is connected immensely rich."

"Won't they make him rich too, Kitty?" the young girl said, her blue eyes wide open and full of interest.

"That must follow," her sister answered; "he is already very necessary to the firm, and he will very soon be a partner—that is, if the plan succeeds."

"I see,"—the young girl looked thoughtful. "Yes, he must be rich any way. I see," she

said, thoughtfully, "for, of course, he can sell his plan to another house, if his own does not take it."

"I scarcely think he would do that," said Kitty; "but I suppose I have been so interested in his success that I have not much considered the money side of it. What a practical little head you have got, Louy!"

"I am only reasonable," the girl said. "It is plain to me that money is the most powerful agent either for happiness or the reverse; school, at any rate, has taught me that, and, if a man has plenty of money, he has one very good quality for a husband."

"Let us talk of something else, child," said Kitty; "we shall not agree about money, I see; but Mr. Burridge has plenty of good qualities besides his chance of being rich."

"He does not come of a good family, I suppose? No,"—Louy shook her fair head—"he does not look well-connected, and his manner is too abrupt."



## CHAPTER IV.

## MARTHA'S HOME.

IT had been a warm, bright day; though it was early May the wind was not in the east, and the sky had a genial look; soft, fleecy clouds seemed to bleach to a yet more dazzling white as they lay basking in the mid-day sunshine.

Piccadilly was thronged with vehicles, and near Burlington House the pavement was so crowded that it was difficult for timid people to get along. The Royal Academy Exhibition was only just open, and a continued stream of visitors had been pouring in since the morning. The day was getting on towards five o'clock, and people were coming out of the Exhibition

through the plank-covered entrance-way, and there were some with pleased, excited faces, others looking profoundly tired and bored, all very dusty, and catalogue in hand. Those still going in had often to wait: the comers out, being the most numerous, filled up the half-finished entrance-way; but Mr. Oliver Burridge had no mind to wait anyone else's pleasure, and, squaring his powerful shoulders, he forced his way through the crowd of chattering girls and men, and soon reached the turnstile. He was forced to wait here till some one in front of him had got through, a gentleman, who turned towards the first room so that Oliver saw his profile.

Mr. Burridge gave a sudden exclamation, and then checked himself, reddening at his own want of control. The gentleman went on into the first room, and Mr. Burridge looked annoyed.

“I am sure it is Penruddock, but I'll not force myself on him,” he said. “Why should he care to recognize me? He's a great swell now, no doubt, and he knows nothing about me.”

Oliver raised his head and smiled at the contrast his future offered to his past, but the incident had clouded his afternoon ; the bright look of expectation faded from his strong, resolute face, and the sternness came back to it. He was annoyed ; he wanted to see the first room before any other, because a friend's portrait hung there, but he did not choose Mr. Penraddock to think that he tried to renew old acquaintance by following him, so he went moodily through the sculpture, and then turned to his left into the large room. The crowd here was not so closely packed, and the costumes of some of the ladies could be seen more easily ; these were, in fact, more remarkable than many of the pictures, being intended to astonish the beholders rather than to be either graceful or becoming to the wearers.

Oliver Burridge did not trouble himself to look at any of them ; he went up to one of the pictures, and studied it closely, but started away with evident annoyance when two gushing young damsels began to declaim in artistic terms on the demerits of the picture in ques-

tion. The long pale nose of one of these female critics seemed to be finding its way through a quantity of straight fair hair, which fell over her face; the other, with a very ordinary round countenance, only remarkable for freckles, distinguished herself from the common herd by a squeezed-out-of-shape bonnet of faded green, decked with daffodils, and a pale green-blue circular cloak, reaching to her heels.

Oliver moved on and halted before another picture, but the fair critics followed him, and again disturbed the thoughts suggested by the picture—a bold, breezy sea-scape, full of fine tone and colour. The technical jargon in which the girls talked seemed to be as much addressed to Oliver as to one another, and again he started away, and hurried on to the next room. There was a block here in the doorway. A tall, broad countryman, with his wife on his arm, was standing still, both agape, instead of moving forward with the crowd, and all at once Oliver found himself face to face with the gentleman he had guessed to be Penruddock.

Now that they stood close together, Maurice

was taller than Mr. Burridge, but he was slighter, though his shoulders were not narrow; his face was paler and more irregular, not less earnest, but less inflexible than Oliver's was. There was a charming sweetness in his long dark eyes as he now smiled frankly.

"How d'ye do? I'm so glad to see you, Burridge," he said. "I have often wondered what had become of you. I don't think we've met these five years. Are you settled in town?"

He backed into the room behind him, and Oliver followed.

"I've been in the north ever since," Oliver said; and they stood chatting about the pictures and of outside, indifferent topics, while each was drawn more and more warmly to his companion. They were two remarkable-looking men, even in so great a crowd.

"Then your sister will be at Fulham for some time, at least," said Mr. Penruddock. "I should like to see her. She used to be so kind to me—and so you all were."

Oliver smiled. His companion had found the way to disarm his sensitiveness. It was sooth-

ing to look back and to feel that he and his sister, and their old blind mother, had given something to Maurice Penruddock's life which it could not have had without them; for, child as he was, Oliver had gathered how dull the country parsonage would have been to Maurice, with its absent, dreamy rector, and its fussy, dull mistress, if he had not had the outlet afforded by his acquaintance with Oliver and his sister.

"You knew we lost my mother. I told you that years ago, when I saw you at Oxford."

Penruddock nodded.

"Would you like to see Martha? I'm sure she'd like to see you. Poor Martha, she's just the same—makes no new friends, but sticks to the old ones like wax!"

"That's a very good character, isn't it?" said Penruddock, smiling.

Oliver remembered that smile, and chafed under it. He knew that its gracious sweetness—a sweetness full of self-respect—had often checked his own rebellious spirit, without impressing his conviction.

"I don't know that," he said, bluntly. "It

may be right to cling to old friends, but it must be wrong not to make new ones; and Martha lives like a hermit when she's at home."

"Ah! London will alter that! But if you will give me the exact address, I shall have much pleasure in calling."

"Our cottage is not an easy place to find," said Oliver. "Tell me where to find you, or I'll call for you to-morrow at your club at seven, and take you down. We still keep up our primitive habits—early dinner, and supper at half-past eight. Will you come?"

"Yes, thank you. I shall be delighted. That is my club address. I shall expect you to-morrow at seven."

They shook hands and parted. Oliver felt greatly pleased; he knew it would be a pleasure to Martha to see her old friend; and also he was glad that Maurice Penruddock should see with his own eyes that things had prospered with the Burridges—for, if Oliver had chosen to live up to his means, he could have lived in better style than he did; but if he was ambitious, he was also prudent, and his present project might

fail, and then he would want money for another idea, which lay ready to spring to life in his busy brain; and as Martha disliked society, and refused to spend money on dress, why should he change his simple mode of life? So, when he came to London to watch over the growth of his plan,—he preferred to have the machinery made at a distance from the town where it was to work such wonders,—he sought out a quaint, old-fashioned house in the quiet suburb of Fulham, and installed Martha there with two canaries and the maid who had lived with them from childhood.

The feeling of gladness grew within Oliver, that feeling which the sight of a long-forgotten face stirs up, till, even in a more worldly heart than that of Oliver Burridge, it will grow to such dimensions that it shuts out all but itself; he strolled about the rooms without looking at the pictures. All at once he thought of Martha.

“I must get home to tell her. She will be so pleased—poor girl, it will quite cheer her up,” and in a few minutes he was on the top of an omnibus, on his way to Fulham.



He got down sooner than he needed, and took a short cut through market gardens; after the bustle and clatter and struggle in Piccadilly, it was refreshing to be among the freshly opened leaves, and all the joyous promise of spring—for plum and apple-trees, cabbages, and whole fields of cucumbers and vegetable-marrows, in their season, maintained, and still maintain possession, in this quiet district, of a large stretch of land between the high-road and the river, and for the present, at least, bid defiance to the inroads of bricks and mortar. Oliver went on between clouds of white and pink softly-tinted blossoms, lying close on their black gouty stems, which seemed to have as little likeness to the blossoms as the coarse, crumpled leaves had. The ground beneath was carpeted with parsley, a golden green wherever the sun found its way in among the thick masses of blossom. Then he turned into the cabbage and lettuce-fields beside the river, screened out of sight by fruit-trees—while, on the right, beyond the fields, were forest-trees in all their spring glory, and exquisite limes, which seemed

to unfold into richer loveliness from hour to hour, beside crimson beeches and the burning bronze of the tardy oaks. After a while he left the fields, and walked along the road, bordered by ancient walls, and sometimes fences, overtopped by stately elms and planes. At last he came in sight of a grand old Italian pine-tree, covered with cones and full of birds' nests; this was shut in by green palings, over which showed yellow corchorus blossoms, almost matching in colour the gate set between two holly-bushes.

Oliver Burridge opened the gate, and then looked up at the open window. This was in the middle of the house, and had a hood-shaped verandah over it, and a wooden balcony in front; hanging on this balcony was a grey parrot in a cage; under the verandah two smaller cages with a canary inside, hung on each side of the window; beyond were trellis and a smaller window, and above three very small old fashioned windows with white sills. The wall of the house was coloured, like the green-white of a duck's egg, but the lower part was hidden by

a porch and a range of trellis completely covered by climbing roses—these were as yet flowerless; on the left was a low range of building, covered with a vine bursting into leaf.

From the tree-branches across the road the birds were singing their evening hymn, but as Oliver stood looking at the vacant chair in the balcony a canary opened its little beak and poured forth a torrent of song that drowned all other sounds; then came a lull, and the other birds sang louder and louder, but the canary broke in upon them again with a flood of melody that must have made the poor things feel they were wasting breath.

Oliver clapped his hands.

“Be quiet, you little chatterer!” He cared little for music, and the bird’s shrill notes broke the spell which the harmony of the lovely spring hues had laid on his senses as he came through the market-gardens.

“Martha,” he called out, “why, where are you?”

The glass door under the porch opens, and there is a tall pale woman, framed in the rose-sprays, smiling a welcome. She wears a dark

stuff-gown, which clings closely to her and shows how fine her figure is, and how round and white is her throat.

Martha's eyes are as green as ever, and have the same look of perplexed restraint, but the eyelids are whiter and heavier, so that the eyes themselves do not look so large. Her hair is smoother and less red in hue, but when she speaks there is no change from the Martha of so many years ago.

"I did not expect you so soon," she says, with a sweet look and an uneasy flush, as if she ought to have divined by instinct the change of time.

"Well, never mind, here I am,"—he kissed her. "I've some news for you—guess whom I've seen to-day, Martha?"

He looked at her steadily. Something in his look stirred old memories and she grew flushed to her hair, and then angry with herself for this; she frowned.

"Don't look cross, you old goose," he said, laughing. "It is some one you like—some one you were very fond of once."

She had guessed at first—instinct had told her—but she wished Oliver would not stand looking into her eyes with that mischievous questioning expression that made her feel as if he and she were boy and girl again.

“I know whom you mean.”—She could smile now.—“It was Mr. Penruddock.” But she spoke uneasily, and looked into the rose-bush.

“Yes; I knew you'd be sure to guess. He asked after you, and he wants to see you. I shall bring him home to-morrow.”

Her eyes brightened, and she smiled with happiness. Then her face clouded.

“Not to dinner, Oliver—please don't. Jane does for us, but she could not cook for Mr. Penruddock. I—it would not do, I think.”

She looked so troubled that Oliver laughed.

“I see you're just like other women, Martha, though you don't go in for fashion and society. Dress and dinner are the only things a woman thinks of when she hears of a visitor. But you needn't worry. Penruddock's coming to supper. It will be jolly to be all three together again, won't it?”

“That it will!”

Martha looked radiant, even beautiful, and a lovely flush deepened on her cheeks; she followed her brother indoors, and then, all at once, as the past came back, she hung her head with shame, and hoped that Maurice was either quite unchanged, or that he had forgotten her silliness when he left Deeping.

## CHAPTER V.

## A LITTLE SUPPER.

**M**ARTHA stood looking at the supper-table. She had looked at it three times already, but she felt so stirred out of her usual calm by this most unusual advent of a visitor that it was difficult to concentrate thought ; and though with her outside eyes she had already seen the fowl and ham, and rhubarb tart, and custards, and salad occupying five places on the table, she had come away each time with a confused idea and a hazy doubt as to how the rest of the supper was laid, and a tormenting fear as to what Mr. Penruddock would think.

Maurice Penruddock ! How strange it would be to see him after so many years, Martha thought.

To be all together again. Oliver had seen him more than once—he would not feel so uncomfortable.

“But then Oliver is never shy; he says he always feels the equal of everyone. I could never feel equal to Mr. Penruddock. His mother is Lady Mary, and he is a barrister; and, besides, though he used to be our friend, and we called him by his name, he always had something about him quite different from ourselves.”

And then Martha's heart swelled, and a bright flush came into her face as she remembered that parting in the wood.

Martha had put on her best gown, a myrtle-green silk, which suited well with her hair, a soft tulle ruching set off her round white throat, and excitement had given her ever so faint a tinge of rosy colour; but, although she would have been called “a well-grown woman,” and was indeed very remarkable-looking, she was so unconscious of any power to attract that she had not even the vanity needful to the perfect success of beauty. She had dressed herself with extra care, to do honour to Mr. Penruddock, and also because



Oliver had said, more than once, "Be sure you are nicely dressed." Certainly she had not the idea of beautifying herself. It would have been impossible to Martha Burridge to think of herself as the possessor of any charm or attraction—her vanity lay in the opposite course, a consciousness of her short-comings; these were, in her opinion, a want of grace, far more apparent, however, in her lank girlhood than now in her fuller development, and her ignorance of the ways of society; to think of herself as likely to attract favourable notice, would have seemed to Martha sheer folly.

"There," she said, when she had completed her survey of the table, and settled several of the things again, "I'll not fidget any more. I've done the best I can, and Oliver knows me too well to expect much; as to that, if Maurice—Mr. Penruddock, I mean,"—she laughed, and grew red at her own mistake—"if he remembers us at all, he knows well what a foolish, half-ready creature I always was."

She could not settle to her satisfaction whether she wished Maurice to forget her or to

remember her. She sat down in the balcony between the two canaries; they took her coming there as a signal, and immediately poured out a flood of song; the parrot put his head on one side, and shut his eyes, but he took no other notice of her arrival. Martha's restlessness had left her. She paid no heed to the full-throated greeting of the little yellow birds; her face was full of delightful memories, the eager looking forward had vanished. She was a little conscious, a little ashamed of the silent worship she had paid all these years to the remembrance of her childish love.

"It was always more on my side than on his," she thought, "and even—" she stopped here.

All these years, colourless to her, had passed by without bringing her any strong personal interest unconnected with her mother and Oliver, but how full they had doubtless been to Mr. Penruddock!

"No! he remembers nothing about me, and he has found more than one girl to love him before this—perhaps he is married."

Martha would have laughed to hear that she was in love with Maurice, and yet, at the thought of his having a wife, a chill fell over her feelings, and all brightness seemed to be taken from the meeting to which she had so looked forward.

It is commonly said that a sudden change of feeling is only the result of impulse, and that, as this subsides, the normal state of mind returns, except where there has been some unexpected revelation of treachery on the part of a friend or kindness from an enemy. But to Martha Burridge it seemed afterwards, as days and weeks went by, that the woman who sat, on that spring evening, in the low wooden balcony between those little yellow singers, was quite some one else, a cold nonentity, with scarcely a wish or an outlook beyond the daily round of common duties, compared with the living self that belonged henceforth to her.

All at once there were voices and footsteps, and the sleepy parrot opened both eyes.

“How d’ye do, Oliver,” it screamed, “all right, my boy,—eh?”

Before Martha could see the two figures she heard Maurice's voice.

"What, you have the old parrot still; poor old Jacko!"

He was not changed, then,—this remembrance of the parrot was just like his old self. Involuntarily she smiled at Jacko, and said, "An old friend is coming, Jacko;" then she went downstairs, feeling far more at her ease than she had expected.

The glass entrance door opened into a pretty little hall, and here she found Oliver and his visitor.

Mr. Penruddock had changed far more in looks than in voice, and Martha felt as if she shook hands with a stranger; but the change was a relief—it blotted out the past.

"I should not have recognized you," she said, shyly.

Maurice shook her hand warmly, and held it for a minute as he looked at her.

"You are changed too, but I should have known you anywhere—you look younger than Oliver does."

“I am some years older—but then he has so much to think of, and that ages him—he thinks for both of us.”

“Come,”—Oliver had grown impatient of this dialogue. “Aren’t we going upstairs, Martha, or do you mean Penruddock to spend his evening on the door-mat.”

Penruddock winced at the somewhat rough tone, but Martha seemed used to it. She turned and led the way upstairs to the room with the balcony. It was very simply furnished, and as the walls were darkly papered there was little light except close to the window. Oliver went there and out into the balcony, where he began to tease Jacko.

“You are very little changed, I’m sure,” Maurice said. “I wonder if the Oliver worship is as strong as ever.”

Martha looked up pleadingly, and Mr. Penruddock thought that her eyes had certainly changed for the better—they were soft as well as bright now, but there was still the perplexed restraint in them—they seemed to be hiding a deeper expression.

“How nice and quiet you are here,” Maurice said, “and what splendid trees there are in this part of the world! I did not know there was such an old world, unfrequented place so near London.”

Oliver heard the last words as he stepped back out of the balcony, wrapping his handkerchief round his finger—he had teased the parrot till it had bitten him.

“We are quiet here just now, but on Saturdays, at this time of year, we have plenty of fashion and gaiety near us; there are, however, some delightful old houses with quaint, old-fashioned gardens.”

“Have you any pleasant neighbours?” Maurice looked at Martha, but Oliver answered—

“Martha is unsociable,” he said, “or she might know some very nice people here,—their place, The Elms, is very pleasant, one of the few where the garden goes down to the river-bank,—people named Venables. He was in your profession, but he gave up practice some years ago—do you know him?”

“I know him slightly. My guardian was a

cousin of this Venables, and my mother is, I believe, a very old friend. They have no children of their own, I think."

Oliver looked out of window. "They have no children, but they have adopted two nieces, the daughters of Mrs. Venables' sister. Mrs. Venables and her sister both had money, but this poor Mrs. Ralston lost most of hers in some bank failure. I always fancy old Venables was to blame in not looking after her affairs, for her husband died long ago; so I suppose he considers he must make it up to the girls."

"And why don't you visit these ladies?"—Maurice looked at Martha in his old smiling, teasing fashion.

"They would not care to know me," she said, hesitating and twisting her fingers. "They are fashionable young ladies. I don't see what they could find in me."

Maurice shook his head.

"You're too 'umble,' I see. You have forgotten all my lessons," he said, mischievously. "I imagine, if they are frivolous girls, you have far more to offer them than they can give in

return. Don't you remember I used to say that you ought to have companions of your own age?"

Oliver had come close up to him, and now he burst in impetuously.

"You are making a great mistake," he said, "they are not at all frivolous girls—at least, Miss Ralston is not. I don't know her sister so well; besides, she's only eighteen."

Martha gave Penruddock a significant look, but he did not notice it; he was annoyed with Oliver's manner, and he walked to the window.

"Isn't supper ready?" said Oliver; then, as Martha nodded, he said, "Shan't we go down then?" and he opened the door.

Maurice offered his arm to Martha, and this disconcerted her. She felt sure that he had become ceremonious, and that he would expect a much more elegant meal than she had prepared. She did not hear a word of his talk as they went down together. However, Oliver had preceded them, and was lighting the candles on the mantelshelf, while a lamp suspended from the ceiling made the table look bright and



pleasant; and presently, when she saw how hungry they both were, Martha grew tranquilised about her preparations.

Oliver became thoroughly genial as his hunger was appeased,—he had a wild-beast tendency to be cross when he wanted a meal.

“You ought to know Mr. Venables,” he said to Penruddock, “he is a shrewd, kind man, and his wife is delightful,—at least, I should think so, if I did not suspect her of being satirical.”

“And the nieces,”—Maurice looked mischievously out of his long, sweet, dark eyes,—“are they satirical too?”

“I don’t think so;” and then Oliver paused as if the suggestion had created a doubt. “No, I am sure the eldest is not,—that is to say, she would not make fun of you behind your back; she is too frank and direct. I don’t know about Miss Louy, as they call her; she is far more conventional than her sister is, I don’t half understand her; they seem to spoil her.”

“I should like to know them well enough,” Maurice said. “My mother has been a great invalid since she came from India, and when we

called they were from home ;” then he turned to Martha. “I suppose I must not ask you to call on my mother ?”

Martha blushed.

“No, thank you. I don’t think your mother would care to see me, and I am sure I should be shy and stupid.” She glanced at Oliver; he was frowning. “You don’t think me very rude to refuse,” she said, timidly.

Maurice smiled.

“I don’t think you lose much by your refusal. My mother goes out so little, and is such an invalid, that, except to the few who know and love her, she is not much of a companion, and it is a long way from here to Bayswater. But, Oliver, you will come some evening, won’t you, and dine with my mother.”

“Thank you, I shall be very glad ; but Martha is a silly girl to shut herself up, and lose every chance of making friends ; she’ll be sorry for it some day.”

If he could have looked into her heart just then, Oliver would have seen that Martha was sorry already—not that she had refused to

call on Lady Mary Penruddock, but deeply sorry that the circumstances of her life had not fitted her to do all that Maurice wished her to do. She shook her head, but she smiled as she answered—

“I know myself better than you do, Oliver. I do best in the shade.”

Her lips quivered. Maurice saw this, and he felt a kind of resentment against Oliver—it seemed to him that her brother did not understand Martha.

“The sweetest flowers blossom best in the shade,”—he smiled so kindly that it took all semblance of flattery from his words. “I see we must leave you alone, and let you judge for yourself; now-a-days self-assertion is so common that your reticence shines out like some bright particular star.”

“Do you smoke?” said Oliver, abruptly. In his heart he was calling Penruddock “a fool for cockering up Martha in her absurd notions.”

“Yes, but I fancy I must say good night; the drawback to this leafy retreat is, I expect, that

there is a difficulty of getting a conveyance to town."

"You won't get a cab, but, if you don't mind an omnibus, you can get one a little way off," said Oliver. "I'll put you in the road, and we can have a smoke as we go along."

Martha stood at the open door under the porch, looking out into the darkness long after her brother had closed the garden-gate behind him. She was glad to be alone, and yet she had felt a kind of anguish, when Mr. Penruddock got up to go away, that the evening was over. How stupidly she had acted; he perhaps would never come again; he could see Oliver in London, and she had refused the chance he offered of making his mother's acquaintance.

"He did not press it; of course he saw how unfit I am to call on her, and yet——"

And yet Martha had realised during this evening, she could not tell how, that the distance between herself and Maurice had lessened. At one time of her life she had thought of being a governess, and, without breathing her intention to Oliver, she had studied hard and taken advantage

of every means of education that came in her way; even now, when she felt herself too necessary to Oliver to think of carrying out her plan, she gave all her spare moments to study; insensibly her horizon had risen and her tastes had become more refined. With all her worship she sometimes shrank from Oliver's roughness and his abrupt contradictions,—it had been a kind of heaven to sit and listen to Maurice's pleasant soft voice and to his gentle raillery. She stood trying to go over it all, one hand clasped in the other.

“How charming he is! Will he ever come again?—if he does not I shall wish he hadn't come to-night, it has brought back so much past time;—and yet, for the sake of old friendship, he will surely come again.”

She blushed with pleasure in the darkness as she repeated to herself all he had said, and it was sweet to remember that he had held her hand in his at their first meeting. But Martha's calm pride could not be cast off entirely. She frowned with scorn at her folly.

“It is because we never have a visitor that

I feel upset like a silly school-girl," she said. "I ought to be helping Jane instead of wasting time in the dark. What would Oliver think?"

Oliver was coming home along the road in a vexed and, what was unusual with him, a self-discontented mood,—and the worst of it was the utter disproportion between the amount of his annoyance and the subject of it. He was angry with himself for having spoken of Miss Ralston and her sister to Maurice Penruddock. What need was there to speak of the Venables family at all?

"I'm a fool to be the means of bringing a taking fellow like Maurice into their house. It would have been quite easy to say we have pleasant neighbours, and let it stop there."

So he went in and up stairs to bed without even bidding Martha good night.

## CHAPTER VI.

## A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

BY half-past eight Oliver had walked as far as Putney Bridge and back, and had finished breakfast. It was a sparkling morning; the leaves seemed to quiver with delight at their own extreme loveliness, and newly-hatched butterflies were careering through the air, and the birds were singing, though Martha's canaries drowned the outside music. On the opposite side of the road was a field; the grass was already long here, and purple with graceful feathered spikes, and as the morning breeze swept over it these tints kept on changing as they change on the incoming sea-waves. Among the purple grass blossoms was a golden wealth of butter-

cups, and here and there deep crimson clover and silver-starred Marguerites, and these seemed to roll over and over as the wind swept by, tasting the fresh morning sweetness of their petals before it was tainted by the white dust which rose up in a cloud as the wind reached the road.

Oliver half turned on the doorstep.

“Martha,”—she was standing in the hall to see him off, but he did not look at her,—“be sure the garden is watered—it was forgotten yesterday, and there will be no rain.”

Martha felt guilty. Oliver was easy to please, but he was stern to harshness at any neglect of what seemed to him a positive duty; he was very stern towards himself, but it seemed to him unpardonable that Martha, who had no outside cares or distractions, nothing to take her thoughts from the duties of this green nest of theirs, should be neglectful.

“Women are so careless, so inaccurate, even the best of them,” he said to himself, as he went along, bag in hand, towards The Elms.

He had promised to show Mr. Venables the



last improvement in his idea. As he went along, the air was so filled with lovely sights and fragrance that his ruffled mood yielded to it. He felt ashamed of his own fears and scruples the night before, and, strong in generosity as he was strong in all besides, he resolved to speak of Penruddock to Mr. Venables.

When he reached The Elms he was shown into the study, a little room on the right of the entrance, so full of books and papers that there was scarcely room to turn in it. Oliver had only just seated himself, when the man came back and asked him if he would come into the dining-room.

A glow of pleasure came to Mr. Burridge. He hoped to find all the family at breakfast; he was disappointed to find Mr. Venables risen from table and walking up and down the large room. Miss Ralston and her sister were not visible, but Mrs. Venables was still sitting behind the silver tea-urn—a delicate-looking lady with bright dark eyes and grey hair; she presented such a combination of dainty freshness and brightness that even Oliver's practical eyes

glanced with pleasure over her dress from the filmy lace cap tied under her chin by broad lace lappets, to the black and white check gown of a soft silky texture, and to the little plump, well-shaped hands peeping beyond the frilled sleeves—all seemed like some exquisite bit of china, though the perfect order of her dress did not match with the varying, and at times humorous, expressions that flitted across her delicate face.

She smiled quietly at the abruptness with which Oliver turned away after he had said good morning. He went up to a writing-table in the bow-window behind Mrs. Venables, and began to take the papers out of his bag.

“I thought you would like to see what I’ve done. I have altered this, you see,” he said, in a shy, constrained voice, to Mr. Venables, who was looking over the papers, “and D takes the place of E, thus getting rid of E altogether. You see, it simplifies the whole thing very much, increases the working power, and reduces expense in carrying out.”

“Yes, I see—I understand perfectly. It’s excellent.” Mr. Venables’s square, intelligent face grew red with excitement, his grey hair and whiskers looked stiffer than ever. He was rather a short man, with very square shoulders and a short neck.

“My dear,”—he took the drawing to the breakfast-table, and showed it to his wife—“it’s really most interesting; if you’ll make a little room among your tea-cups, I’ll lay it down and explain it.”

“You’ll be careful, won’t you?” said Oliver, abruptly. “I have as yet no copy of that drawing.”

“Yes, yes, to be sure.”

Oliver had always been reserved and silent—it had been an effort to speak of his plans even to Mr. Venables, but he had wanted advice about patenting his plan, and had therefore felt obliged to satisfy his friend’s curiosity; he had not meant to submit his drawing to anyone besides Kitty, and he thought Mr. Venables was indiscreet.

Mr. Venables was too excited to notice, but his

wife observed Mr. Burridge's manner, and a little wondering frown puckered her still fair forehead, while her husband went on explaining what to her was the perfectly incomprehensible and uninteresting diagram on the table; but as it interested her husband, and it brought him to her side to explain its merits, Mrs. Venables gave it her best attention, and even congratulated Mr. Burridge on his certain success.

"Thank you," he said. "How are Miss Ralston and her sister?"

"Quite well, thank you," Mrs. Venables answered.

"You only missed them by five minutes." Her husband's tone was much more genial. "They'll be so sorry. Kitty would have liked to see the drawing, I'm sure."

"Do you think she would?" Oliver said, eagerly. "I can't leave it now, but I'll bring it some evening. By the way, I was talking of you all last night," he went on, "to an old friend of mine, who says he ought to know you—his name's Penruddock; his father was Colonel Penruddock."

Mr. Venables' bright eyes grew brighter and rounder.

"I know, I know,"—he spoke quickly—"I know the man, he was a ward of my Cousin Jack's; I knew him when he was a boy, and I've met him once or twice since. He seems pleasant. What is he doing?"

"He's the best fellow you can fancy; he's at the Bar, not making very much, I suppose, but he's not far over thirty yet."

"Does he live in chambers?—his father died in India, I remember."

Mr. Venables' eyes always seemed to sparkle with impatience while he waited for an answer, —he spoke so promptly himself.

"He lives with his mother, Lady Mary Penruddock, somewhere in Bayswater; he's a swell, you know," said Oliver, awkwardly.

"Have you known him long?" said Mrs. Venables. She did not mean to be impertinent, but Oliver was red and vexed in a moment.

"I see," he said, bluntly—Mrs. Venables said to herself, "boorishly"—"you wonder how I come to have any swell acquaintances; but

when Penruddock was a young fellow, he was at school near my home, and somehow we got to be friends.”

Mrs. Venables had listened attentively; she began to feel interested; this was different from the drawing of a machine.

“And has the friendship gone on ever since you were boys?” she said.

“Yes, on and off.” Oliver felt gratified; Mrs. Venables seldom talked to him. “I happened to go to Oxford on business when I was a youngster, and there, curiously enough, I met Penruddock at the railway-station, and we knew one another again; since then, I have seen him in London once or twice, but I have seen little of him since we were boys till last night, then he came down and spent the evening with us.”

“Have you really taken that cottage for your sister?”

Oliver nodded, and Mr. Venables went on, quickly,

“My dear, you ought to call on Miss Burridge;—it is Fir Cottage, isn’t it?”

Oliver did not give Mrs. Venables time to speak.

“You are very kind,” he said, “but my sister is peculiar—so painfully shy that I believe, if you did call, she would never get courage to return your visit; and yet she would suffer badly enough from the consciousness of her own rudeness.”

Mr. Venables laughed.

“You should cure her of that,” he said. “You wouldn’t believe it, I daresay, but my wife was shy when I married her,—weren’t you, dear? You must make your sister feel her own consequence as your sister; tell her she should swagger a little—it comes as easy to a woman after a bit as ordering the dinner does.”

“I don’t call that a good simile, Charles.” Mrs. Venables looked very sweet when she smiled at her husband. “I find ordering the dinner just as difficult now as I did at first. Is your sister younger than you are?” she said to Oliver.

“Several years older; but my mother was blind, and we never had any society when we

were young, and I fancy shyness sticks to folks unless it's shaken off in early life."

"Well, it has not stuck to you, at any rate," Mr. Venables laughed. "You must try and bring your sister to see us. Azile," he said to his wife, "had you not better send Miss Burridge an invitation for your garden-party?"

Oliver looked puzzled.

"I have not sent any cards yet; but I shall be very glad if you will bring your sister," Mrs. Venables said to Oliver. "Do you think I may invite her?"

"Oh, please don't!" he said, impatiently; then, recovering himself, "The truth is, I know she would refuse, and I get cross with Martha when she refuses to go out; and she is too good a creature to get cross with. But I must be off."

"You had far better cure your sister of her shyness,"—Mr. Venables went to the hall door with his guest,—"and here's an opportunity to begin. Bring her to the garden-party; she will be all right once she's here. I believe it will be pleasant."



“Charles,” Mrs. Venables said, when her husband went back to her, “how could you tell Mr. Burrige he had lost his shyness? Why, he’s the shyest man I know; all that awkward abruptness in him is only shyness; he is full of the prejudices of a man who has been brought up in a corner.”

Mr. Venables smiled and patted his wife’s soft little hand as it rested on the back of the chair in which she had been sitting.

“Well, my dear, nevertheless, he won’t stop in a corner; but what creatures women are!—even when they are not common-place, they can’t penetrate beyond the outside husk of things—manner is everything. Still, my dear, it does puzzle me that you should not appreciate young Burrige.”

His wife laughed.

“Your friend is proud and shy. I can’t help being a woman, of course; but I think I can see that he is very clever and ingenious. You are inclined to overrate him, perhaps self-asserting men with a great constructive faculty are apt to get overrated, because all

they can do shows itself, and speaks for their talent."

"Nonsense, my dear; you understand almost everything, but you don't understand Oliver Burridge; you are too fastidious; you let the man's manner come between you and his real merit, and yet I should have thought you too large-minded for that."

"Should you?"—her sweet dark eyes looked up mischievously at her husband. "Do you really think, dear, I should have married you if you had been abrupt and self-asserting?"

"Of course you would,"—he pinched her cheek—"but now that's just the point in question. I don't suppose any fastidious girl would marry a man with a faulty manner, if she heard his defects commented on; you and Kitty are both absurd in this way."

A bright flush rose on the wife's delicate face.

"Oh, Charles, you surely don't mean that you think Mr. Burridge good enough for our Kitty? I have never yet seen anyone who

could make her happy—certainly Mr. Burridge could not.”

Mrs. Venables drew up her slender figure, and looked almost haughtily at the door, as if she saw Oliver there.

Mr. Venables walked up to the window in silence, and looked out a minute before he came back. He and his wife had married for love, and had loved one another all their lives, and yet every now and then they looked at people or things from totally opposite points. Their differences of opinion never grew to disagreement; as Mrs. Venables said, love was too precious, and life too short, to cloud by dispute, but she had felt that, since Kitty Ralston had come to live with them, she and her husband differed much more frequently.

She had a secret consciousness that this darling niece, whose ideas and tastes were in such perfect harmony with hers, was not appreciated or even understood by Mr. Venables. She never discussed Kitty with her husband, but it had brought a cloud into her sunny life that there was one point in it she shrank from talking over with him.

Mr. Venables thought Kitty a pretty girl, but very unlikely, from her unpractical qualities, to do well for herself in life; he had noticed Oliver's admiration, and it seemed to him sheer insanity to reject such a match as Mr. Burridge might be for her. He left his vexation at the window, and came back to his wife with a smile.

"You are so taken up with Kitty that you can't see her as she really is. I believe, looking at her without any prejudice, that she is a very good girl, and that she thinks very highly of Burridge."

"Yes," Mrs. Venables broke in, impetuously, "but she does not love him."

"Leave her alone, and she'll love him quite well enough to marry him. I am sure that he is on the high road to success. He's just the sort of man to get into Parliament before he's fifty; he will do great good in his time, depend upon it."

Mrs. Venables shrugged her shoulders.

"Ah! dear,"—she put her hand on her husband's arm and kissed him,—“girls don't

think of those sort of things—at least, not such girls as Kitty,—and you know it as well as I do.”

## CHAPTER VII.

## AT THE GARDEN-PARTY.

IT was a lovely spring day. Gyneth Ralston wandered aimlessly about the lawn at The Elms with a little flush on her face, that, if it did not increase her beauty, made it supremely bright. Everything looked so gay and charming, everyone—even the cross old butler—seemed so full of happy anticipation, that she began to look on Louisa as a beneficent fairy, gilding all she touched, and turning the somewhat monotonous life at The Elms into an excitement that was full of gentle pleasure.

Louisa had been indefatigable, and though her sister's taste had originated the beauty of the arrangements, still it was Louisa who had seen that everything was carried out. Louisa had

written all the cards of invitation, had ordered the musicians, and the tent, and had made sundry very practical suggestions respecting refreshments, but she did not enjoy her own work as intensely as Kitty did.

The elder sister went dreamily from one point in the garden to another. She thought the river had never looked more lovely than it did to-day: one while golden with glitter, and then a bluish grey, as a quickly-moving cloud swept over the sun, and flung a sudden soft olive on the bright green grass. The rhododendrons that skirted the lawn between the house and the river were past their acme of beauty, and had begun to fall, strewing the ground with their tent-like blossoms, but the azaleas, coral and orange and gold and primrose—a whole gamut of glorious and fragrant colour—were in their prime, though the roses had begun to bloom outside the house, and over a series of iron arches near the river. On the left, behind these arches was a deep-tangled brake, green with spreading ferns and white-flowered parsnip, a large acacia overshadowing one corner, and mingling its

boughs with those of a sycamore, while a pendant tapestry of white briony spread itself so as to intensify the darkness behind, and also the whiteness of a white foxglove, sitting like a queen among the ferns. To please Gyneth, when she came to The Elms, a tiny path had been cut through this tangle—a sort of green darkness quite shadowed by the thick leafy growth above—till it came out on an old time-stained flight of steps leading down to the river.

She was going into this favourite retreat when she heard a cry of “Kitty—where is Kitty?”

She turned back, and met Louisa, glowing with excitement; while a new dress—very pale blue, with strings of deeper blue beads clasping her round white throat—made her eyes a yet more intense blue under the shade of her white straw hat.

“Really—really, Kitty,” she said, breathlessly, her forehead puckered with perplexity, “you are too provoking to go mooning about undressed. Don’t you know the people are asked for half-



past four, and it's almost four now, and some people always come to the minute; and I want you to look specially nice. You are too provoking."

"I did not think it was so late," said Kitty, quietly; "but did you ever see anything so lovely!" She pointed to the foxglove in its tangled home.

"Yes, very pretty—but rather too wild for a garden. But oh, do go, dear Kitty; I know some one will come before you are ready."

Kitty disappeared, but Louisa's fidget was not appeased; she went back to the house and looked in at the drawing-room bow-window.

She gave a sigh of relief when she saw that Mr. and Mrs. Venables were both ready to receive their visitors, but even then her spirit of organizing would not rest.

"Aunt,"—she put her head in at the open window—"don't you think you had better be in the garden, and leave uncle here? Everyone may not care to go through the house, you know."

Her aunt laughed.

“I suppose we must all obey you to-day,” she said, “but it is much cooler indoors.”

Louisa flitted in and out till even her uncle said he wished “the blue-butterfly would settle.” But at last her example proved contagious, and he too began to fidget restlessly in and out, and finally to worry about Kitty’s absence.

She came down just before the first party of guests arrived. She looked very lovely in a black hat with a tuft of black feathers, and a white gown with a simple skirt, scarcely trailing as she walked, and only trimmed with a single frill.

“You look like a magpie,” her uncle said, but he smiled as he said it; he was thinking how well her black feathers suited her fair, colourless skin, and her deep eyes with their long black fringes.

People came at first stragglingly, and the first comers seemed to be oppressed by a consciousness that they were too early. Louisa surpassed herself in her efforts at entertainment, but these early comers were of a dowdy, ordinary, absorbent kind, and received all efforts

made in their behalf without any attempt to return them—they did not even speak to one another, but sat, looking bored, on the chairs under the shade of the trees. It was a great relief to Louisa to hear the rapid roll of carriages increase and continue without any period of lull till the gardens were filled with a large gathering of fashionable people with bright faces and in gay dresses.

Kitty had placed herself in front of the refreshment tent, and there was quite a buzz of talk here, while people drank tea or coffee, ate strawberries and ices, and criticised one another's toilettes.

The band began to play at the end of the terrace beside the river, where there was an old stone seat, backed by a wall covered with roses. Very soon this terrace was covered with groups moving slowly up and down as they enjoyed the music, and the lovely view looking towards the old grey-towered church.

“Why don't you go to the terrace, Kitty?” Louisa said, as she came into the tent with a tall, fresh-faced clergyman, his wife,

and daughters. The clergyman had the suave dignity of an archbishop; he smiled blandly, and cleared his throat at the beginning of each sentence, seemingly to ensure some listeners to his talk. The wife was tall, fair, and colourless, and her talk consisted in assurances that "flowers were lovely, especially at this time of year," and that "the weather was delicious;" while the two daughters seemed to be rather cynical, small editions of their father—as fully aware of their own superiority to the rest of the world as he was, but without the easy assurance which enabled him to be affable and genial both in looks and manner.

"I am very glad to see you so well," he said to Louisa, "very glad—yes," and then he threw back his head, and looked at both the sisters, as if he were arranging his next sentence.

"We must not both stay here," said Louisa.

"I want to stay," Kitty said, pleadingly, and Louisa, to her surprise, left her in peace.

There was only one person coming to-day to whom Miss Ralston cared specially to talk, and that person was Oliver Burridge. He was the

one special friend whose conversation interested her, and why should she not stay and welcome him here? If she went and mingled with that gay, ever-moving throng beside the river, he might be a long time in discovering her, and meantime she could do her duty by talking to the new arrivals as they came in to get tea. So she went on chatting to Mr. Crampton, the clergyman. Just then Louisa passed again.

“I cannot think why you stay here”—she looked a little vexed—“there are so many nice people on the terrace you have not even spoken to.” She looked at Kitty as she spoke.

“I will come presently.” Kitty avoided her sister’s eyes. “I shall not stay here much longer.” As she spoke she looked back towards the path leading from the drive, the path bordered by Wellingtonias. .

“Are you waiting for Mr. Burrige?” said Louisa. “He will find you fast enough; you need not wait for him.”

She was gone again, but she had not left her sister as she found her.

Something in Louisa’s tone had brought

bright colour to Kitty's fair face, and with this colour a sense of annoyance. She had waited for Oliver simply because he was her friend, she had no self-consciousness in doing it till Louisa had given this reading to her action. Kitty writhed under the imputation that Mr. Burridge could be more to her than a friend; she felt for a moment disposed to quit her post and go on the terrace; but no, this would be a tacit acknowledgment that Louisa was right. She turned, and went on talking to Mr. Crampton, who, having finished his coffee, was making havoc among the cakes and strawberries on the tea-table.

He was certainly a fine-looking man, with good features and expressive blue eyes, but his breadth was extreme, and Kitty found herself wondering whether he had to pay extra for the enormous quantity of black silk in his waistcoat. He lived not very far from London, but he had evidently taken root in his parish, and considered it the most interesting of topics both to himself and his hearers.

“I suppose you are getting nearer London?”

Kitty said, "or perhaps I should say London is spreading out to reach you. I sometimes wonder how long we shall have to drive before we can get into the country."

"Well, well, my dear young lady,"—he seemed to expand as he looked down on her—"growth is the natural order of things, is it not? You have grown surprisingly, and as to my parish—when I came there about twenty years ago, we were surrounded with green fields—yes, green fields—with a population of about two thousand, and now there are twenty-four thousand souls. I've had to divide my parish four times since I came to it—yes!" then he stood still, and beamed as complacently as if he had been the means of producing the extra number of human beings around him.

"Dear me!" this was all Kitty could find to say in answer.

"Yes," he continued, after a lengthened pause, "we are an important and influential body, and likely to increase—likely to increase," then he smiled again very affably, and ate another strawberry ice.

Her uncle's hearty laugh made Kitty look round. He was coming up to her with two gentlemen, one was Oliver Burridge, and the other—where had she seen this other?—and yet the name, Mr. Penruddock, as her uncle presented him to her, was quite unknown. "A great friend of Burridge's," her uncle said, and then Mr. Venables went on, and left the three standing together.

To Oliver's eyes Gyneth Ralston had never looked so lovely as she did to-day, in her simple white gown, standing under the shadow of the tent, her dark, liquid eyes looking up at him from beneath the fringed edge which the feathers made to her hat. He forgot his reluctance that Penruddock should see her, and he looked triumphantly at his friend. He saw at a glance the delighted surprise in Maurice's face.

"I'll come back," he said to Miss Ralston. "I have orders to find your sister and Mrs. Gordon, who is an old friend of Penruddock's, so he must come with me."

He went off, but Penruddock lingered.



“My mother was much disappointed to miss seeing you when we called,” he said.

Kitty smiled; till now she had felt indifferent about this Lady Mary, of whom her uncle often talked, but now it seemed to her a pity that they had been from home.

“We were very sorry to be out,” she said, sweetly; “we hope to call very soon.”

“Thank you. What charming grounds you have! I had no idea roses would bloom so well so near London.” He smiled as he spoke, and the girl smiled in answer.

“Are you coming?” said Oliver’s impatient voice, and Maurice bowed and followed him.

It seemed to Kitty that she was in dreamland. She had been waiting half an hour for Oliver Burridge, and now he had come and gone, and she did not feel anxious that he should come back—she could see him any time—but she hoped his friend would return. What was there in his face, in his voice even, which was in such perfect harmony, there was nothing about him to jar and suggest little regrets? She stood

waiting, and Oliver came back alone. His eyes glowed as he looked at her.

“How well you look!” he said. “How admirably you have dressed yourself! You should always wear black feathers.”

She generally deferred to Oliver’s taste, but to-day she found him too outspoken.

“Uncle says I look like a magpie. You see everyone does not think alike.”

“Everyone!” Mr. Burridge spoke scoffingly; he had a supreme contempt for the taste of anyone but Oliver Burridge. “I did not say everyone would like it. It would be common-place if it suited an ordinary taste. I meant that it was in good taste, and that I liked it.”

Kitty, being a woman, often let feeling overrule judgment, when the subject in question involved sparing or hurting the feelings of others. She knew how Oliver hated contradiction, and until to-day she would have let his words pass unchallenged; now, perhaps by contrast with Mr. Penruddock’s easy gentleness, she found Mr. Burridge obtrusive.

“Or, to put it another way,”—she looked up

saucily, her red lips in a mutinous curve, and her dark eyes full of laughing defiance—"it is after the taste of Mr. Oliver Burridge, and therefore it is good taste!"

"Well,"—he thought her so lovely that just then she might have said what she pleased, without protest—"have it so if you like; but I think we usually agree in taste, don't we?"

He spoke so quietly that Kitty was touched.

"Yes," she said, already sorry that she had teased him—"yes, but you have decided taste—mine is only forming." Then she looked round, as if she were seeking some one. "I ought not to keep you here. I am sure there are friends of yours here—at least, there are people who will be glad to see you."

"But if I prefer to stay here?"

Kitty's usually tell-tale face did not show the pleasure he expected; she looked indifferent; but Oliver was not going to give up the chance of winning her for any seeming unwillingness on her side.

"Girls are so deceiving," he said to himself—"at least, they often don't know what they

really wish." Then aloud he went on—"Let us walk up and down, it is cooler outside the tent; the air blows freshly from the water."

They walked up and down in silence; usually Kitty had plenty to talk about, but to-day she kept straying after her own thoughts, and these thoughts took one direction—they went towards the terrace in search of Mr. Penruddock. A murmur of talk, too, was all around them, and merry silvery laughter from time to time seemed to rebuke their silence. Kitty thought that it was scarcely a time for lengthened talk with anyone, and she wished Mr. Burrige would leave her free to roam about in butterfly fashion.

Oliver did not want her to talk; he liked to walk beside her, studying the graceful pose of her head and the pliancy of her figure. At last his eyes got fixed on the long dark lashes that curved up from her transparent skin. It seemed to him that he was a fool to wait and see some one more daring step in and rob him of such a prize; it was evident that the family at The Elms was going in for "society" as it had not

hitherto done, and "when that begins," he thought, "one can't tell where a girl may go, or whom she may see, or what may happen."

How cautious and tepid he had been not to have taken fuller advantage of these weeks of unrestrained intercourse before her sister came home!

"I ought to have made her very fond of me by this time;" he sighed, and Kitty looked up quickly.

"I am a dull companion to-day," she said—"a crowd like this dazzles and stupefies me; but I like to look at its plumage. Are not those grass-green gowns lovely? Altogether, the scene is charming; but I don't enjoy it as Louisa does; it excites her, and carries her into the spirit of its own flutter and gaiety. Do you not think that to be close to gaiety and not to feel gay makes one extra dull?"

"The fault must be in your companion," said Oliver, stiffly. "I know I'm not suited to this kind of thing, but then a man must be a trifler who enjoys it very much."

"But don't you wish you could enjoy it

thoroughly?" Kitty raised such earnest eyes to his that he laughed. "I wish I could. I feel to-day that it is I who am out of tune and wrong, and that Louisa is doing her duty."

"No,"—Oliver spoke warmly. "I believe that your sister is not doing it for duty's sake; she is enjoying herself fully; she strikes me as being one of those people whom society claims for its own. I don't feel this in my own case, and I should be sorry to be different."

She was silent; she was not quite sure that she understood his real meaning. He could not mean that he did not wish to improve! No one could wish that, she thought. He meant, probably, that he was already so gifted that it would be downright greediness to wish for more. Kitty had the faculty, common to an imaginative mind, of endowing her friends with almost heroic virtues.

It seemed to Oliver as if he felt less intimate with her to-day than usual. It might be the fear of a chance interruption—he could not tell, but he resolved not to tempt his fate until his talk with Gyneth Ralston should have made

him sure that she was prepared to hear of his love. It was so sweet to feel her full trust in his friendship, and, after all, he would rather take a quieter time than this for his confession.

Mr. Venables met them as they turned, and he gave Kitty a smile of hearty approval. One of his guests—a wealthy Yorkshireman—had just been singing the praises of Oliver, and prophesying for him a brilliant future.

“I want you, Burridge—I have some people here who want to make your acquaintance.” He went off, and Oliver followed reluctantly.

He did not wish to leave Kitty till he was sure that the full harmony of their friendship was restored. But as he went on, and Mr. Venables mentioned the names of the friends to whom he was taking him, Oliver’s unwillingness yielded: not because they were rich and men of influence, but because his practical faculty told him that in one of them lay just the special help he wanted, and he never doubted his own power of evoking this help when he was once put in contact with its

possessor; there was also pleasure in feeling that his name was becoming known.

Kitty felt a relief at his absence which surprised her, but she told herself that she was too excited to-day to care for sensible talk. She went on towards the terrace, but an "Ah, my dear Miss Ralston," stopped her.

Coming across the grass, with a kind of scattered movement, arms and legs all going at once—suggestive partly of a spider, partly of a crab—was a tall, bright-eyed man, of about fifty, his dark face intense with intelligence. It was neither the intensity of genius nor of suppressed feeling, but of one who had gathered knowledge of all kinds by ready-witted keenness of appetite rather than by deep study, and who was literally always burning to pour out his information on all subjects.

He gave Kitty a devouring glance of admiration.

"You have surpassed yourself to-day, my dear child," he said, in a tone which suggested that she was the only woman present for whom he had eyes or thoughts. "I can't find fit words for you."



Kitty shook her head at him and laughed.

“I think you are never at a loss for something to say—you know everything and everybody, don’t you?”

He glanced at her quickly—his sensitiveness made him always fear ridicule; but he saw that Kitty spoke sincerely.

“Well, perhaps I do—but, I say, some one says your uncle has taken up a prodigy, a man who is about to invent something. What is he? Who is he? I want to know all about him.”

He spoke so rapidly that it was difficult to answer him; and, just as Kitty collected her ideas, he went on again.

“I say, my dear child, don’t you take a fancy to this inventor—he won’t suit you: too practical, and a sort of man who will have rough notions, and won’t enter into your tastes. Ah, taste is a divine thing in a woman. I wish my wife had some, but she hasn’t a fraction.” His eyes stared, and his face looked tragically earnest.

“I thought your wife was perfection,” said Kitty, laughing.

“So she is—so she is,”—the tragedy look vanished, and he smiled—“dear, darling woman—so practical; manages the children in quite a first-class way; it’s really admirable. I can’t think how she does it—servants and everything, she does it all. She is always well, and is never tired—while I can never once manage to rise to the level of my work.”

“But you look very well,” the girl said, mischievously.

“Do I? Then put not your trust in looks, my dear child.” He put his hand impressively on Kitty’s arm. “I’ve no rest—I never sleep; I was up at four o’clock this morning listening to the birds—so sweet and heavenly,”—he looked in an instant rapt with delight,—“and watching the leaves unfold on the lime-trees. It—was—something—quite—too—heavenly” —he emphasised each word separately—“to see the delicate wrinkled things emerging from their brown husks—and the odour!”—he threw up both hands—“it made me sigh with ecstasy. Ah! my dear, what would your Mr. Burrige care for such a sight as that? There is no poetry in a practical man.”

Kitty held up her head a little proudly.

“First, Mr. Burridge is not my property, and next, as you don’t know him, how can you tell what his tastes are, Doctor?”

Dr. Drewitt threw his head back, and laughed till the colour rose on Kitty’s face.

“I like that, I do,” he said; “the ignorance of you young things is so fresh and delightful, it’s like a plunge in the sea or one’s tub in the morning—quite sets you up after a lot of jaded common-places with humdrum people, whose bloom has got all rubbed off them in gaining experience. Bless you, just as if I can’t tell you what a man is like from a little bit here and a little bit there! And any man who gets his head above the level is safe to be talked of. I can tell you just as easily as a naturalist can build you up a whole animal from a joint of its little toe-bone.”

“You are much too sweeping,” she said; “your argument may apply to an ordinary common-place man, but Mr. Burridge is neither—he is quite original, and he does not care at all what people think. But have you made

Louisa's acquaintance?—she must be very much altered since you saw her.”

“Of course she is—she's charming, but she's not you.”

His glance of admiration made Kitty laugh.

“You cannot have seen much of her. Look! she's coming now.”

“She's a very fine young woman,” said Dr. Drewitt, “and she and my wife will be fast friends, I can see it—she has an orderly, practical look about her; they'll be sympathetic; I feel that I ought to brush my hat and set my tie straight when I see her coming.”

Louisa was walking towards them with Mr. Penruddock, talking with much animation. Dr. Drewitt's hat had got so far to the back of his head that Kitty thought if her sister's presence obliged him to set it right, it might not be amiss.

“What do you think of her companion?” she said.

At this Dr. Drewitt's keen eyes quickly scanned her face, but he could glean no tidings from it.

“There's nothing extraordinary there; of

course, the point of interest to you is that he is falling in love with Louisa."

"Falling in love!"—Miss Ralston's lip curled a little—"I was not thinking of anything so absurd; besides, love at first sight has gone out of fashion. It seems to me, a great many people marry without troubling their heads about love at all—at least, about what I should call love."

Dr. Drewitt's dark, keen eyes again scanned her fair face.

"You have thought about it then—well, so have I," he said. "To me love is the great mystery of life. Where does it spring from? No one knows. It may be the growth of months, or it may germinate in an instant. But never mind how it begins; there's magic in it; it can blind to every possible defect, and even when the eyes open to see the defects, yet the love will often live on beside this consciousness. Nothing kills real love but death."

He had gone on, carried away by his excitement, though Louisa and Mr. Penruddock had come up and had stopped beside Kitty.

Penruddock listened gravely, Louisa with an unbelieving smile.

“You are as sentimental as ever, Dr. Drewitt,” she said; “you should not talk sentiment to Kitty; she has too much already.”

Dr. Drewitt shook his head at her.

“You have stayed too long at school, my dear,” he said, eagerly; “come and walk up and down a minute with me, and I’ll prove to you, if you want to have a green old age, you must cherish youthful illusions; though, mind you,”—again his eyes began to stare, and his forehead to wrinkle—“love is no illusion, but a very intense reality. I could prove to you,”—he raised his forefinger emphatically—“I could prove to you, my dear girl,”—he walked on, and Louisa was obliged to follow—“I could prove to you that the lives of half the men and women you know have been altered and influenced by love either for bad or good; till the world gets hold of us, it’s the strongest power we have, and the strongest influence that can be brought to bear on us.” He looked round suddenly, and saw that she was laughing.

“You only laugh because you are so extremely ignorant,” he said, eagerly. “I don’t like to imagine that such a fair young creature has not got a heart, but that would be the only alternative.”

“I must prove I have one by leaving you,” she said. “I have a right to be offended now,” and away she went.

Dr. Drewitt ran after her, but meeting a keen politician he stopped, and was soon deep in an argument on the Eastern Question, in which he displayed such an amount of study and knowledge that Louisa, had she heard, might have wondered so ripe a scholar should be so ready with what she called “nonsense.”

Maurice Penruddock had been saying to Kitty, “Do you agree with Dr. Drewitt’s theory, Miss Ralston?”

She looked puzzled for a moment.

“You mean this last idea?—he has so many. I suppose it is the easiest way of explaining the sacrifices one sees and hears of—the way, for instance, in which women cling to quite unworthy husbands.”

“I think Dr. Drewitt means that it tells both ways. I see you think women more capable of loving than men are. Is that quite fair?”

“I never thought about it. Have you seen my aunt?” She looked troubled; she was afraid Mr. Burridge’s friend was a flirt, and Kitty detested flirting; she was sure Oliver would not talk such silly stuff as this. “Have you been introduced to my aunt?” she said.

Maurice had taken the opportunity of studying her face, and, as Kitty looked at him, she met his eyes, full of unconscious admiration.

“No, I have only the pleasure of knowing your uncle,” he said; the change in her manner puzzled him. “Is Mrs. Venables in the garden?”

“I see her just coming out through the garden door; we can meet her, if you like,” she said. She felt annoyed with her companion, and yet she could not have told why; except that it seemed to her that she had been suddenly disappointed in her expectation.

They soon found Mrs. Venables, and Kitty was surprised at the pleasure her aunt showed in greeting Mr. Penruddock.



“You do not seem a new acquaintance,” she said, with the charming smile that made her look almost young, and which made her listeners love Mrs. Venables so quickly. “I used to hear of you years ago, and you came to see us once, but you were so young that I daresay you don’t remember.”

“I think I remember you,” said Maurice, “but I have not a very good memory for the time before I went to Deeping.”

“It was at Deeping that you got acquainted with Mr. Burridge, I think?”

“Yes; he and his family were very kind to me.”

Kitty had been listening attentively.

“You know Mr. Burridge’s sister, then?” she said. “She is very shy, I believe.”

Maurice looked at her. It seemed to him that this sweet gentle girl would not frighten Martha, as her more dashing, fashionable sister would.

“She is shy,” he said; and then he went on warmly—“She is a very remarkable woman, quite unlike anyone else I know. So gifted,

and yet so utterly unconscious of her own powers."

"Is she handsome?"

Kitty could not have said what prompted the question—it came without her will.

"She has a very striking face,"—looking at Miss Ralston, he was making a mental comparison. "A face that artists would care to paint, I think, it is so very un-ordinary." Then he said, simply—"I do not admire mere prettiness."

Kitty felt jarred. She was thinking of her sister. It was quite unnecessary, she thought, for Mr. Penruddock to give his opinion so decidedly.

"It seems impossible to make Miss Burridge's acquaintance," she said. Maurice thought she spoke sarcastically.

"I am sorry she shuts herself up; but she is not easy to understand, and unless she were fully appreciated, perhaps she is best left to herself."

A bright-eyed girl, hardly pretty, but intelligent-looking, had been walking with Mrs. Venables.

“It is so wrong,” she said, “to shut oneself up,—one loses such opportunities.”

Mrs. Venables smiled.

“It seems a pity,” she said.

The bright-eyed girl shook her head so reprovingly at Mrs. Venables that Kitty smiled with amusement.

“I call it wrong, decidedly wrong. If one reads and cultivates one’s mind, one is bound to go about as much as possible and try to help others into light. If a woman lives shut up, she is sure to go on in the old groove of inferiority and subjection and being taken care of, and all the rusted superstitions from which the next generation will be free.”

“I am so old-fashioned,” said Mrs. Venables, smiling, “that I am inclined to think the old ways safest. Englishwomen have always had a high character of their own, and I do not see why they need adopt the customs of other nations. Depend upon it, a little guidance is good for us all.”

The bright-eyed girl looked scornful.

“But then whom is one to take as guide?”

She evidently considered herself an orator. "No one can judge so well as one can for oneself,—no one else understands one's special needs."

Mrs. Venables smiled.

"I suppose," she said, "guidance need not go on for ever; but girls usually have parents, and some young girls have a husband. I think a wise husband can do much towards forming his wife's judgment."

The bright-eyed girl shrugged her shoulders. In her heart she called Mrs. Venables antediluvian and extremely ignorant.

"Suppose a wife holds quite different opinions from her husband? People may care for one another, and live happily and so on, and yet they may see the topics of the day from entirely different sides. The husband is probably satisfied with his own fund of knowledge, and can talk out of his experience; while his wife may be a woman of lofty aims, who can see that she can only qualify herself, and keep a place in society, by reading enlightened publications. Her husband objects to this reading—calls it free-thinking, and all sorts of hard

names. Well, then, what follows? It is perfectly impossible that she can submit, and be guided by a man who wilfully makes himself her inferior,"—she looked triumphantly at Mrs. Venables, but the amused smile in those sweet dark eyes puzzled her,—“perfectly impossible.”

“The only question is,” said Mrs. Venables, gently, “who is the inferior?—the educated man, who depends on his store of naturally-acquired information, and whose conversation is a part of himself, or the wife, who stores herself, at high pressure, every month with the opinions of others, without having studied the subjects under discussion sufficiently to make her knowledge even partially her own?”

Kitty had been talking to Mr. Penruddock, but she turned round at this.

“I would as soon wear borrowed jewellery as quote book opinions,” she said, laughing.

The bright-eyed girl smiled, but she looked grave next moment.

“You are behind your age, my dear,” she said; “your aunt, of course, belongs to another generation; but you really should shake off all

these absurd notions. A woman is just as free as a man is, if she only has the sense to assert herself."

"Ah, but will she be as powerful to charm? and how about the interest with which men regard her," said Penruddock, laughing.

"I see, you are one of our enemies," said the bright-eyed girl, "and here is another, in the shape of my father, to carry me off."

She said good-bye and went away, and then Kitty returned to the subject of Miss Burridge.

"I shall call her the Invisible Princess!" she said.

And now, by twos and threes, people began to say good-bye, and to take their departure.

The day was drawing on—the light on the river was much more lovely, as all colour faded from the sky except the tender green above a bank of heavy clouds. People were going fast away, much to Louisa's regret.

"It has been delightful. I could have gone on for hours," she said, as the last carriage drove off. "Couldn't you, Kitty?"

"No, indeed; I am more than satisfied."

Kitty looked very pale and weary. "I am tired to death, and I'm not sure that I like a garden-party at home. One has to do so much duty, talk to so many people, and there is no dancing to make up for it. It is different for you—you are fonder of talking than I am. I really feel quite middle-aged and dull amid such gaiety!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

## JEALOUSY.

FOR the next three days Oliver talked to Martha continually of the garden-party. Spite of her deep reverence for her brother, she began to wonder that such a trivial subject should take so large a place in his thoughts. For to Martha, who had always kept outside it, the world and society represented folly and glitter, quite unworthy the attention of a gifted man. At the same time she longed for a peep into this folly and glitter. She knew she should find no real companions there, nothing to compensate for the solace she found in her books and studies, for her books had become real friends. She had for her own sex that sort of cynical pity



which often besets a woman always accustomed to the society of men. Her prejudices were strong with the double power given by a self-contained nature and a secluded youth; and when, on the third morning, at breakfast-time, Oliver again returned to the subject of The Elms and the Miss Ralstons, Martha looked unsympathetic.

Her silence seemed to strike Oliver. He was in a mood that craved for sympathy, for his love had been growing with that sort of exotic growth which seems increased by previous delay, and he longed to pour out this love to his sister, but at this hint of her indifference, he at once stopped.

“It was a great pity you did not go to the garden-party,” he said.

“I was not asked,” Martha answered, simply. She was not sure whether she was glad or sorry about this. She should dearly have liked to see the brilliant scene her brother described. But when she thought of the agony of facing such a crowd of strangers a mist rose before her sight. She felt that she must have turned and fled. As

she answered Oliver a slight flush rose on her cheek, and he looked at her attentively.

“I won’t have you shut yourself up in this way,” he said; “it’s absurd. You would have been one of the best-looking women there, next to the Miss Ralstons; in fact, you are far more remarkable-looking than the youngest is.”

Martha smiled, and grew red under his praise.

“That is a high compliment; but, Oliver,”—she looked at him rather anxiously—“are you in love with the eldest sister?” The blood flew to Oliver’s face in a kind of red disturbance. He gulped down a cup of tea, thus giving himself at once a screen and a respite; then he set down his empty cup and frowned; Martha remained silent, and he looked at her impatiently.

“I never saw anyone like Miss Ralston,” he said, in his most pugnacious tone. “I wish you knew her, Martha.”

“Perhaps it’s best not,” his sister said, “I might know her, and not like her.” She smiled, for she felt inclined to teaze Oliver.

Oliver pushed his plate away.

“That’s impossible—I know exactly what pleases you, and you couldn’t help liking Miss Ralston—no one could.”

“What is her name?” Martha looked cool, and spoke coldly.

Oliver got redder still.

“Gyneth; but she is always called Kitty.” He got up, and went to the sideboard, apparently to cut a slice of ham. “You’re not generally foolish.” His voice sounded hard, and as if he were putting restraint on himself; he sliced into the ham as if he were carving for a regiment. “There’s nothing so foolish as to try to do what you are trying to do now.”

Martha started; she had only been half in earnest; now her eyes turned towards him with a sudden burning gaze—that strange scorching light which betrays the presence of jealousy.

“What am I doing, Oliver, that is foolish?” she said, harshly. “I don’t understand you.”

Oliver turned round from the ham—concealment was irksome to him.

“Well then,” he said, “we had better under-

stand one another. I love Miss Ralston, and I hope to win her."

He looked at his sister half shyly, half defiantly; but Martha sat silent. Her anguish was keen—almost as keen as a mother's is when she first learns that a darling son loves some other woman; the anguish passes as reason and resignation stamp it down into its due proportion, but it has been felt, and the scar its presence leaves will last as long as life does.

Oliver had been Martha's all. She had even checked the interest she felt in Maurice Penruddock, because it seemed to rob her idol of that which was his by right, and now a stranger, a girl he had only seen a few times, had won his love away from her. Her head seemed to spin, but the pain at her heart was worse. She suffered acutely, and yet she must speak. Oliver's gaze compelled her to answer him.

"You must, of course, marry some day," she said, slowly; "but, Oliver, with such a future as I believe yours will be—are you wise to marry young?"

“Marry!” Oliver scoffed; he thought Martha a fool in that moment; “who says I’m going to marry? I said I love Miss Ralston, and I hope to win her, and then you jump immediately to marriage. Oh! I do like the way women go on, and then they are surprised because men don’t rank them as equals, and don’t take them into confidence.”

“Well, but I am only practical—a young lady like this Miss Ralston will have plenty of admirers, I should think.”

“Of course,”—Oliver spoke impetuously—“and that’s just where you could be so useful, if you only chose to help me, and weren’t so perverse—can’t you see?” he went on, quickly, so as to stop her faint protest. “If you were acquainted with her you could talk about me to her——” He stopped and looked at Martha’s cold, white face.

She looked at him, the dumb struggle within showing in her eyes still full of the same intense green light.

“Do you mean that I could praise you to her?” she said. “Why, Oliver, I should feel as

if I were lowering you in anyone's eyes if I were to begin to puff you up. Surely you don't need that? It seems to me that a man who wants to be praised and bragged about is like one of the great spaces I see covered with placards, between this and London—glad to hide its ugly, unstable character under a mass of trumpeting.”

Oliver stood angry and discomfited. In principles he and Martha were too much alike to disagree, and perhaps this likeness made any divergence in small matters harder to bear; his sister's indulgence and idolatry had made him feel that he must always be her oracle.

“You are strangely perverse this morning,” he said; “what I suppose I mean is that a man generally has some kind of belongings. Now I have only you, and it does seem so tiresome that you will shut yourself up and behave more as if you were a Sister of Mercy than a lady.”

“Am I what the world calls a lady?” said Martha, some scorn curling her lips. “I do not know how to dress, or move, or even speak as fashionable ladies do; I should only

make you feel ashamed if you saw me with Miss Ralston," she said, bitterly. "I can talk of nothing but books, and those are chiefly old books; I cannot talk about dress and dances and the opera; I know nothing of the topics of the day."

Oliver gazed at her in wonder. She had got up from her chair, as if her passionate sense of inferiority could get better vent standing—for the tussle it was having with her pride—the pride that made her despise this unknown girl, even while she coveted what she felt sure was her easy grace and fashion. Oliver could not remember that his sister had ever so spoken to him. What did it mean?—was Martha actually jealous that he should care for anyone but herself? The idea was soothing both to his vanity and his affection.

He looked pityingly at his sister.

"You are morbid sometimes," he said. "To begin with, Miss Ralston is not fashionable, though she knows plenty of fashionable people."

"Why do you love her?"

He laughed at her abruptness.

“You are too clever to ask such a silly question; the best answer I can give is to say, wait till you see her; and then I think you will find reason enough.”

“You are not going to marry for the sake of a pretty face!”

Oliver was annoyed, but he smiled at what seemed to him childish perversity.

“I don’t think so, but perhaps you will. I can’t promise to agree with you, though. Will you call with me some day at The Elms, or shall I tell these ladies they may call on you?”

Absolute terror shone out of Martha’s eyes, but she tried to hide it from Oliver.

“I want to know,” she said, in an altered voice, “if Miss Ralston cares for you.”

Oliver walked away to the window, and answered over his shoulder,

“I hope so; but I have not known her long, and I should not care for a girl who showed her feelings at once. I am sure there is no one she likes better.”

“Very well; then wait, dear, before you introduce me to her; once you are sure of her



love, the sight of me can do no harm, for a woman who loves is blind. We shall be here some little time longer, and I am happy as I am, Oliver."

Her eyes were so full of love for him that it was a pity he did not turn round.

"I don't think that is quite what you used to teach me," he said, in a vexed tone. "When I was a little chap, you always said 'Be what you seem to be' was the great motto for life, and I would like Miss Ralston to see me here quite as I am before I speak to her."

"I was half joking. If she is a girl who would turn from you because of our simple way of life, she won't make you happy, Oliver; you are not the sort of man she wants."

Involuntarily another man rose up beside Oliver—gentle, refined, courteous—lacking, very likely, Oliver's power for rising in the world, and Oliver's brilliant augury of success, but a man whose love must infallibly make a woman happy. Maurice Penruddock would be a dangerous rival to Oliver, Martha thought.

"You know nothing about it." Her brother's

impetuous words roused her from her vision. "Miss Ralston has a very original mind; what she dislikes most is anything stereotyped or ordinary. I don't mean to say that she is odd or eccentric, but she detests to do a thing for no better reason than because everyone does it, and because it is a fashion."

"That sounds nice." Martha longed to be at peace with Oliver, but her honesty would not let her come round without a reason.

Her brother came up to her.

"I never saw two people so likely to suit as you and she; she is so lively that she will do all the talking, and she will admire your reading, I know."

"Is she a great talker, then?"

Oliver frowned.

"You are tiresome this morning, Martha. Miss Ralston's fitfulness is half her charm. Sometimes she is as dreamy and silent as you are, and then, if anything excites interest or sympathy, her eyes light up, and she is as gay and sparkling as possible."

"Ah!" Martha sighed, "I don't say it to vex

you, but I am sure she'll not care for me; at any rate, don't be in a hurry to ask her to call, and let me know before you do."

Oliver looked disappointed, but he knew that direct opposition would do no good.

"I shall be home late to-night, and I'm off to the North to-morrow by an early train. I shall be away three or four days. Good-bye."

He bent down and kissed her suddenly, and went off to London, leaving Martha standing in the porch, full of struggling thoughts.

## CHAPTER IX.

## ON THE BRINK.

SOME special fate had been at work to hinder the satisfying of Lady Mary Penraddock's curiosity; though curiosity is too strong a word for the languid interest she felt in the amount of Mrs. Venables' attractions. Her wish to revive her ancient acquaintance with the husband was vivid, and it had been a disappointment to her to be out when both husband and wife returned her visit.

But to-day the fates were propitious. Mrs. Venables was not at home when Lady Mary reached The Elms, but she was shown into the drawing-room, and found Mr. Venables and his niece Louisa. Lady Mary's smile never even

wavered, though her self-esteem suffered acutely.

“Can I have changed as much as he has?” she thought. “Can that little, round, self-satisfied man be really Charles Venables?”

Meantime, the little, round man presented his niece, and Louisa’s fancy was at once captivated by the languid grace and charming dark eyes of her uncle’s friend.

“You were about as old as Louisa the last time we met,” said Mr. Venables. It seemed to Louisa that her uncle spoke a little nervously, and also more earnestly than the subject required. Looking up, she saw Lady Mary’s dark eyes fixed on him, and a flush on his face. He went on rapidly—“I could not fancy it so long ago.”

“I think I could,” the answer came, with a little sigh.

“We were very sorry you could not come on Thursday,” he said. “Toothache, was it not? You are better, I hope, now. Charming fellow that son of yours.”

Lady Mary smiled; then she turned to Louisa.

“You have a sister, I think?”

“Yes, and here she comes,” Louisa said, as Gyneth passed by the window on her way to the garden-door.

Lady Mary had looked at Louisa approvingly, yet without any pangs of motherly apprehension; but the glimpse she got of Gyneth revealed so uncommon a face that a secret anxiety took possession of her, and this was not soothed when Miss Ralston came into the drawing-room.

A slight shyness of manner made her appear younger than Louisa, but this did not take away from the distinction of her looks.

“I never saw anyone like her; but she is not really pretty,” Lady Mary thought, and yet she felt that this elder Miss Ralston was far more attractive than her sister was, and she hardened herself against Gyneth.

“Aunt will be very sorry to miss you,” Gyneth said; “she so much wishes to see so old a friend of uncle’s.”

Lady Mary’s smile stiffened. This sentence did not please her; it seemed to her that it would have been more natural if Mrs. Venables had shrunk from this meeting.

“Yes, we are very old friends,” she spoke, indolently.

“Your son is very like you,” Gyneth said.

Lady Mary’s eyebrows grew arched, but Mr. Venables broke in, hurriedly.

“You are paying him a high compliment, Gyneth,” and then he smiled at the visitor.

It seemed to his mother quite unnecessary that Maurice should be discussed, especially by so young a woman as Miss Ralston ; she was, besides, ruffled by the sensation of *désillusion*. If she could see only the eyes of her old admirer, and listen to his words, this visit would be so much pleasanter. His voice jarred her ; it had grown louder and coarser than she remembered it ; and when she looked at him, and also when she knew instinctively how others must now regard him, a vague fear of seeming ridiculous came to check the tide of pleasant recollections awakened by the idea of meeting him.

Fancy had played its usual tricks with memory. Years ago Mr. Venables, then just called to the Bar, had really been captivated by the lovely, gracious young wife who made his even-

ings so pleasant when he called in to see his old school-friend ; and Colonel Penruddock, who did not know one note of music from another, used to go to sleep, and leave the young people to make acquaintance over the pianoforte. Lady Mary had been flattered to find herself thus worshipped by so clever a man ; but she cared for her husband, and her heart had not in any way responded to the love which she, however, saw was hers. She went to India, and soon almost forgot Charles Venables, who suffered more at parting from his smiling yet unresponsive goddess than ever he cared to tell—suffered, it may be, more than he ever again did for love. It may be, too, that this first idolatry—although he had since chosen a wife full of deep feelings—had given him a fancy for girls without much warmth below the surface, and perhaps unconsciously on this account he much preferred Louisa to Gyneth Ralston. And yet, now that they met again, he saw the havoc time and climate had worked on his former idol. A keen feeling of shame possessed him ; he felt he had indeed been cherishing an



ideal which had no longer a real existence, while she, who had been encouraging fancy to falsify the past, was inclined to weep over the changed feelings, which had really never been hers to alter. But Mr. Venables strove to put as much warmth as possible into his manner, encouraged thereto by the long sweet glances bestowed on him from under Lady Mary's dark eyelids.

“Do you remember our singing days?” she said, softly, and she gave a little sigh, for this, too, must have passed away like all the rest—passed away with the glossy nut-brown curls and with the earnest devoted manner she so well remembered.

Charles Venables had always seemed to have a special manner for her; to others he had been self-possessed and rather careless, but towards her there had been an almost nervous wish to please, a something for which she could not find a name, but which had effectually distinguished him from all others. How very frank and easy he had grown, she thought, while she listened to his answer.

“Perfectly; and I have sung a good deal since

then," he said; "now I listen to younger voices. Gyneth can't you sing us a song?"

Gyneth glanced at Lady Mary, who at once echoed the wish, and then, going to the piano, she sang one of Schubert's tender, exquisite plaints. Lady Mary listened, her senses were ravished by the melody and the pure cultivated voice and the skill with which it was controlled and exercised, but mental disquiet made her shrug her shoulders in mute disapproval. The girl, with her deep expressive eyes, looked inspired while she poured out these full, liquid notes which seemed to thrill her listeners.

No, it would never do for Maurice to visit at The Elms. Miss Ralston was not a pretty girl. Lady Mary had already decided that she could not compare with her sister Louisa, even though Louisa had but *la beauté du diable*. Still, if Louisa only had a fortune, she was infinitely the best wife for Maurice; but at this point Lady Mary roused to assure herself, with some indignation, that Maurice could not possibly want a wife at present.

While the song was ending, it seemed to her

quick ears that she heard a ring, and then the arrival of a visitor; but no one came in till the last note had died into silence. Then the door was softly opened, and some one came in with hushed tread, unannounced, evidently some one certain of his welcome.

“Ah! how d’ye do, Burridge?” Mr. Venables said, heartily, and then he presented the visitor to Lady Mary Penruddock.

“I have the pleasure of knowing your son very well indeed,” and Oliver held out his hand.

This familiarity discomfited the lady, who had been favourably impressed by his appearance, and she gave him two of her long fingers without looking at him again. But, being a keen observer, her eyes followed the manner of the two girls, and she was sensible that, while Oliver’s acquaintance with Louisa was of the most conventional kind, he had far warmer feelings for her sister.

Lady Mary had begun the life of a beauty early, and had carried it on till she was utterly wearied of society, weary of everything that did not excite her. In Oliver Burridge’s glowing smiles and

ardent eyes—for she looked at him again while he spoke to Gyneth—she thought she saw a germ of interest, of special interest, for this girl; and, if Maurice's friend loved Miss Ralston, Maurice would certainly be proof against her charm. Yes, she remembered it all now. Maurice had spoken to her often about Oliver Burrige, and had asked her to have him to dine with them.

“Not a man I could like, I think,” she said, thoughtfully. “Does that girl like him, I wonder? She listens, and her eyes droop under his. No wonder, when he stares in that decided way; he is too decided, quite too decided—in a degree rude; a sort of man who will never pause in his life to let any moss grow over his angularities; he will always be harsh and awkward. I fancy he is much too clever to behave well.”

She suppressed a little yawn, and seemed to listen to Mr. Venables, who had begun to tell her his plans for an autumn holiday; but all the while she was following the conversation between Mr. Burrige and Miss Ralston, for Louisa was too intent on studying Lady Mary to care to talk to Oliver to-day.

“Yes, I should much like to see a manufactory,” Gyneth was saying.

“Can you not come North when you leave town? I can get you over any mill you care to see in our part of the world,” he said, eagerly.

Miss Ralston smiled.

“I should like it, but I know we shall not go North; we shall go abroad first, and then to the sea, and a southern air suits my aunt best.”

Oliver looked ruffled.

“Three people are to be sacrificed to one, eh?” he said, in the abrupt, masterful tone that always alienated Gyneth. But Oliver was too self-absorbed to remark the chill that had come in her attention. “I think it is part of the education of an Englishwoman to see English machinery at work. Nothing attests the stubborn perseverance of the nation better than some of the life which can only be seen in a manufacturing town.”

Gyneth had grown interested again, and she looked at him while she spoke.

“Do you know, I have often longed for such

a life—I don't mean"—she laughed at his sudden look of inquiry—"that I long to be a mill-hand; but I think these poor, over-worked women, and men too, must want so much sympathy and help in so many things that they have no time to think of for themselves."

Oliver smiled at the enthusiasm that shone in her eyes, but he shook his head.

"I don't know about help," he said, "they are mighty independent, and, for the most part, would not accept a penny from anyone like you, although they will often help one another."

Gyneth had flushed a little while he spoke.

"Oh, I did not mean money help; there are so many ways in which one woman can help another without giving money—one could teach them to sew, and to cook, and to nurse the sick, and bring up their children, for it seems to me their life must be such a scramble."

Oliver looked at her admiringly.

"Yes, I daresay you might do some of the things you mention—in Leeds, for instance, some of these plans have been found to work well; but when you come North I want you to

see the actual work that is done there, and by the people.”

Lady Mary had silently noted the two faces, and as she drove home she said to herself,

“Maurice’s friend is desperately in love with that taking Miss Ralston, but I am not quite sure that she returns it. He is too serious about everything, and I fancy he is very literal.”

As soon as Lady Mary had departed, Oliver felt more at ease ; something in her *grande dame* way of shaking hands had disturbed him, and made him captious. In the free atmosphere he shook off his vexation.

“Mr. Venables,” he said, when the master of the house came back, “when will you bring Miss Ralston up North to see the manufacturingies?”

Mr. Venables was too full of his fair visitor’s charming farewell, as he placed her in her carriage, for such a question.

“My good fellow,” he laughed, “we are going to a more congenial atmosphere than one of your smoky, tall-chimneyed towns; we are talking of Italy this autumn.”

“Just like an Englishman, always proud of what he knows least about. Yes, you’ll go abroad, and be fit to knock a Frenchman down for disputing the superiority of English manufacture, and yet you, I know, were never inside a mill in your life—haven’t, in fact, the ghost of a notion how the stuff you wear on your back is made.”

Mr. Venables laughed heartily.

“Well, it is not right, I grant you, and we will go some day, Gyneth, Louisa, and I. I don’t think my wife will care about it.”

“Nor I, uncle,” said Louisa. “I am quite sure I should not understand, and should be deafened and sickened besides. You and Gyneth shall have it all to yourselves.”

“And, meantime,”—it seemed to Gyneth as if they had all been hard on Oliver, and she so admired his talent that she felt eager to make atonement,—“you know you did promise to show me the drawings, and explain the idea to me, if,” she said, softly, raising her eyes with a sweet entreaty in them, “it is not asking too much.”



Oliver felt wrapped in a sudden glamour; if he and Gyneth had been alone, something of his impetuous love must have got into words; but Mr. Venables and Louisa were far too observant for him to risk the chance of attracting their notice, and he tried to speak coldly.

“I shall be proud to show them to you; I would have done so sooner, but first they were not ready, and lately they have not been in my possession. I have got a sketch with me that I brought back from town to-day,” and then he looked at her.

“I will say good-bye,” said Louisa; “I am too feather-headed, you know, Mr. Burridge, to understand plaus, I leave things of that sort to uncle and Gyneth.”

Oliver seldom took any notice of Louisa. “You have seen this sketch,” he said, in his abrupt way, to Mr. Venables; and then turned his back on him while he spread out a paper before Gyneth.

As she glanced at it, her head seemed to spin with the confusion of so many crossing lines; but, when Oliver began to explain every-

thing in a simple, clear fashion, she found the subject so interesting that she could have listened for an hour. Mr. Burridge seemed transformed while he explained the drawing to her; he was so modest in receiving praise, so kind in explaining over and over again till she had quite mastered the difficulties, and felt as if she should really understand the process of it even at work.

“How did the idea first suggest itself?” She looked full of interest, and Oliver thought her lovely. “Did you think of it all at once, or did it come by degrees?”

“Not all at once;” it was so delicious that her sweet eyes were fixed on his, as it were drinking in his answer, her expression of interest was so earnest that his thoughts wandered even from his beloved project, and he hesitated, and got confused, having really lost the clue to what he was talking about; and no wonder; she had bent over the sketch with him till their heads had nearly touched and her sweet lips had seemed within reach of his own. “No, it—it—I mean it came first as a whole, but not

vividly, it—it”—a slight smile on Gyneth’s lips recalled his recollection—“at first it was indistinct, then, as I thought it out, I saw bit by bit clearer.”

“And at last you saw it perfect as a whole?”

“Oh, no,” he smiled; “the whole that I saw was for many months very inferior and defective, to the whole I have been explaining to you—but how very kind, how very patient you have been. I can’t thank you enough, I——” all at once he remembered Mr. Venables. His face had grown flushed, and his hand trembled as he rolled up his sketch. “I am afraid I have taken up a great deal of your time,”—he gave an uneasy laugh. “Good-bye, and thank you very much for your patience, and for the interest you have taken,”—he held her hand, and looked earnestly at her.

Gyneth felt troubled, and a flush tinged her cheeks.

“I must thank you,” she said, warmly, “you have been so very kind in explaining it all; I have enjoyed it extremely.”

She gave him a long, grateful look. She

was not only grateful to him for having shown her the drawings; he had re-established himself in her good opinion, and thus had soothed her self-love. Once or twice lately, especially at the garden-party, he had seemed so rude and abrupt that she wondered how she could ever have taken the pleasure in his society which she had found in it before Louisa's return.

## CHAPTER X.

## MAURICE AND MARTHA.

**E**VEN when we are calm and self-contained, outward movement, at least, is apt to be impressed by joy or sorrow, and to this influence Oliver was no exception. His step was so light and rapid as he traversed the short way between The Elms and his own cottage that he felt like a schoolboy. Much happier, though—school-life, even in retrospect, was never gilded to Oliver. He had been bullied because he bragged, cuffed because he would not submit to tyranny, and had never been popular even with the small boys, whom he fought for and befriended, because of his rough, ungracious ways.

“I can’t humbug,” he used to say, when remonstrated with. “I lick fellows who bully Stephen and Giles, not because I like the little chaps, but because I hate tyranny.” And so he had gone on all his life, till he had got sentiment so confounded with real feeling that he often mistook one for the other. Perhaps this was one of the many charms that drew him to Gyneth Ralston. She was so real that he could never suspect her of affecting feeling, and yet so natural that she could not altogether hide the existence of much deeper feelings than she showed outwardly.

“She is different from anybody else I ever saw,” he said, as he hurried along; “she and Martha must make acquaintance, and then, directly I see my way, I will sound Mr. Venables.”

He sighed. In his heart he preferred Mrs. Venables to her husband, but he knew she was not his friend, she seemed always so wholly indifferent to him.

“After all,” he thought, “this gives me more hope. Kitty is so fond of her aunt that she must have a decided liking for me, or she would

not have listened as she did just now. I shall win her before long ; I must manage it better with Martha than I did last time."

Then he went on with sparkling eyes, whistling the air of Schubert which Gyneth had sung, looking straight ahead, and yet seeing nothing but a vision of those sweet dark eyes raised to his.

But as he came near the cottage he saw some one ringing the bell. It was Maurice Penraddock, and at sight of his friend Maurice's face glowed with pleasure.

"What has become of you, old fellow?" he said, affectionately. "I have been expecting you to look me up, so you see I have come to see after you instead."

"That's capital. I've been away," said Oliver, while he produced his key and unlocked the little yellow gate—"in fact, I'm only now come home from the North."

The canaries were singing a chorus of welcome without accompaniment, for their uncaged rivals had sunk into the comparative silence that ends the spring-time. The old grey parrot

opened his sleepy eyes, put his head on one side, and said, "Oliver! Oliver! what's o'clock?" and Martha, roused by the sound, went forward to meet them in the porch. Maurice had been twice to the cottage since his first visit, and she was getting to feel more at ease with him.

Oliver had not time to kiss her before her arms were round his neck; she had not forgotten their parting two days ago.

"I knew you had come home," she said. "Peter brought your bag an hour ago."

"Yes,"—Oliver hesitated a moment—"I saw Peter as I got down from the omnibus, so I gave him my bag; I wanted to call at The Elms."

"Ah!" said Martha. She thought she had quite conquered her jealousy of Miss Ralston, and yet she felt deeply wounded that her brother should go to The Elms before he came home.

"I met your mother there." Oliver turned to Maurice. "I have papers in this bag which I must see to at once, so I'll get you to talk to Martha till I've done." He nodded, and



went off to his study, the long, low room, built out on the left of the house.

“Shall we stay here?” Maurice seated himself on one of the benches inside the porch, now white and pink with roses and early clematis.

“If you like.” She seated herself, and let her long, white hands fall in her lap. They were beautiful hands, Maurice thought, as he looked at them—not small, but of perfect form and colour, and well-proportioned to her height, and, as he glanced up from her hands to her face, it struck him that Martha was very handsome. Though she was so colourless, there was plenty of colour in those deep green eyes of hers, and plenty of colour in the rich red masses of hair, much too thick to lie flat on her forehead, although she tried to smooth it into braids; there was colour, too, in the firmly-closed red lips. Perhaps it was the nobility of the face that made it so striking; it was firm and fearless, and yet with not a trace of boldness to mar its purity of expression.

“Have you made acquaintance with the Miss Ralstons yet?” Maurice asked.

“Always these Miss Ralstons!” Martha thought. She gave him an imploring look.

“Why should I? I suppose you will say because Oliver wishes it. That ought certainly to be reason enough; but even then—suppose when I see her I don’t like Miss Ralston—it will be very uncomfortable, for he likes her so much.”

“Does he like her so much?”

But Martha remembered how the avowal of his love had burst from Oliver, and she was on her guard.

“Oh, yes, he likes her, and you like her too, do you not?”

She spoke carelessly; a sudden thought had come to her with regard to her companion, and the light in her eyes grew intense as she listened for his reply.

“I think everyone must like her.” He met her eyes so frankly that Martha felt soothed; “but I own she puzzles me; she is as difficult to understand as you must be to a stranger.”

A burning blush flushed into her cheeks; it was such a new, delightful sensation that

Maurice should think her worth considering, and yet she shrank from being discussed at all.

“I!” she half smiled; “there is nothing worth understanding in me.”

Maurice shook his head.

“If you were not yourself, I should say you are asking for praise; but I believe you are wrong to undervalue yourself as you do. I wish you would let yourself be visited.”

“Why,” she said, smiling, “what use could I be in society—what good could I do? I should just sit in a corner and say nothing.”

“You can talk better than most people can, and—do not be offended—you would be more ornamental to a room than most people are.”

Martha looked aggrieved.

“Now I know you are laughing at me,” she said, gravely. “Why do you not praise my dress as well as my looks?”

She turned her head away. She had forced herself to speak frankly to Maurice, and it seemed to her that he was ridiculing her real feelings as if they were mere fancies.

“Martha,”—the tone took her back to Deep-

ing, when she had always believed in and always trusted Maurice. Involuntarily her eyes sought his, and she saw he was not mocking her. "If I say what I think," he said, "I think your straight, plain, close-fitting gown suits you admirably, and that it would be very much admired as a novelty; but I do not care for eccentricity in a woman, and I think, if you go into society, it would be wiser and humbler to dress like other people. But there is nothing so easy; put yourself under Miss Louisa Ralston's guidance, and in a week's time you will find yourself dressed like any other lady."

"Still my question is not answered. What use can I be? I am far too shy and self-conscious ever to talk easily in society, so I shall only take up the room of some one really useful or ornamental," she said, with a smile.

"I don't agree with you,"—he was thinking how handsome she would look with her beautiful hair arranged so as to show its colour, instead of being squeezed into a tightly-twisted knot—"besides, that is more than you can tell till you

have tried. It may be good for you too; this change would help your spirits, and not one of us knows what we really are till we have been tested by contact with others."

"Well, do I not see you and Oliver? you both try my temper sometimes."

She laughed; she felt very happy to be talking quietly to Maurice without fear of interruption.

"Ah! but that's not it. Why do artists exhibit pictures?—it is not merely to sell them, it is to expose them to the wholesome ordeal of general criticism. The criticism may be faulty, but it is far more wholesome discipline than the false light thrown on a man's work by the judgment of his own circle."

"Do you really think me so very vain?" said Martha, earnestly.

"On the contrary. Society will teach you your own value; you are just the person who ought not to be shut up; you might do a great deal of good."

Martha shook her head; but her heart swelled with pleasure at his praise. There was a little silence, which the canaries filled with song,

though they had hardly stopped singing ever since Maurice's arrival.

“But”—Martha looked shyly at her companion,—“suppose I do call on Miss Ralston, or she calls on me—if we are both so difficult to understand, our acquaintance will not progress.”

Maurice laughed.

“Oh! I never said that you will not understand one another; it is one of the mysteries of life to me to see how women can read one another. I see it in my mother; while I am content to take the reading of a character that is offered to me as the true one, she dives below the surface and discovers quite another version.”

“I should be afraid of your mother.”

“I don't think you would. She is so delicate and fragile that I believe all your kindly feelings would be drawn out by her mere presence; and she is very sweet and loveable to people when she likes them.”

“Ah! yes, when she likes them,”—Martha smiled, and shook her head. “No, no, let well alone. I am sure that the day your mother

sees me will be a sad one for me, at any rate."

Then, alarmed at her unwonted frankness, she bit her lips, and twisted her fingers together, just as she had done when she was a girl at Deeping.

Maurice thought that her shy reserve made a quaint setting to her remarkable face and figure ; but her words impressed him more than Martha had meant them to impress ; it would have seemed mockery to her to hear that any value could be attached to her opinion. Her mother even, who had owed so much to Martha's care and devotion, would never accept her daughter's advice until it had been submitted to Oliver, and her mother's helplessness had so engrossed Martha's time that she had had no space for friendships. She had a few acquaintances ; but she was adored by the poor who had lived near her at Deeping. There had been deep lamentation among them when she came away. She had soothed the old, and taught the young to sew and read ; and she had cheered the hard-working wives and mothers with sensible and hopeful words. Since she came to Fulham, though

she had made some friends among the garden-workers who lived in the cottages near the river, yet Oliver had been her world, till this renewal of friendship with Maurice had taught her that there was some one else to think of.

Her words had set Maurice thinking about his mother, and he knew that Martha was right. Lady Mary, with all her perception, would not recognize the grandeur of this woman's humility; she would shrink from what she would call want of *savoir faire*.

"It is possible," he said, gravely, "that you would not care to know my mother; and she is so often ill that she keeps much at home; but the Miss Ralstons are different. I shall perhaps call at The Elms as I go home. Shall I say you will be glad to see these ladies?"

Martha gave a terrified glance round her, as if she longed to escape; and then she smiled at herself.

"Oh! no, not to-day; by-and-by, I shall get a little courage; besides, Oliver wishes to take me himself to The Elms."

"Then Oliver is wrong; you will be much



more at your ease, and far more likely to do yourself justice, if these ladies call on you here than if you call on them ; but I'm going to find Oliver."

He left her, and strolled across to Oliver's den.

"Come, old fellow, will you never have done? Am I not to get a word out of you?"

Oliver did not even look up, but kept his eyes fixed on the plan he was working out.

"No," he said, slowly. "No, I think not to-day;" then, rousing himself, he looked up in Maurice's amused face. "Don't think me unsociable," he said; "but I dare not give myself any more holiday to-day. I'll look you up at the Temple in a day or two, or will you come down some evening next week?"

"I think you had better come over to Bayswater. Come over and dine with us next Wednesday."

"Cannot it stand over? I don't feel sure of a day before me till this is worked out; and you had much better come here; it pleases Martha," and then he stopped.

“Well, I’ll say good-bye;” but Maurice felt slightly disappointed, and he also felt that he cared far more for his old companion than Oliver cared for him.

“He is getting spoiled,” he thought, when he had taken leave of Martha; “his world has grown so large and so fully peopled that he has no time left for a special friendship.” It never occurred to Maurice that Love, that dire disturber of friendship, was claiming every moment of Oliver’s time that could be spared from his work.

## CHAPTER XI.

## A FIRST VISIT.

THE lodge gate at The Elms was open, and the lodge-keeper, Reuben Tew, stood at it, enjoying the sunshine, with his thumbs thrust into the armholes of his red waistcoat.

Though he was past seventy he was very erect; his chin was in the air, while his large, high-bridged nose seemed, as he stood now at the gate, with his hands under the tails of his coat, to be overlooking the road and the trees on the bit of waste grass opposite with some amount of contempt. There was certainly something ineffable in the curl of the corners of his lips, and yet contempt was not the normal expression of Reuben Tew's face. He had never been

handsome, but his face must always have arrested attention. His skin was very dark; his mouth was enormous, but his yellow-green eyes were full of intelligence, and so was his well-developed forehead. Perhaps the usual aspect of the man was that of genial satisfaction, for now, as he turned round to look towards the lodge, he beamed through his tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles as if he saw something pleasant in the empty doorway. There was nothing there, however, but a cat, of carrotty appearance, with bright green eyes.

“Aha, little puss!” said Reuben, “purring, I expect; eh, that’s right.”

Nothing in the words themselves, and yet spoken with such suave condescension that they established Mr. Tew as the monarch of all around him, and made one feel that the little cat was indeed honoured by his notice.

All at once he turned to the road again. A gentleman was standing at the gate; his approach had not been heard by Reuben, for the only warning time had given him was deafness; he could not hear a sound until it was close

beside him, and even then, in the case of words, the sound must be loud.

He drew himself up till he looked almost as tall as Mr. Penruddock, and then he remembered him as a visitor at The Elms.

“Good morning, sir,”—he bowed graciously. “You will find the ladies in, sir, if they be what you was inquiring for. A remarkable fine afternoon, sir.”

Maurice smiled and nodded, and took his way up the drive.

Reuben Tew did not look after him; he nodded his head, closed his lips firmly together, and then called out, in a loud, shrill voice—“Molly!”

There came to him out of the lodge a tall woman with a flat, pale face. She had dark hair, but slightly touched with grey; pale lips, and eyes like those of an amiable cow, dark, and dull, and projecting. Indeed, Mrs. Tew may be said to have presented a generally cow-like appearance. Her face was placid, her movements were slow; there was, too, in her whole aspect a milk-white cleanliness and a

homely air of motherhood that carried out the likeness, and inclined one favourably towards her.

As soon as Mr. Tew saw that his summons was obeyed, he turned again to his survey of the road, while his wife moved slowly up to his side.

“Did you call, Reuben?” she said, in a faint voice, which always reached her husband’s ears, spite of his deafness.

“Did you notice”—he spoke without looking at her—“the young man that passed up to the house?”

“No, Reuben—I was darning your stockings,”—Molly spoke rather faster, and in a tone of apology. “You see, I have only wits for one thing at a time.”

“Quite so,” he smiled; he was never hard on Molly, poor thing. “She does the best she can,” he had a habit of saying when he spoke of his wife. “Well, Molly,” he went on, with a pleasant smile, while his chest expanded with a conscious benignity, “that there gentleman was Mr. Penruddock, the son, or maybe the younger

brother, of the lady which was here in her carriage a while ago. Now listen, Molly; when this sort of thing occurs in a family like our people's, d'ye know what it means?"

Molly's under-jaw fell, and her mouth remained open, showing that she had not lost her teeth, but that they were very crooked.

"Lor', now, Reuben," she said, "do it mean anything? I should never ha' known it was anything but visits."

Reuben smiled yet more, his lips parted in the centre, and the upper one curled so that it might have reached his nose had it been shorter.

"Quite so—you wouldn't," he said; "now I'll tell you." He threw open his chest and cleared his throat. "There are two young ladies here of a marriageable age, and with expectations, for, the master having no children, there is no one else to take the property. Well, then, my opinion is that the mother came to open the matter, and that there gentleman has come to forrard it."

No answer coming, Mr. Tew turned to look at his silent help-mate, who stood pinching her

black silk apron between her thumb and finger in wonder at her husband's shrewdness.

“Well, to be sure.” And then she added, timidly—“And I was that stoopid I was thinking Mr. Burr ridge was courting our Miss Gyneth.”

Reuben was very supercilious now, and yet he kept a smile.

“Now look you here, Molly ; when you was young, was I the only young man as you ever spoke to or looked at? Wimmen is wimmen ; there's some they likes to look at, and some they likes to look at them, and for my part I don't see how they are to prevent this. Mr. Burr ridge is one, we'll say, and this Mister Penruddock's another, and maybe there'll be six or seven more between her and Miss Louisa ; but the ones as has mothers to back 'em up is the ones which wins in the long run, though maybe the young women prefers those which has the smoothest tongues without the mothers. That Mr. Burr ridge is too rough and ready a chap for our young ladies”—his chin rose as he spoke ; —“this one now gone in has more the manner to suit our Miss Gyneth.”



“Is he good-looking?” Molly asked, with a faint show of interest in her big, prominent eyes.

Reuben’s thumbs were in his armholes, but his fingers spread themselves out in protest.

“Lor’ bless me, why do you ask? Is a man any the better for being handsome? If he has looks, he has to pay for ’em one way or another; either he wants money, or brains, or luck. A handsome man, as you call it, Molly, is most times a fool and a tyrant too, safe to be a bad husband, because he’ll think he’s thrown away on just one woman. Mr. Burridge isn’t a fool, though he’s, I suppose, good-looking; but he’s dooced masterful. T’other chap is, just according to taste, a sort of sad face, like a picture; he’s quiet altogether—quite another breed from what Mr. Burridge is.”

“Will he be better for our Miss Gyneth, then?”—Molly’s eyes had really brightened, and her pale lips had relaxed into a look of keen enjoyment.

“Bless my soul!—bless me,”—the old man put both hands behind him again—“how fast

you do get on! I wonder life isn't too long the way you settle everything off. I had not so much as got to Miss Gyneth; we was speaking about gentlemen who came to see our young ladies. Is he good-looking, you says. Now I'd another reason to offer you again' looks. Perhaps you call Timothy Parkins handsome?"—he turned round and gave her a keen, amused look. Molly nodded, but her eyes had faded back to their usual dulness; for Timothy Parkins had succeeded Reuben as head-gardener at The Elms, and was a very sore subject for conversation. "Yes; and so I suppose he is—a handsome ass,"—he jerked his head at each syllable. "He comes to a garden in its prime and can't keep it up to the mark. Now, how did I find that garden?"—he brought his wrinkled hands from under his coat-tails and plunged the thumbs vigorously into his waistcoat arm-holes; the action seemed to give breadth both to his chest and to his smile. "I found that there garden—a rubbish heap; the lawns was paddocks, and the beds was—well, fit for potatoes. What did I do? I didn't lean

on my spade, and grin, and pull at my whiskers, or any o' the confounded antics of Mr. Parkins. Bless you, no. I says, says I to master, 'Look you here, sir, we wants drainage, and we wants dung; and, above all, we wants labour. Look at the place! I'd like to know where Tomkins and his new fangled flower-beds 'ud have been without my bottom-draining. It's always the way; it's just the same with a building—people comes and praises this and praises t'other when it's done, but ne'er a word for the scaffold-poles. But, Lor' bless ye,"—he folded his arms across the ample space of red waistcoat—"the scaffold poles don't care—not they."

He turned away from the road at this, as if he had thought it had been sufficiently explained, and followed Molly slowly and with dignity into the lodge.

Meantime Maurice Penruddock had found Gyneth alone in the drawing-room. Mrs. Venables had returned, but was upstairs; and Maurice rejoiced at the chance of seeing a little more of Miss Ralston. He observed that she did not mention his mother's visit, and he talked at first

about the garden-party. The conversation grew pleasant; they both agreed on so many points; and the atmosphere of sympathy drew Gyneth into her brightest mood.

“It seems curious that you should know my friend, Oliver Burrige,” Maurice said, after a pause.

He was looking at her earnestly, thinking of the contrast her face offered to Martha's, and wondering which of the two was the most remarkable; but Gyneth met his searching glance, and coloured. She could not have told why. Probably the name of his friend brought back the half pleasant, half confused feeling with which she had parted from Oliver so short a time ago.

“Yes,” she said smiling. “How gifted he is; you knew him when he was a boy, I think. Oh! yes, I remember you said you knew his sister too. Does it not seem strange we do not know Miss Burrige?”

“Would you care to know her?”

“That depends,”—Gyneth smiled; “but if she is like her brother I feel sure of liking her.”

“I think,”—Maurice spoke slowly—“I feel almost sure you and she would be friends; you seem so very unlike, and unlikeness is one requisite for sympathy, is it not?”

“Sometimes;” but Gyneth’s voice was doubtful; she was thinking of Lady Mary Penruddock.

“I believe,” Maurice said, “that you could be very useful to Mar—Miss Burridge; she has no friends here, and the longer she keeps out of society the harder she will find it to break through her shyness.”

At this point Mrs. Venables came in.

Gyneth was surprised at the pleasure her aunt’s face expressed at the sight of Mr. Penruddock. As she listened to their talk she wondered still more; this was only their second meeting, and yet it seemed to her that Mr. Penruddock was far more at his ease with her aunt than Mr. Burridge was; but then Mrs. Venables was never quite just to Oliver Burridge.

“It may be that,” the girl thought, as she listened. “What a strange thing sympathy is in developing people’s qualities!” She sat

thinking, and then all at once it came to her that this was the secret of the restraint she had felt earlier in the afternoon. "Lady Mary does not like me," she said.

"I am so sorry to have missed your mother," Mrs. Venables was saying, looking so pretty and pleasant that Maurice thought he had never seen so charming an old lady; "I used to hear of her as a beauty in my younger days."

Maurice smiled; he took a fond pride in his mother's looks.

"Yes, I believe she was greatly admired. As you came in we were speaking of my friend Burridge's sister. I wish Miss Ralston could get to know her, for I fear she is very lonely, though I don't suppose she would admit she was dull."

"We will call, if we may," Mrs. Venables said.

"That would be the natural course of things; but she is so shy that I don't feel sure she will admit visitors; she is proud, too, and has an idea that any kindness shown her is from pity."

"That is being humble, is it not?" said

Gyneth. "Shall I write and ask as a favour if I may call?"

Maurice shook his head.

"It must happen naturally ; I think, perhaps, you may meet her with her brother."

"Coming out of church," said Mrs. Venables, smiling. "I scarcely think so busy a man as Mr. Burridge takes week-day walks with his sister."

"No—but you will not see them at church either ; they are Dissenters."

Mrs. Venables did not answer, but she said to herself that this accounted for Mr. Burridge's self-willed notions. Mr. Penruddock's evident friendship for these people puzzled her.

He went on speaking to Gyneth.

"You can do so much for her ; she is a great lover of books, and has a very limited supply of them ; then she really has a good voice, but she has had no instruction in singing, and wants both practice and self-confidence. She has read and thought so much that her conversation is very interesting when she gets at her ease."

"You make me quite wish to know this

young lady." Mrs. Venables spoke with a slight infusion of malice.

"Perhaps I speak partially," he said; "but you must pardon my wish to give her pleasure. I am only trying to induce Miss Ralston to bring sunshine into a very solitary life, and the Burridges may stay some months here. Of course I may be wrong in my estimate of her qualities; you may not care about Miss Burridge."

"I will tell you the next time I see you," said Gyneth, laughing; "you have so excited my curiosity that the acquaintance will have to be made without delay."

"And now I must ask you,"—Mrs. Venables smiled very sweetly at Maurice—"to persuade your mother to come to dine with us quietly one day. My husband and she are such old friends that they must want a long chat, and you will come too, will you not?—any evening next week will suit us."

Maurice expressed his thanks, though, if he had not been her son, he might have thought his mother would scarcely be flattered by



Mrs. Venables's security about her husband's friendship. But he did not go away; he felt strangely unwilling to go, and he scarcely knew why. He liked to watch Gyneth Ralston; her face varied so constantly in expression every thought seemed reflected on it like the changing light and shade on a landscape under the April sky; then the face itself was so refined and delicate, with a lurking mischief in the eyes and in the corners of the flexible lips, as if she could be very merry when she chose. But it was not only her face that charmed him; her movements were so gentle and full of grace; he noted, too, with a kind of lazy pleasure, as he leaned back in his easy-chair, how deftly and expressively she used her hands—the hands themselves, too, were small, not so white and beautiful as Martha's hands, but full of delicious curves and dimples; and once, when she extended her hand to reach a book her aunt asked for, he noted the exquisite rose-coloured palm and the charming line of the little finger to the round, blue-veined wrist.

Mrs. Venables went on chatting pleasantly,

and Maurice answered ; but his thoughts were with Gyneth. He was very fastidious about women—rarely completely pleased with any young woman ; but every moment his pleasure grew more intense as he sat watching this girl. He felt, as he listened to her saucy speeches to her aunt, that his first impression had hit the mark, though it had only received a fragmentary idea of her ; she was not merely the gentle, graceful girl she had appeared to be when he first arrived to-day. There was fun, and sometimes a pathetic entreaty, in those liquid dark eyes, which he found himself wishing most intensely to look into.

The conversation had turned to a recent railway accident ; a disaster in which many lives had been sacrificed. As Gyneth spoke, the dark pathos in her eyes grew piteous.

“ Perhaps I am hard,” she said, “ but I cannot quite sympathise with the universal fuss and demonstration that such an event calls out ; it seems to me that life has greater miseries than this sudden death to many of those poor people.”

Mrs. Venables looked surprised ; and then she smiled at Maurice.

“I do not see,” she said, “why we need sympathise less with other misery because our feelings are stirred up about such a widespread calamity as this is.”

“I was wondering,”—Maurice looked at Gyneth with a half teasing, half admiring look—“how Miss Ralston has already become so well acquainted with the miseries of life.”

She thought he was laughing at her ; her cheeks glowed, and her eyes grew bright with indignation.

“One cannot live with one’s eyes shut ; and I believe there is much more sorrow than one can even imagine. Among the poor how terribly a woman suffers who has a bad husband. I have seen many sad cases.”

“Yes,” Maurice said, gravely, “I agree with you ; but I do not only pity women. Men who—who—marry thoughtlessly are often just as much to be pitied.”

“You will not get Gyneth to agree to that,” said Mrs. Venables, “she is full of arguments

against marriage, because she says women suffer so much more than men do in it."

"Yes," Gyneth said, earnestly. "It must be so. Most men have so much more in their lives to occupy thought. It is twice as important to a woman to have a good husband as it is to a man to have a good wife."

Maurice looked at Mrs. Venables and laughed.

"You will not agree to this," he said.

She laughed. "It is certainly a one-sided view, though perhaps there is more chance that a good wife reclaims a bad husband than *vice versa*; and if she fails, no doubt she is less exposed to outward temptation than a man is; but——"

She hesitated; the conversation had strayed, and she looked at Mr. Penruddock.

"I agree with you," he said. "Perhaps it ought not to be so; but I believe a man generally goes to the dogs who has a bad wife. I sometimes think—dangerous as it might be in some cases—it would be a good thing if some young wives knew how very great their power for good or evil is over the minds of their husbands;

but I am inflicting a visitation on you this afternoon."

Very reluctantly he said good-bye to the two ladies, and took his way back to London.

"Why have I wasted so many weeks in getting to know these people? I might have known them months ago," he said. "I never met anyone like them before."

In the glow of pleasant feeling he thought Mrs. Venables quite worthy of her niece; his disappointment in Oliver was forgotten; Martha, too, who usually held a fixed place in his thoughts was obscured by the vivid impression of this visit. He was so unwilling to disturb his pleasant dreaming that he walked the whole way home to Bayswater.

## CHAPTER XII.

## A CONFIDENCE.

WHEN Oliver had finished his work, he came in to tea. Not to the little upstairs sitting-room—Martha kept that for Maurice's visits—but into the dining-room, which was very bare, and empty of any attempt at decoration. To-day its bare, stone-coloured walls and the ugly carpet seemed to show themselves in a new light to Oliver.

“Dear me,” he said, “I wish we could make this place more habitable. I don't mean new furniture, but a few flowers, or something bright and pleasant.”

Then he looked with some discontent at Martha. Unobservant as she was by nature, she was always keenly sensitive to her brother's

moods, and she knew he was dissatisfied with her now.

“I will get some flowers, dear, if you like.” Oliver shrugged his shoulders. Love has the faculty of making a man very hard in judgment towards other women, and especially towards the women of his own family.

As Oliver looked at Martha, she seemed to him stiff and ungraceful, and he grew impatient of the earnest gaze fixed on him.

“I wish, Martha, you could see the rooms at The Elms; I don’t know what it is, but there’s a something about them that makes one feel at home at once.”

Martha’s lips drew together, while he spoke, till they almost made a scarlet line in her pale face, but her eyes grew dark and luminous.

“Very likely”—her voice sounded hard;—“but, to make things different here, first there must be some expense, and then much more taste than I have.”

“No, I don’t mean expensive things—I mean bits of needlework that women can make for themselves; and flowers are cheap enough. I

can tell you one thing that struck me—there are sheaves of dried grass rising up here and there out of china vases, and there are other things about on the tables. If you'll look out some of mother's teacups and saucers that you keep locked up out of sight, I don't mind having a few shelves put up——”

Oliver stopped in a sudden, shame-faced way, but he laughed at the cloud of rebuke in his sister's eyes.

“I thought you despised mere prettinesses. Why, Oliver”—her indignation found vent in the tone of her voice,—“you always say that nothing is noble or true, or to be aimed at, that has not a use in it, and what use can there be in wasting time over grass and china?—pictures and books are different, they raise the mind, but knick-knacks are quite folly.”

She looked almost angry as she ended. Oliver felt irritated and foolish, for his sister had given even a mild rendering of his often-uttered prejudices against useless labour and ornament. And yet—he looked round the bare, meagre room and shuddered, and felt disgusted when



he thought of the drawing-room, or even of the breakfast-room, at The Elms.

It was quite true. This room held everything necessary for the mere daily requirements of life. The table and chairs and sideboard were good and solid; the carpet and curtains were ugly, but good of their kind, and they were neither old nor shabby-looking. And yet——

“Well,” he said, sulkily, “I suppose one lives and learns; there is a certain use in even mere prettiness when it soothes one’s temper. This room puts me out; there is not one suggestive corner for the eye to rest on—nothing soothing or pleasant.” Then, after a minute’s pause, he nodded to Martha. “I am going out till supper-time,” he said. “I wish you had kept Penruddock; I could have talked to him then.” He nodded again, and turned to the door. As he was going out he looked at her. “I tell you what, Martha,” he said, kindly; “if you would only visit about a little you would soon see what other people do, and pick up a few ideas.”

Martha did not move for some minutes from

the place where he left her standing. Her whole nature was stirred, and in the upheaval and the conflict of opposite feelings she lost any consciousness of outward surrounding.

Outside the grey parrot called loudly, while Oliver crossed the garden—"Good boy, Oliver; come again soon, Oliver; smoke a pipe."

Oliver laughed, and, turning round just below the window, shook his fist at saucy Jacko; but Martha did not hear or see. She stood very pale and erect, her taper fingers gleaming white against the dark green of her gown, her pale face, with its rich red-gold crown of ruffled hair, in full relief against the light wall behind her. The afternoon sunshine, which had made the room look still more unlovely to Oliver, while it lit up every vacant corner out of the dusky mystery in which interest might be supposed to exist, had made Martha's hair to glow gloriously, and revealed wealth of colour not only where the sun turned it to a fiery gold, but where in the shadows purples and even carmine seemed to lurk; and the blending of all these in the richest of browns—a brown that made one think of a beech-wood in late

October, when autumn has laid a jewelled grasp on the lessening leaves, or of the rich-toned umber hues of a pheasant's breast.

At last she came out of this pale, statue-like attitude of reverie, and passed one hand slowly over her eyes.

“Am I jealous?” she thought. “Yes, I think I am; I am angry with Oliver for wishing me to be like Miss Ralston—and yet no, I wrong myself; well, even Oliver always says I do that.” She stopped, clasped her hands over her head, and gave a slight laugh. “No,” she went on; “it is quite natural that I should feel vexed to see Oliver come down from the very ideas which have made me look up to him, and yet he is not really changed—no”—she began to walk up and down the room, and her cheek flushed warmly—“it is only that he is infatuated out of himself and his proper reason for the time; it is no fancy of mine; have I not the authority of history and poets too? Spenser and Tasso have both shown how Love can blind a man and enfeeble his judgment—no, I must be patient with Oliver; when the love-fit is over, he will be just and kind again.”

But still her love for her brother conquered her wounded pride. She went to the porch and gathered some of the creamy clusters that had scented the afternoon air so sweetly, while she and Maurice sat together; and when the supper-cloth was laid, she placed this nosegay in a neat vase in the middle of the table. She stood looking at it, and again she laughed slightly at herself.

“Oliver may take the will for the deed,” she said—“perhaps he will; but a stiff little nosegay like that is not what he means, I know.”

A sort of writhe seemed to twist through face and figure.

“It is pitiful,” she held up her head, looking, though she did not know it, very grand and noble; “I scarcely know which is worst—not to be able to do such petty little things, or to crave and long, as I do, for power to be more like other women.”

She stretched out her white hands in a passionate pleading, and there was a sob in her voice; her thoughts had strayed from Oliver; it was to Maurice that her entreaty addressed

itself. He had said, when he left her, that he was going to The Elms ; would he too go and gaze on Gyneth Ralston, and become so fascinated by her and her charming ways that he would find the cottage too dull and homely to visit ?

“ If Oliver does, how can I wonder ? ” Martha thought.

Not so long ago, when her brother went away for a few days—and these short absences often happened—he was always in a hurry to come back to Martha and tell her all his little adventures ; he would dwell on them even to make amusement for her, and now he had been away from her three days, and he had gone to see Gyneth Ralston on his way home, and had regretted the chance of spending the evening alone with Martha. She writhed again as the jealous pang struck through her with its cruel strength ; for an instant she asked herself if she could yield up Maurice, so that Oliver might be spared to her. Would it be possible for Maurice to supplant Oliver with this girl ?

She hid her face in both hands. It had grown dusk, and the lamp was not yet lighted,

or the contrast between Martha's white fingers and her glowing cheeks would have been very visible. No—she could not yield either brother or friend.

“They are all I have—all I have ever had since mother died; why am I to have nothing at all in this world, and this girl has all she wishes for? She shall not have either of them!”

She roused herself resolutely, and watched the maid place the supper; she felt glad that she had expected Oliver to-night, for she was confident that he would be pleased with what she had provided. Hitherto, at any rate, he had never found fault with her housekeeping; still she cast doubtful, dissatisfied looks on the table.

“Go in the garden and get some more parsley, Jane—butter wants parsley as well as the chicken and tongue,” she said; her voice had a nervous, fidgety sound that did not belong to it, and the maid looked surprised as she went to gather some parsley—she wondered to herself was that Mr. Penruddock coming after Miss

Martha again; and then decided, after the creed of a woman whose life had been given up to others, that it was not possible Miss Martha could do such a thing as leave her brother to fend for himself, for the sake of any man living.

“Time enough,” Jane argued, as she stooped to gather the curled leaves from the plot in the garden behind the house; “plenty of time for Miss Martha to think of a husband when Mr. Oliver’s settled, and don’t no longer want her.”

When she came in, Miss Martha had lost her fidgety manner; she took the parsley from Jane’s hand, where it had assisted at a vivid contrast of crimson and emerald, and began to deck with some of the prettiest bits the pale primrose roll of butter; and while she did this another thought came to Martha.

“Jane,” she said, “suppose I get some wooden moulds; do you think if I do you can make the butter into pats when Mr. Oliver is at home?”

“Lor, yes, miss.” But Jane wondered still more what had come to Miss Martha, to set

her up with all these new-fangled notions.

Martha was still bending over the butter when Oliver came in. The lamps had been lit, and as the brilliant glow fell on the table, he saw at once the little attempts at decoration. Quite heedless of Jane's presence, he went up to his sister, put his arm round her, and gave her a hearty kiss.

"That's capital, Matty," he said; "you've got the table quite gay. That's the best of you, Martha—you're always in such earnest about everything; you only want a little teaching."

She drew herself away; but Oliver was too ready for his supper to be sensitive just then.

"I had everything cold," she said, "because I was not sure about your coming home to-day."

"Quite right," he said, with his mouth already full; "and besides, I don't care for hot suppers—they are not wholesome later than eight o'clock, and then one might as well dine as sup. I have been thinking"—he looked at her to see the effect of his words—"that perhaps in some



ways it is reasonable to do what others do. I don't mean for the sake of fashion or nonsense, but I believe it's wiser to dine late than early."

"Do you mean that you wish to dine at eight o'clock?" she said, in a tone of astonishment.

The tone jarred him; it was so new to find Martha out of harmony and agreement with his slightest wish, that he began to think he had been living in blindness; he wondered how he could have so long endured this severe companionship.

"Why not?" he said, abruptly—"it would not give more trouble, and it would save my time in the middle of the day."

He had meant to talk this over with her, but her manner had settled what was only a floating idea into a fixed purpose.

"Very well, just as you please," said Martha, coldly.

Oliver went on with his supper, but Martha could not eat. She listened patiently while Oliver talked on about his journey, and the state of business in the north, but she answered him briefly; she was really wrapped up in her own thoughts. Oliver was often

rough and hasty, but then he was soon appeased. She had grown up to consider these ebullitions as part of his extremely masculine temperament, which was not to be gauged by her merely feminine experience.

But she now saw, as she forced herself to review the past weeks, that this falling off both in affection and confidence had not merely arisen in these last days, when she had suddenly missed them in her brother. She knew now, she thought, why life had seemed so dull when she was alone, and why she looked forward so longingly to seeing Maurice. Oliver's love was gone from her, not into a mere passing fancy, but for ever; he could not be so cool and smiling if he had a spark of love left. Why, anger would be preferable.

All at once she roused. Oliver drew his chair close to hers, and put his arm round her, just as he had always done when he had something particular to tell her.

At the fond, familiar touch her heart swelled with a sudden throb of pain, and tears came to cool the light that was again burning in her

eyes, so dark and sweet now, as she looked into her brother's. He gave her a hearty kiss.

"Come, old woman," he said, "you mustn't be hard on me just now. Don't go fancying, in your dear old morbid way, that I love you less because"—his honest face grew crimson—"I care for some one else too, quite in a different way. I was quite content with you, and I shall never think anyone else like you; but, you see, I'm in love, Martha, and that's the long and short of it."

Martha's hands had instinctively sought one another, and they lay now twisting in her lap in an intense dumb protest against this fact, which she could not bend herself to receive with sympathy.

Love was to Martha, who had studied Dante and Shakespeare, and all the old-fashioned writers who believe in the undying strength of true love, a real living power; and if Oliver said he was in love, of course he was so. Her old faith in him was still too strong to be shaken, though rebellion kept her silent. But her brother's earnest look was changing into a pained

expression, and with a great effort she smiled at him.

“Are you, dear?” she said, tenderly.

He was too excited to be critical, or he might have said that Martha’s tone was suited to a child who comes and says he is hurt rather than to a confession of love.

“Yes, and you know I always talk things over with you, and I don’t want to keep this from you, Martha.” He kissed her again, as if he felt that she suffered. “I want you to know Miss Ralston,” he went on, “before I speak to her. I think I must speak soon—I feel sure I shall—but I should not like to engage myself to some one you don’t know, Martha. Shall I take you to see her, or shall she call here? I want so much to know what you think of her.”

Martha knew that really her opinion would go for nothing with Oliver; but in this supreme moment of mental disorder, when her old landmarks seemed to be slipping away, and she felt change of every sort threatening her uniform life, she was very grateful to her brother for

even this make-believe deference. "He thinks he wants my opinion," she said to herself.

"Well," Oliver said, impatiently.

Martha smiled. She began to feel that she was self-willed. Why should she refuse to do what Maurice so much wished? He, at least, had no purpose to serve in asking her to see Miss Ralston.

"I think she had better come here," she said, shyly. "I shall be stupid enough, but I don't seem to know what would happen to me if I went to The Elms. I could not, indeed;" she looked with alarm in her eyes, and put her hand beseechingly on Oliver's shoulder.

Oliver laughed. "Well," he said, "you are the oddest girl that ever lived; but I am sure, after a bit, you two will get on well together."

Martha was glad to see him take his pipe out of its case; it gave her an excuse for being useful, for she could not say, "I hope so."

At that moment her most ardent wish was that he might leave off caring for Gyneth Ralston. And long after she had said good night to Oliver, during the wakeful night that followed, she lay

wondering if she could bear to see Maurice supplant Oliver in this girl's liking, so that she might keep her brother to herself.

“No,” she said to herself, “the same woman cannot love Maurice and Oliver with that sort of love. I fancy this Gyneth is more like Maurice himself, and if so, then she wants a stronger, rougher nature to cling to. And yet there is no weakness in Maurice; his extreme gentleness hides his strength. Ah! but this girl does not know him as I do; no mere fashionable lady could ever appreciate him, he is too proud to produce himself as Oliver does.”

Here she fell asleep, only to be tormented by restless, distorted dreams.

## CHAPTER XIII.

PREVENTION IS NOT ALWAYS BETTER THAN CURE.

GYNETH RALSTON had fairly regular features, and yet her great charm was in the eloquence with which her face told her feelings. She was impulsive, and yet she had plenty of self-control; her manner would remain unchanged, while her eyes brightened with interest, or grew liquid with sympathy; but on this day, which had brought so much disquiet to Martha Burridge, Gyneth's feelings had been stirred in a most strange and new way. The fanning of Love's wings, even if he only hovers near without in words revealing his presence, has a marvellous effect on a woman's beauty. While Oliver talked to her, and when looking up she met his ardent eyes fixed on her

face, Gyneth's colour had deepened, and the glow had seemingly spread to her eyes, darkening their velvet-like softness; and even after Mr. Burridge's departure she did not at once come out of this haze of new emotion—she was still wrapped in a pleasant, dreamy consciousness when Maurice Penruddock arrived.

All the way home—he found the road far too pleasant to give up walking—he pondered the change he had found in this girl to-day. Dreamily through the cabbage and lettuce gardens, and then through hideous rows of small, poor houses, varied with cheap shops and flaring public-houses, wholly undistracted by the crowds of noisy children rushing out of school, not even turning his head to look at the exotic ferns in the nursery as he passed by its windows, he went on thinking—thinking, making his way across two high roads and through acres of stuccoed houses, of as mushroom growth as many of their occupiers, till he reached the quaint “old court suburb,” with its quiet, unpretentious charm, and found



himself at the entrance of the broad walk in Kensington Gardens.

A lady driving by, smiled at him; he turned round, and saw that the carriage had stopped, and that his mother was bending forward to speak to him.

“If you are going home,” he said, “I’ll come with you.”

“Yes, I am going home,”—Lady Mary spoke fretfully, while he seated himself beside her; “I am quite over-tired. I paid a long visit at The Elms. I wanted to see Mrs. Venables, but she never came in—I believe the poor woman keeps out of my way,”—she smiled through her grumbles,—“and then I called on the Merthyr Joneses, and I really wish I had not done so.”

“Why not?”—he could not help smiling at her puckered face. “Was not Marian amusing? or did Editha treat you to an extempore sermon?”

“Oh! no, she never preaches. Marian was not well, and she was much duller than usual; but Editha has such a saddened aspect, she looks as if she were called on to bear the sins

of the whole world, and had them hanging round her neck, and she makes one feel that she is quite aware of one's own exceeding sinfulness, but that her Christian spirit makes her endure one. While I am with her I feel subdued, but as soon as I get out of the house I am in active rebellion."

Maurice laughed heartily.

"Poor Editha! I believe she is very good, but she certainly does not hide her light. She is always so afraid of contamination."

Lady Mary leaned back in silence.

Maurice wished to ask whom she had seen at The Elms, and yet he shrank from hearing his mother's opinion of Gyneth.

"You did not see Mrs. Venables, then?" he said.

"No; I saw Mr. Venables, grown so old that I scarcely knew him, and two nieces, one a nice girl enough, rather pretty, too, with blue eyes."

"Do you think her pretty?" said Maurice.  
"One so often sees that sort of fair face."

His mother noticed the constraint in his voice.

"I saw a friend of yours, too," she said. "A

Mr. Burrige. I cannot say I admire him, dear Maurice."

Maurice flushed; his mother usually said "dear Maurice" when she differed from him.

"Do not let us discuss him, then; he is a very dear friend of mine. When I was a young fellow at Deeping, you can't think how kind Oliver and his mother and sister were to me; but I have often told you about them in my letters."

"Yes," she said, looking extremely bored, "I remember—of course I remember. You have been wanting to ask this Mr. Burrige to dine. He seems very intimate at The Elms, especially with the elder Miss Ralston."

"Oh! yes, he has known them some time, and she would interest a man like Oliver. What do you think of her?" he asked, abruptly.

He had decided not to ask this question, and somehow it had made its way to his lips.

Lady Mary gave him a charming smile.

"She is nice-looking and has regular features," she said, "and I have no doubt she has read a good deal, and that sort of thing. I dare say

she would be more telling in her sister's absence. She is rather dull beside that bright, merry girl; Louisa has a certain style, too, quite wanting in her sister."

Maurice felt singularly contradictory.

"That's curious," he said. "I always think the youngest much more common-place. Miss Ralston is like her aunt, Mrs. Venables; she says things that strike one as new and original."

Lady Mary's face was full of protest. She smiled, but her eyes had a dark light in them that did not look like satisfaction.

"Ah! yes,"—she nodded with her words—  
"I know the kind of woman you mean. She goes in for eccentric ways—new lights, and so on. Fortunately Mrs. Venables has had no children. You say her niece is like her; but women of that sort are most undomestic, my dear Maurice. They are quite unfitted to take their place in society as wives and mothers."

There was a silence. Maurice was thinking how much more companionable a wife Gyneth would be than her sister, and his mother was full of disquiet at this confirmation of her

misgivings about his taste. But her scheming brain understood that open argument was the most fatal weapon she could employ.

“I feel a little sorry for your friend, Mr. Burridge. I think the youngest sister would have been far more useful to him. She would have softened him down, whereas the eccentric one will only foster his abruptness, and call it originality.”

Maurice looked at her sharply.

“What do you mean?” he said.

She smiled.

“You are quite safe with me, Maurice. I am not likely to tell Mr. Burridge’s secrets, and I have no doubt he has told you he is going to propose to Miss Ralston.”

“I am sure he has not told me so.”

“Really. Well, he seems so frank and impulsive that I fancied he would tell you everything; but perhaps you don’t see much of him, after all.”

“Yes, I do.” But he answered mechanically—he was thinking. His mother’s surmise might be a true one. It was not likely that Oliver

would speak to him of his love ; besides, they had not seen one another alone for some time past.

A dull cloud had come over his spirits. Oliver's faults of manner, his overbearing self-reliance, and his occasional harsh fits of injustice—all these errors, which, if his mother had commented on them, Maurice would at once have felt called on to defend, now seemed to gather round the image of his friend.

“What makes you suppose this?”

His mother had been watching Maurice, and it seemed to her that she had done well to speak so soon.

“My dear boy, I really can't tell you. Don't you know that women are witches in all that concerns the affections? they are sure to guess rightly.”

His thoughts went back to Martha. Did she know of Oliver's attachment?

“I wonder if he has said anything about it to his sister?” he said, in a low voice.

Lady Mary looked discomfited.

“A sister!” she said to herself; then she

hesitated; instinctively she shrank from her question. "I suppose he lives alone now."

Maurice smiled. It seemed to his unsuspecting mind that here was a good opportunity to interest his mother in Martha.

"Oh no; he and his sister live together in a cottage at Fulham. I have been calling on them this afternoon."

"Really," she said, drily, "is Miss Burridge as high-coloured and talkative as her brother is?"

Maurice turned his head away; he was angry at this slighting mention of his friend.

"Miss Burridge is extremely handsome," he said decidedly—"very pale, but tall and distinguished-looking."

Anyone looking at his mother would have seen her shrink into herself; her face grew still yellower; she was vexed and frightened all at once. She had been worrying herself in a most unnecessary way about Gyneth Ralston, while actually Maurice was visiting a girl he admired, and he had never so much as spoken of her.

"Dear me," she said, pettishly, "I should like to see her—I like handsome people. Can she

call on me, or shall I pay her a visit? She must be worth seeing if she answers to your description, Maurice."

He felt the irony of this speech, and he looked at his mother earnestly.

"It is kind of you," he said, simply, "to wish to know my friends, but I am not sure that a call from you would be a real kindness in the case of Martha Burridge."—Lady Mary shuddered.—"Does he actually call her Martha?" she thought. "She is so shy and so unused to society that I believe the nervous fear of such an event would make her ill."

His mother shrugged her shoulders; they had just reached home. As she stepped out of the carriage she said—

"If she is not a visitable person, I have no wish to intrude on her."

There was something extremely disagreeable in the way these words were said, and Maurice wished most earnestly that he had held his tongue respecting Martha's shyness. He thought, as he followed his mother indoors, that her graceful, languid self-possession was just



the quality that Martha lacked, and that she must have infallibly gained by Lady Mary's society. His only doubt was whether Martha would ever feel sufficiently at her ease with her to observe or learn.

"No," he said to himself, "she will get on best with Miss Ralston; she is shy too, and this sympathy will help them to understand one another."

But his mother's suggestion about Oliver's love was too disturbing to give room for other thoughts. He was glad that he was not going to dine at home; he felt that he could not discuss this subject till he knew the truth about Oliver.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## MARTHA AND GYNETH MEET.

GYNETH had several friends in the small houses beside the cabbage grounds. She had been to see a sick woman in one of these cottages, and now, as she passed by the others, a curly-headed boy and a little crippled girl came out and looked at her with shy smiles. Gyneth nodded, but she did not stay to talk. Evening was drawing on, and she was out much later than usual. Her uncle and aunt and Louisa had gone to dine in town, and, as the day had been very warm, Gyneth had waited to take her walk till the air grew cool.

She had soon got through the cabbage grounds, and then she remembered another cottage nearer the river to which she had long

promised a visit. She turned down a road which opened on the left. At the end were tall trees which bordered the banks for some distance, but the end of the road itself was open; and here the river showed between the darkness of the tree-lines a phantom-like grey, with a rose-coloured reflection of the sunset.

Gyneth hurried down the road; she could see the sunset from The Elms, but the opposite bank at this point was wooded, and she felt before she reached the opening how lovely the view must be.

When she reached the river the sun had sunk into a purple cloud, but the sky was fiery red, in strange contrast with the long line of misty greyness that marked the opposite bank looking Londonwards. The river too was of a luminous grey, above which, in the far distance, twinkled a line of star-like lights; but up the river the sunset reflected itself here and there in angry flame-coloured patches on the grey water—patches that served to bring into more prominent view the line of a yellow out-rigger, and to light up the gaily-painted green side of a

pleasure-boat coming back from an afternoon's excursion.

While she stood looking, a pale-blue vapour spread into the picture, making the weird, grey trees opposite look still farther off; and then a black steamer, its red line just over the water, came into sight, and another coming up the river nearly met it. The two blue clouds melted into one another, and seemed to lie suspended on the pale mist that rose from the water. Then they too passed out of sight, so did the outrigger and the pleasure-boat—only a black, lumbering barge, like some sleeping sea-monster, moved slowly along, scarcely disturbing the stillness of the scene. The low trees on the opposite bank grew yet more weird and shadowy; they might have been phantoms, like those near Pointe du Raz, waiting to be ferried to the shores of the departed.

Gyneth sighed deeply; she had nothing consciously to sigh for; her mother's loss was always a present grief to her, but then Mrs. Ralston had been a great sufferer, and her daughter knew that death had been a boon.

Gyneth felt, too, how rare a blessing was her aunt's warm and tender sympathy. No, her sigh was not for past sorrow, it was rather called up by a feeling of intense sympathy with the dim, half-told mystery of the landscape; for Gyneth, like any other true worshipper of the beautiful, loved all that appeared to the imagination beyond the mere outward vision, and cared little for things which left nothing to discover. She thought it was this subdued reticence that so attracted her in Mr. Penruddock. There seemed so much to find out in anyone who had either so little wish or so little power to reveal himself. She sighed again at the contrast between him and Oliver Burridge, and Louisa's talk on this subject, the evening after Oliver's last visit, had vexed her.

“What are you going to do, Kitty?” the girl had said. “That man will evidently propose to you. Are you going to accept him?”

Gyneth did not answer; she could not say, as she had said in the spring, that Louisa was “missy and fanciful”—she felt that Oliver's manner had changed, and that his

evident preference for her made her shrink from him ; and while she stood in hesitating silence Louisa added,

“ You don't know how you have changed lately about poor Oliver Burridge ; when first I came from school, he was everything that was gifted and wonderful, and now I believe, in your secret heart, you like that briefless barrister the best of the two.”

Gyneth turned very red.

“ I thought we had agreed that this was not a discussion we cared for. We are sure to consider things differently so long as you think as you do now. It is odious that one cannot talk to a visitor without considering how much he is worth, and what are his chances of getting on in the world.”

“ It may be odious,” Louisa could smile with superior wisdom, “ but it is common sense. What are girls in our position to do ? We have no claim on uncle ; and besides, he may live for years, and you and I should make a very pinched living on our own little income. I consider it to be a duty, and certainly far more

unselfish, to establish myself as soon as possible in a house of my own." Then she spoilt her wisdom and added, "I thought you liked Oliver Burridge."

"I do like him!" said Gyneth, vehemently, "but you will make me hate him if you talk in this way. I don't want to be married," she tried to smile; "why should I take so desirable a husband away from some one else?"

"Why?" Louisa shrugged her shoulders. "The reason is plain; the man is very much in love with you. Now don't turn off in a pet; you are very charming now, but you will get older, and men don't care for a *passée* girl," said this precocious monitor; "and you have so many tastes in common with Oliver Burridge that I know you would love him dearly very soon; I quite look on him as a brother already."

Louisa checked herself; she saw by Gyneth's frowning brows and flushed face that she was not taking the wisest course of persuasion.

There was silence for a little; then Gyneth said,

"I do not want to be silly or affected,

Louy, and I tell you the truth in saying I have no wish to be married. Now let us talk of something else."

Louisa was vexed. She thought her sister ought to trust her more fully.

"Well," she said, with a toss of her fair head, "I only hope this Mr. Penruddock has nothing to do with your indifference to poor Oliver—poor fellow, he has done nothing to deserve such caprice. I can tell you one thing," she said, with rather an unkind smile. "Mr. Penruddock is not a marrying man—he is like ourselves, Kitty—if he marries at all he must have money. The chief advantage of knowing him is that he has a charming mother. I adore Lady Mary, and I mean to make a friend of her."

She departed, leaving her sister very much ruffled; far more disturbed by Louisa's words, she thought, than was needful, or even natural; for there was inward discontent, apart from the vexation caused by her sister's advice. Now, as she stood looking at the grey water and thinking of Maurice and Oliver, all this talk came back to her.



“We are not quite what sisters should be,” she thought. “And I cannot see how confidence can exist while Louy is so worldly and scheming. No circumstances can ever make it right for girls to settle that they will marry for expediency.” But she was too fond of her young sister to dwell on this.

She asked herself if she really was growing capricious. Did she prefer a new friend to an old one?

“And yet,” she said, “Mr. Burrige is only an old friend of uncle’s. I have not known him more than a year; and it is only lately that we have grown intimate.” But here conscience smote hard. Gyneth knew that Oliver had tried to let her see him as he really was, failings and merits too; while she had only seen Mr. Penruddock twice, and knew nothing of him. “And I feel I could not like his mother,” she said.

She felt impatient with herself. Why need she think of Mr. Penruddock at all. She was bound to think of Oliver. He had not come to The Elms for several days, not since the after-

noon when his manner had been so earnest. Gyneth had silenced her sister's teasing, but she knew that Oliver's manner had changed towards herself, and she dreaded the next meeting with him. She liked him so very much, and yet whenever she got to this point in her meditations something checked her from pursuing the subject.

She turned to leave the river. The bright, angry red of the sky and its reflection had grown dusky, mixing every instant with the stealing grey that had lost its luminous weirdness, and would soon be dull and colourless.

Gyneth started when she saw looming through the dimness, not many yards off, the tall figure of a woman. The figure was coming rapidly towards the opening, and turned to go up the road when Gyneth did. The two women looked hard at one another, and Miss Ralston fancied that the stranger shivered, and drew her shawl round her. She thought she looked white and ill.

For a little while they walked side by side

till they reached the corner of the road which led east and west through the market-gardens. It was much lighter here, and Gyneth looked at her companion again. A curious idea had taken possession of her—this woman so exactly answered to Mr. Penruddock's portrait of Oliver's sister; and, as she gave a long searching look at the pale face, it seemed to Miss Ralston that she saw a likeness to Oliver himself. Should she claim acquaintance? even if she were mistaken she should be glad of a companion in the fading light; but while she hesitated the opportunity fled. The tall, strange lady, for Gyneth decided that she was distinguished-looking, hurried on, and as soon as she was a few steps in advance began to run.

Gyneth smiled. It seemed to her that, if this were Miss Burrige, it was the very course her shyness would lead her to take.

When Gyneth reached home she was told that Mr. Burrige had called in her absence.

“I was to give you his card, ma'am,” the butler said. “He wrote a message on it.”

Gyneth stood under the hall lamp to read the

pencilled words. The light fell on the soft rounding of her cheeks, glowing with her rapid walk; her feathered hat, as she leant forward, shadowed her eyes. Oliver had written :

“Will you call on my sister to-morrow? She will be glad to see you, and I shall be much obliged.”

“Will she be glad?” Gyneth thought. “I doubt it—and yet that tall, mysterious-looking woman may be some one else; there are several isolated cottages between that part of the river and Fulham.” But as, during her solitary evening, Miss Ralston could not reckon up any one acquaintance as remarkable and interesting in appearance as this stranger of the lane, she began to hope that she might prove to be Miss Burridge, and to look forward with quite changed feelings to this intimacy.

“Living so near, if we know one another, we might be intimate,” she said, “and I don’t know why I seemed to shrink from seeing her.”

She did not own it to herself, but Mr. Penruddock’s praise had invested Miss Burridge with interest; “he is not a man who would like

everybody," Gyneth argued. Next minute she smiled at herself. How could she judge of his tastes? She had seen him so little.

"I shall understand him better when I have seen this perfection of his."

When she went to bed, she was surprised at her own eagerness to become acquainted with Martha Burridge.

Next morning was rainy. Mr. Venables read the paper even more diligently than usual. Mrs. Venables was tired, and had little to say about the past evening, but Louisa was garrulous with pleasure. The dinner in town had been so well done, everything so stylish, and the dresses charming.

"Not only fashionable, Kitty, but evidently so costly—such magnificent silk, and the trimmings!—I can't fancy what they must not have cost."

"But were the people nice?" Gyneth asked.

"Really I can't tell you. I sat next a man who had been in the war in the East; he had very little to say for himself, but then one felt he was very likely a hero, and looked up to him.

My other neighbour, fat and middle-aged, did nothing but grumble.”

“But the women?” Gyneth asked.

“Oh, the women! Well, I confess I was too much taken up in studying the make of their dresses to look at what was in them, or to care for talk in the drawing-room. I begin to wish you would part with Douglas, and get a less old-fashioned maid; she is really so behind-hand in her ways and ideas. My hair was done higher than anyone’s.”

Gyneth smiled. “Douglas shall take lessons, Louy, but I cannot part from her as long as she is willing to stay; she always seems like a bit of our dear mother.”

Louy stooped to kiss her sister. “You are an affectionate old dear,” she said, “but I wish you would do your hair fashionably.”

In some ways Louisa had come between Gyneth and her aunt—not in the way of affection or confidence, but Gyneth and Mrs. Venables had grown into a habit of taking long country drives together; and now Louisa asserted the claims of society, and declared the necessity

for paying visits far more frequently. Her uncle warmly approved of this change, and Mrs. Venables acquiesced in it, and saw the justice of the girl's arguments, although she secretly lamented the lost pleasures she had enjoyed with her eldest niece.

To-day, therefore, Gyneth did not say a word about her intended visit, lest Louisa should propose to go with her. She felt instinctively that Miss Burridge would be more at ease with her than with her more stylish sister. She dressed herself as simply as possible, and, as soon as Mrs. Venables and Louisa had driven off, she started for the cottage.

She had begun to gather some lovely July roses to take with her, and then she remembered what Mr. Penruddock had said about Martha's pride.

"I will give them to Mrs. Tew," she said.

Reuben was standing outside the lodge as she approached.

"The missus ain't in," he said, in answer to Miss Ralston's inquiry. "Yes, I'll give her the roses, Miss Kitty, such as they are; your kind-

ness in bringing of 'em is what she'll think of and value; it ain't no matter to her that the roses is no more the roses they was than I'm the man I was when I had the pruning of 'em. Ah, they were roses, if you like. These are well enough, when you consider Parkins's legs, and his whiskers, and the time he spends on 'em; they're pretty much as good as might be expected. But if I may make so free, miss, why don't you drive out every day like you used?"

"I do sometimes, but I like walking too, Reuben."

"Do you now?" He looked at her inquisitively. "Don't you walk too much by yourself in the cabbage gardens; there's more nor there should be of loafers and tramps about. I don't hold with young ladies walking about alone." He said this with his chin in the air, quite as much to himself as to Gyneth, and she passed out into the road, leaving him standing with the roses in his hand.

The rain had ceased; bright drops glittered on the leaves in a pale watery sunshine, but the dust lay quiet, and Gyneth found this



shadeless walk far less trying than she had expected. The birds were everywhere chirping a hope that rain was over for to-day, and as Miss Ralston reached the yellow gate of Holly Cottage, the song of the canaries poured out in a gush of noisy welcome.

Jane opened the gate, and, when Gyneth asked for Miss Burridge, she looked over her shoulder towards the porch.

Gyneth saw a tall lady rise from the rose-sheltered seat and come forward towards her.

## CHAPTER XV.

## AN INTERVIEW.

MARTHA had decided to receive Miss Ralston out of doors; she was ashamed to expose her want of taste and of household graces to this competent judge's criticism.

She came forward nervously and held out her hand, and Gyneth recognized, as she expected, the tall stranger beside the river, and yet she could not smile at once. Martha's eyes were so full of shrinking dread that a strange fear crept over her companion. There was warning, almost menace, in the gaze of those deep green eyes.

Next moment the spell loosened, and the two women smiled at one another.

“I believe I met you last night,” said Gyneth, in her sweet low voice. “Yes. I was half tempted to speak to you, and then I suppose I was too shy.”

“You cannot be shy.” Gyneth shrank from the constrained voice, but next moment Martha spoke more gently.

“Will you sit here?” she said. “Or do you prefer to come in-doors?”

“I like being here, thank you.” Gyneth’s eyes were riveted on her companion. She thought she had never seen anyone like this before. This beautiful woman, with her crown of rich brown-red hair, was a picture she could not tire of gazing at. How splendid she was, with her background of dark leafy green, her round white throat, rising above the tiny line of white collar that parted it from her green, straight-falling gown.

Gyneth had been painting that morning sun-flowers against a pale background, and the thought came to her, as she gazed, how grand Martha would look among the tall golden blossoms.

But it was plain that Martha would not break silence. She sat twining her white fingers together, and stealing long looks at her visitor.

"I hope your brother is well," Gyneth said.

"Yes, thank you." Martha spoke very stiffly, for the question seemed sheer hypocrisy. She thought Oliver went every day to The Elms. Miss Ralston must see more of him than she did.

"We know a friend of yours," Gyneth went on. "Mr. Penruddock."

She said this nervously. Martha's constrained, impassive manner was beginning to tell on her visitor's composure, and Gyneth felt singularly ill at ease. A slight flush rose on the pale, immovable face.

"Yes, he is an old friend." Then, fastening her eyes searchingly on the sweet eyes opposite her, "Do you like him?" she said.

"Yes, very much," Gyneth answered, hurriedly; but there was something in the tone of Martha's question that roused her. She began to feel that she did not like Miss Burridge.

"Do you like this part of London?" she

asked. "It is very far from town for your brother, is it not?"

"Yes." Martha hesitated; then, looking straight at her visitor, "He only took the cottage at first for a few weeks, and then, when he began to know your uncle, and all of you," she added, with an effort, "he settled to keep it on till the end of the year."

"I am glad you are going to stay. I hope we shall see one another sometimes." Gyneth had tried to speak as pleasantly as she could, but no answering smile came on Martha's face. She was striving to get courage to say what was in her mind, and she pinched her fingers painfully, while the flush on her cheek spread and deepened.

"I don't know," she answered.

Gyneth's courage rose. She began to feel no longer afraid of this proud-looking woman. She thought Miss Burridge carried reserve to the verge of rudeness.

"My aunt," she went on, "will be very glad to see you, if you will kindly call at The Elms. We are almost always in at five o'clock."

Martha looked at her silently for a moment or two.

“No, thank you,” she said, abruptly, “I’ll not come.”

Gyneth began to think that Oliver’s sister was wise to shut herself up. She must be crazy to be so rude; but, before she could speak, something in Gyneth’s face, or in the sympathetic atmosphere of her presence, expelled the dumb spirit that had chained Martha’s tongue.

“You think me very rude.” She held up one of her hands in protest, and Gyneth wondered at its exquisite fairness, and at the blue veins that showed so plainly through the delicate skin. “I am ignorant of all that belongs to polite society, but, if I refuse to go and see your aunt, it is not from rudeness—it is because I won’t inflict myself upon her.”

Gyneth scarcely knew how to answer, for she felt that Mrs. Venables would shrink from this singular woman.

“But you will come and see me,” she said, sweetly. Something was drawing her strongly

towards Martha. She felt more and more interested.

Martha shook her head.

“I don’t care to look foolish,” she said, bluntly. “Miss Ralston, you talked of feeling shy just now. You have no idea what real shyness is.”

“I know something of it,” the girl answered; “but I can tell you that the more visits you pay, and the more strangers you see, the less shy you become. You can hardly imagine how shy I was some years ago.”

Martha’s eyes brightened; she forgot to think of herself in her eagerness to answer.

“That is very well for you—when you left off being shy—there was something in you worth knowing and caring for; it is quite impossible anyone could care to know me for myself.”

Gyneth had grown excited, partly by contradiction, partly by the belief in others, which was part of her enthusiastic nature.

“I thought we were supposed to know nothing about ourselves,” she said. “I do not see, if you have always kept out of society, how you can tell what impression you would make

there ; silent people are often the most popular.”

“I should not care to be popular,” Martha said, coldly—she had begun to think Miss Ralston did not understand her, though she had spoken so freely. “I know beforehand the tax I should be on others. I should sit in a corner, not saying a word, and making people feel themselves obliged to be civil, while I was only taking up the room of some one who could have been pleasant.”

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders in a sort of shiver at the picture she had created.

Gyneth was puzzled. The true insight of sympathy had already told her that in practice Martha Burridge was not a woman who lived for herself and her own enjoyment of life, and yet this way of talking sounded very selfish.

“I cannot agree with you,” she said. “I confess I like society, though perhaps I don’t care much for stiff parties ; but I should have thought that, to anyone looking at life merely from the duty side of it, it wouldn’t seem right to shut oneself out from the chance of benefiting or helping a neighbour.”



“You are laughing at me, Miss Ralston. Well, you are too kind for that, perhaps; but if you knew me better, you would not think I could help anyone.”

Gyneth smiled, and Martha began to feel the loving, gentle influence of her presence—she could not have explained it, but a feeling of warmth, and of brightness too, seemed to be creeping into her soul, shed down on her from the liquid glances of those sweet dark eyes, drawing her out of her reserve in a way she had as yet hardly realised.

“I said once very nearly what you have been saying,” Miss Ralston said, “and I was told that one did not go only into society to please oneself, one went also either for good or for harm to others; that it was impossible to play a colourless, neutral part in life, and that one might have a power of giving pleasure quite apart from any mere self-loving wish to please.” Then, laughing at her own seriousness, “I don’t mean to say that I think one can remember this, and act on it consciously—pleasure and outward distraction carry one so

completely out of self-consciousness ; but I suppose this idea may act as a principle, and help one spite of oneself."

Martha shook her head incredulously.

"I remember," said Gyneth, "reading once that, when one of the saints was preaching a sermon, in the middle of it he felt tempted to be vain of his own eloquence, and called out suddenly, 'I did not begin this to please Satan, neither shall he have the end of it; let God have all the glory.' I suppose that story carries out my idea better than I can express it myself."

"I know little about saints," said Martha, abruptly ; "but I like you, and if you care to come to see me again, I shall be glad to see you. I had rather not go to The Elms. I dare say it is selfish to refuse your kindness, but it would mentally cost me too much."

Gyneth rose. "I suppose I must hope that you will change your mind. Thank you for saying I may come to see you. I shall like it very much."

"Can you stay a little longer now?" said Martha, with the shyness with which one

woman, conscious of her own want of fascination, offers friendship to another more liberally gifted.

Gyneth sat down again. "What a pleasant, quiet nest you have here! You must have plenty of time for reading."

"Yes, I have. I read nearly all day; but, Miss Ralston,"—the colour flew up to her forehead—"I want to know if you like Oliver?"

She fastened her eyes so keenly on Gyneth's face that the girl found it impossible to answer unconsciously.

"I like him extremely," she said; "he is so wonderfully clever. You must be very proud of your brother," she added, smiling.

"There is no one like him,"—Martha drew up her head, and her eyes brightened. "He has been like that ever since he was a young boy; whatever he planned was sure to be right, and always did well; and, Miss Ralston," she said, emphatically, "whatever he sets his mind on is sure to happen. He is very determined; and he gets his own way with everyone, because he is always right."

Gyneth kept silent. A cold chill had fallen on her while she listened; the dread that she had once before felt of Oliver revived. If he really loved her, would he make her marry him? She did not dislike him, and since she had seen Martha she felt a yet deeper interest in him; but she recoiled from the idea of being his wife.

“Do you often see Mr. Penruddock?”—Martha spoke hastily, wishing to turn the conversation from Oliver.

“We have not seen much of him; we have only known him lately; he is a very old friend of yours, I believe?” She said this as a question; she wanted to make Martha speak of Mr. Penruddock.

“He is the only friend I have ever had; he comes often to see us,” she said, almost boastfully, Gyneth thought. “He told me I should like you, and he was right; I was afraid you were more fashionable.”

“But”—Gyneth smiled mischievously—“is it not hard that because a person is fashionable you resolve to dislike her?—fashion seems such

a very outside quality—sometimes put on and taken off with one's clothes."

"I mean something more than that," Martha said. She longed to ask whether Miss Ralston knew Lady Mary Penruddock, and to hear her opinion of Maurice's mother; but she shrank from asking; it seemed a sort of treason to discuss anything relating to him with a mere acquaintance.

"Well"—Gyneth got up to go away,—“I suppose I ought to be grateful that Mr. Penruddock gave me a good character; he talked very much of you; I could see he knew all about you.”

Martha flushed, and then turned pale.

“Did he speak of me?” she said—“did he?” There were other words on her tongue, but she forced them back into silence. It was such a deep joy to learn that Maurice cared to talk of her, that all other thoughts were soothed into sweet peace. She smiled genially at Gyneth as she walked with her to the gate. She even smiled when Miss Ralston asked to be remembered to Oliver, and, coming back to the porch

alone, she sat down to quiet the unwonted excitement caused by the visit, and to muse over Gyneth's words.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## A ROW UP THE RIVER.

MAURICE PENRUDDOCK had only just reached his chambers, and was opening his letters, when Oliver came hurrying in without waiting to be announced, closely followed by the discomfited clerk, aghast at such an invasion.

Maurice's reception of his visitor seemed to pacify the clerk, who retreated to the den where he spent his day in killing flies and reading the paper.

"I beg your pardon, my dear fellow"—Oliver was breathless with excitement,—“but I've got news for you.”

“Good, I'm sure”—Maurice's face was full of

ready sympathy, and he grasped Oliver's hand warmly;—"what is it, old fellow?"

"Well"—Oliver drew a deep breath, and checked the excitement, which had increased in his rapid journey to his friend's chambers,—  
"I told you the machine would soon be tried—at least, the small one which I have been improving."

"Yes."

"Well, it had been settled that when it was judged to be a favourable time for the trial I was to go down, so as to be present. Very well. I took no more thought about it, and this morning I get this news; I've left the letter with Martha, who can't take her eyes off it. Old Hawkes, our senior partner, you know, in his anxiety to spare me disappointment—he has never quite believed in me—actually made the trial the night before last, and it is a complete success—at least, the only hitches are those I have provided against in my last improvements. Now will you believe in me another time?" he said, triumphantly.

"I have always believed in you," Maurice



said, heartily. "How do the workpeople take it?"

"Only a few know—the men who were wanted to work it; there lies our difficulty; but they believe in me, most of them; it will be all right when I go down among 'em. By Jove! I was never so glad of anything in my life; I actually mean to take a holiday. Come along, old fellow, out of this dark hole and get some fresh air; let's go on the river."

"Very well; I'll come," Maurice said, quickly; he could not at once rise to the boisterous level of his friend's spirits.

Oliver went on talking eagerly while he waited.

"I must do something to get through the day," he said, impetuously.

Maurice wondered. He thought Oliver would have borne his success with so much more dignity; he could not understand this tumultuous excitement.

"You are going down yourself to see it work?" he said.

"I should have started by now"—Oliver

spoke eagerly ;—“but I must do something first—I must see Mr. Venables, and he, I find, is away, and only returns to-night.”

Still Maurice wondered, and the two friends walked silently along the embankment, as Oliver meant to take a boat at Battersea Bridge.

Presently he burst out again—

“I never was so glad. I know now that I did not feel sure about it, though I thought I did. Maurice, old fellow, what makes you so silent? I know you think I’m a fool to be carried away by success. You’re wrong, my boy, it’s not that at all; something far better worth having than even success.”

The two men looked at one another, and again Maurice shrank into himself; but he forced a show of interest—he could not understand his own coldness.

“Indeed!” he said. “What is that?”

“I nearly told you on the day of the garden-party—the day at The Elms, I mean. I forget that is not the only garden-party in the world for you, as it is for me. Well, it’s this—I love

Miss Ralston, and I can have no peace till I've asked her uncle's leave to speak to her."

At every word Maurice's heart had hardened against his friend, he longed to go away and leave him to talk his love out by himself. Oliver's selfishness and self-love had grown all in one moment intolerable.

"Does she—Miss Ralston—know anything of this?" he said, coldly, and he looked hard across the river at the green frosted spire of Battersea Church.

"If you mean have I said anything to her—certainly not. I did not feel justified in speaking till my success was sure, impetuous as you may think me; but she must know I love her, and she is too high-minded to listen to me as she does, unless she meant to give me hope. Well, don't you think I'm a lucky fellow, now? Bless my soul, what's the success of the machine to this? Nothing at all; and yet one hinges on the other."

"I don't see that," said Maurice. He could not help contradicting, he was so much out of temper with Oliver. "If a girl loves a man,

she loves him whether he's rich or poor, successful or unsuccessful."

"Quite right; but no poor man worth his salt could ask such a girl as Gyneth Ralston to share a small income. A delicate, refined creature like that, every inch a lady, must have every luxury in her home."

He waited, but Maurice kept silent.

"Won't you wish me success, old fellow?" Oliver said. "What is it? Don't you want me to marry?"

He turned such honest, affectionate eyes on his friend that Maurice was touched, his heart smote him for his want of sympathy. If Miss Ralston chose to marry Oliver, she had a right to please herself.

"I daresay I'm selfish," he said, giving Oliver a smile which soothed him; "and I daresay Martha is so too. You see, this will break up our happy evenings at the cottage."

Oliver was satisfied. The assurance of affection was what he wanted just then. He had so much to think of that he did not care for many words, nor was he critical about the way in which they were spoken.

“ You see I cannot be married till the whole thing is fairly in working order ; and, of course, although there’s no doubt how it will end, there may just at first be a fuss with the mill hands. But, anyway, I don’t see why a man need give up his friends because he marries.”

They had been going along Cheyne Walk, with its old red houses, suggestive of departed grandeur, of the wit and beauty, the vice and fashion, of the old days of King Charles and Queen Anne, and now Oliver hurried on, and had soon settled on a boat to carry them to Shepperton.

“ Rather a long pull,” he said, “ but we can come up by train, and it’s just what I want to quiet myself. You can steer. I don’t want help, Maurice.”

But Maurice preferred to take an oar. He had no wish to talk, neither did he care to sit face to face for so many hours, while his friend was in this talkative mood.

His brain was as irritable, and as much in need of repose, as that of a dyspeptic patient after a too liberal meal. He had the conscious-

ness of weight and disquiet, and also of the necessity for searching his own feelings as to the cause of these sensations, which, in a finely-strung nature, insists on freedom from any outward disturbance, or, when disturbed, will cause an outbreak, wholly puzzling to an unsympathetic outsider. In such a case the intense longing for a period of undisturbed mental digestion may well make the sufferer envy the placid cows ruminating in large leisure under the shade of the trees.

They passed the pleasant sloping lawns this side Putney Bridge, with charming houses, or else the signs of them, in blue wreaths of smoke among the trees; and as they passed The Elms, both the rowers' heads turned and gave a long gaze at the terraced walk beside the river, but neither of them spoke; and even when they had passed under the bridges at Putney, and beside the old opal-grey towers that guard the river at this point, one looking down from its surrounding headstones at the other nestling among lofty elm-trees, they scarcely noticed the river banks.

The river was very gay and busy at this point; outriggers and rowing boats, with gaily painted sides, darted swiftly past them, like dragon-flies or a kingfisher in search of prey. Then there were steamers here to be watched for and avoided, with freights of happy-looking people, chiefly nurses and children, going to spend an afternoon at Richmond or Kew.

Maurice's brows knit and his teeth grew set in his efforts to concentrate attention on himself amid all these calls on his watchfulness. He had no need to ask himself twice why Oliver's news had so disturbed him; he was much too real a man to keep a veil over his own feelings when he gave himself up to retrospect; he was doing this now, and something closer and sharper-sighted than mere dreaming, which in itself would have been more consonant with his gentle, simple nature than this more earnest form of questioning.

He sighed heavily. He saw that all unconsciously he had let the image of Gyneth Ralston pass from the mere pleasant interest which he had thought she inspired to a far deeper

place in his heart. This must be so, he argued, or why should he be so troubled by the news of Oliver's love for her ?

"I am not so vain," he said, "as to be angry that she likes him, unless I want her myself."

The thing that puzzled him was that, although he had been conscious of an increased charm in Gyneth in his last visit, still his feeling for her had been the same from their first meeting—a feeling that she was unlike anyone he had ever seen. She rose before him full of charming grace and refinement. He forced himself to consider her side by side with Oliver——

"Hulloa, what are you about there?" from a boat they had nearly fouled by Maurice's carelessness, interrupted his reverie.

He strained vigorously at his oar, and they shot past the danger.

"I say, old fellow, you must keep a look out," said Oliver, cheerfully; "if I'd done it, now, there'd have been some excuse, but a steady old chap like you, who have never been in love in your life—I'll tell Martha! She will be amused."



Maurice felt more and more alienated. He shrank from the open way in which Oliver spoke of his feelings; it seemed a profanation to couple Gyneth Ralston's name with his friend's.

"He cannot make her happy," he thought; and then a strong temptation came to Maurice. He had not thought of marriage for some years yet, but then he shrank from the ordinary idea of marriage as a respectable institution, with its comforts and responsibilities, its dulness and security. It was quite another idea to covet the possession of Gyneth as a life-long companion, a sympathiser in his aspirations, a sharer of thoughts hitherto unshared even by Martha.

Here he checked himself. Why did he not confide more entirely in Martha? So far as he could judge, her judgment was firmer and far less timid in asserting itself than Gyneth Ralston's was, and yet Maurice knew that it was this half timid, half saucy manner that heightened the charm of those sweet dark eyes. He was puzzled at Oliver's choice; he fancied

he would have preferred more decided beauty, less dependent on expression. It was quite possible that his friend had been mistaken in his choice, and that Miss Ralston would fail to make him happy.

But a warm tide of shame swept the temptation from him. Setting aside Oliver's confidence, Maurice was not in a position to offer such a home to Gyneth as she might expect, and it would have been mere selfishness to bind such a girl to a long engagement; but now the idea was a treason against his generous-hearted friend. Martha and Oliver had treated him like a brother, and he was bound to them very closely; if he were a true brother, then Oliver's happiness should be as dear to him as his own. After all, he knew very little of this girl; it was possible that she loved Oliver, and that he was her ideal, for he felt sure she would not marry a man she could not love.

"Why should I dream that I should suit her better?" he said. "Surely I do not compare myself with that fellow either for talent or goodness. I suppose I am thinking of what

my mother said, and yet who can tell? A practical, energetic fellow like Oliver is perhaps the very man who needs a dreamy, unworldly nature beside him to soften and refine his downrightness."

And then, with the strong revulsion that with Maurice always followed the slightest injustice, it seemed as if his eyes opened, and he saw magnificent and glowing all the grand and sterling qualities of his friend, and his own insignificance beside him.

"He is so true," he said, "so manly, and so thoroughly in earnest—earnest both in theory and practice—his schemes are no mere flights of fancy. He has real enthusiasm, and both the fire and the energy to keep it burning, which so many enthusiasts lack,"—and then he told himself that Oliver would not have dreamed of trying to rival him in his love; he had always been the same from a boy, steadfast and generous. Since Maurice's thoughts had been so full of Gyneth, he had not been again to the cottage, though he had called at The Elms, and a sense of his inconsistency increased the warmth

of this revulsion of feeling towards Oliver. He remembered how pale and troubled Martha had been, and he guessed now that she had longed to tell him about Oliver's love. He was the only friend of this shy girl, and he had not even given her the chance of pouring out confidences to him when she most needed sympathy. He resolved to go to the cottage this evening; and he also determined that he would not see Gyneth Ralston again until she was married to Oliver.

He smiled at this resolution. It seemed to him that he was treating a mere fancy too seriously; but it was safest not to investigate any closer the place which this fair creature had taken in his affections, and he shrank from seeing her under these new convictions; he looked over his shoulder, and gave Oliver an affectionate smile.

"You will tell me, as soon as you have settled matters at The Elms, won't you?" he said.

Oliver was delighted. In spite of his brusque ways a certain self-consciousness made him sen-

sitive, and he had felt the coldness of this long silence.

“Of course I shall tell you. You and Martha will have to plan heaps of things, and you’ll have to be best man, you know.”

He looked so happy, so full of faith in himself, that Maurice thought Martha was right. Oliver’s will was sure to have its own way.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.











