

RALPH RYDER OF BRENT

L.C.

A NOVEL

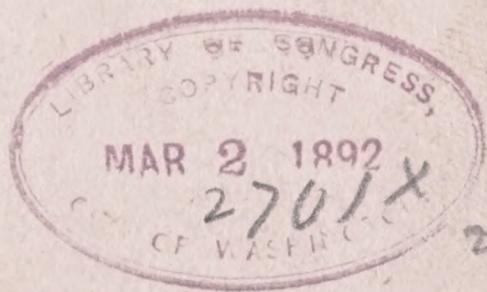
BY
FLORENCE WARDEN *ps.*

AUTHOR OF

Fl. A. P. James ✓

"A WITCH OF THE HILLS," "THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH," ETC.

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RALPH RYDER OF BRENT.

CHAPTER I.

“ Edinburgh, Saturday.

“ MY DEAREST, DARLINGEST, OLD NANNY,

“ I don't know what I think about it! To begin with, I was so surprised, so utterly 'dumbfounded and knocked all of a heap,' that I have hardly taken in the news in all its bearings yet. At the same time there is no getting away from it. You, my little sister, the only girl in the world worth mentioning—my little white lily with the laughing eyes—are really and truly going to get married! Of course it had to come, so I pass over the fact that you are out of your turn, and that you always promised to wait dutifully until I, as elder, had gone off. Perhaps you thought you would have to wait too long, and, indeed, so you would, now I have got stranded up here among these snuff-dried Scotchmen. They are all born at thirty-five, dear, and at once begin to age rapidly. Ugh! I hate them. But you, you—I'm as jealous as I can be of this man who is carrying you off. To begin with, I'm sure he is a great deal too old for you. His photograph (which I duly return herewith) is that of a man of sixty. You say yourself that his hair is nearly white, and that he 'looks much older than he is.' Depend upon it, he is much older than he says, dear. Men under thirty don't have white hair and those lines in their faces, unless they have been preternaturally wicked—and you say that Captain Ryder, on the contrary, is preternaturally good. I am crazy to

see him, and I must and shall come to the wedding—however quiet your future husband wants it to be, he must let me be there. Of course there will be a tussle with papa over the expense of the journey to Swansea. (*He* thinks Captain Ryder an angel of light, because he won't wait for a trousseau!) But I don't care. I must battle it out, and promise to go without a new evening dress this winter.

“To tell you the truth, though perhaps I ought not to, I met an old lady the other evening at a most dreary *soirée* given by one of papa's scientific friends, who filled my head with all sorts of alarming fancies about this Captain Ryder. She is a Miss Anstruther, an old thing who goes about a great deal, and is looked upon as a very great swell. She was listening while I told Mrs. Robertson all about it, and interrupted me, as these old ladies always seem to think they have a right to do.

“‘Ryder!’ she squeaked out, looking at me through her gold-rimmed eyeglasses as if I had done something shocking. ‘Did you say the name was Ryder, and that he had been in the army?’

“I had to say ‘Yes.’

“‘Then don't let her have anything to do with him, my dear,’ she said, laying down the law as if the whole world had nothing to do but to obey her, ‘for he is sure to turn out to be some relation to that other Captain Ryder—that dreadful man that nobody talks about;’ and she dropped her voice quite low, ‘Ralph Ryder of Brent.’

“I told her that *your* Captain Ryder's Christian name was Dan, and that he was not ‘of Brent,’ but ‘of Madras.’

“Then she got a little quieter, but she refused to tell us anything more about ‘that dreadful man,’ except to say that he was the husband of a very dear friend of hers, who was a good deal younger than herself, Lady Ellen Ryder, and that for her sake, she never talked about ‘the affair.’

“You may guess how curious she made us to hear

what 'the affair' was; but all she would tell was that 'it happened a long time ago.' And the old lady finished by saying she should write to Lady Ellen and ask if Dan Ryder was a relation of hers.

"Of course you will laugh at all this gossip, and at me for thinking enough about it to repeat it. But, then, it would really not be pleasant to marry into a family that had some horrid scandal attached to it; and it seems rather strange that he doesn't talk about introducing you to his people first, or having any of them to the wedding, doesn't it? Anyhow, you must not be angry with me for writing all this; of course you cannot tell everything in the letter, however fully you may write, and no doubt you know a great deal more about him than you can say except by word of mouth.

"Oh, I do so hope and pray that he may be a good, kind, loving husband to you—one who will cherish and appreciate my old fair-headed baby as she deserves! Papa just took his head out of his scientific nosebag (this is vulgar, but expressive) to say that if Captain Ryder really was the grave and serious man you describe, your flirting ways would drive him mad. But I laughed him to scorn, and told him that when you were once married there would not be a steadier wife in England; that you only flirted because you must be devoted to some one, and, in fact, that you were one of the girls (and they are the best, I think) who have wild oats to sow, and that you would be all the better for having sown them. Will you laugh at this, or be angry, I wonder!

"It's of no use to send love by post. If I were to send all I have for you, they would have to put six engines on the train, and then it would take all the postmen in England to drag it along at the other end of the journey.

"Ever your loving old sister,
"MEG."

"P.S.—Miss Anstruther has started on a voyage to

Australia for her health, or I should have shown her the photograph of Mr. Ryder when it came this morning."

Nanny May read this letter through for the eighth time, as she sat on a stile near Bay View Farm-house; and when she put it slowly back into its envelope and tucked it affectionately away in the bodice of her dress, her face was as grave as a girl's face can be when she is pretty, twenty, and just "engaged."

She did *not* know more about her fiancé than she had told in her letter to her sister, and, moreover, she could not help fancying that she had heard him mention a place called Brent.

If she had blindly adored Dan Ryder, Nanny would not have thought twice of this circumstance. What did his family matter, so that he was himself? she would have said or thought. But Dan bore the proud distinction of being the only man who had ever paid her attention with whom she had not felt the least bit in love. And yet he was the only one of the long line of admirers she had had since she was fifteen, whom it had ever occurred to her as possible that she might marry.

He was so different from all the rest: there perhaps lay the secret. If she had had to choose one of the others, it would have been so difficult to have come to a decision between their slightly varying degrees of youth, good-looks, sheep-like devotion, and impecuniosity. But when this grave-mannered man, with his soldierly, distinguished bearing, long, gray moustache, and kind brown eyes, fell in love with her at first sight, and let the whole neighborhood ring with his straightforward admiration—Nanny, in all the pride of the distinction it gave her, and in the delight of a novel sensation, refused him twice for form's sake, and finally accepted him.

And now she sat on the stile, a fair young girl without any history, wondering in a vague youthful way what the history of her future husband had

been, and whether old Miss Anstruther's mysterious wicked Ralph Ryder had been in the family. Down in the depths of her innocent little mind she rather hoped that he had. A villain in the family was almost as interesting as a ghost; it gave one a sort of distinction. But beyond all else, the suggestion roused the girl's curiosity, and set her maiden thoughts running upon the future before her, so strangely wide to the depths of her maiden ignorance. How strange it was, she thought, that he knew all about her, down to the very weakness for almond hard-bake that she had not yet quite conquered, while she knew very little more about him than his name and profession.

While she sat considering this marvel, she heard the sound of a horse's hoofs trotting in the lane close by, and she blushed and tried to look unconcerned: for, although the formation of the ground did not yet allow her to see him, she knew that the approaching horseman was her lover.

Should she get off the stile? Decorum said "Yes," honesty said "No"—and honesty won the day. He should understand that she was the sort of girl who would sit on stiles; it would give him an insight into her character, she argued. So it was on the stile that Dan Ryder found her, in a frock of cheap brown stuff, a tall girl of very slender build, with a dead white, almost colourless, skin, scarlet lips, gray eyes, and fair hair. Nanny's face was not strictly pretty, but it was piquant, seductive; and her slim figure approached the perfection of grace.

These, on the whole, pleasing facts had been impressed upon her again and again, and the knowledge of them gave her more ease of manner than is possessed by most English girls of twenty, and a great deal more than her lover had, as he tied up his horse to a gate in the lane and came quickly up to her.

Captain Ryder was a thin, worn-looking man, with a sun-browned skin, gentle brown eyes, and gray

hair and moustache. He was not tall, though his upright soldierly carriage made him appear so. In fact, the type to which he belonged is a common one enough among soldiers who have seen service in hot countries; and the only point of difference between him and them was that whereas other men, as worn and weather-beaten as he, own to fifty and sixty years of age, Captain Ryder claimed to be still on the right side of thirty. Margaret May's explanation seemed the only possible one—that he was afraid of frightening the girl by the disparity in their ages.

It was easy to see that love had made Captain Ryder abject enough for any folly. He stood beside her, after a greeting which seemed constrained by reason of the very force of his passion, stroking his moustache and watching her pretty airs shyly, like a lad.

She pretended to be surprised to see him so early in the day. As a matter of fact, she would have felt no astonishment if the "hands" at the farm where she was staying had stumbled over him outside the threshold when they went to their work at four o'clock in the morning.

"Please forgive me if I have come too early," he said humbly. "It is so difficult to keep away from you. I have to invent little errands and duties to keep my feet employed, or they would carry me off here, against my will, as soon as I thought you were up."

"But it is never your feet that bring you here, but your horse's."

"My own would not be quick enough—especially to-day."

"Why 'especially to-day'?"

"Because I have something to ask you." The poor man was getting dreadfully nervous. "I—I have to go away—on important business, next week."

The evident pain with which Captain Ryder made

this announcement was all on his side. Nanny bore it very calmly.

"To go away! Oh, that is a bore! For how long?"

"I—I don't know."

He was more than nervous: he was getting miserable.

"You don't know for how long!" echoed Nanny, opening her eyes wider in mild surprise. Then a possible explanation of his evident embarrassment occurred to her. "Oh, and you are going to suggest that, as you are going away for an indefinite time, we shouldn't be regularly engaged till you come back again?"

Nanny said this in a very matter-of-fact tone, but she was of course secretly nettled by the possibility. Her lover, however, protested with startling vehemence.

"No, no, indeed! I would give up any business, however important, rather than that. What I had to suggest was—was, in fact, that we should be married—first."

"First! Before next week!"

"Yes. Don't look alarmed; and, above all, don't be offended." For over Nanny's bright young face was creeping a look of blank dismay. "You have promised to be my wife; I shall never be happy until you have fulfilled that promise. Why should we wait?"

"My—wedding—dress!" gasped Nanny. "I couldn't have even that ready in time!"

On this Captain Ryder grew even more persistent.

"What do you want with a special dress? The one you have on is charming!"

Nanny interrupted him with a little scream.

"*This* old thing! Oh, you can't mean it!"

"But I do, indeed. Above all things I hate a fuss, such as people generally make about weddings. I think it indecorous—absurd," said he, with more irritability than Nanny had yet seen him show about anything.

The poor child's expression was growing tragic. To be married in this brown stuff frock, which when it was new, had only cost eleven-pence three-farthings a yard, would be only a little better than not to be married at all. But, beneath her mutinous ways, there was in Nanny an under-current of submission to authority which made her content herself with protest, instead of pushing matters to absolute refusal. Her grave face made Captain Ryder laugh, but it also woke in him a lover's compunction.

"Why, I only told my sister about it three days ago, and got her answer this morning," she murmured in a wavering tone in which there was an accent of despair.

"And I got a letter from your father this morning, in reply to mine, in which he says that since—since ——" Here Captain Ryder hunted for the letter, produced a long document on blue, official-looking paper which Nanny recognised as similar to that on which her father wrote his scientific treaties, and proceeded to read aloud from it in a modestly triumphant voice: " 'Since my daughter Antonia' — Nanny made a grimace— 'has selected you as the one individual in the universe to whom she feels conscious that she may entrust her happiness without hesitation (and that she does so feel is evident from the precipitancy with which she has entered into this engagement), a refusal on my part to accord my consent to her union with you would argue a lack of appreciation of your straightforward and honourable pretensions, which I should be exceedingly reluctant to exhibit. I therefore most cordially——'"

Nanny interrupted the reading by a nod and a little cough.

"Thank you," she said drily. "You needn't read any more. I've known papa for some years now, and I could tell you what he means in a dozen words without wading through all that. In modern, vulgar English, it is this: 'Marry daughter! (Frocks and food for one girl less.) Rather!' All the same," she

went on, with a sigh, "I meant to let him in for one frock more!"

"You shall buy yourself the prettiest frock in London as soon as you are my wife; and I will send to Hancock's to-night for some diamond rings to choose from."

"Diamond rings!" cried Nanny, in astonishment, her pretty eyes sparkling and her disappointment forgotten, as she leaped off the stile, unable to control her delight. "But you said you were a poor man! I begin to think," she went on, shaking her head wisely, "that your sort of poverty is a very different thing from our sort of poverty, and that I shall like yours much the best."

Captain Ryder laughed

"Why, I did not mean, certainly, when I said I was poor, that I could not provide my wife with everything befitting her rank as my wife"—Nanny felt that she was growing taller—"but only that I cannot afford to keep her in the style her beauty deserves."

The stiff, soldierly compliment delighted Nanny. Her young face beamed, and, between compliments and talk of diamonds, she forgot her disappointment over the quiet wedding. His next words, however, threw a slight chill over her exuberant joy.

"There's a lot to be done at Brent Grange," he said, "before it can be made fit for you to live in. It has been shut up for years—ever since my father died, I believe. That's the important business I have to see to. But we may just as well be married first, and then there will be less risk of my spoiling the business by hurrying over it."

And he looked at her with an affectionate smile.

Brent Grange! The name sounded not quite pleasantly in Nanny's ears. She did not feel any real alarm; still, she was conscious of a dim wish that Meg had not listened to silly gossip, and put ideas into her head which she would rather have been without. Taking the cloud which had come over

her face merely as a touch of maidenly hesitation at the nearness of the opening of her married life, Captain Ryder went on quickly :

“And we can stay at an hotel in London while the workmen are in the house, and go to the theatres, and buy pretty things.”

Nanny turned her head quickly, with a little bubbling sigh of delight. The theatres! Oh, this was worth a possible tragedy in the family!

Her lover was obliged to smile, though a little ruefully, at the ingenuousness with which poor Nanny unconsciously made it clear that the least interesting part of marriage to her was the husband. She burst into incoherent raptures; and as they made their way slowly over the fields towards the farmhouse, Captain Ryder had wit enough to use this inducement so well that, before they entered, Nanny had consented to marry him in the following week.

Mrs. Thomas, the farmer's wife, was a bright little, rosy-cheeked woman, who had been nurse to both Margaret and Antonia May. So that when Nanny, whose health was not robust, needed change of air, it was down at the little farmhouse on the hills overlooking Swansea Bay that she found it. Here it was that Captain Ryder, who was staying on the outskirts of the town of Swansea, at a friend's house, met the girl by chance as he was trespassing on Bay View Farm, fell in love with her as she led him to the high-road, and left no stone unturned until he had found means to secure a proper introduction.

Mrs. Thomas curtsied as she invited Captain Ryder to enter; but when she heard the news they had to tell, she was filled with dismay. She was holding open the door of the “parlour,” a tiny apartment filled with souvenirs from her old charges, and the window of which was blocked up with straggling geraniums. Mrs. Thomas thought highly of this room, in which she had introduced the luxury of a piano.

But Nanny loved the brick-floored kitchen, with

its rug made of odd scraps of cloth, its miraculously hard sofa, its garniture of hanging hams, and the linnet in a wicker cage by the window, better than the cold splendours of the parlour.

"No, no, nurse. In here," she said. And she put her hands lightly on her lover's shoulders to guide his steps into the kitchen, where a faint glow under the smouldering coals invited the attention of a small ginger-coloured cat, who seemed to waver between the charms of rug and fire on the one hand, and the warm September sun outside on the other.

"Oh, Miss Nanny," cried Mrs. Thomas, as soon as she fully comprehended the impending calamity; "why, it's as much as there'll be time for me to get the cake done—for the icing can't be done while its new!"

"Then why have icing, Mrs. Thomas?" said Captain Ryder, fearing the old woman's influence might be strong enough to make Nanny waver again. "I'm sure any cake of your making would be good enough without."

"Good enough! yes, sir. But there's the proprieties to be considered in these things," said the ex-nurse with dignity. "And Miss Antonia's too good to be given away with a pound of tea, as it were. Her own mother not being alive, poor lady! to look after her daughter, it's for me to think of these things. And, if I may make so bold, sir, it's not fitting Miss Antonia should marry you till she's been introduced to some of the ladies of your family."

As the old lady uttered these words with some dignity, secure in her knowledge of the etiquette of these matters, Captain Ryder became so evidently disturbed that both of his companions looked at him curiously. He perceived this, and laughed, though rather uneasily.

"My good lady," said he, "your Miss Nanny is not going to marry the ladies of my family; and she can very well put off the curious scrutiny she will be subjected to until she has acquired the dignity of a

married woman. What do you think, my dear?" he added, turning to her rather anxiously.

"Oh, I will do—just what you like," she answered, with a blush of pretty submission, but not without a slight secret feeling, half of curiosity, half of uneasiness.

She would have liked, before taking the final plunge, to have seen some one who could tell her something about "the family."

But the matter was disposed of now, and there were plenty of other things to think about—the first, when Captain Ryder left the farmhouse that afternoon, being to write again to Meg, telling her the date of the wedding.

Then for three days there was a rush of work at the farm: frantic excitement on the part of the women-folk, ill-concealed impatience on that of the lover, Nanny rushing about like a whirlwind all day long, with a needle and cotton in her hand, pretending that she could sew.

On the day before the wedding the lovers were sitting together in the farmhouse kitchen. Nanny was sewing a button on her fiancé's glove while he was giving her a lesson in making toast. Mrs. Thomas was bustling in and out of the room preparing an elaborate tea in the front parlour, and grieving over the lack of dignity revealed by the homely tastes of the lovers. When *she* was a young girl "keeping company," the parlour was the only place good enough for her and her "intended" to sit in, looking through photographic albums. But, there! she had often noticed, in her years of service, that gentlefolk were peculiar in their tastes; and if they liked the kitchen better than the parlour, why, to be sure, the floor was as clean as a new pin, and the plates on the drèsser, and the tinware on the walls shone with constant scrubbing.

She had just come to the fireplace with the teapot in her hand, and Captain Ryder was gallantly holding the kettle and delivering a lecture on tea-making at

the same time, when a shuffling sound was heard on the brick floor of the passage outside, and one of the farm-boys put his head round the door. He didn't look at anybody in particular, his attention being immediately absorbed by the plate of hot muffins by the fire; but he sniffed, and he coughed, to intimate that he was an ambassador. Captain Ryder saw him first.

"There's a gentleman at the door," said he gently.

The "gentleman" grinned from ear to ear.

"Nay, master," said he; "but there's a lady waitin' for you outside, look you!"

"A lady! What do you mean by a lady, Hugh? Anybody from the village?" asked Mrs. Thomas.

"Nay, it's nobody from the village, nor from the town. It's a strange lady."

And Hugh advanced a step into the room, to get a better view of the muffins. Mrs. Thomas went towards the door, and Nanny looked up at her lover with a laugh. But the expression she caught on his face was one of unmistakable fear.

"What's the matter, Dan?" she asked anxiously, and with curiosity.

He laughed, but not very spontaneously, and as he answered he was evidently listening.

"Matter? Nothing—but that the kettle is hot and Mrs. Thomas's kettle-holder worn out."

But Nanny was so convinced that this was not all the matter that she withdrew her eyes shyly from his face and kept them on the glove in her hand, until a familiar voice in the passage struck upon her ear.

"Meg!" *she* shouted, as she threw glove, button, needle and all away from her, and flung her arms round her sister's neck. "Oh, Meg, how lovely of you to come!"

"You didn't think I should let you go right off in that way without coming, did you?" said her sister, in a voice full of affection.

And then she turned sharply, full of curiosity to see the man who was to be her darling Nanny's

husband. There was nothing in him that she could find fault with : appearance, manners, attitude towards her sister, all were perfectly right. When the girls were alone together that night, Meg had nothing to say against him.

But yet the vague fears roused in her by old Miss Anstruther's words were not wholly appeased, more especially as she found that her sister knew no more about his connections than she did. As for Nanny, Meg's coming had put everything right for her—she would be crying with girlish fright one moment, dancing with excitement and happiness the next.

“I shall have a house—a house of my own, Meg, where you can come and stay with me!” she cried. “I shall be Mrs. Ryder of Brent Grange.”

“*Brent Grange?*” cried Meg, aghast.

Nanny frowned petulantly.

“Oh, dear! I didn't mean to tell you. What do an old woman's stories matter? I was afraid you'd make a fuss about it.”

But Meg did not “make a fuss”; she was too much alarmed for that. She could not stop the marriage now, with nothing definite to go upon. She could only lie awake that night worrying herself about her sister's hasty marriage, and praying that Nanny might be happy.

The wedding took place in the simplest fashion. Mr. Thomas drove the sisters into the town at eight o'clock in the morning; they entered the church, where they found Captain Ryder waiting at the door, and the ceremony was performed at once without incident, the old clergyman mumbling the service through in a voice so low that Meg caught scarcely a word.

But when they all went into the vestry, and bridegroom and bride had signed their names in the register, Meg stared blankly at the page as she in turn took up the pen.

The bridegroom had signed his name as “Ralph Ryder.”

CHAPTER II.

NAME : "Ralph Ryder" ; condition : "Bachelor" ;
Age : "30."

This was what Captain Ryder had written in the marriage-register, and this was what Margaret May read with starting eyes, as she took the pen to sign her own name as witness to her sister's marriage. As she glanced from the writing to his face, Captain Ryder looked back at her with a slight frown of annoyance. But he was admirably cool, and even before she removed her gaze he smiled, and tapped the page to show her where her own name was to appear.

"Yes," she said faintly, while Nanny, not having noticed, in her excitement, that which had alarmed her sister, looked at her in surprise ; "I know. But——"

She pointed, while clergyman, clerk, Nanny, and Mr. Thomas looked on with astonishment, to his signature.

Captain Ryder, with a little more vexation than before in his face and voice, glanced down at the page, and then again at Meg.

"Well, it is quite right. That is my name," he said irritably.

But this incident having drawn everybody's attention to the register, the three other men present were all considering, with knitted brows, another point in his description of himself, and, after reading "Age : 30," were examining his appearance in bewilderment.

Perceiving this, Captain Ryder suddenly showed more susceptibility to criticism. He grew very red under the sunburn of his skin, and playing nervously

with his moustache, answered their looks with apologetic words.

“Yes, yes. Nobody will believe I am not more than thirty, I know, unless I produce my certificate of birth—which unfortunately I don’t happen to carry about with me,” he said, irritation getting the better of his confusion, as he uttered the last words. “I ought to dye my hair, or something—and I will, now I am married.”

Again he caught Meg’s eye, and saw in her expression more suspicion than ever. Instead of shrinking, however, he frowned upon her angrily as, having recovered her quiet self-possession, she held her ground.

“But the name you have written here is ‘Ralph,’ and we understood that it was ‘Daniel,’” she objected, not aggressively, but in a courteously deprecating tone.

“‘Daniel!’” he laughed derisively. “No, I am afraid I cannot claim to be a Daniel. ‘Dan’ is the nickname I am known by in the regiment. My name is Ralph.”

There was no more to be said. His explanations were clear enough, and seemed to satisfy every one else—from the clergyman, anxious to show regret for his expression of surprise by relating how his own father had gone gray while still young, to Nanny, who tapped her foot impatiently and looked at her sister with open vexation. Whether he spoke truth or falsehood, Captain Ryder had such a perfectly natural and dignified manner that it was scarcely possible to express open disbelief.

In poor Meg’s ears however, as they all left the church, rang the words she had been repeating to herself ever since she heard old Miss Anstruther’s comment on her sister’s approaching marriage—“Ralph Ryder of Brent, Ralph Ryder of Brent.”

She found herself walking to this refrain, which, indeed, had rung in her ears to the rattle of the train which carried her from Edinburgh to Swansea. It

seemed to her that it must have been familiar to her for a long time, and the poor girl asked herself whether she had not in her childhood heard the name whispered as that of some monster of crime.

So they all got up again into the farmer's cart, and were driven back by him to Bay View Farm in the bright sunshine of the early September morning, all very silent and all conscious that they had been assisting at a very rapid rush into lifelong responsibilities.

Mrs. Thomas had been persuaded to staying at home "to have the breakfast quite ready in time," they said, but really to avoid the risk of her expansive feelings getting the better of her during the ceremony. She now met them on the threshold, beaming with cheerful pleasure, incoherent with excitement, offering a hearty embrace to all who would accept it, not excepting the dignified bridegroom himself.

"Hold hard, lass!" said the farmer, in good-humoured amusement at his wife's sobs. "One 'ud think it was thou as had just been married. Tears is the bride's privilege."

"Nonsense, Evan! I am not crying. And it's only because I'm so happy to have my little lady, and like my own child that was, go off from our house."

"Well, if it's tears of happiness the thought of marriage makes thee shed now, it's the first time thou's seen it in such a fair light, judging by what thou's said to *me!*" grumbled Evan, with a shake of the head.

His wife did not heed him. She was leading Nanny, who was very quiet, white, and nervous, into the parlour, where a "breakfast" was spread, which was a pride and a joy to Mrs. Thomas to her dying day. Even the unappreciative Evan felt a proud glow at the genius of his better-half, as he looked from the elaborate icing of the cake to the pink blanc-mange, the castellated and highly glazed wall of the raised pie, and the opaque white paste which disguised the chickens.

“Nothing looked as if it was made to eat, I declare it didn’t!” was his admiring comment to his wife afterwards.

The magnificence of the repast made a convenient topic for the bridal party, over whom an air of constraint had hung since the incident in the vestry. Nanny, to Meg’s great grief, seemed to resent those comments of the latter which had led to it.

The bride and bridegroom were to leave Swansea by an early train, and a cab had been ordered to take them to the station. When it drove up, Nanny ran upstairs to get ready, as if impatient to break up the oppressive constraint which was upon them all.

Meg rose to follow her, but Captain Ryder, anxious that no words of prejudice should be poured into his newly-made wife’s ear, and determined also to have an explanation with her sister, detained the latter; and, at his suggestion, they went out into the little garden among the late roses, the southern-wood, the asters, the purple pansies, and the stiff rockeries with their pretty growth of stonecrop. Here he opened fire upon her at once.

“Will you tell me, Miss May, what it is that has caused you to look upon me, and even to treat me, as if I were a suspicious character? If it is, as I suppose, only the natural jealousy of one sister who is losing the other, don’t you think you carried the expression of it this morning a little too far?”

Nothing could have been more simple and straightforward than his manner. Meg, who was a sturdy little sandy-haired person, with penetrating blue eyes, could detect no sign of a guilty conscience under his annoyance. She hesitated, and felt ashamed and uncomfortable.

“I haven’t known you long enough to feel the confidence of an old friend towards you, have I?” she asked frankly.

“But I am staying with old friends who are very well known in this town. Surely that is testimony enough to my not being a bad character?”

“Oh, yes, but—— You seemed in such a hurry to marry her and carry her off before you could know any of her people, or she know any of yours.”

“Well, you should be the last person to be surprised at my anxiety to carry her off. As for her people, they seem, as far as her affections are concerned, to be summed up in you. As for mine——”

“Well?” said Meg somewhat eagerly, seeing that he stopped.

“Mine are all summed up in one person also—my mother. And, frankly, I was ‘in a hurry,’ as you call it, to get my marriage over before she could learn anything about it.”

“But why?” asked Meg, rather haughtily. “We are poor certainly. But, after all, our father is a well-known scientific writer, and our family——”

“Is one that I am greatly honoured in connecting myself with,” he interrupted, with a formal little bow. “The whole truth is simply this—that my mother, having been left a widow young, with no child but me, has hung over me and kept me tied to her apron-string all her life; so that I dread the thought of her jealousy in the weakest-minded way in the world.”

He spoke with more irritability than affection, which Meg considered an ugly trait in a son so adored.

“She won’t want to live with you, I hope!” broke out the girl with more sincerity than discretion. “I—I beg your pardon, but you see, it would be rather unpleasant for Nanny, wouldn’t it?”

Captain Ryder’s face clouded with annoyance.

“Yes, very. I am most anxious to avoid such a thing. But I think it can be done. My mother hates Brent Grange, because it recalls the loss of my father. And I am determined to live there. Now are you satisfied?”

Not at all. Meg’s lips did not say this, but her eyes did; and Captain Ryder noted her suspicious expression in apparent perplexity.

“Thank you ;” was all she said. Then, gathering a pretty half-blown rose, she said she would take it to Nanny.

But again she was stopped.

“No,” said the bridegroom imperatively, “you are not going to poison her mind with your suspicions and suggestions. Whatever you have more in your mind about me say out frankly to me.”

“I will then,” cried Meg, her face crimson, her voice shaking, “I—I have heard of a Captain Ryder who is a very bad man, and who—who has a wife living.”

He heard her very quietly, and his face grew at least as red as hers. There was an embarrassed pause when she had finished speaking. Meg’s feet moved restlessly on the garden-path.

“And you have reason to think—what? That I am that Captain Ryder?”

But the suspicion she had entertained, thus put into words, was too much for poor Meg’s equanimity. She drew a long breath of horror and fear suppressed.

“If it is some relation of yours she said at last, in a scarcely audible whisper, “tell me. Naturally I should say nothing about it. And the relief it would give me—to know—after what I have wondered—and feared—— Tell me, do tell me.”

Her heart sank as she looked up at him. He either was, or pretended to be, deeply offended.

“I am sorry that I can’t credit myself with bigamous intentions to satisfy you,” he said coldly. “And as I am at present the only Captain Ryder in the service, your informant must have been drawing on his invention.”

Meg shot her last bolt quickly, hoping to catch him by surprise.

“Have you ever had in your family a Lady Ellen Ryder?” she asked.

At last she saw that she had come to one little scrap of solid fact which he was not in a position to deny.

“Well?” said he shortly.

“*She* could tell me what you—*will* not!”

“It seems to me that, on the contrary, you could tell her a great deal about her family which she does not know.”

“Will you introduce me to her?”

“I am afraid you must excuse me. I must decline to expose any lady of my family to the insulting cross-examination you have put me through this morning.”

“Now, why do I do it? Isn't it clear enough that I can have only one motive—concern for my sister's happiness? If I had had time, I could have made inquiries; but it was suddenly sprung upon me that she was to be married in a few days, and I had no time. So I had to put my questions direct to you.”

“And what was the use of that, since you were determined not to be satisfied with my answers? Once for all, I tell you there is nothing to learn about me, and that there is not now, and never has been, any sort of mystery attached to any member of my family. We have always been honest, ordinary, humdrum people, with a penchant for the army, and nothing else to distinguish us.”

Nanny was at the door, putting on her gloves, and glancing towards them with nervous, eager interest. Therefore Captain Ryder uttered this last speech rapidly, with his eyes fixed upon his bride. He was at least thankful that he had succeeded in keeping the sisters apart at the last. But when, after one long embrace between them, the farewells were over, and bride and bridegroom were driving rapidly on their way to the station, Nanny turned quickly to her husband and asked:

“What was that you were saying to Meg?”

Captain Ryder looked annoyed, as well he might, and withdrew the arm he had flung around her.

“Nothing, my darling; at least, she was only telling me to take care of you.”

“Oh, no, she wasn't,” said Nanny, who had caught

stray words of their talk as she stood preparing for the journey at her little window not far above their heads. "You said something about a mystery. What was it?"

"I said there was no mystery," he answered shortly. "Your sister persisted that I was the possessor of a criminal secret of some kind, and wouldn't believe my denials. Do you know where she got hold of the story?"

"No," answered Nanny.

She was rather frightened by the vexation in his tones and by the change to abruptness in his manner. She had seen him before only in a state of yielding, sentimental softness, and without considering how much reason he had to be annoyed, she shrank from him in timid bewilderment.

After this they were both silent; the cab drove quickly on until, arriving at the top of the steep descent into the town, the horse had to slacken his pace. As they jolted slowly down, they passed the house where Captain Ryder had been staying; and from half a dozen windows handfuls of rice were flung on the cab by merry young girls who had been lying in wait for it.

At the same time, a man-servant ran out of the gate, and handed a telegram in to Captain Ryder through the cab-window.

"It came for you only ten minutes ago, sir; so I was told to look out for you, and deliver it as you went past."

As Captain Ryder took it, a shade passed over his face, which became a black frown as he read the message. He said nothing about it to his bride, who was watching him and even furtively trying to read it over his shoulder: but he put the telegram carefully back into its torn envelope, and into one of the pockets of the greatcoat he wore.

Nanny, like the spoilt child she was, resolved to read that telegram or perish in the attempt.

To Captain Ryder's annoyance, but to the poor

little bride's great joy, they could not get a carriage to themselves in the train, and had to get in with a fidgety City family, returning to London after their Summer holiday. Her head was in a whirl, with excitement and want of sleep and a young girl's wondering emotions on her wedding-day. And a fear of her newly-made husband ran through it all, mingled with astonishment that she could have married a man of whom she knew so little.

The day was warm ; the heat of the crowded carriage soon became unbearable, and Captain Ryder took off his overcoat and made it into a cushion for her. She would have been much more comfortable without it ; but he was in the adoring stage when he must make her life unbearable with his attentions rather than leave her alone. So she put up with the inconvenience patiently, in the knowledge that it would make her intention of reading the telegram the easier to carry out. When, therefore, the train stopped for five minutes at Bristol, Nanny at once sent her husband to the bookstall to choose her a novel—"one of Ouida's, or the author of ' Archie Lovell,' or Mrs. Oliphant's, or Rhoda Broughton's."

With which somewhat puzzling directions, the bridegroom, marvelling at the catholicity of her literary taste, submissively took himself off.

In a moment Nanny's fingers were diving into his greatcoat pockets ; she pulled out the telegram, read it, and thrust it back again, to the amusement of her fellow-travellers and her own discomfiture. For the message was as follows :

"Come up at once and meet me at the Métropole. Take no step till I have seen you.

"F. R."

The telegram had been sent off from "Brent," and Nanny guessed that it was from Captain Ryder's mother, who visited the place from time to time, as he had told the young girl, to look after the property she had there.

Nanny trembled at the thought of what awaited her. She knew that the *Métropole* was the hotel to which her husband was going to take her—he had told her so the night before. If she was to be exposed, immediately on her arrival in town, to the furious anger of a jealous and imperious mother-in-law, Nanny felt that she should break down, run away, do something desperate.

When her husband came back, followed by a boy with a tray full of books, the poor child was in such a state of confusion and excitement, consequent on her own indiscretion, that she took up a yellow-backed novel without even reading the title, and with a hasty "This will do beautifully," sat back guiltily in her corner.

Perhaps Captain Ryder, who had already learned to watch every change of her fresh little face, guessed what she had been doing, and took pity on her. At any rate, when they at last reached Paddington, and got into a hansom, the hotel Captain Ryder directed the man to drive to was not the *Métropole*. Nanny dared not ask the reason of this change of plan; but her husband presently turned to her and said:

"I don't think you will find town lively at this time of year. We have just an hour to get something to eat, and then we go right through to Paris."

"To Paris!" echoed Nanny, with a start of surprise, and an impulse of delight, which was followed immediately by a sneaking regret that it was not Meg she was going with, instead of this alarming incubus of a husband. For Nanny had not time to fall in love with the man who had chosen her, and he was becoming every moment more terrible in her girlish eyes.

This mother-in-law too, whom they were evidently going away to avoid, was another terror in store for her. Nanny pictured to herself the awe-inspiring person she would be—an upright, commanding woman, with fierce black eyes. The young bride knew that the elder Mrs. Ryder had followed her son

wherever he was sent with his regiment, had been with him in India, and at Gibraltar, and that it was by a quite unusual chance that he had been staying at Swansea without her. To face her would be an ordeal from which even high-spirited Nanny shrank.

Meanwhile she was being whirled off to Paris without a moment's time for calm reflection.

And if the journey afforded no chance of quiet thought, what of the next few days? Nanny, brought to the brightest of bright cities, with all the fresh power of enjoyment of early youth, attended by a slavishly devoted husband whom she, in her turn, soon began to adore, was as much intoxicated as a child at its first pantomime.

All the sober realities of life, to say nothing of ugly mysteries and evil, whispered stories, had disappeared from view in these days which were like a fairytale adapted to the earth. From the moment when the morning sun, shining into the bright little bedroom of the hotel, with its many-colored carpet, its huge looking-glass, and its gilt clock which never told the time, kissed her pretty eyes into wakefulness, one pleasure followed fast upon the heels of another, until, wearied with the delight of living, she fell asleep again at night with words of love in her ears. And Captain Ryder, if he was less susceptible to the charms of the lively city, was at least as happy as she, for he was even more in love.

One trouble he had, but he would not let her share it with him. Every day he received a long letter in a woman's handwriting, and while he was reading it and for some time afterwards, he looked harassed and annoyed. These letters were not sent to the hotel where they were staying, but to another at which Captain Ryder would call to fetch them. And he made no secret of the fact that he gave no one his real address because he did not want his honeymoon to be interrupted.

"From your mother, dear?" Nanny would ask sympathetically, as he hastily thrust the unwelcome letter into his pocket.

He would say "Yes" rather shortly, and there for the day the matter ended.

Oh, what a Gorgon she must be, Nanny thought, to worry the poor fellow like this, when he had only done what every other man did, and what he had a perfect right to do, in getting married! But Captain Ryder, although he did not speak of his mother with any striking amount of affection, would never hear a word against her.

"She has had her own way all her life, and is very clever and used to managing," he would say.

And then, having fulfilled his duty, he would seem glad to change the subject.

But after a fortnight or so, even this cloud on their happiness seemed to melt away, for the letters stopped. Thenceforward the only small trial in Nanny's rosy existence was the amount of attention her charming appearance excited in the Parisians, whose courtsey to strangers has been so ludicrously over-praised.

She bore this little annoyance in silence, however, until one day when her husband, having driven with her to the Cascade in the Bois de Boulogne in an open fiacre, left her alone one moment to bring her some fruit from the restaurant. She would have liked to accompany him, and to eat her pear and drink her wine at one of those little marble topped tables, among the bourgeois wedding-parties and the gaily-laughing couples who congregated there. But her husband would have thought there was contamination for his sweet wife in such contact. When he returned, Nanny was flushed with annoyance.

"Do you know, Dan, these people are really very rude?" she said impatiently. "As soon as you left me, a little old woman, who was driving past, stopped her fiacre, and deliberately got out and walked round to stare at me. Of course I pretended to take no notice, but it was done deliberately, I assure you. And, more than that, I have seen the same old woman staring at me before like that, once when we were sitting on the Boulevard des Italiens, and once at the

Comédie Française. I do think these French manners are shameful !”

“ Perhaps she wasn't French,” suggested Captain Ryder, in a very quiet voice. “ What was she like ?”

“ She was very, very tiny, and bent and shrivelled. She had white hair, and an insignificant, withered little face, with two long prominent front teeth, one on each side. And she walked with a stick, leaning on it all the time, just like a witch.”

“ I thought so,” said Captain Ryder, pulling his moustache fiercely, as he did when he was angry. “ It was my mother.”

“ Your mother !” echoed Nanny in astonishment. “ Oh, no, that is not possible. You have told me your mother is not much more than fifty, and was once a beauty. Now, this woman was seventy-five at least, and as ugly as she could be !”

“ Nevertheless it is my mother. Little woman, our honeymoon is over !”

Nanny could not quite believe it. The little old lady was ugly and witchlike, but she was not at all formidable-looking ; not at all the clever, managing woman Dan had described.

When, therefore, while she was dressing the next morning, and her husband had gone out for an early stroll, a card was brought up to her bearing the name “ Mrs. Ryder,” she flew down into the reading-room in a state of great curiosity and excitement. Dan was right. It was the little old lady who had stared at her so persistently in the Bois.

And yet was it Dan's mother after all ? For, with a pleasant smile, and the softest, kindest voice in the world, the tiny, witch-like creature was raising her face to the soft young one for a kiss, and was congratulating her already on her marriage !

“ He will be a good husband to you, I am sure,” said the soft voice, “ for he has been a good son to me.”

And Nanny, returning the caress timidly, felt alarmed and bewildered.

CHAPTER III.

NANNY wondered more and more, as she sat down by old Mrs. Ryder's side in the big reading-room of the hotel, and felt the affectionate touch of the small, thin hand, how the difference between the real mother-in-law and the mother-in-law of her imagination, was to be accounted for. Her husband had always spoken of his mother with the greatest respect, but without much affection; as of one whose strong will had kept him in bondage for a great many years, and whose jealousy had prevented him from marrying. Yet here she was, all sweetness and gentleness, already treating her son's wife as a beloved daughter; and solicitously, yet with a pretty deference to the girl-wife, asking questions about Dan.

"Is he well, dear? Happy of course he is," she added with a smile.

Yes, he was quite well, Nanny said.

"And you don't lead too dissipated a life, I suppose?" went on old Mrs. Ryder, with a little anxiety in her tone. "Late hours, days too full of sight-seeing, theatres night after night, and—and champagne-luncheons as a pick-me-up in the morning?"

"Everything but the last we must plead guilty to, I am afraid!" answered Nanny, laughing. "We do go about a great deal, but we don't drink much champagne. I like orgeat better, and Dan doesn't drink much of anything."

This answer evidently gave much satisfaction to the old lady, who, noting the little smile about the corners of the bride's mouth, shook her head gently, and said:

"You think me a fussy old woman, dear, don't you? But men who have lived in India have to be

very careful what they drink, I assure you ; especially those of highly nervous temperament, like my son, Dan. Of course," and she leaned forward confidentially, and placed her hand upon Nanny's much larger one, "you needn't tell him that I said this to you. But it is better to know it."

The young wife assented, with secret amusement at the idea of her daring to suggest to Dan what he should or should not eat or drink. Devoted though he was to her, Captain Ryder, with his gray hair and dignified manner, inspired Nanny still with some awe ; it was he, and not she, who took the lead in suggesting what they should do, and where they should go. Therefore, when the elder lady asked whether she liked the idea of setting down at Brent Grange, Nanny replied dutifully that she should like whatever Dan chose to do.

"And you think he would like to settle down at Brent?" asked Mrs. Ryder doubtfully.

"He has always spoken of it as a matter of course!" said Nanny, looking at her with some surprise. "Hasn't he got some property or other there? He seems to think he ought to look after it, and I know he blames himself for having left all the trouble of it to you while he went travelling about the world. Besides, he says that, always wandering about, he has never yet had a home."

Both ladies flushed deeply, and poor Nanny would have given worlds to withdraw that apparently unkind speech. She had, indeed, only repeated Dan's words ; but it was not until now that she saw what a reproach they contained to the mother who had scarcely ever left him.

"Of course travelling about always must be miserable. And you can't expect ever to be really comfortable until the very ground your house stands on is your own, so Dan says," she added quickly ; but with an uncomfortable consciousness, as she noticed the expression on her companion's face, that she was making matters worse instead of better.

“I thought that life was the best for him,” said the old lady humbly, almost pleadingly. “And I knew that, if he married, he would want to give it up. But,” she went on, in a different tone, “I don’t think you would, either of you, be comfortable at Brent Grange. The neighbourhood has gone down of late years; almost all the large houses are to let; and they are pulling them down to build rows of small shops. Besides, the Grange is not half a mile from some brick-fields, and the smell, when the wind is south or south-east, is almost unbearable.”

If this was a correct description, it was not an inviting one, certainly. Nanny considered the prospect for a moment, and then burst out with a happy suggestion, as she thought:

“But Dan has another house down there, hasn’t he? He——”

Mrs. Ryder interrupted her very abruptly.

“Oh, he has a great deal of house-property about there, but it consists chiefly of cottages, at a few shillings a week.”

“Ah, but he has another large house, I don’t know whether it is in Brent, but it is somewhere about there, ‘The White House’ I think it is called.”

Old Mrs. Ryder did not start, or change colour, or do anything in the least sensational, at the mention of this house. But she involuntarily conveyed to Nanny’s mind, as clearly as if in words, that the name woke in her some strong feeling. She answered at once, quite quietly, evidently unconscious that she had in any way betrayed herself.

“Oh, yes; I know the place you mean—‘The White House,’ at Bicton. It is on high ground, and would have done very well if had been in repair. But it has been in a ruinous state for a great many years.”

“It could be repaired, couldn’t it?” asked Nanny, curious and interested as to the reason of her companion’s emotion.

“I suppose it could, at least, of course it could. But it would take a very long time, and cost a great

deal of money. And then the grounds, which are large, are simply a wilderness."

Then the old lady started another subject, and Nanny got no chance of learning more about "The White House" before her husband came in.

Captain Ryder was dutifully affectionate in his manner towards his mother, but there was little spontaneity in his tenderness. He was naturally annoyed, Nanny thought, at her having spied upon them, as it were, before presenting herself to her daughter-in-law.

"Mrs. Ryder says, Dan——" began Nanny presently.

She was interrupted by the old lady's soft voice.

"Say mamma, dear."

"Mamma says," corrected Nanny, with a smile and a blush, "that The Grange, is in a horrid neighbourhood, and that The White House is uninhabitable."

Captain Ryder laughed.

"You are a good deal more particular for us than we shall be for ourselves, mother, I expect."

"Well, dear, The Grange, has been to let for years, with a great board up that has had to be repainted again and again. And yet nobody has taken it."

"I must run down there as soon as we get back to town, and see how things have been going on."

"Do you doubt that I have done the best that could be done during all these years that I have had the overseeing of the place?"

There was, not unnaturally, under her habitual sweetness, the slightest possible tone of acerbity.

"No, indeed, mother. But I doubt whether it was in agents' human nature not to take some advantage of your being a sweet woman, instead of a burly, bullying man."

He was quite good-humoured, and she had not lost her temper. But mother and son exchanged looks which were not those of perfect trust. Nanny, who

was quick-witted, watched with interest the eye-to-eye encounter ; and when the visitor had left for her own hotel, she turned to her husband with a world of ill-suppressed curiosity in her face.

“Why don't you like her better?” was what she wanted to say. “I like your mother very much,” was what she did say. “And from the first moment, she wasn't a bit unkind, as I was afraid she might be.”

“No, my mother would never be unkind to anyone,” said he shortly.

Nanny wondered why, then, there had been this anxiety to avoid meeting her, this talk about her jealousy, this constant interchange of vexatious letters. But to a timid question on this head, all she got in the way of answer was this :

“She wants me to live abroad, and I mean to settle down in England.”

Nanny was silenced. But she felt that the explanation was by no means either full or satisfactory.

Captain Ryder had one more interview with his mother, the particulars of which he did not relate to his wife, to whom he merely said that he had seen the old lady off on her way back to London.

“Why do you say *old* lady, if she is only fifty-five?” asked Nanny, who had been struck with the same peculiarity in the mother that she had remarked in the son, namely, the great difference between her real and her apparent age.

“I'm sure I don't know. She seems to me older than she is ; perhaps that is the reason.”

“Yes,” said Nanny ; “she looks seventy, doesn't she?”

Perhaps this remark reminded him that he looked more than his age, a rather sore point with him. At any rate, he answered somewhat shortly, and turned his wife's attention to something else.

Old Mrs. Ryder's visit seemed to make a break in their honeymoon from which their spirits never quite recovered.

When they had been in Paris three weeks, Captain

Ryder suggested to his wife that, instead of carrying out their first plan of a visit to Italy, they should return to London. Of course Nanny agreed to this, as she agreed to every proposal of her husband's ; and the next day they were back at the Charing Cross hotel.

On the very evening of their arrival in England, Nanny took courage to make the suggestion that they should go down to Brent Grange on the following day and look about them. Looking grave at once, Captain Ryder said that he had to go down to Aldershot to see a friend who was ill there, and added that there was no need to hurry over it ; they had the London theatres to sample before they began to concern themselves with the cares of housekeeping. Did she think she would be dull to-morrow if he left her for the whole day ? He would be entirely at her service afterwards for another month of gaiety.

“It will take quite the day to go to Aldershot and back,” he said ; “for my old regiment is there now, and I shan't be able to resist the temptation of letting everybody congratulate me. For you know I was a sworn old bachelor.”

Of course Nanny acquiesced in this arrangement ; so Captain Ryder wrote at once to his mother, asking her to come round on the following afternoon to take his wife for a drive. The next morning, having taken care to provide her with novels enough for a month's hard reading, he went through the deliciously painful experience of a first parting from her, and started for Aldershot.

With the help of her books, Nanny got through a couple of hours very comfortably. But it was a lovely day, and she was of active habits. Very soon the arm-chair grew too hard to be endured, the exciting adventures of the heroine became insufferably tedious. She longed to go out.

So she wandered about the big, handsome, un-homely sitting-room, now dipping impatiently into a book, now looking with longing out of the window

at the busy crowd in the streets, until a telegram was brought to her.

It was from old Mrs. Ryder, who was staying with friends in Kensington. This was the message :

“ Sorry cannot come this afternoon. Will call 7.45 and take you to concert.”

Nanny threw the paper down, as soon as the waiter had disappeared upon her dignified intimation that there was no answer, in a fit of petulant disappointment. She would not, could not, stay indoors all day. What was the use of being married, if you were to be shut up all day long, and not have half the liberty you had when you were single? A happy thought flashed into her mind : she would go to Bicton, and see those two houses, one of which was to be her home. She would be back in plenty of time for the concert, she thought.

Nanny ran downstairs to the office, where a very young, pleasant-faced girl, the daughter of the manager of the hotel, got a “ Bradshaw ” and helped her to find a train for Bicton. Nanny took a fancy to the girl, and asked her if was not dreadful to have to sit in the office all day long on warm days like that.

“ Oh, no,” said the girl, smiling. “ It is a pleasure to me. I live in the country, and am only allowed here for a treat now and then. It’s such fun to hear the stories about the people who come here : one hears such strange stories in hotels.”

“ Why, how can you tell much about people who just come and go? ”

“ One can sometimes. There’s the strangest story going on here now, for instance. But—perhaps I oughtn’t to tell you.”

“ Yes, do, do.”

“ Well, there’s an old gentleman here now, who came here about three months ago with a handsome lady, who seemed perfectly devoted to him. And as for him, he didn’t seem to be able to do the least

thing for himself ; it was always she who must help him. She was his nurse, she said, and the poor gentleman wasn't exactly out of his mind, except just at times, when she had to bring him up to town to see the doctor. And she said it was the wickedness of his wife that had brought this upon him, and that he had just seen her, and he always had an attack after seeing her."

"Poor man ! How very dreadful !" said Nanny sympathetically. "And is the nurse with him this time ?"

The young girl glanced about her mysteriously, and lowered her voice.

"No, that's the strange part of it. He's brought quite a young girl with him, who, he says, is his wife ! And now he is behaving just as if he was sane."

"Perhaps he's cured," suggested Nanny.

"But how about the other wife, the wicked one ?"

"She is dead, I expect."

"But she was alive two months ago !"

"Well, he couldn't have married again if his first wife wasn't dead."

"But don't you think," suggested the young girl mysteriously, "that he may have married her in an interval of sanity, and forgotten that he had a wife already ? It seems such a strange thing to bring the new wife to the hotel he came to with the nurse, unless his memory for the past is quite gone, doesn't it ?"

Nanny had to admit that it did seem strange. She had herself no suggestion to make but that such things were not likely to happen.

"I wish the nurse would come here again, and explain it all," continued the young girl, with a sigh of baffled curiosity. "I saw her, for I was here the day they came. She was a very nice woman, and she talked to me and gave me her portrait. Mamma took it away from me, because she wanted a photograph to fill one of her frames. Here it is."

She took from the mantelpiece a frame containing the photograph of a rather handsome woman with a very well-developed figure.

"I don't think I like the face much," said Nanny dubiously. "And did you see the old gentleman too?"

"Yes. I saw him when he came with the nurse, and I saw him to-day, too. Such a change in him! Instead of seeming to be always brooding over some trouble, as he was last time, he looks as brisk and as happy as a boy!"

"Perhaps it *isn't* the same man, but his twin-brother!" suggested Nanny, much interested.

"Yes, it is the same," said the girl, shaking her head. "Eyes, hair, voice, everything, down to the very pin in his tie, a little pearl acorn in a gold cup."

"Oh, the pin is nothing. My husband has a pin like that."

"Your husband!" echoed the young girl, growing suddenly crimson. "Oh, are you married? I didn't think—at least, I thought—I mean you look so young!"

She was very much disturbed, and, taking up the "Bradshaw," began hunting for a train to Bicton with great energy. She alarmed herself unnecessarily, however. Nanny was indeed musing over the story; but no thought that it could have any connection with herself entered her head.

"I hope the poor young wife will never find out that there is anything strange—or wrong about her husband," she said at last. "That would be dreadful!"

The young girl shot at her a quick glance of frightened compassion over the "Bradshaw."

"Yes," she almost whispered, "she—she would have to leave him, wouldn't she?"

Nanny was rather startled by this view.

"I don't know," she said slowly, with a tinge of deeper colour rising in her face; "she would always

feel she was his wife. And if she loved him very much——”

Her voice trembled, and she broke off. For a moment she had, in all innocence, tried the case as her own, and found herself unable to give an answer. It was her turn now to find a relief in the pages of “Bradshaw.”

Luckily for Nanny's chances of getting to Bicton that day, the manageress of the hotel returned at that moment to the office, and made the route clear to her. Still more luckily, Nanny, as she ran upstairs to get ready for her journey, did not see the look of horror on the face of the manageress, nor hear her sharp reproaches, as her young daughter confessed what she had been telling the guest.

On first arriving at Bicton Station, Nanny was ready to hastily endorse all her mother-in-law had said as to the undesirability of the neighbourhood. In every direction she saw row after row of small, brand-new, contract-built houses, of that glaring red brick which, in conjunction with scraps of bilious glass let into the windows, is facetiously termed, by builders, “artistic.” And there were rows of cheap and startling shops to correspond with the houses. Everywhere was a mushroom growth of that dull-souled poverty which loses its dignity in empty pretension. But when, following the direction given her by the second person she asked (the first had never heard of Brent Grange), she walked down a half-built street which straggled off into fields, things began to look brighter.

When the last of the “eligible modern residences” was left behind, and a bit of real country road, with a hedge on each side, brought her to the corner of a little “green” surrounded by old houses, Nanny felt that there was hope in life. For the vulgarity of cheap modern improvements had scarcely yet touched the village of Brent.

Nanny went straight forward by the narrow village green, gazing all around her in delight. Great trees

spread their branches over the roadway. Half a dozen cows, munching the short grass, lazily raised their stupid heads and stared at her with the expression with which an Englishman of the wealthy classes, whether peer or potato-merchant, stares at the stranger who dares to get into the same railway carriage with him.

To right and left, in well-wooded gardens, and shut in by tall shrubs, old-fashioned houses, all of different shapes and sizes, seemed to show, in shabby paint and broken railings, a sense that their best days were gone by. For the well-to-do London tradesmen who had formerly occupied them, instead of driving up to business daily in a gig from Brent, now lived at "West" Kensington, and went to town on the penny 'bus. One large white house, the tiled roof of which had been repaired with slates, now felt itself to be too humble for its elaborate cast-iron gate, and had therefore abandoned this stately entrance in favour of a modest wooden gate in the side wall.

Before the next house to this, a plain, shabby, red-brick structure, with battered wooden railings, a little comedy was being enacted, to the great entertainment of a small group of children, a neat maid-servant sent out to post a letter, and a few other idlers. A freshly painted board announced that the house was to let; and the sale of the late occupier's goods, which had just taken place, indicated the unhappy termination of his tenancy.

The most conspicuous figure in this scene was a young fellow in tennis costume who with a large soft felt hat tilted over his eyes, was sitting on the low wall beneath the broken railings, and greeting each piece of furniture, as it was taken out and packed into a cart outside, with a gentle stream of comment.

"Gently, gently," he murmured, as a big comfortable, but shabby chair was brought out, and bumped in its passage against the gate-post, "that off-side fore-leg won't stand much rough handling. It has precipitated me into the fireplace more than once."

Again, as a pile of school-books were brought out—one or two being allowed to fall on the pathway he shook his head reproachfully.

“I mustn’t blame you,” he said with magnanimity; “I’ve found them heavy myself.”

Nanny, who was standing near enough to him to hear all this, was puzzled but amused. Without appearing to notice her presence, the young man was evidently not insensible to the fact that a beautiful woman, who was also a stranger, was within hearing.

“What is it?” asked Nanny, of the maid-servant with the letter. “Some poor man sold up?”

The girl blushed and glanced towards the gentleman, who immediately rose and, raising his hat, showed a fairly good-looking young face, with a large ginger-coloured moustache.

“Yes, madam,” he said, with an air of much amusement, “I am the poor man.”

“Oh, I—I beg your pardon, I’m so sorry. I——”

“You’re very good to be sorry about it,” he said courteously, but with great cheerfulness. “But I assure you I’m not. None of these things were worth carting away, even if I’d had a cart, or the money to hire one, which I haven’t. And now these good people have saved me all trouble on that head. What they will do with the books I don’t know, for the people of this benighted village can’t read and they wouldn’t come to me to be taught how to.”

But, moved by his misfortunes and his tawny moustache, Nanny persisted in once more expressing her sorrow before she walked away. She made the tour of the green, which comprised the whole extent of the village, carefully looking about for the Grange.

At the point of the green from which she had started, a high, old-fashioned brick wall, with a solid, projecting coping, extended for some distance up a road to the right; this wall was fringed by a thick growth of ivy, and enclosed grounds so thickly wooded that no glimpse of a house could, at this time

of the year, be obtained from the road. Nanny followed the wall until it bent inwards to the unpretending high wooden gates, flanked by two smaller ones, which formed the entrance. Above the wall and the ivy she could just see the roof and chimney of a small lodge. Was this interesting-looking place the Grange, she wondered. Still following the wall until, some distance further on, it turned inwards from the road, she espied a battered and defaced board, half hidden by the branches of trees, on which were still faintly traceable the words "To Let. Apply to——." But the name was now illegible.

This, then, must be the Grange.

In ever-rising excitement, Nanny retraced her steps until she stood again before the entrance. Could she summon up courage enough to ring the bell and ask to be shown over the place? Somebody lived there, evidently; for she could see a thin line of smoke rising from a chimney behind the trees. But then who was the occupier? A caretaker, she supposed; but it was evidently a caretaker not used to being disturbed, for the board which stated that the place was to let would scarcely have been seen except by someone who was looking for it.

While she was thus debating within herself, one of the side-gates opened, and an old man, who looked like a gardener, came out. Something about him reminded Nanny, in a vague way, of her husband; but she had not then had enough experience to know that it was merely the similarity in carriage and bearing between one infantry soldier and another, however wide the difference of rank between them may be. The old man who had a hard, shrewd face, noticed the unmistakable look of interest in the young lady's eyes, and he saluted her respectfully in passing. Nanny turned to him eagerly.

"Can you tell me—I believe this house is to let?" she said. "Could I see over it? Does anyone live there?"

"Yes, and no, ma'am. There's a lady lives in it,

but she's only there as a caretaker-like, I believe, though she's been there some years now. But I've heard something about the gentleman that owns the house coming to live there, with the lady he's married So, of course, the other one's got to turn out."

"The other one!" It seemed a strange way of speaking. Nanny began to feel, on the one hand, very nervous about her rash expedition, and, on the other, very anxious to see this lady-caretaker, with whose feelings in the matter her informant seemed to side.

"Mrs. Durrant ain't at home just now; he said, as he opened one of the little gates and ushered Nanny through into a paradise of luxuriant vegetation, "she's gone to see her brother, who's met with a misfortune, poor gentleman! But I can show you over the house, ma'am, and answer any questions."

"And—and who are the people to apply to, about the rent and all that? I couldn't read the name on the board," said Nanny, who felt bound to keep up the character of a house-hunter.

"Oh, they're dead, ma'am, long ago."

"Then who do people apply to, when they come to look at the house?"

"They don't come to look at it, ma'am."

And Nanny perceived by his dry tone that she was found out.

After this she followed him in silence past the lodge which was shut up, deserted, and in a ruinous condition; up a pretty winding drive under the trees through a garden which showed signs of care; past a long line of now empty stables, built of red brick mellowed with age, to a large, rambling, old-fashioned house of the same warm tint with a red-tiled roof, gable windows, and a thick ill-trained growth of ivy and wisteria over the lower portions.

"Oh, what a pretty place!" she cried, as she stopped short on the stone-paved yard, half overgrown with moss, by which they approached it from the side.

“Yes, ma’am. And maybe Mrs. Durrant finds it as unpleasant to leave it like, as—as them that’s going to take her place finds it pleasant to come into it.”

Nanny felt her breath coming faster. What did this man mean by his curious insinuations? He did not speak in the least disrespectfully, but rather in a grave tone which sounded almost like one of warning, and with the authority of a person who knew all the circumstances of the case.

“You like this Mrs. Durrant very much, then?” she asked in a tone which she flattered herself was one of complete indifference. “And perhaps you think she is not being very well treated?”

“I’ve nothing to say against Mrs. Durrant, ma’am. And at the same time I’ve nothing to say against the family, meaning Captain Ryder and his mother, ma’am. It’s not likely, considering how I’ve been in their service nigh on forty years.”

“Forty years!”

“Nigh on it, ma’am. And I would only suggest quite respectfully, ma’am, that people that have been in charge as long as Mrs. Durrant, why, they learn to know things which it’s better they should keep to themselves, ma’am. And I wish Captain Ryder’s lady—I should say Captain Ryder’s mother, ma’am, would see it in the same light. It would be better for the family, take the word of an old soldier that has seen the world.”

As he finished speaking, a rather high-pitched feminine voice, speaking in a fretful, complaining tone, reached their ears; and the old gardener, if such he was, courteously invited Nanny, by a rapid gesture, to stand aside under the spreading boughs of a tall cedar.

“Mrs. Durrant, ma’am, and her brother, Mr. Valentine Eley,” said he in a low voice.

The voice of this caretaker was that of a young woman; and she was saying as she came up:

“Well, I am going to see the Captain this evening and we’ll see what he says about it.”

Nanny looked at her, and looked again with her heart beating fast and her thoughts in a whirlpool of bewilderment. For this Mrs. Durrant was the original of the photograph which had been shown to her at the hotel.

CHAPTER IV.

A PANG of vague suspicion shot through Nanny's heart as she overheard the lady's words; "going to see the Captain to-night."

How came the nurse of the mad old gentleman to be caretaker at Brent Grange? And who was the "Captain?"

Retreating still further into the shade cast by the spreading trees, she watched Mrs. Durrant as that lady passed in the direction of the house. The commanding "caretaker" was tall, and what men would call "a fine woman;" still young, but already inclined to grow a little too stout, according to the wont of this type of beauty. Nanny did not see her face until Mrs. Durrant was turning to enter the house. Then she caught a glimpse of a handsome profile, with an aquiline nose and a rather tightly shut, small-lipped mouth.

The person to whom she was talking was the young man whom Nanny had seen enjoying the selling up of his home. He was following with his hands in his pockets, giving from time to time a lazy assent to his companion's vehement speeches, but without seeming to suffer himself from any sympathetic emotion.

Nanny, watching the two intently, forgot that she was not alone. The old man who had shown her into the grounds had retreated out of sight. Stepping forward to get a better view of the house, she heard a sharp voice above her, and, looking upwards, saw Mrs. Durrant, wearing an indignant expression of face, at one of the windows.

"Valentine!" she was crying out; "there's some-

one trespassing in the garden. Go out and tell her this is private property."

But Valentine being in no hurry to obey this mandate, Nanny, with her cheeks very red and her eyes filling with angry tears, turned to walk back towards the gate. As soon as there was an intervening clump of trees between her and the house, the old man rejoined her.

"If you will wait here a few minutes, ma'am," he said, "Mrs. Durrant is going out, and I could show you over the house."

"Oh, no, no, thank you," she answered vehemently. "I—I don't think this house would suit me. It's—it's too big."

The old gardener listened respectfully, and made no comment. But she knew so well that he guessed who she was that, not troubling to make a fresh pretext, she said simply :

"Do you know the White House at Bicton? I want to see it."

"Yes, ma'am ; I can show you where it is, but that's about all. For it has been in a dismantled state many years now, and the doors has been nailed up to prevent the boys getting in and stealing the flooring for firewood. If you want to go over it, ma'am, you'll have to get an order from the agent, and he'll have to communicate first with old Mrs. Ryder."

"Isn't it a great loss of income to Captain Ryder to have two big houses uninhabited?" asked the young wife, with some pride in her own acumen and growing distrust of her mother-in-law's powers of management.

The old man gave her a sharp look.

"Big houses aren't wanted about here, ma'am," he answered. "There's lots more of 'em to let. Bicton and Brent has gone out of fashion with people that can afford to live in style. The place has gone down, ma'am."

Nanny had already seen for herself evidences of

the truth of this. As they went out through the gate by which they had entered, she gave one more fascinated glance up the long vista of tall elms and beeches on the left, through which smooth lawns, with a fringe of flowering shrubs, rhododendrons, laurestine, and the tall sword-leaves of the iris, made a most inviting picture. She turned suddenly to her guide.

"This Mrs. Durrant," she began, "does she ever take in mad people?"

The stolid face of the old gardener underwent just so much change as convinced Nanny that the knowledge she had gained was supposed to be a secret. But he answered very quietly, with apparent surprise:

"Mad people! No, ma'am. There's nobody lives with her but her two servants."

"But I know that she once had charge of a mad old gentleman, who got well and married," Nanny went on, with a great appearance of astuteness. "Now, I don't think Captain Ryder would be pleased to hear that his house had been used as a private asylum."

A most malicious smile twinkled for an instant in the man's hard eyes.

"I don't know how you came to hear of it, but I wouldn't mention it to the Captain, ma'am, if I was you," he said drily.

And again a pang of vague and nameless fear shot through Nanny's heart.

They were out in the road by this time, and were going to the left, under the old ivy-hung wall. A little shabby wooden door in this wall was suddenly opened from within, and Mrs. Durrant came out with a quick step and locked it behind her with one of two large iron keys which she carried tied together on a piece of string. In the other hand she held a small hand-bag; and as she stopped to open it, and drop the keys inside, Nanny noticed that her face was not wholly hard, that she had brown eyes which betrayed a passionate nature, and that her mouth, when not compressed with anger, had curves denoting good

nature. When she saw Nanny, whom she recognised as the trespasser in the Grange garden, she scowled and seemed inclined to address her. But noticing that she was accompanied by the old gardener, Mrs. Durrant gave him an indignant look, before turning up a lane nearly opposite to the gate by which she had come out.

Then Nanny and her guide went steadily on towards the highroad, where, turning to the right, they ascended the hill into the old High Street of Bicton itself.

Bicton is one of those villages in the more remote suburbs of London which, under the rough hand of "modern improvement," are rapidly losing their primitive picturesqueness. Among the irregularly-built, low-browed shops, with their thatched roofs and quaint chimneys, tall new buildings have shot up, stiff, straight, staring, and devoid of all beauty or interest. To the right, on the brow of the hill, a new church of red brick has replaced the old one; but further on, for the most part deserted indeed by their late occupiers, a dozen pretty, stately old houses are still left to lament their decadence, till such time as the speculative builder shall come to run up rows of many-gabled villas of mongrel Gothic architecture, where the guelder-roses and lilac-bushes grow in clumps upon the shady lawns. Past these Nanny went with her guide, till the straggling houses gave place to open fields. Some distance along this pretty road she saw, a long time before they came to it, the White House.

It was built very near the road. A plain, square, substantial-looking building of considerable size, with many small windows, most of which were fitted with outside shutters which had once been green, gave the house a rather un-English appearance—as if more sun had been expected to shine upon the place than was likely to illuminate these gray British skies. Such of the shutters as had not broken away from their hinges were closed. Most of the glass

which was not thus protected had been broken, and green stains of damp showed under the eaves. The roof of the stables and a portion of a large conservatory, most of the glass of which appeared to be broken, could be seen from the road.

The tall front gates, the only thing about the place which seemed to be in good repair, were fastened up securely. Nothing could be seen of the grounds, which were evidently extensive, except a forest-like growth of fine old trees. When they came in front of the gates Nanny stopped, and considered every detail attentively.

“I shouldn’t like to live *there!*” burst from her lips.

“That’s what everybody else feels, ma’am,” said the old gardener, with a grim smile, “and so it doesn’t get let.”

“Well, they don’t seem to try to let it. It wouldn’t cost much to make it *look* better, at least. A pot of paint and a few nails would do something, and the gate might be made to open, instead of being blocked up as if the place were a prison. I think the sooner Captain Ryder takes the management of the property into his own hands, the better it will be for him.”

But the old man’s face grew suddenly severe in expression, and he shook his head warningly.

“Old folks’ ways seems bad ways and slow ways to the young like you, ma’am. But there’s some sense in it all, depend on it. And the world goes round none the worse for not going too fast.”

This shut-up, lonely old house interested Nanny even more than the picturesque Grange. Her one idea was now to get rid of her guide, and to try to force an entrance on her own account.

“I should like to go over it,” she said, peering about curiously, but without discovering any breach in the lofty wall by which a burglarious entrance could be effected.

“There’s no way of getting in,” said the old gardener. “It’s fastened up every way, as you see, all along of them vagabond boys.”

“And why shouldn't the vagabond boys enjoy it if they like?” said Nanny mutinously. “Nobody else does. And why boys, who can enjoy life so splendidly, should always be kept out of everything and treated as if they were pariahs, I never could understand. It would be better for them to have the flooring for firewood than for the rats to have it for food.”

But the old man would not see things in the same light; he accepted her half-crown as a hint that he was at liberty to leave her, and, having directed her back to the station, retreated respectfully with a lowered opinion of her judgment.

Nanny had an idea that the old gardener—whose name, he had informed her, by the way, was William Pickering—intended to keep an eye upon her movements; so she walked back into the overgrown village, found the station, and made inquiries about the next train to take her back to town. She had an hour to wait; so she promptly started to return to the White House. It was not yet much past six, and was still quite light; besides, her curiosity had got the better of her discretion. There must be some reason, she argued, for keeping a large house and its grounds in this neglected state; indeed, Pickering, with his wise saws about “old folk's ways,” had almost said as much. Nobody would tell her what this reason was, therefore she must try to find it out for herself.

And, as she walked along, the young wife teased herself with a second question: What did Mrs. Durrant mean by her remark that she was “going to see the Captain to-night?” Of course she could not have meant Captain Ryder, Nanny's husband; but for all that it would be more satisfactory to know whom she did mean. This, however, Nanny felt, was more than she was likely to discover.

There was no way of getting inside the grounds of the White House from the frontage on to the high-road—that was clear; but Nanny said to herself that

the very care with which the front gates were fastened up pointed to the fact that there would be a practicable entrance somewhere, by which Pickering, or whoever had charge of the place, could enter and see that the much-maligned "boys" had not succeeded in storming the fortress. So she scoured the neighbourhood by its lanes and by-ways until, as she had expected, she came upon the back wall of the grounds; and following it for some hundred yards along a narrow footpath skirting a field of stubble, she at length found behind a cowshed, and almost hidden by hawthorn bushes a door in the wall. It was closed; but Nanny's heart beat high as she saw in the keyhole a great iron key, from which a second key dangled on a piece of string.

She had seen these keys before—in Mrs. Durrant's hand.

Without a moment's hesitation as to this rash proceeding, Nanny pushed the door open, passed through into the grounds, and drew it close behind her. An instant later she had plunged into a thick growth of rank vegetation; briars, nettles, long grass, and tall heads of hemlock making a dense, damp mass in which she struggled breast-high. This was not the garden, but a park-like enclosure separated from it by a wire fence, and suffering comparatively little from the neglect which had fallen upon the whole place. True, the grass grew rank and high in some places, while in others the earth was bare; the paths were overgrown and could scarcely be traced; broken boughs lay, with their dead or withering leaves, half hidden in the grass.

But it was in the garden on the left, and the forlorn house beyond, that the decay of the place was most plainly to be seen. There was a wild beauty, certainly, in the masses of laburnum, copper beech, and barberry trees which, all untrimmed and unrestrained, hung their straggling branches over clusters of peonies and Scotch rose-bushes, which in their turn had outgrown their proper proportions and thrown up weedy

offshoots in all directions. Everywhere the grounds were so well wooded that, in their present state of wildness, the whole place was like a corner of a forest.

Through the park, however, and straight to a point in the wire fence where Nanny judged that, hidden by the surrounding verdure, a gate must be, she could see that a foot-track had been worn over beaten-down grass and weeds. But she did not dare to follow it, being afraid to come face to face with Mrs. Durrant, who must, she judged, be somewhere about. Instead, therefore, of venturing on the track, she approached the fence by a roundabout way through the trees, sometimes losing sight of the house altogether, until, when quite close to the fence, she perceived, as she had expected, that she was not alone in the grounds.

In the garden, some distance from where she stood, were two people, not yet clearly discernible to Nanny by reason of the intervening foliage, but sufficiently near for her to hear that one of them, a woman, was talking fast, in a low tone of voice. This, she felt sure, was Mrs. Durrant; but who was her companion? A man. So much Nanny could see, but for a long time that was all.

Something much stronger than an instinct, however, although she could not distinctly trace the source of her feeling, told her that she knew the man. She tried to strifle the suggestion that rose in her mind, tried to tell herself that certain tricks of gait and attitude in the half-seen figure bore only a fancied resemblance to those of her husband.

But the fear at her heart soon overmastered all other thoughts and emotions. She leaned over the wire fence till it bent under her weight, peering into the mass of greenery with eyes that tried *not* to see; for the knowledge she hated was growing inevitable.

After a few moments' anxious waiting, the two figures moved a little, coming more into the open.

Nanny stared stupidly at them, with a perplexed frown upon her face.

The woman was indeed Mrs. Durrant; and just as surely the man with her was Captain Ryder. What did it mean?

Something in their gestures and bearing, as the two sauntered slowly in and out among the trees, told her that they were used to these strolls; the woman's hand seemed to find by habit rather than by sight the bunches of reddening barberries which she gathered as she passed. As for Captain Ryder, with his erect carriage, long gray moustache, and curly gray hair, he was an unmistakable figure.

If Nanny had dared, she would have climbed over the railing and met them, pretending to see nothing very wrong or surprising in the incident of their meeting. But she felt that she would not be able to carry off the encounter with the self-possession she wished to show; for the story she had heard at the hotel ran in her head—a jumble of facts which she found it, at that moment, impossible to disentangle or to understand.

While she was standing thus, in miserable doubt and anxiety, plucking nervously at the little straight leaves of a yew-tree which formed one of a group in which she was half buried, she heard the door in the wall, by which she had entered, creak on its hinges. By moving back a few paces, and pushing aside the sweeping branches of a willow-tree, Nanny was able to see who it was that had come in. The intruder was Mr. Valentine Eley, who walked along the trodden track to the wire fence, then strolled beside it in the direction of the spot where Nanny was standing with his eyes fixed on his sister and her companion, and at last stopped short and whistled. Mrs. Durrant turned immediately, and, seeing who the intruder was, at once ran to the fence. Brother and sister were near enough to Nanny for her to hear the conversation which passed between them.

“What business have you in here?”

“Oh, my dear child, don't excite yourself! I haven't

come to disturb your *tête-à-tête*. I've just met Pickering, and he says the pretty girl with the blue eyes and the big gray straw hat is young Mrs. Ryder, and that she's come down here to look about her. That's all."

"Well, and what does that matter to me?" asked the lady sharply.

"Oh, nothing—nothing at all, of course. I apologise for having brought you to listen to anything so trivial." He was provokingly cool; and she, in spite of her assumption of indifference, was disturbed.

"Where is she now, this woman? Is she about still?" asked Mrs. Durrant, after a pause, in a vixenish tone.

"Gone back to the station, Pickering said. What did you want with her?"

"I should have liked to get a good look at her, that is all, and to see whether she looks as if she has any brains."

Valentine shook his head decidedly.

"I should think *not*," he said briefly. "Too pretty. Plays tennis, I'll swear; and thinks Browning's poetry, and Wagner's music, and Madame Somebody or other's bonnets, and strawberries and cream, all 'quite too charming.' I'm in love with her. I shall have to shoot her husband."

"You had much better save your shot for yourself and me. What have we to live upon if I am turned out?"

"Why, a secret which ought still to be worth bread and cheese to us both, my dear."

"How coarse you are!"

"No, how honest. Silence is said to be golden—and it is, besides, our only capital. Let us, then, get its fair value. I don't wish any harm to anybody, and least of all to the good people at whose expense you, my dear, have been pretty comfortable for so long. Still, I wish to put off starvation for you (and for me, too, for that matter) as long as possible. Therefore I say that the Captain must be worked

upon, and the old lady made to 'stump up.' Excuse the vulgarity of the expression. I perceive that you shudder. It is but homely English for 'afford pecuniary assistance.'"

Mrs. Durrant gave a deep sigh.

"I wish I'd never come near the people," she said impatiently. "Though I am really fond of the Captain—I am indeed—quite as fond, in my way, as his wife is."

"I am sure of it, dear," said Valentine easily. "And all this time he is wondering what has become of you. Go back at once with my apologies. Or, if you like, I'll take them myself."

He made a feint of getting over the wire fence, but Mrs. Durrant pushed him back.

"No, no," she said impatiently; "when will you learn to keep in the background until you are wanted? The sight of you would only irritate him."

"I don't see how the sight of me could possibly have an irritating effect on anybody!" exclaimed her brother plaintively.

But he obeyed her wish without further opposition, and began to stroll back in a leisurely fashion towards the gate by which he had entered the grounds. Mrs. Durrant went back across the shaggy lawn, as fast as she could, in the direction of the spot where she had left Captain Ryder.

Nanny was shaking like a leaf in the wind. A dozen times during the course of this conversation, which had been carried on very rapidly, and in too low a tone for her to catch more than the sense of it, she had been on the point of interrupting the speakers with a passionate outcry. But her fear of confronting a jealous virago, or of sinking to the same level in her excitement, a dread of what they were going to say next, and yet a burning curiosity to hear it—all helped to keep her silent until they had separated; leaving her, half stunned, in the lengthening shadow of the old yew-trees.

It was no longer possible for Nanny to doubt that

the story she had heard at the hotel concerned her husband. He had been subject to fits of insanity, and Mrs. Durrant, the "caretaker," had been his nurse. It was a dreadful thing to learn, but in Nanny, full of young love, and hope, and loyalty, the circumstance, confirmed as it was by his mother's hints, awoke more tender pity than fear. He was cured; or, if his malady should ever return upon him, was not she, his wife, by his side to exorcise the evil spirit by her loving care?

The inexperienced woman of twenty was less troubled by this than by jealousy—retrospective jealousy of that first wife, of whom she had never heard from him, and actual jealousy of this woman—this nurse—whom he visited in secret. The suggestion of the girl at the hotel, that the first wife was still alive, did not now occur to her. Nor, if she had thought of it, would it have troubled her. Not even a man who had been insane could forget such a circumstance as the fact that he had a wife living.

Nanny stared at Mrs. Durrant as the latter ran through the long grass, but she could no longer see her. The waving branches of the trees seemed to form a thick veil before her eyes, shutting out the scene.

Why did the woman come to meet Dan here, instead of receiving him at Brent Grange, where she lived?

The poor child stumbled back through the long grass to the door in the wall by which she had entered. Just as she reached it, it occurred to her to wonder whether Valentine Eley was outside waiting for his sister. The thought only made her pause for an instant. If he should see her, what did she care? But there was no one outside, and she went quickly along the road to the station without incident of any kind. This walk was a great relief to her, so was the fact that the train was crowded, and that during part of the journey she had to stand.

It was not until she reached the hotel, and it suddenly dawned upon her with what different feelings

she was returning from those with which she had left it, that she began to understand the force of the shock she had received. The blood rushed into her head and throbbed in her temples as she stopped at the foot of the stairs, afraid to go up, afraid to face her husband. At that moment she heard the soft voice of old Mrs. Ryder addressing her from the top of the staircase.

“ Ah, my dear child, I’ve been waiting for you for ever so long! The concert began at eight, and it is now nearly half-past.”

With sudden agility Nanny ran up the stairs, and looked down at her mother-in-law with a white, passionate face. It is in human nature to be glad to find a scapegoat, and she had found one.

“ I want to speak to you,” she said, scarcely above her breath. The old lady began to tremble violently, and her withered lips shook with fear.

For she saw that Nanny had found out something.

CHAPTER V.

NANNY opened the door of the sitting-room, and ushered her mother-in-law in with a quiet deliberation which astonished the elder woman, and disconcerted her a little. A young woman all tears and threatening hysterics would have been more easily managed, because more comprehensible. The old lady recovered her self-possession in a moment, and, taking Nanny's hands in hers, looked up into her face solicitously, and told her she looked pale.

"I dare say I do," said Nanny. "I'm tired. I've been to Bicton."

A tinge of colour came into the elder lady's withered cheeks. But if the news agitated her, this was the only sign she gave of the fact. Drawing Nanny gently with her, she sat down on a sofa and made her companion do the same.

"Come and tell me all your adventures then, my dear," she said, with effusive interest. "I do wish, though, that you had waited for me to go with you. I could have shown you so much more of the place than you could see by yourself."

"I don't think so," said Nanny. "For, after all, the only things there of interest to me were the Grange and the White House. And I saw them both."

"Well, and what did you think of the Grange?"

"It is a beautiful house—from the outside. I did not go over it. I was more interested in the White House."

"But you could not go over that. It's shut up altogether."

"I went into the grounds." Under the close watch which was kept upon her the elder lady could not hide

the fact that these words startled her. "And I saw a meeting there, which seemed strange to me." Nanny was speaking now very slowly, on purpose to observe the effect which her words had upon her companion. "It was between the caretaker at the Grange, Mrs. Durrant, and—my husband."

Nanny detected no surprise in her mother-in-law's face, but some annoyance, and even more fear.

"Dan!" she cried, after a moment's pause. "But how could that be? Dan has gone to Aldershot, I thought you said."

"He *told* me he was going to Aldershot. But he did not go there. He went to Bicton instead. I saw him with my own eyes," insisted the young wife with emphasis.

Old Mrs. Ryder, though still evidently somewhat disturbed, shook her head with a light laugh.

"It could not have been Dan," she said. "He never deceived me, his mother, in anything; therefore nothing is less likely than that he would deceive his wife, and a wife whom he adores too! And to whom he has not been married six weeks."

"That is what I thought at first," murmured poor Nanny in a trembling voice, while the tears welled up into her eyes.

"Depend upon it," broke in the other with authority, "it was your eyes and not your husband, that deceived you. You must have seen this man in the distance, and your fears must have helped you to see a resemblance which, on near inspection, you would have found not to exist at all."

Nanny wavered for a moment. She would have been so glad to believe this. But a fresh, a stronger proof than that of her eyes suddenly recurred to her.

"She called him Captain Ryder," whimpered the poor child.

There was a pause. Old Mrs. Ryder felt the shock of this proof as strongly as she did, and grew white to the lips.

"You misunderstood," said she at last. "When

Dan returns he will tell you that he has been to Alder-shot to-day, and not to Bicton."

"He will tell me so, no doubt. Both you and he have told me things which are not true; and, because I am young and inexperienced, you think I am going to believe them in spite of the evidence of my own eyes and ears."

"What things have we told you which are not true?" asked old Mrs. Ryder, growing quieter as her companion grew more excited.

"You both told me there was no secret, no mystery, connected with your family. But there is a mystery, there is a secret, and, inexperienced though I may be, I mean to find it out. As for your caretaker, this Mrs. Durrant, she is what they call an adventuress. I have found that out already. And you have a reason for keeping her there."

Nanny rose, and, out of breath from the rapidity with which she had poured forth this indictment, stood looking at her mother-in-law with an expression of face which clearly said: Deny this if you can. But the old lady saw that denial was useless. She hesitated, listened for some minutes in silence to Nanny's quick breathing, and then tried to temporise.

"I don't deny, my dear child," she then began in her softest voice, "that there is a little bit of a secret (it is certainly not of importance enough to be called a mystery) about—about the property down there. But it concerns myself entirely, I give you my word of honor, and has nothing to do with Dan. Will you take my assurance—my oath if you like—and promise not to say a word about it to my son?"

"No," replied Nanny decidedly. "I can't promise that."

"Not if I assure you the secret merely concerns some money difficulties I have got into, through extravagant management of the estate? Would you betray an old woman to her son?"

"But, mamma, why do you make up all these stories to me, when I tell you I *know* something. I

know," and the young wife's voice dropped to a tone of sadness, as she hesitated for a moment to go on, "I know that poor Dan—was ill once, and—and not able to understand things clearly, and that this Mrs. Durrant was his nurse. And, you know, you yourself have said things about life in India, and its effects on men of nervous temperament——"

She stopped. Old Mrs. Ryder, whose face had lighted up with an expression of intense interest, turned to her suddenly.

"You mean that he—Dan—my son—has been—insane—mad?"

Nanny shuddered at the words.

"Oh no ; not that exactly—but——"

The old lady slipped down to her knees in front of Nanny, and clasped the hands of the young wife in a fierce grip. Her eyes seemed suddenly to have regained the brilliancy of youth, her fingers the strength of a girl.

"You are right, you are right!" she whispered earnestly. "I don't know how you learned it, but it is true. And don't you see, child, "she went on earnestly, peering into the face of the other, "that, this being so, you must never give a hint of the fact to him? And that you should, by every means in your power, dissuade him from settling in a place which has such melancholy associations for him?"

"What!" cried Nanny in alarm. "Was it at the White House that he lived when——"

"Hush!" interrupted the mother. "Ask no questions about that time. Be satisfied with what I have told you."

But a fresh trouble occurred to Nanny.

"I heard," she said in a trembling voice, "that Dan had been married before. If this is true I ought to have been told of it."

"It is not true. There is not a word of truth in it," asserted her mother-in-law energetically, but with a sudden break in her voice.

Nanny got up, crossed the room, and began to

look out of the window farthest from her mother-in-law. But if this was intended as a hint to the latter to go, it was a useless one. They remained silent, the one at the window and the other on the sofa, until the clock struck ten. A few minutes later Captain Ryder's step was heard in the corridor outside.

He entered quickly, and it was clear that his wife was queen of his thoughts.

"My darling! My darling, where are you?" he cried at once, in a low voice ringing with affection.

They did not use the gas, from a dislike of Nanny's to that means of illumination. Four candles stood on the table between the door and the window at which the young wife was standing. Therefore the first person Captain Ryder saw was his mother, and at sight of her his tone changed suddenly.

"You here, mother?" he said, not unkindly, though without much warmth.

"Yes, my son. You wrote to me, you know, asking me to take Nanny out."

"Oh, yes, to be sure I did. I—I had forgotten. Is she in her room?"

Nanny came forward and met him as he was crossing to the folding-doors, after having given his mother a somewhat perfunctory kiss.

"Why, child! what is the matter?" he asked in alarm.

For he detected, on the instant, a change in her manner towards him, and he glanced with a slight frown at his mother, as if he thought this was her doing.

"Nothing," she answered in a constrained voice. "I hope you have enjoyed yourself—at Aldershot."

"Well, yes—in a way I did. But I confess I don't find very much to enjoy now anywhere without you."

"Oh!"

This was not a hard, ironical interjection. It was rather a little, timid, embarrassed bleat thrown out helplessly instead of an answering comment. Captain Ryder was astonished. He looked again, angrily,

at his mother, who came forward with little hands stretched out before her, and pretty purring ways.

"She is tired to death, this poor child," said the elder lady, putting one hand caressingly on Nanny's arm. "We may as well tell you all about it, and you will be able to tell her in return that she is a fanciful little goose. But, remember, Dan, if she were not so fond of you, dear, she wouldn't take such fancies into her pretty head."

"What fancies? What is all this long preamble about?"

Nanny freed herself with quick movements from both mother and son.

"I—I went to Bicton to-day," she burst out hurriedly—"by myself," she added quickly, as again he glanced with a frown at his mother; "and I saw, or thought I saw, you there."

"Well?"

"Talking to a—a woman!"

"I was there, and I was talking to a woman. What then?"

Nanny felt confused. She put her pretty hands up to her forehead. What then, indeed? But she was not satisfied. Indeed, she only knew what she had known before. She had, however, no answer ready. It was old Mrs. Ryder who broke the momentary silence which followed.

"Nanny thought, dear, that you might have told her you were going to Bicton, or have waited until you could go with her. She is just as much interested in her new home as you, you see. I think some such thought as that was passing through the little mind; eh, dear?"

And again the caressing hand, which Nanny suddenly began to feel that she hated, was passed soothingly, and it seemed to her warningly, down her arm.

"Was that it, Nanny?" asked Captain Ryder very gravely.

"N—not exactly," said the young wife, flushing

deeply as she raised her face, but with her eyes still cast down. She was an honest, truthful girl, not given to petty deceits ; and although she stood somewhat in awe of her husband, she was determined to tell him the truth. "I—was—jealous."

"Jealous!" Captain Ryder laughed almost contemptuously ; "I shouldn't have thought it possible."

Again his mother broke in :

"Don't scold her, Dan. It is all over now, and——"

Captain Ryder interrupted her rather sharply.

"Scold her? Scold Nanny? Why, mother, what are you about putting such a notion into her head? I think you must know me well enough to be sure that to scold a loving woman, or a woman I love, is as impossible to me as it is to every other creature above the level of a brute!"

"I beg your pardon, dear ; I did not mean——"

Her tone was very humble, very contrite ; but this fact apparently irritated her son, who found it hard to keep all annoyance out of his tone as he interrupted her again :

"Listen, mother. You know I have not been to Brenton or Bicton since I was a little boy—a baby, I believe—and that I have left the management of the property there—at your request, mind—altogether in your hands. I go down there to-day for the first time, find two big, handsome houses there, not only untenanted but neglected—although I have been short of money for years—and I say nothing harsher to you than this bare statement of facts. Now, if I were the bully you are trying to make me out, should I be so lenient?"

Captain Ryder spoke, indeed, quite kindly. His mother looked guiltily at the floor.

"It is very difficult to let houses of any size about there. The neighbourhood has gone down so much lately," she said, with some sign of suppressed emotion in her voice. "But—but you will be glad to hear that I have heard of a possible tenant for the

White House. Of course I must make inquiries about the person. But if they are satisfactory you will no longer be saddled with a single unlet house—that is, if you are determined to live at Brent.”

“Quite determined,” said he simply.

She rose to go, and, having embraced her daughter-in-law, suffered Dan to escort her downstairs to the little victoria which, in spite of fallen fortunes, she always kept at her disposal when in town.

When Captain Ryder returned to his wife, he found her standing by the table, quietly waiting for him, with no pretence of being occupied.

“Dan,” she cried, as soon as his arms touched her, “I’m not satisfied. It is of no use to pretend that I am. What made you go to Bicton at all to-day? You said you would go with me.”

“I didn’t mean to go there at all, dear, to-day,” he answered, with a look of anxiety and annoyance, the result of the interview with his mother, still on his face. “I meant, as you know, to stay at Aldershot all day, and dine at mess with the —th. Well, two of my old friends were away; and what with the disappointment of not seeing them, and the uneasiness I always feel away from you, child, the day was a beastly failure, and I came straight off after luncheon. But remembering in the train that I had told my mother to take you for a drive, I got out at Clapham Junction, thinking I would run down and have a look at the place we are to live in. Now, if my mother hadn’t been talking to you, what would you have seen suspicious in that?”

“But, Dan, I heard that Mrs. Durrant, the care taker, as your mother calls her, say she was going to meet you. And then, what did you want that long interview with her in the garden for?”

“I had plenty to ask her about the house. And if you saw me with her, as you say, I don’t think my demeanour towards her can have caused you much jealousy. If she said she expected to see me to-day, it must have been simply that she had heard I was

in England, and supposed I should come down at once."

"But she is so—so good-looking, Dan! If she had been ugly, I should have thought nothing of it," confessed the young wife. "Or—next to nothing," she corrected, remembering the secret.

"She was a pretty woman, certainly," admitted Captain Ryder at once. "But there isn't in the world a woman pretty enough for you to be jealous of, my darling. Remember that, once for all."

He spoke so peremptorily that Nanny was rather frightened, especially as his manner betrayed a certain preoccupation of mind, such as she had never before noticed in him. When he perceived that she was watching him furtively, as, indeed, the poor child could not help doing, he recalled his wandering attention with a strong and evident effort, and devoted himself to her for the rest of the evening with an assiduity which disarmed her vague fears.

And yet, at the bottom of her heart there remained, whenever for a few moments he was not talking to her, the inevitable uneasiness which could not but follow her discoveries of that day. It seemed to her now that the consciousness of having what he believed to be secrets from her was growing heavy upon him. Yet she dared not confess she knew them. That he had had a former wife, that his mind had been affected, oh! she could never venture upon forcing his confidence upon such points as these! And then Dan would turn to her with looks and words of tenderness again, and the questions and the doubts at her heart would fade away.

The next day was one of almost perfect bliss for Nanny, for her husband gave her five pounds to spend as she liked, and took her out shopping. She had never in her life before had so much money, except burdened with the condition that it was "to last"; and no millionaire ever felt so conscious of the power that wealth gives as this young wife, as she hovered before the windows of the bonnet-shops, all her ener-

gies concentrated upon the choice of high brim or low brim, gray straw with marguerites, or black chip with poppies. Both husband and wife were glad to forget for a time the small annoyances and apprehensions connected with their settling down at The Grange; and neither Brent, nor Bicton, nor old Mrs. Ryder was mentioned by them in the course of that day.

On the following morning, however, both felt that there was a business before them which must be taken in hand, and Captain Ryder suggested, during breakfast, that they had better make their way down to Bicton at once.

“And get it over,” he added.

“Yes,” said Nanny.

They felt that old Mrs. Ryder’s management, or mismanagement, had made the subject an unpleasant one.

“Supposing we don’t go to live there at all, Dan?” suggested Nanny, who was weakly afraid of Mrs. Durrant and her ugly suggestions.

“Supposing we have no choice,” said he. “There we can live rent free, you know, if the house should prove habitable. And I suppose it is, or this Mrs. What’s-her-name——”

“Durrant,” put in Nanny, with a hot blush, wishing he had not thus affected scarcely to know her.

“This Mrs. Durrant couldn’t have lived there. At any rate, we’ll go and interview the lady, and perhaps it will all pass off more pleasantly than we could have hoped.”

He did not disguise the fact that he felt nervous about the visit, and he seemed anxious and preoccupied on the way down. As for Nanny, she was excited and curious about the meeting with Mrs. Durrant, who might, she felt, have some unpleasant communications to make in her anger at having to leave The Grange.

“Shall you tell Mrs. Durrant to-day for certain that

we are going to move in?" asked Nanny, as they were walking from Bicton Station.

"Certainly. But she knows it already. I shall tell her the date. I shall say the last week in October. That will give her a month."

"How came such a smart-looking person to consent to act just as caretaker?" asked Nanny, not without a feeling that she was on dangerous ground.

"I'm sure I don't know. It was my mother's doing," answered Dan shortly.

They had reached the pretty old wall. Between the branches of the trees, now thinning a little in the autumn breezes, the tall chimneys of the house could just be seen by eyes which knew where to look for them. The noonday sun streamed, bright and warm, on red wall, hanging ivy, and dusty road. The row of new vermilion semi-detached Gothic-church-cum-Swiss-châlet villas on the opposite side of the way glared in the heat. They reached the heavy gates, and rang the bell.

Again and again they rang, but there was no answer. They tried the side doors; they were locked. Captain Ryder, who said very little, began to grow angry; Nanny felt anxious and disturbed. At last a small boy from the village, with a basket on his arm and a half-devoured apple in his hand, came by, sat down on the gate which led into a paddock opposite, and looked at them. He offered no remark, however, and, having finished his apple, was passing on, when it occurred to Nanny to interrogate him.

"Can you tell me how to make the people in the house hear?" she asked. "We want to get in."

"You can't make 'em 'ear," replied the young gentleman simply. "They've gone."

Captain Ryder turned upon him, not without savagery.

"Then why couldn't you say so before?"

"'Cause you didn't ask me."

Nanny wanted to laugh, but her husband was so angry that she didn't dare to.

“Well, can you tell us any way of getting in?”

“Yes. You can go along the road till the wall ends, and then get over the rail and into the field, and go along under the wall. And then when you gets to the back you can go along by the wall again till you comes to a hole in it. And then you can get through. I’ve often got through that way after birds’ nests, and everybody’s been through that way this morning.”

There was no resisting the impulse to laugh now, and Nanny gave way to her merriment until the tears came into her eyes, so that in the end her husband was perforce obliged to join her. Much against the latter’s will, they were compelled to follow the boy’s directions, and, skirting the wall, they soon found themselves at the breach he had described. This was a gap caused in the first place by the fall of an old tree. Having been left unrepaired, marauding boys had taken care, by removing the bricks one by one, to make it more convenient for themselves, until there was now an opening wide enough to enter by without much difficulty. The boy with the basket, being apparently a gentleman of means with time on his hands, had followed them for the excitement of seeing them climb through.

“They haven’t gone away,” exclaimed Nanny, as she mounted into the aperture. “I see a lot of people—one, two, three, four—playing lawn-tennis.”

“That’s only Bambridges,” explained the boy.

“Bambridges” seemed to be making themselves at home. On a beautiful wide lawn, sheltered on all sides by big trees, three young girls and one young man were playing tennis with great vigour and enjoyment, making the old place ring with merry young voices. Nanny and her husband watched them for some minutes, admiring the pretty picture they made, in their light dresses, amongst the trees. At last, however, the young man caught sight of the intruders, just as Nanny had sprung to the ground and her husband was proceeding to follow her.

“Hallo!” he cried imperiously, “this is private property, you know. You’re trespassing.”

“And pray what are you doing, then?” asked Captain Ryder.

“Oh,” was the ready answer, “we’re in charge.”

A ripple of suppressed laughter from the girls showed what substance of truth was in this statement. Captain Ryder, followed by Nanny, who hoped he would not be too cruel to these delightfully impudent intruders, stepped into the midst of the group.

“You soon will be in charge if you don’t take yourselves off,” said he, with assumed ferocity. “I’m the owner of this place.”

The effect of this announcement was instantaneous and awful. As for the girls, their very racquets grew limp in their hands. One, the prettiest, seemed to feel the policeman’s hand already on her shoulder, and was trying to flee, while a more sedate sister detained her forcibly, and murmured incoherent apologies. The young fellow, who was evidently their brother, tried to keep up a bold front.

“What proof can you give us that you are the owner?” he asked haughtily.

But his sisters with one accord rose and fell upon him, metaphorically of course, and filled the air with apologies, some meek, some vehement, for his conduct and their own.

“And if you like to send him to prison, you can, and it will only serve him right,” added the plainest but most vivacious looking of the girls.

“Thank you,” said her brother, with a vicious look.

He was a bright-faced lad of twenty or so with pleasant eyes full of mischief.

One of his sisters, clearly the eldest of the party, had by this time recovered sufficient composure to give a coherent explanation of their presence.

“We are very, very sorry for——”

“Having been caught,” interpolated the vivacious sister.

The other went on; "For our intrusion. **But the** caretaker left the house yesterday, and——"

"And we didn't expect you to come so soon."

"And our tennis-lawn is such a miserable one, so small, and without any shade, that our brother——"

"That's right, put it all on to me!"

"Suggested that we should have just one game in here."

"And the temptation was so great that, being daughters of Eve, we fell," finished up the vivacious one.

Their spirits were rising all round as, looking from the half-smiling owner to his wholly smiling wife, the young people saw that they were forgiven.

"Well, you must own that you have committed a very serious offence. And, therefore, to punish you, I insist that you all remain here playing tennis, prisoners on parole, while my wife and I go over another house we have at Bicton."

"If you mean the place they call The White House," said one of the girls, "I don't think you can go over it now, for it has just been let to a gentleman who came in yesterday."

Husband and wife stared at each other in amazement. The tenant came in yesterday! And it was in a ruinous state the day before? Who could this singular gentlemen be?

As quickly as they could, they took leave of their amusing trespassers, and started off for The White House in search of an explanation.

They had scarcely got outside the walls, by the same means by which they had entered them, however, when Nanny, who had gone on ahead, while her husband lingered to disperse an admiring knot of small boys, had her attention attracted by the sight of a bent old man who, leaning against the wall as if he had received a blow, was gazing at Captain Ryder with eyes that seemed to start out of his head. He did not notice Nanny, but holding one hand to his

side, kept mumbling and muttering to himself as she approached.

“Lord save us! Lord save us!” he quavered, while beads of sweat stood on his forehead. “It’s the Captain; it’s himself; it’s no ghost. Lord save us! A murderer can’t rest in his grave; can’t rest—so they say, so they say. And there he is, sure enough, the very man I buried with my own hands twenty-nine years ago!”

A great sob of terror burst from Nanny’s lips and drew the old man’s attention to herself. His mouth closed with a sudden snap, and as Captain Ryder ran up to join his wife, the aged labourer bent his head over his stick with a mumbled word of supplication to Heaven.

CHAPTER VI.

CAPTAIN RYDER, as he came up to his wife, looked at her pale face and frightened eyes with astonishment and alarm.

“What is the matter, child? Are you ill? Has anything startled you?”

Nanny shook her head, trying to laugh, though the effort was not a very successful one. She slipped her arm through her husband's and walked along, leaning on him for support. Then she told the truth though not the whole truth.

“An old man—that old fellow who was leaning on his stick under the wall, began muttering and mumbling. And for the moment it startled me. No, no; don't speak to him,” she went on, as Captain Ryder turned quickly to look at the man; “he didn't mean to frighten me. He is childish, I expect.”

And Nanny told herself that this was the true explanation of the old labourer's alarming words; but as she walked on with her husband towards The White House, she wished with all her heart that he had not resolved to settle in Brent.

In twenty minutes they reached the deserted mansion.

The broken shutters had been thrown open, and a man was at work repairing the broken glass of the windows, and another was on the roof replacing some dislodged slates. These appeared to be the only changes consequent upon the letting of the house. The carriage gates, as the growth of grass and weed about them plainly showed, had not been disturbed, the workmen passing in and out by a little gate of ornamental iron-work which stood in the wall to

the right of the house. This gate, also, had been disused for so many years that a tangle of shrubs had grown close up to it on the inner side, thrusting their boughs through into the roadway, so that the neighbours had been accustomed to help themselves freely to sprays of lilac and laburnum in the spring, and to sprigs of holly in the winter. A passage had now been roughly made by tearing up a couple of these bushes by the roots. By the side of these, a plasterer's boy now kept watch and ward, throwing handfuls of gravel from time to time, to scatter the little crowd of curious children who gathered round the gate, much interested in the lively doings at the great house they had always seen shut up and deserted.

The boy seemed puzzled how to deal with the two grown-up visitors. He had been told not to let anyone pass, he said. A sixpence, however, was more effectual than an assurance from Captain Ryder that he was the owner of the house.

"He had been told," the boy said, "that the house belonged to an old lady."

Having succeeded in overcoming the boy's scruples, the next thing was to get up to the house. This was not easy, for the way to the front door was blocked not only by more overgrown shrubs and straggling plants, but by the ladders and planks and pots of the workmen. When at last they had stumbled to the front door, which was open, there was another difficulty in the fact that there was no knocker, and that the bell wouldn't ring.

"Of course," said Captain Ryder, "the gentleman who has taken the place in such a hurry cannot have come in yet. So we shall be doing no harm if we go in and look about for somebody to tell us something."

Now, Nanny had her doubts about this view; but not liking to put her suspicion into words, she followed her husband without comment. They passed through a wide and handsome hall, which Nanny observed was partly furnished. Old mats, a chair or two, and

a hatstand which now held the workmen's coats, all looked as if they had been here for many years. A strange discovery this, in a house supposed to be abandoned!

Dan, however, walked on, taking no apparent note of these things. They could not get through the long hall very fast, on account of the ladders and pails that were lying about. As Dan bore to the right, Nanny, seeing an open door at the end of the hall, on the left, jumped nimbly across the intervening impediments and peeped in. She saw a carpeted room of fair size, containing a small bed and a few pieces of plain furniture. There was no one in it. Nanny retreated from the door and rejoined her husband, but did not tell him what she had seen.

They peeped into a great empty dining-room, they visited a lofty drawing-room, where the damp had come through from the outside and peeled some of the white and gold paper off the walls. There was a veranda behind, raised from the garden by a few steps, and now a nest of wisteria, clematis, and Virginia creeper, which had spread over the railings in all directions, so that it was with difficulty that Nanny, opening the window, forced her way through to look out over the grounds. The wild, luxuriant vegetation in this neglected garden seemed to her, at that moment, more attractive than the better-cared-for beauties of the grounds of Brent Grange.

"Oh, Dan," she cried, "what a beautiful place this might be made!"

Dan who was standing just inside the window behind her, made no answer. He was staring out at the waste with a frown on his face, and a look of mingled anger and bewilderment.

There was a slight noise inside. A man's voice was heard uttering an impatient exclamation, a man's heavy tread along the floor. Then Captain Ryder found himself seized by the shoulder, and drawn back roughly into the room.

"What business have you here?" cried a voice,

which Nanny recognised. "Don't you know that you have no right to come inside this house at all now?"

He had got thus far, when Captain Ryder, recovering his breath, and indignant at the unceremonious handling, freed himself with so quick a movement that his assailant staggered back a yard or so. In the meantime, Nanny, breathless with amazement, and wondering what was going to happen next, appeared at the window, and instinctively caught her husband's arm.

"Dan," she exclaimed, "it's a mistake. This is Mr. Eley, the brother of Mrs. Durrant." Then, turning to Valentine, she went on with dignity, "This is Captain Ryder, my husband."

But this introduction failed to restore composure to the unfortunate Valentine, who still stared at Captain Ryder with an expression of quite unmistakable terror. He stammered, he grew red, he grew white, he did everything one would not have expected in a man so easily self-possessed as he had appeared to Nanny on her first acquaintance with him.

"You see," he said abjectly, looking from one to the other as he spoke, "this house—shut up so long, you know—What was it I said? I forget the words." Again he looked anxiously from the wife to the husband. "But every passer-by thinks he has a right to come in and—and tramp all about the place. And I assure you, Captain Ryder, I apologise most humbly."

Both the visitors had long since recovered their serenity, and Captain Ryder said at once :

"It is we who have to apologise, but the place was let so recently that we didn't think there was anyone inside but workmen. To tell you the truth, the first I heard of the letting was when I came down here this morning. Two days ago I was here, and there were no signs of a prospective tenant. I don't know even who has taken the house : perhaps you can tell me?"

But these remarks seemed to disconcert Valentine,

who flushed a deep beet-root colour, and laughed uneasily as he glanced at Mrs. Ryder.

“Well, the fact is—that I am your new tenant. I know you, Mrs. Ryder, will hardly think me an eligible one.” For Nanny could not repress a start of astonishment. “But—er—my friends—er—have come forward, and not being able to overlook the claims of such a deserving case, have set me on my feet again.”

Captain Ryder looked from the young man to Nanny, with an evident touch of jealousy at what looked like an understanding between her and this singular tenant. She turned to him, blushing and laughing very prettily.

“You know, Dan dear, I think I did tell you about my first meeting with Mr. Eley?” When Mr. Eley, having the misfortune to be behindhand with his rent, had his valuable furniture and effects sold and carted off before his very eyes.”

This recital seemed to give Valentine as much amusement as the incident had caused him. But it was scarcely to be wondered at that his new landlord did not see the matter in quite the same light. It was with a little coolness, therefore, on the one side at least, that they parted, Captain Ryder observing that they had left some people waiting for them at The Grange.

“The Bambridges, by any chance, may I ask?” said Valentine, who evidently knew something of those young people. “If so, they would say a good word for me, I’m sure.”

“It will take a great many good words from a great many people to make me like that young man,” said Captain Ryder decidedly to his wife as soon as they got outside. “I don’t like his face, and I don’t like what little I’ve heard of him. And he has exactly the manner towards women which they like, and I *don’t*,” he added emphatically.

This opinion of his was confirmed on his arriving at The Grange again, where the Bambridges, one

and all, sang Mr. Valentine Eley's praises. If one was less vehement than the rest, it was Laura, the vivacious one, who rather listened to than joined in the general chorus, but who blushed at every mention of Valentine's name. They were all delighted to hear the news that Nanny let slip, that it was he who had taken the White House. They all seemed surprised at the intelligence, however, and presently the story came out, as they all stood together under the great trees of The Grange, of the sale of his furniture when he lived in a little cottage on the green.

"That was his sister's fault, I'm sure," said Laura warmly. "I always did dislike that Mrs. Durrant. She was so mean, and thought so much of herself, and had curious ways of disappearing and reappearing. Of course, living here in the biggest house in the place, we were disposed to look up to her, and to expect her to take the lead in things. But she always said she was too poor. Though we never believed it until this morning, when we learnt that she had suddenly left the place for good, and——"

Laura was interrupted in her glib speech by Jessica, the eldest sister, a plain-featured, dark girl, who looked delicate, and whose only other salient characteristic was a remarkably sweet and gentle expression.

"You are making Captain Ryder think us very inquisitive, Laura," she said warningly.

And poor Laura, becoming suddenly aware how very indiscreet she had been, laughed and blushed, taking the reproof very well.

"You see," chimed in Adela, the youngest and only pretty sister, coming very gracefully to her sister's aid, "it really matters so much who lives here. And with nice people in it, it will be so different."

"Now we shan't be so dependent upon the Hitchins," cried Laura triumphantly, having already recovered her spirits.

"And pray who are the Hitchins?" asked Captain Ryder, smiling.

“Three old maids who live next door to us,” began at least two voices.

“And they keep doves and cats,” added Adela.

“And sometimes the cats eat the doves,” went on Laura.

“And then one of the maids comes with the Misses Hitchins’ compliments, and please have we found any feathers in the garden, as the Misses Hitchins is very much upset, and wants to give them a proper funeral!”

“And serve them right, for they encourage all the stray cats in the neighbourhood, until you can’t leave a hat out in the garden all night without finding a stray kitten in it in the morning,” concluded Arthur.

“And when we get up a bazaar, they always send two dozen kettle-holders, and two dozen penwipers, and two dozen bookmarks, with hieroglyphics worked on them, that read ‘Kiss me,’ when you twirl them round and round. And if they’re not all sold (and they never are), Arthur has to make the rest up in a parcel and leave them in a train, or they’d be offended, and they would never put into our raffles any more.”

Having talked herself out of breath, Laura took her eldest sister’s hint, and held out her hand in farewell to Nanny.

“Please forgive us for detaining you so long,” said staid Jessica, as they all prepared to go.

They all trooped off in the direction of the gate, but, finding that locked, had to retreat with ignominy through the gap in the wall by which they had come. Adela, however, the youngest girl, ran back breathlessly to ask if they wanted to get into the house, and whether they had a key.

“For I know it’s locked,” she said, with a laugh and a blush, “because we were dying of curiosity to know what it was like inside, and we—we tried the doors.”

“What! haven’t you ever been in the house, when you lived so near?” asked Nanny.

“No, never. Mamma wouldn't let us visit Mrs. Durrant. She didn't like the look of her, she said. I've come back to ask if I shall run across to old Mrs. Spriggs, who has charge of the key?”

They didn't want to trouble her, they said. But Adela said it was no trouble, and ran off, perhaps not without a secret hope that she would be rewarded by an invitation to get a peep at the interesting old house before any of her brothers and sisters.

If this was her thought, she was not disappointed. When she returned with the key, her round, rosy cheeks flushed with running, Captain Ryder unlocked the front door, and admitted both ladies into a wide, low hall—spoiled, to fastidious modern eyes, by two mean wooden staircases with painted banisters. However, the interior of the house was not altogether a disappointment. It had been beautifully kept; the dust of the one day only that it had been shut up lay lightly on the furniture, which was just not old-fashioned enough to be in fashion, and consisted chiefly of the curly-legged chairs, inlaid tables, and whatnots of the “Keepsake,” period of civilisation. The pictures were either heavy engravings, dark copies of “old masters,” or fruit and flower subjects and landscapes in watercolours of a strictly conventional kind. The carpets and curtains also, and the tawny sheepskin mats, dated from pre-South Kensington days. But there was an appearance of cosiness and comfort about the low-ceilinged lower rooms, and a freshness about the white dimity of the bedrooms, which gave a charm of their own to the old place.

“It's like going through the Sleeping Beauty's house, and expecting every moment to come upon her,” said Nanny. “Whatever this poor Mrs. Durrant may have been like, she certainly kept the place in most beautiful order.”

This last remark was not quite spontaneously made. She looked at her husband to see whether this comment would draw forth some expression of

opinion concerning the caretaker. But it did not. Captain Ryder was busy, examining with interest an old rifle which hung on the wall, with a number of similar relics, in a little corner room on the ground-floor.

"This must have been my father's study," he said, as he glanced around him at the massive amateur tool-chest, with marks of use and wear; the neat bookcase with its rows of undisturbed, beautifully-bound standard works; the hunting sketches; the horse's hoof mounted as an inkstand. Everything in the little room betrayed the tastes of a young man whose habits had been active rather than sedentary. The study was at the corner of the house, with windows looking to the north and east. These did not open down to the ground, but were so low that from the wide, cushioned window-seats it was easy to get out on to the soft grass underneath. But a thick growth of creepers hung over the windows, tapping at the frames as the wind stirred them, and the moving branches of the trees made strange, shifting patterns in the afternoon sunlight on the faded drab carpet.

Nanny saw that her husband was deeply moved, and she stole up to him while their young girl companion was trying the window-seats.

"It reminds you of him very much, doesn't it, Dan?" she murmured.

Captain Ryder started.

"I can hardly say it reminds me of him, for I never saw my father. He died before I was born. But it all touches one, of course."

He turned from her to examine a crayon drawing of a little fair-haired lady with very blue eyes and very pink cheeks, which hung on the wall opposite to one of the windows.

"She is very pretty," said Nanny, with a jealous feeling. "Who is it?"

"My mother. There is not much resemblance left to that, is there?"

Nanny, in astonishment, had to admit that there was not.

“And your father. Isn't there a portrait of him somewhere?”

“I think not. At least I have never seen one. But I have sometimes entertained a suspicion that the poor old lady treasures one up for her own eyes only, as something too sacred to be shown even to me.”

Adela rose suddenly from her window-seat with an exclamation.

“They are coming back,” she said. “And, oh, look what they are bringing!”

Over the lawn, laughing, scolding each other, putting their burden in imminent danger, came Laura and Arthur, with a wicker-work table between them set out for tea.

“Mamma has sent this, with her compliments and apologies for our shocking conduct.—There now, you have joggled the cream all over the bread-and-butter!” panted out Laura, all in the same breath.

“It was you who joggled. If it had been me——”

“I,” corrected Jessica, who was following with a plate of cake.

“If it had been I,” went on Arthur, accepting the correction without comment, “the cream would have gone over the biscuits. That stands to reason. Only women have no reason. Captain Ryder will see the justice of my case.”

“And Mrs. Ryder. You are positively insulting, Arthur.”

“Not at all,” said Arthur gravely. “Married ladies learn reason from their husbands. Mrs. Ryder has learnt it from her husband, just as my wife will learn it from me.”

He was laughed down in contemptuous chorus, while his sisters asked Nanny whether they should place the table under a big mulberry-tree which grew near the southeast corner of the house.

“But won't you stay and have tea with us?” asked

she, when she had thanked them, and they were preparing to retire. "We shall be so disappointed if you won't."

"There, I told you so!" said Arthur, aside to Laura triumphantly. "I will go and fetch some more cups and saucers," he added aloud, with an obliging smile.

But, from the speed with which he reappeared, it was too evident that, expecting an invitation, he had had those cups and saucers within easy reach. He further "gave himself away," as he himself expressed it, by his alacrity in bringing out some chairs from The Grange drawing-room—which led to the confession that he and Charlie had before now watched Mrs. Durrant go out, and then broken into the grounds and made explorations.

"Of course," added Arthur hastily, perceiving that he might have admitted too much, "we shouldn't think of doing so now. It doesn't matter how one behaves to persons one is not on visiting terms with."

With which appalling axiom, delivered with as little concern as if it had been a truism, Arthur helped himself abundantly to cake.

This unexpected meeting with bright lads and lasses of her own age delighted Nanny, whose spirits had, in spite of her husband's devotion, suffered somewhat in consequence of her recent discoveries. She expressed her pleasure to them with frank confidence. Arthur shook his head.

"It is lucky it was I, and not Charlie, who stayed away from the City to-day, then," he said, with sublime modesty. "Or we should not have made such a favourable impression. You won't like Charlie, I'm afraid. At least, he may be a very good fellow, but—he rides a bicycle."

"And why not?" asked Captain Ryder. "It isn't everybody who *can* ride one."

"I look upon the rider of a bicycle as only one degree above the reader of *Tit-Bits*," said the lad majestically.

“There are sometimes very amusing things in *Tit-Bits*, Arthur,” cried Adela, blushing. “In a copy I found in your coat-pocket the other day——”

There was a most unkind outburst of laughter, which did not disconcert Arthur, who went on to explain that he had bought that copy as a text on which to read his elder brother a lecture on the vitiation of the mind by “scrappy” reading.

And so, amid a buzz of light laughter and “young” talk, tea under the mulberry-tree came to an end, and the lad and the lasses, with hearty farewells, tripped across the grass with their table and cups and saucers, leaving an echo of their merriment in the old trees.

Then silence fell suddenly on the couple, who wandered indoors, and began to peer about into the nooks of the old house, making closer acquaintance with it. Then they stood under the cuckoo clock in the gallery over the hall, while the little wooden bird sprang out and jerked forth his two notes as six o'clock struck. It was getting dark and cool, and rather melancholy, Nanny thought. Her husband was so silent, and the old trees did sway about so, and make such a sad sound in the rising night breeze.

Suddenly they heard the sound of a key in the lock of the front door down below.

“Hallo!” said Captain Ryder to his wife in an undertone; “keep back, and don't make a sound. This looks like burglary.”

Nanny obeyed, and retreated into the corner by the clock. Her husband went quietly down the stairs, and waited, grasping his stick tightly, for the door to open. But it was no burglar who entered: it was Pickering, the old gardener, who started back at sight of Captain Ryder with a very evident shock.

“Captain!” he exclaimed, in a low voice full of alarm, “you here? Why, Lord love you! sir, how did you get in? Didn't you know she'd gone away, sir? The old lady came and packed her off yesterday, and she went as meek as any lamb.”

“What the — do I care how she went?” cried Captain Ryder, in an irritable voice. “If you mean by ‘her’ and ‘she’ the woman who has been living here, and who has left me the legacy of another undesirable tenant in the person of her brother.”

“Oh, yes, sir,” answered Pickering, in an entirely different tone of voice. His sharp eyes had caught sight of the outline of Nanny’s head and hat against the window at the end of the gallery. The suggestion of affectionate intimacy had gone from his voice which had become on the instant cold, distant, and respectful. “I beg your pardon, but I thought you had perhaps called to see Mrs. Durrant about the furniture and the state of the place, sir, before coming in. But she had an ‘infantry’ made, sir, most careful, and I don’t think you’ll find anything wrong, barring the roof over one of the attic bedrooms lets in the water a little at times.”

“Confound the roof!” said Captain Ryder shortly, as he turned away, and glanced anxiously up towards the place where his wife was standing.

He foresaw that a “scene,” or a misunderstanding, or something unpleasant of the sort, was inevitable. For Nanny had come forward, and was leaning against the railing of the balcony, and he could hear that she was breathing heavily, and see that her slender little figure was shaking like the branches of the wind-tossed trees outside.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN RYDER did his wife injustice. Nanny was very young, very inexperienced; but common-sense and her affection for her husband served her as well, in this emergency, as maturity and knowledge of the world could have done. The little scene she had just witnessed seemed only to prove what she knew already, that Dan had not been quite frank with her, in that he had certainly known Mrs. Durrant more intimately than he professed to have done.

But, on the other hand, if this woman had really been his nurse while his mind was affected, Dan, wishing to keep the whole matter from coming to his wife's ears, would, of course, have to pretend he knew nothing of her. Nanny wished that Dan would have confided in her, and she made up her mind that some day, when the awe in which she still held her dignified husband should have a little abated, she would worm out of him, by coaxing and by practising all the arts of cajolery she knew, the secrets she had already learned. He should tell her about that unhappy first marriage, and even about the mental illness which she felt sure was a consequence of it.

And then there flashed suddenly through her mind the horrible words uttered in her hearing that day by the old labourer: wild, childish, rambling as they were, they troubled her. There must be yet another secret in this family into which she had married; Nanny resolved to find out what she could about her husband's immediate ancestors. For one word in the old grave-digger's rambling talk had frightened her.

"It's getting late, Dan, isn't it? We ought to be

going back," she said, with a little nervous tremor in her voice, as her husband came up to her.

Captain Ryder, who had reached the top of the staircase, saw that her hands were clasping and unclasping the railing of the gallery. He knew that she must have heard what passed between him and Pickering; and, much as he had dreaded a "scene" over the incident, he thought it better to have done with it there and then.

"Yes," he said briefly, in answer to her suggestion. And then, coming a little nearer to her, so that she might not, in the half-light, be able to hide the expression of her face from him, he said: "You heard the way in which that man spoke to me when he first came in, Nanny. Now, what did it make you think? Tell the truth, dear."

The young wife hesitated a moment before replying, in a low voice:

"It made me think that you must have known Mrs. Durrant before, and——"

"And, therefore, that I had told you a falsehood in saying I did not know her?"

"No, no, Dan, not that. I don't remember, now I think of it, that you ever did tell me, in so many words, that you had never seen her before yesterday. And, Dan dearest, you don't think I should trouble my head about an idle word said by a servant. Whatever you do is right to me, and what you tell me I believe without any question."

"Then you will believe me when I tell you that I am not even sure that the woman I saw yesterday was Mrs. Durrant. I only know that she said she was the person in charge of The Grange. Now are you satisfied?"

Captain Ryder spoke with more irritation than he had ever before shown to his bride, and she listened to his words without comment. But she was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. She could have remained content with half knowledge, and would have put her own simple-minded and most generous con-

struction upon that part of the matter which she did not know. But this challenge she could not directly face. He had denied too much.

“I was satisfied before, Dan,” she said timidly.

“But are you satisfied now?” he persisted, being much too keen of sense where she was concerned not to be conscious of the slight constraint which peeped out under her wifely submission.

He came nearer to her, and his right hand, which had so often caressed her passionately, touched hers on the railing. And emotion becoming on the instant stronger than reason, she caught his arm and put her fresh young face close to his.

“I am satisfied—I am satisfied that you love me—only me! And that whatever you say it is right for me to believe, if all the world besides denied it!”

Well, no husband of a month's standing could be otherwise than content with such a declaration so uttered. And he showered kisses on her pretty lips, and as she leaned in his arms they both forgot the untoward incident; and they left the old house with the feeling that they would be happy together within its walls. But as they drew near the gate they saw Pickering, standing like a sentinel on duty, among the trees not far off. Captain Ryder called to him; but, affecting not to hear, the man disappeared in the shrubbery. And husband and wife, thus reminded of what they would fain have forgotten, made no comment, but felt again a slight uneasiness—none the less vexatious because neither would confess it to the other.

Next day Captain Ryder started off immediately after breakfast to see his mother. He returned to the hotel to luncheon, disturbed, annoyed and gloomy. Nanny asked him no questions, but of his own free will he presently satisfied her curiosity.

“I have had it out with the old lady,” he said when, luncheon over, Nanny was lighting his cigar for him.

“Well, dear.”

“I put it to her that I couldn’t afford to have a big place like the White House kept empty for the sake of this lazy young *protégé* of hers—that Eley.”

“What did she say to that?” asked Nanny, full of excitement.

“Said she had a personal regard for the fellow: one of his relations had rendered great services to our family.”

“And then—how did it end?”

“Just now? Oh, in her having her own way, of course. I suggested that she should offer this young man one of a row of pretty little cottages I have at Teddington, as being much more comfortable and convenient for a young man than a great rambling house. She would not hear of it.”

“Well, now, isn’t there something suspicious and mysterious about that fact itself?” asked Nanny, who was secretly full of indignation against both brother and sister for their cynical avowal of their intention to live on her husband.

“My mother, Nanny, belongs to a large class of strong-willed, imperfectly educated women who delight in mysteries—no matter how petty—because they give them the sense of power, of possessing some little scrap of generally useless knowledge not held by some one else.”

“And you think such a petty feeling ought to be indulged?”

“No, dear. I indulge it against my better judgment. The old lady is mistress of every art by which a woman gets her own way. When I pleaded poverty, and the hardship it was to me to have a big place bringing in no rent, she said Valentine Eley should pay me rent, and that if I did not think it sufficient, she would give up her own brougham and give me what it cost a year to keep it up.”

“But it was unfair to say a thing like that. And, do you know, Dan—of course you won’t believe me, but I don’t believe she meant to give her brougham up.”

“Of course she did not. I knew that all the time.”

“And you let her have her own way all the same? Dan, you are more indulgent to your mother than you are to me.”

“Quite true, child. You are tender, unselfish, submissive. You have been well educated, and not spoilt. As you can never attain to it, I don't mind telling you that a steady, aggressive selfishness is the best means in the world of getting your own way, not only in youth, but in age.”

Captain Ryder spoke with much bitterness, and Nanny would not let him say another word upon the subject. She was not really jealous of his mother's influence with Dan, since that influence did not extend to an empire over his heart. That, Nanny thought, was her province, and it was one in which she feared no rival. Indeed, in spite of his submission to old Mrs. Ryder in the matter of Valentine Eley, he showed a growing wish to emancipate himself altogether from what Nanny saw had been a tyranny.

Thus, when his young wife suggested consulting the old lady as to the servants they would want, and asking her help in engaging them, Captain Ryder answered very shortly that she had better trust her own judgment.

“We don't want a spy in the house,” he added hastily : then, feeling that he had gone a little too far, he laughed and said in a more leisurely tone : “These dear old ladies always want to know too much about a household that is newly started, Nanny. Servants look upon the woman who engages them as their mistress, and we don't want it reported to my mother or any one else what bad judges we are of a leg of mutton, or how wasteful we are with the sugar.”

“But, Dan dear, that's just what I'm afraid of! I *am* a bad judge of a leg of mutton, and I *shall* be wasteful with the sugar! You ought to have married Meg. She's a splendid housekeeper.”

“Perhaps if I'd wanted to marry a housekeeper I

should have chosen Meg. We'll have a cook-house-keeper, and then you won't have to tease your pretty little head about it."

"Oh, Dan, won't that be too extravagant?"

"I think we can manage it. Then we must have three other woman-servants; and for the present at least we must do without any men-servants, except just a gardener and coachman. Of course you must have a brougham."

"But, Dan, I don't want one. I——"

"It is not what you want, but what my wife must have," interrupted he decidedly. "As soon as we are settled I am going up to Durham, where I have a little property. It has not suffered like the Bicton estate, from my mother's mismanagement; but I am going to see whether the most is being made of it, which I doubt."

For the next few days husband and wife were busily occupied, the former with business, the latter with the search for servants. Unluckily, of the four she chose, only two were disengaged and could come at once. However, Nanny and her husband decided to settle in their new home without further delay, and manage without a parlour-maid and with only one housemaid for a little while.

Before the end of October, therefore, they took possession of The Grange.

It was on a raw, cold day, with a drizzle of rain falling, that they arrived. Nanny rather prided herself on her forethought in having told the two servants who could come to settle in the house the day before, so as to have everything ready. But only the cook-housekeeper, a middle-aged woman with a formidably excellent character and an appearance to match, had put in an appearance when her master and mistress arrived. She had a cold in the head, was very cross at having had to stay in the house alone all night, and gave an appalling account of the deficiencies of the place. Having been used to large households, she had a way of talking which

crushed poor Nanny and drove Captain Ryder to frenzy.

“The kitchen-range was of a sort she had never even seen before, and was evidently not intended for the purpose of cooking. All the chimneys smoked except one ; and in the case of that exceptional one, not only the smoke, but the heat also, went up the chimney. The passage was draughty, the boards creaked. The——”

Captain Ryder would not let his wife hear any more. He cut the woman's complaints very short, and began to lead Nanny, who was almost in tears, straight to the study. But as they went the cook-housekeeper, raising her voice, managed to deliver a parting salute which struck terror to the heart of her so-called mistress.

“And you will please understand, ma'am, that I leave this day month, and that if you can suit yourself before that, I should be glad, ma'am. I've been used to the best families, and to having everything regular and comfortable. Let alone that I did not expect to be left alone in the 'ouse, which it's damp and not fit to sleep in without a month of airing, and with old women with staring eyes prowling about and asking questions which would never be heard of a respectable 'ouse.”

Nanny dragged her arm out of her husband's suddenly as these last words, uttered in a shrill, piercing tone, fell upon her ears.

“What does she mean, Dan ?” asked she, shaking with nameless fears.

“I don't know,” said he savagely. “But whatever she means, we'll have no more of her nonsense, for we'll send her about her business this very minute.”

He was proceeding to suit the action to the word, when Nanny detained him, clinging to his arm.

“Don't, Dan ; don't. At least till one of the others comes. I can't cook and I can't light fires, and——and——”

She broke down, and began to cry. Captain Ryder,

half distracted, found the first experience of life in one's own home disappointing. He postponed the eviction of the cook, while he proceeded to dry his wife's eyes and console her.

"Don't—don't cry, there's a dear, good child!" he said, slapping her hands under the vague impression that this was a preventive of hysterics.

But through his kind words Nanny heard a fresh outburst from the indignant cook, who had expected to have her wounded feelings soothed, and who had instead overheard her master's threat of dismissal.

"Send her about her business, will you? No, nobody ever yet treated Sarah Tebbits with insult, nor yet they never shan't either," she cried in vindictive tones. "Nor yet wouldn't she stay in a place where there was a doubt who her mistress was either. And when old women that comes to pry about the place says, says they: 'Is your mistress plain Mrs. Ryder, or is she Lady Ellen Ryder?' why then I says to myself, 'Sarah Tebbits, says I, this is no place for *you!*'"

With which words, uttered with vicious emphasis, the enraged cook-housekeeper slammed a door, and for a time effaced herself.

Husband and wife had both listened, both heard. Of the two, Captain Ryder was the more startled by her angry speech, and by the mention of "Lady Ellen." Half lifting her off her feet, he led Nanny into the study. It was cheerless and cold there, and the room felt damp, as if it had not been used for some time. A fine rain was falling, blurring the window panes, and making the garden outside look fresh and green.

"What shall we do?" cried Nanny, sinking on the sofa, and looking tearfully at her husband.

The fireplace was filled with the old-fashioned white shavings which had been put there for the summer. The idea of making a fire in it seemed too remote to afford any hope or comfort. Captain Ryder was struck with a cheering suggestion.

"I know," he said. "I'll find out those nice girls

who were here the other day ; they'll do something for us."

But Nanny felt reluctant for him to go.

"I'm so afraid," she said, "that that dreadful woman will come in and abuse me again. Couldn't I go with you?"

"In the rain? No, my darling ; you had better stay here. I know by what those girls said that they live close by. I shall be back in a few minutes."

He sat down on the sofa beside her, trying to coax her into acquiescence. It was some minutes, however, before he could persuade her to let him leave her. It was clear that something of more importance than a servant's ill-humour was troubling the poor child's mind.

"Lady Ellen ! Who did she mean by Lady Ellen ? And who could the old woman be whom she said she found prowling about here ?" she broke out at last.

"Oh, only some old local busybody who makes other people's affairs the business of her wretched life," answered Captain Ryder impatiently.

"But Lady Ellen ? Who is Lady Ellen ? Do you know anything of her ?"

His reply to this was shorter and more constrained :

"Never mind old women's tales now. Let us think about ourselves."

The sofa on which they were sitting was in the corner between the two windows. Suddenly the light from the north was partially shut out, and husband and wife became aware of a face peering in, close to the glass.

"There she is !" cried Nanny, starting up.

The wet creeper outside swung about and scattered a shower of raindrops, as the intruder drew back quickly on perceiving that the room was not empty. Almost as quickly, however, she recovered her ground on catching sight of Captain Ryder, and stood as if transfixed, gazing at him steadily through a gold double-eyeglass.

"Who is she ? who is she ? What does she mean

by spying on us?" asked Nanny in indignation and fear.

"I haven't the least idea, but I think we'll have an explanation," said he.

Perhaps the woman outside heard or guessed the gist of their talk. At any rate, she disappeared so promptly that by the time Captain Ryder had gone along the passage to a garden door, unbolted it, and got outside the house, there was no sign of her recent presence to be seen in any part of the garden. When he returned to his wife, she had on her gloves again, and was standing up ready to accompany him, and he no longer tried to dissuade her.

The first person they met in the road outside was able to tell them where "Bambridges" lived. It was in a pretty white house, facing the green, with trees and tall shrubs darkening all the front windows. The panels of the front door were decorated with what looked, when the gas was alight, like stained glass, and the hall showed traces of pretty taste, clever fingers, and visits to Liberty's.

Nanny and her husband had not been five minutes inside the house when they felt that they had found rest from their troubles. Once settled in the pretty, bright drawing-room, overfilled with marvels of crewel-work, string-work, fret-work, and every other sort of work which busy girl-fingers could do, with kind Mrs. Bambridge listening sympathetically, the girls indignantly, and the big brother Charlie ferociously, to her account of the onslaught of the cook and the apparition of the old woman, Nanny recognised that the tragedy of it was all over.

"Mrs. Calverley!" cried a chorus at the mention of the face at the window.

"Who is she?" asked Nanny.

"She is the *grande dame* of the place, the only person in Brent who ever dares to consider herself on the same footing as The Grange people," cried Laura, in spite of a reproving glance from her mother, which, indeed, she did not see. "She looks down upon us

from a great height, and has never called upon us, in all the four years we have lived here, until two days ago."

"And then it was only because she had heard the girls had seen you, Mrs. Ryder, so she called to 'pump' them about you," said Charlie, who was a very tall young man, with a plain-featured, intelligent face, and an expression of quiet mischief in his eyes.

Mrs. Bambridge, good soul! looked much distressed by her children's ill-chosen cackle. She was a kind, motherly woman, of a type common enough in England—honest, honourable, industrious, unselfish, devoted, full of practical common-sense in the small matters of life, in whom the natural striving after the ideal found vent in petty ambitions to be thought something a little different from what she was. The greatest grief she had ever known had been her husband's insistence on leaving their gloomy porticoed house in an obscure part of Bayswater for the fresher air and lower rent of Brent. "How could she hope to get the girls off at Brent?" she had piteously asked him. Nor was she comforted by the reminder that her "at homes" in the Bayswater back street, where she had successfully reproduced the heat and the overcrowding of a fashionable reception while missing its brilliancy, had not brought the young men to their knees. "Not even your lukewarm lemonade and flabby biscuits would drive 'em to it, Emily, you know," chuckled her matter-of-fact husband, who was an accountant in the City, with no soul for social aspirations.

And of late her very children seemed to be taking more and more her husband's view of the matter, and not hers. Here they were, at the moment when a lucky accident had brought them prominently under the notice of "The Grange people," and placed them on a footing of intimacy with them, taking a lower ground, and undoing the good of it all!

"What nonsense, Charlie!" she exclaimed.

“Why should Mrs. Calverley look down upon us? I am sure she was most civil.”

“Well, mother, ten minutes’ civility once in two years ought not to be too great a strain on the constitution of a lady who has married the second cousin of an Irish viscount.”

“I don’t know why you should sneer, Charlie. It is not her fault that Mrs. Calverley is well connected.”

“No, it is our misfortune.” Charlie got up, and crossed the room to Captain Ryder. “If you want to get rid of the cook to-night,” he suggested, “you had better pack her off before it gets dark.”

Captain Ryder agreed, and accepted the offer of the young man’s companionship on the expedition.

“If she won’t go of her own accord,” said Charlie, with a grim smile, “I’ll undertake that Arthur and I will dislodge her.”

Mrs. Bambridge now came forward, insisting that both husband and wife should remain her guests for the night. But, while accepting the invitation for Nanny, Captain Ryder refused it for himself. He would sleep at The Grange, to take care of it.

He and Charlie Bambridge had not left the house more than five minutes when another visitor was announced, whose name caused a great flutter—Mrs. Calverley. For while Mrs. Bambridge was delighted beyond measure that it was at her house that the two great ladies of the neighbourhood would meet, poor Nanny was full of passionate excitement at the thought of encountering a woman whose questions and prying investigations proved that she had some knowledge of, and interest in, the Ryder family.

Not all her vague surmises and apprehensions, however, had prepared Nanny adequately for the critical stare, the compressed lips, the frigid bow, with which the old *grande dame* of the neighbourhood greeted the young one. She had evidently not expected this meeting, and, while affecting annoy-

ance, was really delighted at this opportunity of expressing her mysterious disapproval of the new mistress of The Grange. To the other ladies this behaviour seemed a mere affectation of importance; but Nanny knew better.

The young wife remained very silent during the old lady's visit; but when, after a little bald talk about trifles, Mrs. Calverley rose to go, Nanny took the opportunity of a diversion caused by the overturning of the cream-jug on to the carpet by Mrs. Bambridge's lap-dog to address the departing guest rapidly, in a tone almost as haughty as that lady's own. She wanted an explanation of the look on Mrs. Calverley's face at sight of her husband.

"You know my husband, Mrs. Calverley?" she asked in very low and rapid, but firm tones.

"I have not that honour now. I knew him in the time of his first wife, Lady Ellen—many years ago."

On fire to hear more, and with self-command enough still to speak low and quickly, Nanny said:

"My husband is only thirty years of age, madam."

The elder woman merely smiled with thin, drawn lips. Nanny looked her full in the eyes.

"When did this Lady Ellen die?" she asked very quietly.

The answer, in spite of its cruelty, came without hesitation:

"I never heard of her dying at all."

Nanny received the blow almost without emotion. Before she put this last question she had known what the answer would be.

II

CHAPTER VIII.

No one who knew her, not even Nanny herself would ever have guessed that she was capable of bearing a great shock so bravely as she bore Mrs. Calverley's announcement that her husband had already a wife living when he married her. Perhaps if she had had no hint of the blow before it fell, she would have felt it more. As it was, for a few moments she felt stunned, and then she remembered that her manifest duty was to hide every sign of emotion until she had been able to test the truth of the statement she had just heard. So she sat down as Mrs. Calverley went out ; and when one of the girls asked her if she would have another cup of tea, she said " Yes," and drank it with a perfect appearance of composure.

" How dreadfully tired you look ! " cried Mrs. Bambridge suddenly, with kindly solicitude.

The only indication Nanny betrayed of the emotions which were agitating her, was in her lips, from which the bright vermilion colour which usually contrasted so strongly with her pale face had altogether disappeared. She laughed a little without apparent effort.

" I *am* tired," she confessed ; " my head feels quite confused and sleepy."

They brought her smelling salts and eau de Cologne, and in their gentle attentions Nanny felt the balm of sympathy. They were like Meg, she thought, and this was the highest praise she could give.

While they were thus ministering to a need so much greater than they supposed, Mr. Bambridge and his younger son arrived from the City. The former gave Nanny the impression of being a very

good match for his kind, sensible wife ; but the latter engaged more of her attention by his lamentations when he heard the story of the cook.

“ Why wasn't I here ? ” he exclaimed, feeling more burdened than usual with the sense that nothing could be done well without him. “ What's the good of Charlie in a thing of this sort ? It wants diplomacy, and—I know ! ” and his face lighted up as with inspiration, “ magnesium wire ! ”

“ What ? ” cried two of the girls together.

“ Don't say ‘ What ? ’ It's vulgar,” corrected Arthur, walking towards the door. “ And I can't stop to explain. You shall hear all about it when it's done.”

With an air of great importance he disappeared, paying no heed to his father's injunctions not to set The Grange on fire with his clown's tricks, and to ask Captain Ryder and Charlie to come back to dinner, and put off killing the cook till afterwards.

The time went on, dinner was put back, but neither Captain Ryder nor the boys returned. Poor Nanny grew very uncomfortable, and begged so hard that they would not wait for her husband that Mr. Bambridge, with a fine courtesy unusual in a City man ordered the dinner to be brought up instead of grumbling at the delay. Then, after a meal which he rather hurried in the fear that something might have gone wrong, he put on his straw hat and said he would go and see whether his young ruffians had blown up The Grange and its master.

Kind Mrs. Bambridge, divided between solicitude for her husband's digestion and hospitable sympathy with Nanny's growing anxiety, begged him to have his nap first, a prayer in which the younger ladies all joined.

“ It makes me so miserable to put you all out so,” pleaded Nanny.

“ And you're always so cross, you know, papa, if you don't get your forty winks,” said Adela.

“ You impudent little baggage ! ” grumbled Mr. Bambridge, with good humour. And he kissed her

as she let him out and looked anxiously at the sky. "It won't rain again," said he; "it has cleared up for the evening."

Now, the one great anxiety at Nanny's heart had swallowed up all smaller ones; so that she felt little or no uneasiness at her husband's delay in returning. Nor was she even alarmed when Arthur came back, and, instead of entering the room, called his mother into the hall, said a few words to her, and went out again.

Mrs. Bambridge did not come back into the drawing-room; and Laura, whose tongue wagged more merrily when the restraint of her mother's presence was removed, threw open the window and offered to show Nanny "the estate."

"We always call it the 'estate' when mamma isn't here," said she gaily, as she stepped out on to a veranda so small that there was only room on it for one American lounging-chair.

"And sometimes when she is, Laura," added Jessica reproachfully.

"Now tell me, Mrs. Ryder," cried Laura, without heeding her sister, "did you ever see so much in so little before?"

Nanny could truthfully say "No." In the ambitious attempt to make one poor little half-acre yield all the joys of a garden six times its size, the resources of that poor corner of earth had been taxed to the utmost.

First, there was a lawn which you could have covered with a good-sized tablecloth, and at the corners were flower-beds so diminutive that the unhappy geraniums and calceolarias seemed to jostle each other for breathing-space. At the back of this came a rockery, on which there flourished, among other things which did not flourish, one fern of fair size. A thin hedge separated this part of the garden from the pond, in the centre of which a fountain threw up a jet of water, the volume of which was exactly equal to the stream poured from a teapot. Meagre

as the fountain was, however, it was almost strong enough to wash right out of the pond the one small duck swimming round and round in it. Over the pond was one big tree, which spread its branches on the one side over this vast sheet of water, and on the other over the tennis-court, which was the next attraction. Then came a forest of scarlet runners, in the midst of which was a summer-house. And to the beans succeeded a row of small frames, in which grew cucumbers and melons of corresponding diminutiveness. And at the end of all a narrow little strip of ground had been set aside as a run for half a dozen fowls. Round the whole of the garden ran a narrow path, and a still narrower flower-border. Every part was exquisitely neat and well tended. Bad as the light was getting, Nanny saw this, and said so.

“ You, with your beautiful grounds, can afford to say that,” said Laura, laughing half ruefully. “ But in your heart you must laugh at our attempts to do much with—nothing.”

“ Oh,” said Nanny earnestly, “ indeed you are ridiculously wrong. I have never been used to big houses and gardens before. It is quite a new experience to me I have made my own dresses and trimmed my own hats. I’m a *parvenue*,” she ended, smiling.

They were back under the Virginia creeper, which now hung, a reddening mass, over the railing. Nanny had quickened her steps on seeing that Charlie was standing at the drawing-room window, and that the girls were hanging about him as if he had been telling them something interesting. They both shrank out of sight, however, as Nanny and Laura came up. Just at that moment Arthur entered the room from the inner door, crying out :

“ It’s all right. I’ve sent off the wire ! ”

Charlie turned angrily. It was too late. Running up the three steps from the garden to the veranda, Nanny sprang into the room, and met the elder brother face to face.

“Something has happened!” she said in a whisper.
“What is it?”

A glance from his face to the frightened countenances of the rest confirmed her fears.

“Where is my husband?” she asked. “And where is Mrs. Bambridge? She will tell me—what it is.”

“I will tell you,” said Charlie, in a broken, shamefaced voice, for, as he said afterwards, it made him feel like a brute to have to break the news to her. “Your husband——” He stopped a moment, and, waving his brother and his sisters imperiously back into the room, he came close up to the window, and spoke without looking into the young wife’s face: “Captain Ryder has met with an accident; he has had a fall, and——”

“Is—he—dead?” asked Nanny, craning forward as if her eyes would dig the truth out of his.

“Oh, no, no—not even very seriously hurt, I hope. But he was jumping out of—of—of a window, in fact, and a grating which was hidden by the creepers gave way, and he fell, and—I—I must tell you, you know—he has hurt his head.”

“And—and who were you telegraphing to?” asked Nanny, in a low voice, looking over his shoulder, and speaking timidly, as if she had been put into a trance.

“Captain Ryder’s mother, I think: 47 —— Road, South Kensington.”

“His mother!” she repeated to herself. And for a few moments she either forgot Charlie, or had not self-command enough to put any further questions.

“He hadn’t time to say much before he fainted with the pain, you know,” said the young fellow soothingly. “No doubt he was afraid of the shock to you, and told me to send for his mother to break it to you.”

Nanny had turned, and held out her hand mechanically to each of the girls in turn.

“Good-bye,” she said, in a dull voice. “I shall never forget how kind you have all been—never.”

Laura kissed her impulsively, and the two others

more timidly followed suit. As for Arthur, afraid to face her in her distress, he had disappeared. Charlie accompanied her without question on her way back to The Grange, and they skirted the green in silence.

Just as they turned to the left into the road that led to the big house, she said abruptly :

“You may as well tell me the truth, because I can guess nearly as much as you know. My husband was getting out of a window, you say?”

“Well—er—he was—er——”

“Getting out of a window ; you said so. Which window?”

“That little corner-room where the girls found you the other day. The study, I think it is—the window facing the lawn.”

“I know. He was following some one !”

She turned upon him so quickly, and uttered these words in a tone of such absolute certainty, that for a moment he was disconcerted. Recovering himself almost on the instant, he said :

“It was some tomfoolery of my brother’s. He had lighted some magnesium wire to frighten out the cook, and was making faces in the glare, and——”

“That would not have frightened my husband !” cried Nanny contemptuously. “Besides, the cook was not in the study, I am quite sure.”

“That is the only way in which I can account for the accident,” said Charlie readily.

“Oh, but you know more than that,” cried she impatiently. “It is of no use to try to deceive me, you see. Won’t you tell me what you saw if I swear that it will do no harm to any one to tell me—nothing but good—good?”

And now, if Nanny had been doubtful before, she knew that the young man possessed more knowledge than he would own to ; for he set his teeth hard and frowned, and stared ahead of him, to steel himself against her entreaties. When at last he felt the temptation to break faith grew too hard, he said briefly,

“Come along,” and, drawing her arm within his, fairly ran the rest of the distance through the gates and up to the house, so that she arrived too much out of breath for more entreaties.

Mrs. Bambridge met them in the hall, where she had been waiting, expecting the wife’s arrival. She threw a motherly arm around Nanny, and told her not to worry herself; he was going on as well as possible.

The doctor was with him now, and she should see him in two minutes.

“Where is he?” asked Nanny.

“In the dining-room. The doctor thought it better not to take him upstairs, and the study was too small. We have made a fire there, and Charlie and Arthur took down one of the beds upstairs and made it up down here. They are handy lads, my boys,” added the good creature, in irrepressible pride of happy motherhood.

“You are all good—so good that I never knew there were such kind people in the world before,” said Nanny, pressing her hand convulsively. Then she looked round her at the candles and lamps they had placed about the hall and gallery, and at the grim black shadows which filled the gaps between. “I will wait here until the doctor comes out,” she said.

Mrs. Bambridge tried to persuade her to rest on one of the mahogany benches, which were the only seats the hall contained. But Nanny could not sit still. She paced up and down, up and down, remembering that she was not alone, and therefore keeping strict control over her feelings, but tortured with fears and misery.

At last they heard a door open and shut, and the doctor came quickly along the short passage which led from the dining-room to the hall. Mrs. Bambridge came forward to meet him, but it was to Nanny that he at once addressed himself.

“Mrs. Ryder, I believe?”

“Yes,” said Nanny huskily. “Is there danger?”

“I hope not. But your husband is very seriously

ill. And your friends here have done wisely in getting a nurse for him at once."

"A nurse?" echoed Nanny sharply. "I'm going to nurse him."

"You are going to help, of course. But it is no light matter to nurse such a case as this, and you may think yourself lucky that there was a certified nurse in the neighbourhood."

"You will forgive me, won't you, dear, for sending ——" began Mrs. Bambridge's gentle voice.

"Forgive you! She is ready to go down on her knees in gratitude, or she will be when she knows all about it," interrupted the doctor. "You might as well ask her forgiveness for sending for me."

"Doctor!" broke out Nanny in a firm voice, "it is very serious. I can tell that by what you have said. You will tell me just *how* serious, won't you? Look, I am quite quiet, and I am not hysterical a bit. What is the matter with him?"

"He has injured his head."

"Oh, that is dreadful!"

"Don't take it too seriously. His head struck against an iron grating, and he is suffering from concussion of the brain."

"He must be kept very quiet?"

"Absolutely quiet."

For the moment poor Nanny experienced a sensation of relief. For a time the horrible doubt might rest. While he was ill she was his wife, whatever miserable discovery might come afterwards. She detained the doctor as he made a step towards the door.

"You are not going away?"

"I shall be back again presently. Don't be frightened unnecessarily. It will do you harm. You would not like me to forbid you to see him."

"Look at me. I am quite calm. I am going to see him now." She raised her great grey eyes, widely distended and bright with anxiety, and fixed them steadily on his face. "But I want you to be

here when his mother comes. It is she, not I, whom you have to fear."

"Very well. I will be here again in an hour. Now, continue to be reasonable and calm as you are, and don't try to do too much."

"I will do just what you tell me to do," she said submissively, as he shook hands with her, and turned to speak to Mrs. Bambridge.

Nanny went straight to the dining-room, opening the door softly. All the spare leaves had been taken out of the great mahogany table, which was pushed into a corner, so that the room seemed completely transformed. The nurse, a short and pleasant-looking woman with quick dark eyes, was moving about rapidly yet quietly before the fire. There was a screen between the door and the bed. Nanny acknowledged the nurse's courtesy with a faint smile and a bend of the head, and stole gently round the screen.

"He's quite quiet, ma'am, but you'd better not speak to him. He won't know you hardly. There's no fever yet, but he's in a stupor most of the time."

So said the nurse in a low voice, which did not disturb the sick man. Indeed, he looked as if nothing would disturb him any more. Poor Nanny was frightened, and in spite of her promises and protestations of calmness, the tears ran down her face, and she had hard work not to let her sobs be heard. In her distress at the sight of him, lying there so pale, and with an expression on his features which told, if not of the pain he was suffering then, of that which he had suffered only lately, she forgot the shock she herself had received that afternoon. There was only one thought in her mind as she turned away, fearing to lose her self-control altogether. This thought found utterance as the kind but business-like gaze of the nurse met hers.

"Will he—do you think he will get better?" she asked beseechingly, so low that the woman could

only just understand the question without absolutely hearing it.

But Nanny need not have been afraid of the words reaching her husband's dulled ears.

The nurse does not despair, but is never so hopeful as the doctor. To impress the anxious inquirer with a sense of danger, with which only the highest skill and experience can successfully cope, raises the dignity of one's profession. So Mrs. Walters looked grave, even while she told the young wife not to be afraid.

"We will do all we can for him, you may be quite sure. And you, ma'am, must take care of yourself. One invalid is enough in a house."

Nanny, who was not half so fragile as she appeared, gave her a mournful look, full of gratitude and entreaty; and then, feeling her own helplessness, she sat down at a little distance from the bed, and kept her eyes fixed on the pale face on the pillow. Presently she heard the front door open and shut. Rising quickly, but without noise, while the remembrance of Mrs. Calverley's words suddenly flooded her mind afresh, Nanny left the sick-room and ran to the hall, expecting to meet old Mrs. Ryder. It was not she, however; it was Arthur Bambridge, with a heavy load of things which he had been sent to fetch.

"I think I've remembered everything," he said with pride, as his mother unburdened him of his various parcels. "I couldn't bring the shin of beef, because Mr. Robbins said he wouldn't recommend it unless we liked it gamey. So I went up into Bicton and tried the big butcher's by the station. But when he heard the meat was for the new people at The Grange, he would have been torn to pieces by mad wolves rather than let me carry it home myself. So that will come presently. In fact, the welcoming feeling the tradespeople here show ought to warm your heart, Mrs. Ryder," the young fellow went on. "Dicks, the dairyman, wishes you to throw him into a frying-pan and poach him if a single one of

the eggs turns out to be other than new-laid. And the grocer would sell his own soul (adulterated, of course, like the rest of his goods!) rather than that you should complain of soap or salt or sugar."

"Hush! hush! you will drive Mrs. Ryder mad with your chatter," said his mother when he had quite finished.

She thought him the prince of wits, really, and would not for the world have cut him short before he had said all he wanted to say.

Nanny, too, liked to hear the boy talk. . But when Mrs. Bambridge had carried off the parcels to the kitchen, where she had installed one of her own servants for the time, Arthur's tone suddenly changed, and he said earnestly :

"Mrs. Ryder, don't you believe Charlie if he told you that it was my magnesium light that startled your husband. He told the girls that, but it is not true. I should never forgive myself if it had been through me the accident happened. But it was *not*. I was right at the other end of the house."

Nanny nodded her head reassuringly.

"Don't worry yourself about that," she said. "I know it had nothing whatever to do with you."

So he went away comforted. But Nanny stole away to the study, with all the perplexing and maddening questions starting up in her mind again. Who was it that had looked in at the window and startled him? Mrs. Calverley again, perhaps. But no ; she had retreated in confusion on seeing that the house was occupied. Was it—Lady Ellen? The idea was so appalling that Nanny waited outside the study-door, listening, before she ventured inside. But there was no sound to be heard, and in a few moments she summoned enough courage to open the door.

A rush of cold air blew straight in her face, and extinguished the candle with which she had taken care to provide herself. Then she felt the door slowly shutting upon her. She pushed it, trying to force it

wide open, and believing that the resistance was caused by the wind from the open window. The more she pushed, however, the more surely it closed upon her. She could see, in the faint light, the tendrils of the Virginia creeper blowing about ; but it was in no such tempest of wind as would have closed the door violently upon her.

Some one was there—behind the door.

Nanny, with spasmodic courage, looked round it. Her eyes, dazzled with the candlelight, could see nothing in the gloom. But she was seized, pushed back, and in another moment found herself outside the door. Then the key was turned on the inside.

She listened again. She could hear something this time—the opening of the bookcase. Something was taken out ; then the bookcase was shut.

There was a way out into the garden close at hand, by a door at the end of a passage. Nanny ran down to this door, drew back the bolt, and went out.

It was quite dark now, and the rain had begun to fall again. Nanny ran into a yew-tree, which shed upon her a shower of raindrops. That window of the study which looked towards the north was the first she came to, and Nanny pressed her face against the window, but could see nothing. She ran round to the window which faced the east. It was still wide open, and, in the tangle of down-trodden creepers which had been dragged about on the grass, Nanny saw the displaced grating which had fallen into the area it covered, and caused her husband's fall. With some difficulty she climbed into the room and assured herself that no one was now in. Then she opened the door, which she found unlocked, and, procuring a light, made an exhaustive search.

A gap had been made on one shelf of the bookcase. Although she had studied the titles of the books it contained, she could not remember what volumes were missing. Further examination, however, showed something white at the bottom of the area outside the window. With much trouble Nanny

fished it out, and found that it was an open book—volume i. of a pretty little edition of Byron, in six small morocco-bound volumes, which she had previously noticed and admired. On again looking at the bookcase, she found that it was these which were missing.

The intruder, then, had stolen these books, and dropped one into the area in a hasty flight. Stolen, did she say? Nanny turned quickly to the title-page.

In a neat, fine feminine handwriting were the words: "Ellen Ryder. From my dear husband, Ralph."

Nanny leaned out of the open window, feeling sick and faint. Was the person who had taken the books the *owner* of them, Lady Ellen?

As she asked herself this question the night-breeze blew against the face a branch of a sweetbrier bush, the tiny thorns pricking her cheeks. She pushed it on one side. Clinging to it was a scrap of black stuff, damp with rain. Not doubting that it was a relic of the intruder, torn off and left behind in her flight, Nanny examined it in the candle-light.

It was a fragment of a woman's black gossamer veil.

CHAPTER IX.

NANNY could no longer have any doubt, as she turned over in her hands the scrap of torn black gossamer, that it was a woman whose appearance at the window had disturbed her husband and been the cause of his accident, and who, as soon as the room was vacant, had entered and taken the now missing volumes from the bookcase. A woman! Then what woman?

The rain fell in a never-ceasing drizzle. The wind was rising and blowing the dead and dying leaves from the trees. They swirled past her, they lodged in her hair and on her shoulders as she stood by the corner of the house, with the volume of Bryon in one hand, asking herself what this secret visit meant. What motive could any one have for getting into a house by an open window, only to steal a handful of old books? None but a sentimental one, surely. Then Nanny opened the volume which had been dropped, and read again, in the dim light of the moon faintly seen behind the rain-clouds, the name "Ellen Ryder."

This Lady Ellen, then, was Dan's first wife. And if the sight of her—for Nanny could not doubt that it was she whom he had seen and pursued—had startled him so much, it could only be because he had believed that she was dead.

A faint moan escaped from the poor child's lips. Her eyes, distended with fear, roamed about in the dusky obscurity under the trees; she saw arms of black-robed women in the spread-out branches of the cedars on the lawn, heard sighs of distress in the rustling of the leaves. But in a few minutes her youth and her faith rose in revolt against the dark thoughts which had seized possession of her mind.

Captain Ryder's first wife had been described by Mrs. Durrant, to the girl at the hotel, as a wicked woman. It might be, then, that by her own act she had lost the right to the name of wife, in which case her appearance at The Grange would alarm and enrage Captain Ryder for Nanny's own sake. And if any possible doubt of her husband's truth remained in her mind, there rose to comfort her the belief of the young : that although exceptional happiness may be, and probably is, in store for them, exceptional misery cannot be. Whoever the intruder might be, she was, therefore, not Dan's wife.

At the same time it was not desirable that one's house should be subject to burglarious entry on the part of an unknown woman, however excellent her intentions might be. And Nanny, who was not of a nature to be either miserable or inactive for long, without strong cause, began carefully to pick her way over the wet grass to the spot where the trees grew thickest, and pushing the great, dripping boughs aside, to search every likely hiding-place. Making her way thus, with ears and eyes on the alert, she came at last to within a few paces of the great front gates, and heard some one running fast up the road outside.

It was a man. He burst open one of the side-gates, and entered, panting so vigorously that he had to lean for a few moments against the gate-posts to recover his breath. Nanny could not see him, neither could he see her ; it was too dark under the trees for that. But she could hear him muttering to himself in great excitement as he came slowly forward a step or two ; and then, going back to the gates, she heard him bolt them all. Who was he ? She came forward a little nearer to the drive, counting upon the shelter of a great copper-beech, the boughs of which hung low. But the man caught either a sound or a movement, and, turning from the gates, rushed towards her like a wild beast upon its prey.

Nanny was too much frightened even to scream. It flashed through her mind that her best chance of

escaping this man, whom she took for a lunatic, would be to "dodge" him among the trees, and then seize the first opportunity of making for the house. But as he came on his mutterings grew loud enough for her to hear, and her fear of him gave place to a dread much stronger.

"This is your Mr. Eley's doing—this is," he panted out. "And now—you've once—given us the slip—you'll always be at it, I suppose—and there'll be a nice job—for some of us presently!"

This, punctuated by gasps for breath, was the burden of the man's lament as he came along; and Nanny, full of curiosity, and no longer afraid of him, stood quite still, hoping to hear more.

For it was Pickering—perfectly sober, perfectly sane, but in a desperate state of anxiety. At last he rushed, with a triumphant roar, at the rhododendron bush which was hiding her, and shaking with her movements. To Nanny's great disappointment, he discovered his mistake at once, and drew himself erect and saluted, begging her pardon.

"Who did you think it was? Who were you looking for?" cried she eagerly.

"Why, ma'am, begging your pardon if I've discommoded or frightened you by a-rushing on you so sudden, but I thought, seeing some one among the shrubs at this time o' night, how it might be some tramp got in, and would be getting up to the house presently. You know, ma'am, of course I couldn't see who it was in the dark, only somebody moving."

"Somebody has been up to the house," said Nanny, "and got in by the study window. Now, you know who it was as well as I do."

But Pickering was proof against her innocent wiles. He stared before him with as much expression in his face as if he had just received the command, "Eyes front."

"Indeed, ma'am, if you can tell me who it was I shall be very glad," said he, with an almost plaintive assumption of humble ignorance.

“It was Lady Ellen,” said Nanny abruptly.

He shot one glance at her, and was himself again in the twinkling of an eye. But in that half-second Nanny had learnt that he knew who Lady Ellen was, and that he was alarmed by the thought that she knew also. He said nothing, however, being unwilling to commit himself further until she, in her innocence, had let out the extent of her knowledge.

“And she got in to get some books with her name in. And you have got her shut up somewhere—in The White House, perhaps,” she went on with a flash of intelligent suspicion; “and she has got away, and so you are afraid. Pickering, who is she? Tell me who she is?”

Nanny spoke in a tone of passionate entreaty, which, however, left the old soldier unmoved. He shook his head like a mechanical toy.

“I never heard of her, ma’am,” he said coolly. “And there is for certain no lady of that name at The White House, seeing how it has been empty and shut up for years, and is now let to a single young gentleman by the name of Eley.”

Nanny drew back a little, for a moment disconcerted. Only for a moment.

“But I heard you say,” she persisted, “that someone had given you the slip, and that it was all Mr. Eley’s doing. Now, what did you mean by that?”

“Mr. Charles Bambridge’s bull-dog, ma’am,” answered Pickering promptly.

Nanny knew that Charlie Bambridge had a bull-dog, although she knew equally well that the animal was not the cause of Pickering’s uneasiness.

“But I heard you bolt the gates! You would not have done that to prevent a dog’s getting out!”

“Not any other dog, ma’am,” answered the man unabashed; “but Crib has more slyness than most Christians.”

Nanny saw that it was of no use to try to learn anything from this man; therefore she turned impatiently from him towards the house. Remembering,

however, that Pickering knew nothing of the accident to her husband, she said :

“ Captain Ryder has had a severe fall through this. He jumped out of the study window to follow what you say was only a dog, and has concussion of the brain.”

The effect of this announcement on Pickering was much greater than she had expected. He was silent for some minutes, except for half-audible ejaculations. At last he said, eyeing the lady narrowly in the gloom :

“ Concussion of the brain ! That’s bad. He’ll be full of queer fancies when he gets better, and think he sees all sorts of queer things, won’t he, ma’am ? ”

Nanny began to tremble. These words were the echo of her own fears.

“ Oh no ! ” she cried earnestly ; “ I hope not—I think not. I must ask the doctor.”

“ Ah, but doctors don’t always know, ma’am, ’specially with gentlemen like the Captain, that’s been in India, where they pick up all sorts of things that don’t get understood over here. What with the heat and the drink, ma’am, India does plenty harm to a many gentlemen.”

Nanny said nothing to this, but she shuddered. That concussion of the brain would be more serious to her husband than to another man, being likely to lead to a recurrence of the mental malady from which he had formerly suffered, she could not doubt. And then, amidst the rush of wild, unhappy thoughts which chased each other through her mind, there came the remembrance of a curious reticence which would come into her husband’s manner when, in the course of conversation, certain references to the past were made.

She stopped short in the middle of the drive, trying to recall some of those references, to find out what they had been. Pickering respectfully reminded her that it was raining ; but, as she paid no heed, except by a brief “ Thank you,” the old gardener went on

at a rapid pace towards the house, leaving the young lady absorbed in her own thoughts.

For she had just remembered that one of those moments of reticence on the part of her husband had been occasioned by some chance allusion to the story of a faithless wife. She walked on to the house slowly, shivering, not so much with the damp and the cold as with a sick sensation of doubt, miserable doubt, and fear. She had to pass the stables, a deserted pile of red brick, corresponding with the house. Most of the windows were choked by a neglected growth of creepers, and the paved space in front was green with moss and grass. The coach-house door was ajar, however, and from within came a low murmur of voices. Her heart beating high with excitement, Nanny crossed the old stone pavement with light steps. Quietly as she came, however, she was not quiet enough to deceive the old soldier. Just as she reached the coach-house door, Pickering came out, closing it behind him.

If she could only get past him, Nanny felt that she should be one step nearer to the secret of the Ryders, for she should see the intruder whose appearance had startled her husband. But that was not Pickering's intention. He stood outside the closed coach-house door, affecting not to understand that she wished to enter, until they both heard another door shut in the interior of the building. Then Nanny knew that it was the intention of the person inside to escape by a back way, and retreating at once, as if offended, she walked towards the house until she was out of Pickering's sight, and then ran to the back of the stables.

She was in time to see some one escaping from the building, crashing through the shrubs in the direction of the side-door in the wall of the garden, through which Mrs. Durrant had passed on her way to The White House on the occasion of Nanny's first visit to Bicton. Nanny went in hot pursuit, but she was too late. The wet boughs closed behind the retreating figure, the outline of which it was impossible to make

out in the darkness, and the door was opened and slammed to before she could reach it. When she looked out into the road, no one was in sight but the driver of a cab, from the inside of which old Mrs. Ryder's voice was heard calling shrilly :

“ You've passed the gate, you've passed it ! ”

Nanny ran back to the house without a moment's delay. She wanted to be in her husband's room when his mother came in. Mrs. Bambridge was just outside the sick-room ; she was taking something to the nurse. Nanny told her who was coming.

“ Old Mrs. Ryder ! ” echoed Mrs. Bambridge. “ Dear me ! A sad home-coming after all these years ! ”

“ All these years ! But she visited the place every year, did she not ? ”

“ Never. Mrs. Durrant told me, on one of the very few occasions I ever spoke to her, that the old lady had never been inside this house for thirty years. I don't know how Mrs. Durrant knew. I suppose the old gardener, Pickering, told her. ”

Nanny entered the sick-room in a state of fresh bewilderment. If this was old Mrs. Ryder's idea of managing an estate, it was not surprising that The White House had been neglected. The only matter for astonishment was the excellent order in which The Grange had been kept. She stole round the screen and looked at her husband. He was staring at the rail at the foot of the bed, and muttering to himself. From his left hand, which was just under the bed-clothes, the nurse was in the act of taking something.

It was an old letter, which he had crushed up in his fingers. The nurse handed it to his wife.

“ He has held it in his hand ever since the accident, ” she said, as Nanny took the crumpled paper, which was hot and limp and damp from the treatment it had received. “ I could not get it from him while he was conscious. It seemed to worry him that he could not read it, for he kept carrying it up and down, up

and down, to and from his face, and seemed to try to hide it from me."

Nanny took it quite quietly, and said "Thank you, nurse," in a steady voice as she did so. But she was in a tumult of emotion, for in an instant she had recognised the slim, old-fashioned handwriting of the inscription inside the volume of Byron.

There was not time to take the letter away and read it in private. Mrs. Ryder might be in at any moment. Nanny never asked herself whether she had a right to read it. Perhaps such strict scruples were scarcely to be expected in a young wife tortured by jealousy and caught in a network of mysteries which no one would explain to her.

With one guilty look towards the bed, one deprecatory prayer to her unconscious husband to forgive her, Nanny crossed the room to the mantelpiece, where a small shaded lamp was burning, and where the screen shielded her from the stare of the vacant eyes. Quickly she spread out the crumpled papers, for it was a long letter—there were two sheets of it—and began to read.

This was the letter :

"DEAR RALPH,

"I cannot go on with this farce any longer. That is why I have gone to mamma's to-day, so that I might write this from her house. I am not coming back. What would be the use? The same old round, the same continual jealousy of yours, the same quarrels, and then one of your mad outbursts. Of course, I know what you will say—that it is all my fault, that it I had never made you jealous you would never have taken to drink. But was it all my fault? Was it my fault that the child could not live in India, and had to be sent home? Was it my fault that I fell ill, and had to be sent to England after her? And once here, could I live like a nun? I might have done, perhaps, if I had been fifty, and hideous; but young as I am, it was impossible. I did not even

try. In such a case one man is sure to be singled out by a woman's kind friends as *the* man. But I don't care for Colonel Garside; I never did care for him. It is not on his account that I am leaving you, or, rather, it is because of your perpetual use of his name when you want to quarrel with me, but not for any feeling I have for him.

"It is of no use for you to come here for me. I shall be gone. And I won't receive any letters from you. Entreaties and reproaches will make no difference, for my love for you will never come back. I know you are handsome and that you love me, but you have made your face more repulsive to me than if you had been ugly; and of what good is love which is like the fitful passion of a wild animal rather than the calm affection of a reasoning being?"

"You had better get a governess for the child. She is getting too much for nurse. Or your mother would come and look after her. She loves children, and has all the proper woman's ways with them that I never had or could have. And you need not try to work upon my feelings by means of the child, because you might just as well try to work upon the feelings of the house she was born in. She is your child, and that is enough for me. I don't wish to have anything to do with you or any one belonging to you any more as long as I live. Of course, you and everybody will say I am a wicked, heartless woman. But I don't care—I don't care. I would rather be wicked than live with you again.

"Your unhappy wife,

"ELLEN RYDER."

This letter was undated, and was punctuated, in the old-fashioned slipshod manner, with dashes and notes of exclamation. Nanny read it through with a growing feeling of horror and disgust. The story it told seemed clear as daylight. Ralph, her husband, was then, at old as he looked, and had had for a wife this "Ellen Ryder," who must be the "Lady Ellen" spoken

of by old Miss Anstruther to Meg, and by Mrs. Calverley to Nanny herself, as being still alive. Dan must, therefore, have divorced her; for although in her letter she declared herself innocent of the great wrong, Nanny found it impossible to rely upon the truthfulness of a woman whose every word proved her to be selfish, cold, and heartless.

The tears rushed to Nanny's eyes, and her heart glowed with a passionate sympathy for her husband such as she had never felt before. It was the old story. The man who "has suffered," or who has the reputation of having suffered, from the misconduct of some other woman, will always out-distance, with an inexperienced young girl, the man who has no such "interesting" record. Of course, there is the presumption that he will know, by comparison, how rightly to value the woman who treats him well. Nanny forgave her husband his suppression of the fact of his first marriage and its consequences—for-gave him even the fiction by which he represented himself never to have cared for a woman before he met her. He had forgotten the fact. The past had faded away like some frightful nightmare; why conjure up its hideous images again? For that troubled time had been disturbed by other horrors. It seemed inconceivable to Nanny now, knowing Dan as she did, as an adoring husband to herself and the most temperate of men, that he should ever have been driven, by his passion for a heartless woman, to drink as a solace. But the words of this letter put this fact beyond a doubt; and old Mrs. Ryder's warnings and the man Pickering's words had confirmed it.

Nanny could understand, after this first terrible matrimonial experience of her son's the fear and reluctance felt by the old lady at the idea of his tempting Fate for a second time. Lady Ellen herself had said "she loves the child, and has all the proper woman's ways with her." The child! What had become of her? If living, she would be grown up by this time. But Nanny had certainly never heard of her before, and

she came to the conclusion that, having been born in India, and therefore delicate, she must have died in childhood.

She looked again at the letter, examining it carefully. In spite of the feminine absence of a written date, the fine sloping, angular handwriting, the thin discoloured note-paper and faded ink, and the creases into which the letter had worn, testified to its being at least a quarter of a century old. She was poring over these indications by the light of the lamp on the mantelpiece, when a soft step behind startled her, and caused her to turn.

Old Mrs. Ryder was standing there, with her faded blue eyes fixed in curiosity and apprehension on the letter in her daughter-in-law's hand. She must have seen it before, Nanny thought, and must be suffering again from the shock the heartless missive had given her; for the little white-haired lady was shaking from head to foot, and her pale face looked bloodless with anguish. Nanny passed the letter gently before her eyes, and Mrs. Ryder looked up at her and tried to speak; but at first the withered lips only mumbled indistinctly. At last she whispered:

“Where did you find it?”

“In Dan's hands. He must have been reading it when the accident happened.”

The wrinkled face became on the instant distorted with terror. Old Mrs. Ryder bent her head and pressed one shaking hand to her forehead, while her limbs trembled as she stood.

“Again, again!” she moaned—“when I had hoped the old story was forgotten!” She looked up suddenly into Nanny's face. “And you—you know it too, then!” she murmured, in almost hysterical terror. “Oh, after all these years! What shall we do? what shall we do?”

She was startled into resumption of her self-control by the appearance of the nurse, who came round the screen with a warning face. The old lady pressed her handkerchief hastily to her eyes, and crossed the

room to look at her son. After standing quietly for some minutes, she asked the nurse for the fullest details concerning the accident. These Mrs. Walters was unable to give, so she asked young Mrs. Ryder to come forward, and retreated herself to the fireplace.

“He was sitting in the study, as we suppose,” said Nanny, in a dry voice, “when he must have been alarmed by the appearance of some one outside the window—some one he did not expect to see. We think he opened the window and jumped out in pursuit, but falling through the grating over the area, injured his head.”

“Some one outside the window!” echoed Mrs. Ryder, looking at her curiously. “And who was it?”

“I think you know better than I. Was it Lady Ellen?”

The question, which Nanny took care to shoot out suddenly, gave the old lady a shock of surprise.

“Lady Ellen!” she repeated, faltering, as she gazed into her daughter-in-law’s face more searchingly than ever.

“Yes. Look,” Nanny said, in a very low voice, so that neither nurse nor patient could hear, meeting the gaze of the elder woman with one quite as penetrating, “I know more than this letter tells me. This”—and she touched the crumpled sheets of paper—“only tells me that Dan had a wife before he married me”—at that old Mrs. Ryder’s eyes suddenly fell, as it were slinking away from the young woman’s piercing look—“that she was a bad, heartless wife and mother, deserting her husband and her children, without giving a thought to any one but herself”—old Mrs. Ryder bowed her head in assent—“faithless to her husband, too, most likely——”

The old lady interrupted for the first time, but timidly.

“Not that, I think. She does not own to that in the letter, does she?”

There was a pause. The light of a fresh perplexity, a fresh terror, came into Nanny’s face.

“Then if she did not deceive her husband, he could not divorce her. And she is alive—I know that she is alive!” she cried, in a choking voice.

The old lady did not answer at once. It seemed to the unfortunate young wife, hanging on her words, that she was casting about for a loophole of escape. When she spoke, it was in the same meek, tentative tone as before.

“Lady Ellen never was my son’s wife,” she quavered out. “Won’t you be satisfied with that, and—and let this old scandal rest?”

“No, no, no! I will not be satisfied, any more than you were satisfied when you knew that he was going to marry me. You must have felt that he was not morally free, or you could have had no objection to his taking another wife.”

“I—I had other reasons, as you know.”

Old Mrs. Ryder flashed another of those curious, inquiring looks at her.

The shadow of a terrible fear came over Nanny’s face.

“Tell me—tell me the truth!” she whispered hoarsely. “Had he been deceived into thinking her dead, when all the time she was alive?”

There was a pause again. Old Mrs. Ryder’s reticence was horrible to Nanny, implying, as it seemed to her, that there was so much to conceal that silence was the only safety until every course had been fully weighed.

“And then,” said Nanny suddenly, seizing the old lady by the slender little wrist and looking down into her face, “there is the child. What about her?”

All the withered flesh on the old lady’s thin face seemed to shrivel, and to leave bare and shining the glassy eyes, the yellow teeth. She shook and swayed under Nanny’s touch as if the life had gone out of her aged limbs.

“The child! Ah, the child!” she muttered hoarsely. Then, putting her quivering lips up as near to Nanny’s ear as she could, she gasped out: “Never ask, child! Never—never try to know!”

CHAPTER X.

THE entrance of the doctor, who came into the room just as old Mrs. Ryder was uttering her passionate warning, was a welcome relief both to Nanny and to her mother-in-law. The young wife knew that she would get from the elder lady no satisfactory answer to any of her questions; the latter was most anxious to escape from the ordeal of facing those searching eyes.

It seemed to Nanny, whose head ached, and who was altogether in a querulous, excited state, that the doctor and her mother-in-law made common cause in treating her as if she were too young and frivolous a person to be of much account in the house. The doctor would not hear of her sitting up with her husband, and said, "You could do no good, and only wear yourself out," in a tone which hurt her, making her feel useless and in the way. Mrs. Cambridge wanted to take her home with her, and old Mrs. Ryder seconded the suggestion with vigour. But Nanny insisted on remaining at The Grange. She did not feel satisfied that the intruder of the afternoon had really left the premises. There were plenty of nooks and corners both in the house and about the grounds, where a person familiar with the place might remain hidden for hours. Nanny knew that she should never feel safe again until she met this person face to face, had found out whether it was or was not Lady Ellen, and what the real position of the lady was.

Until very late that night the unhappy young wife wandered, restless and lonely, about the house, listening at the door of the unused rooms, keeping watch in the long half-lighted corridors, on the alert at every

sound. Old Mrs. Ryder and the nurse had finally turned her out of the sick-room, and told her to go to bed. Mrs. Bambridge had gone home, leaving one of her servants, who was to sleep on the ground-floor, so as to be within call of the nurse. A bedroom on the floor above had been hastily prepared for Nanny, who retired to it reluctantly, childishly frightened by the old-fashioned full-tested bedstead. So much, indeed, did it heighten the feelings of uneasiness and fear which had haunted the poor child all the evening, that she got upon the bed and tried to pull the curtains down. But they were so securely fixed that she had to give up the attempt, afraid of bringing down the whole rickety wooden erection upon her head.

Well, then, all she could do, she decided as she stepped carefully on to the floor again, was to examine the room carefully before going to bed and to be sure to lock the door. She had taken care to note, when she came up into the room earlier in the evening, that there was a key in the door. After making the circuit of the room, therefore, looking under the bed, under the muslin-covered hangings of the old-fashioned dressing-table, and into the cupboards in the wall, Nanny reached the door.

But the key had been taken away.

Small as this matter was, poor Nanny, in her excited state, felt that she wanted to scream on making this discovery. Common-sense suggested that Mrs. Bambridge's servant, having to sleep on the ground floor in a strange house, had taken the key in the hope that it might fit the door of the room she was to use. But Nanny was more in the mood for entertaining the marvellous than the homely and the probable, and her excited imagination pictured the unknown and mysterious Lady Ellen as having secreted herself about the house and possessed herself of the key for some purpose antagonistic to Nanny's own comfort and repose. She felt that it would be too childish to trouble the occupants of the sick-room

again about what they would consider a trifle ; so she barricaded the door with a long chintz-covered settee on casters, which stood under one of the windows, and presently went to bed.

She was restless, and could not sleep for a long time. At last she fell into an uneasy doze, troubled by feverish dreams. A dozen times, in the course of the next two hours, she started into wakefulness, and lay for a few minutes a prey to miserable imaginings before falling again into the same unrestful slumber. At last having grown used to this, and being by this time extremely sleepy, she awoke and lay with closed eyes. The same fancies as before hung in her still half-slumbering mind : unknown voices, half-heard sounds, were troubling her. Through it all she asked herself wearily when this was going to end in sound sleep. Then the voices seemed to die away, but the other noises grew louder and more distinct ; strange creakings and mumblings, and a sound like the tearing of stuff. Roused a little more, Nanny turned over on her side, and her face touched a soft, woman's hand. An attempt was at once made to withdraw this hand, but Nanny seized it, and inflicted upon it a long deep scratch with her own nails before the intruder succeeded in freeing it.

“Who's that? who's there?” Nanny asked with almost a shriek, as she sat up and peered about her vainly in the darkness.

There was no answer, no sound. Nanny leapt out of bed and ran towards the door, but she fell over something and rolled on the floor, hurting herself ; not so severely, however, but that the next moment she was up again. For in that moment of time she had heard stealthy footsteps rapidly crossing the room towards the door, and knew that it was the intention of the intruder, whose eyes had become more accustomed to the darkness than Nanny's own, to escape under cover of this accident.

Nanny was a high-spirited young woman, and could throw off her natural feminine cowardice very effec-

tually when she was excited. It was the settee which she had placed against the door over which she had fallen; the fact that it had been displaced was proof enough, if proof were needed, that someone had entered the room. Nanny replaced it against the door with one rapid push, and stood against it, scouring the darkness with eager eyes, and remaining as motionless as possible, in order that she might hear the least movement on the part of the intruder. But for a long time she listened in vain for the slightest sound.

The complete stillness, of course, frightened her much more than an attack would have done. Nanny even began to feel half inclined to steal out of the room and wait outside the door. But a dogged determination to get to the bottom of this mystery at all hazards conquered the suggestions of timidity. She sat down on the settee and waited.

She remained sitting motionless, and always on the watch, until the first rays of dawn began to steal through the drawn curtains of the windows. Nanny grew more uneasy, as the affair seemed to grow more mysterious. She could have seen an approaching figure in the faint light which now struggled in. And she kept her eyes always in the direction of the windows, so that she might be prepared for an attack. An attack!—for Nanny did not disguise to herself her fear that it was a lunatic with whom she had to contend.

At last, when the light had grown stronger, the strain on her staring eyes became so painful that, for one moment, Nanny had to close them. Scarcely had she done so when, with almost inconceivable rapidity, she found herself overthrown on to the ground by a rapid jerk of the settee away from the door. Nanny uttered a scream and a cry of "Help!" but by the time she had risen to her feet certain soft sounds, growing fainter and fainter, along the corridor towards the staircase, told her that she had been outwitted. She gave chase as far as the head of the staircase, but in vain. And the sound of the closing of a distant door,

which she believed to be the back-door into the garden, told her that pursuit was useless.

Sick, cold, frightened, trembling, Nanny returned to her room. The light was now quite strong enough for her to see how she, watching as intently as she had done, had in her turn been watched, and more successfully. The bed-valance was caught up, proving that someone had been watching her from under the bed; and as the light fell full on Nanny, this "someone" had been able to take immediate advantage of the momentary closing of the tired eyes.

The astounding agility with which the unseen watcher had crept out, pulled the settee forward, and dashed through the door was the first thing which struck Nanny with amazement and fear; then followed a momentary paralysis of terror at the thought that during all that time during which she had sat on the settee by the door, she had been under the gaze of a pair of unseen, malevolent eyes.

Whose eyes?

Nanny vowed to herself that on the following day she would know, whatever the knowledge might cost her.

In the meantime she could not pass the rest of the night in that room by herself. She dressed hastily, and went down stairs to her husband's sick-room.

Entering softly without knocking, she found old Mrs. Ryder dozing in an armchair by the dying embers of the fire. Her head was bent forward on her breast, and she did not hear Nanny enter. Even in her agitation, the young lady could not help smiling to herself at this discovery: for in the library of petty fictions which no old lady is without, Mrs. Ryder treasured up the belief that in an armchair she could never close her eyes. Nanny glanced at the bed. Dan was lying quietly, with his eyes closed; but his face was flushed, and his lips moved almost incessantly.

Nanny crept up to the bedside, and a deep sigh escaped her as she leant wistfully over him. Oh, he

had never wittingly done any harm to her, or to any woman—Nanny was sure of that. He was her dear husband, her own darling old Dan! Nothing could alter that; nothing *should* alter that. Nanny found herself saying this half aloud, with clenched teeth. For there was that horrible fear at the bottom of her heart; there was this cry always ringing in her ears: “Lady Ellen! Lady Ellen!”

Neither her sigh nor her whispered words disturbed him, nor her quick-drawn breath, as she leaned over him in a rapture of yearning love. When at last she drew back, a board creaked under her tread. The sound did not rouse her husband, but old Mrs. Ryder started in her chair.

“Is it you, nurse?” she asked.

And the old lady shivered. Nanny came up to her and made her look up, blinking in the feeble light of the night-light.

“No, it is I.”

“You, child! You are not to sit up watching. Go back to bed at once. Dan would never allow it.”

“I can’t go back. Whatever you say, I’m going to spend the rest of the night here,” said Nanny, with determination. “I have had a fright; someone got into my room.”

“Into—your—room?” repeated the old lady in a troubled voice.

“Yes. We will talk about it to-morrow morning. In the meantime, I’m going to stay down here.”

The old lady looked as if she would have liked to ask some more questions; but as the nurse, roused by their voices, now entered to take her turn at watching, Nanny escaped for the present. Taking a chair near her husband’s bed-side, the young wife, now wide awake, and with her mind at its keenest, as it happens to us all during a wakeful night, thought over all the little mysteries which had already disturbed the course of her short married life, and came to a decision before morning as to what she should do. Then, as the light grew strong outside, sleep over-

came her at last, and seized so firmly upon her tired senses that the nurse was able to put a pillow under her head and a footstool under her feet without rousing her.

When she awoke it was nine o'clock. She was full of self-reproach at first, shamefaced and angry with herself for her inability to watch by her husband's side. But the nurse soothed her with assurances that Captain Ryder was going on quite as well as could be expected, and that it was the consciousness of that fact which had enabled her to sleep. Comforted, though not convinced, Nanny went upstairs for her morning bath. The missing key of her bedroom-door she found lying on the floor near the mat outside; she would not trust it in the lock again, but put it in her pocket. In the breakfast-room she found old Mrs. Ryder looking much more aged and infirm than ever before, as a result of her share in the night's nursing.

The elder lady showed many more signs of a disturbed state of mind than the younger, eating scarcely any breakfast, and starting nervously at every sound. Nanny, indeed, felt half stupefied from the effects of violent excitement followed by heavy slumber. The poignancy of the night's terror being past, and her mind made up, she seemed even stolidly indifferent, and cast scarcely a glance more than the barest courtesy demanded, at her mother-in-law's face. When the old lady left the table she rose too, and was going out of the room when Mrs. Ryder stopped her.

"Antonia, my dear, I wish to speak to you."

Nanny turned, and waited for the next words with disconcerting passivity. The little old lady—a little porcelain creature she was, always dainty with old lace and jewellery, and with a faint suggestion of lavender and pot-pourri in the folds of her soft silk-gowns—drew about her more closely a tiny shawl of embroidered Indian muslin she was wearing, and came up to her daughter-in-law with the graceful movements and pretty affected dignity of the "Keep-sake" period to which she belonged.

“You had a fright last night, my dear, you say. Tell me about it.”

Nanny did so at once, without hesitation or reservation. Mrs. Ryder listened quietly, and from her manner it would have been impossible to tell whether she guessed who the intruder was or not. Nanny, however, had no doubts on this point.

“It was Lady Ellen, I know,” she said, with simple conviction; “the only questions in my mind are: whether she is sane, and what she wanted to do to me.”

“Do to you, child! You surely cannot suppose

“I don’t suppose she took the key out of my door, and so prepared her entrance, without some object in view. I can’t tell what her object was, but I caught her hand feeling about my pillow, and I should be much more comfortable in a house where I didn’t have such mysterious visitors.”

Nanny felt brave by daylight; besides, she thought she saw her way to finding a solution of the mystery. Her companion looked at her curiously.

“Of course,” said the elder lady, after a pause, “if such a thing were to happen again, you would write to your father?”

“Oh no; indeed I should not!” answered Nanny at once. “He would say that I had chosen of my own free will to marry Captain Ryder, and that the number of wives he had was therefore my look-out.”

“Your sister Meg, then?”

“No. What could poor Meg do? It would only make her unhappy.”

“What do you mean to do, then?”

“To find out the whole story from someone who knows it—Mrs. Calverley.”

Into the elder lady’s face there came a faint tinge of colour.

“Mrs. Calverley? So that old busybody is still alive! Well, you will hear something from her certainly, but no one is less likely to tell you the

truth about *anything*," she ended rather snappishly.

Through all this talk Nanny noted with astonishment and annoyance how the mystification to which she was being subjected delighted the old lady, who revelled in the perplexity on Nanny's face with a small mind's keenest enjoyment. Nanny turned abruptly and with scant courtesy to the door, impatient with such trifling, long before old Mrs. Ryder was tired of watching her puzzled face.

Carrying out the intention she had formed in the night, Nanny then ran upstairs, put on her hat, and went in search of Mrs. Calverley's house. It was a pretty, picturesque whitewashed house, with a very old roof of red pan-tiles, standing back a little way from the road in a nest of trees.

"And that 'ere's the Admiral—Admiral Calverley," said the boy who was acting as her guide, pointing to a rather vapid-looking blue-eyed old gentleman in a straw hat, who was picking snails off the dahlias in his garden. Nanny went up to the house, while the Admiral, who was on the other side of a great bush of flowering trees—lilac, laburnum, and guelder-rose, the blossom-time of all of which was past—disappeared into the building by a side-door, with a transparent pretence of not having seen her.

Nothing is so easy to understand as the "not at home" of a servant who knows that his mistress is in, but that she does not wish to see the visitor. Nanny blushed deeply, therefore, when she received this answer, and set her lips tightly together, with her mind quite made up that she would see this exclusive old lady, and before long, too. She knew very well that the Admiral had seen her, and that he had gone into the house to report upon her to his wife.

The rest of the day Nanny spent chiefly in her husband's sick-room, avoiding any other chance of a *tête-à-tête* with her mother-in-law. In the meantime two of the servants she had engaged arrived, and the desolate look the whole house had worn began to disappear.

A little before six o'clock Charlie Bambridge came, and Nanny, delighted to have a chance of speaking to someone young and cheerful, went at once to the drawing-room, and, greeted him warmly.

“My chief purpose in coming to trouble you at a time when I'm sure you don't want to be bothered with visitors,” said he, when he had made inquiries about Captain Ryder, “is to apologise for the barbaric conduct of—of all the rest of us the other day. There is just this excuse for the young ones,” he went on loftily, “that Mrs. Winton, a widow who lives with her father next door to us, has taken to fertilising her garden with fish manure, the Arabian perfume of which is so strong that she has had to buy off the objections of all the neighbours by the gift of a flower-potful all round. My bull-dog ate up our lot, and liked it. But it didn't agree with him, and I trust that this experience will have the effect of disgusting him with foreign kickshaws. But it was inexcusable of them, all the same to trespass upon your property, as I meant to have told you yesterday.”

The young fellow was evidently nervous, and seemed at first anxious to avoid any serious conversation. Nanny assured him, truly enough, that the ready kindness of his family had been the only bright spot, so far, in her experience of The Grange. She began to wonder why he had come. He had clearly something upon his mind, and did not know how to unburden himself of it. Nanny, who had something upon her mind, broke through their mutual reserve first.

“You were with my husband yesterday when the accident happened,” she said abruptly, when there was a pause.

“No ; I came up a minute later—when I heard the crash of his fall, in fact. I had left him in the study, looking through some old letters and books.”

“Yes,” said Nanny quickly, “but you know what caused him to leap out of the window ! You saw who it was that startled him. It was a woman.”

Charlie answered without looking at her.

“Was it? Then I give you my word I didn’t see her, Mrs. Ryder,” he said, with so much force and appearance of sincerity that Nanny would have believed him but for his evident reluctance to meet her eyes.

“You give me your word you did not see the person whose appearance at the window startled my husband?”

But he would not commit himself. He reddened, stammered, and finally said :

“Ask Captain Ryder when he gets well. I saw that he was startled, but—but really very little more. And—and as for being annoyed by inquisitive women, that was just what I came to speak about,” he went on, as if breathing more freely now that he had got on to safer ground. “There is a meddlesome old woman whom you met at our house yesterday, Mrs. Calverley, who has been spying about here ever since she heard you were coming.”

“Yes, she was here yesterday.”

“She is always here, it seems. Now, it appears the nurse told our servant, and the girl told us, that you were frightened last night by someone, Mrs. Ryder.”

“It is quite true—I was,” said Nanny, blushing.

“Oh, you mustn’t be annoyed at our hearing about it. If you ever find a blackbeetle in the dining-room, that blackbeetle will be all over the village in two hours. But I thought it was better to let you know about this old woman, so that you might circumvent her. I have no doubt it was she who frightened you, for she was lurking about outside your gates quite late last night.”

“Thank you very much for telling me,” said Nanny.

She did not attempt to undeceive the young fellow, who had evidently heard a very garbled version of the story of her fright. She thanked him for his visit, sent grateful messages to his mother and sisters, and promised him that, as soon as her husband got well,

they would let him give them a row "up the river somewhere" in his boat. For, next to his bulldog and his bicycle, his boat occupied the largest share of this everyday young man's heart.

When he had gone, Nanny put on her hat and went out into the garden. If this Mrs. Calverley was "always spying about," as Charlie Bambridge had said, she would be on the watch until she caught her and forced her to give an explanation of the mystery about Lady Ellen. Nanny looked out of the principal gates, and then out of the side-gate, but it was not until the third reconnoitring expedition she made that evening that she at last caught sight of the Admiral's wife walking slowly up and down on the opposite side of the road. It was ten o'clock and quite dark; but as she came under the light of a gas-lamp, Nanny recognised and ran up to her at once, and placed herself resolutely in front of the old lady, blocking the footway, determined not to be passed.

"Mrs. Calverley, I think?" she said, in a voice which sounded timid because she was trembling so much from excitement. "I called upon you this morning, but I was unfortunate. I was told you were not at home."

"That, unhappily, is what you will always be told when you call," answered the elder woman, in a dry, hard voice, as she looked meanwhile nervously at Nanny through a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses.

"Will you tell me why?" asked Nanny, with a sob in her voice.

"I thought I had explained my reason yesterday. Knowing as I do that Captain Ryder's wife, Lady Ellen, is alive, it is not possible for me to receive her supplanter."

"How do you know that Lady Ellen is alive?"

"By the best of all proofs. I saw her last night."

"Where?"

"Here. She crossed the road quickly, and went into The Grange garden by this side-gate."

"Did you speak to her? Are you sure it was she?"

“ I did not speak to her, but I am sure it was she. I imagine she was coming from The White House at Bicton, where I have seen her twice before during the last few years.”

“ The White House? Is she insane? Is she locked up there? ”

“ I don't know whether she is insane, but I cannot suppose she is locked up, for on each occasion I have seen her going in or out. But allow me to remind you that, sane or insane, she is Captain Ryder's wife all the same.”

“ But I want to see her—I want to see her,” said Nanny, stamping her foot impatiently. “ How can I believe in this will-o'-the-wisp woman, whom everybody seems to see except me? ”

Mrs. Calverley laughed softly, and, raising her eyeglass, began to scan Nanny's face curiously, and not unkindly, in the light of the gas-lamp.

“ Look here, little girl,” she said at last, “ you've been very badly treated; I must allow that. You have married a bad man, and you may tell him I said so. Take my advice; now, while he is lying ill, and can't come after you, go away back to your friends. You will be quite safe from him, for, when he once suspects that you know who he is, he won't dare to follow you. And don't attempt to come face to face with Lady Ellen. Although she hates her husband, she is not at all likely to love you. And to tell you the truth, child,” went on Mrs. Calverley, with a sudden impulse of expansion, “ I shan't be able to rest till you are gone. For, knowing what a pair of demons Dan and his wife are, I can do nothing but haunt this place, waiting for another tragedy, ever since I heard that he had had the assurance to come back.”

“ Another tragedy! ” echoed Nanny in a horror-struck whisper.

But Mrs. Calverley, already afraid that her confidence had gone too far, merely wished her “ Good-night ” with her former frigidity, and hurried abruptly away in the direction of her own home.

CHAPTER XI.

NANNY'S first impulse, when Mrs. Calverley left her thus abruptly, was to run after that lady, and insist on hearing more details of the mystery of the Ryders. But she had scarcely taken two steps in pursuit when she stopped short, and straightway abandoned this intention.

After all, what was the use of it? The Admiral's wife, with her hard voice, her short-sighted, inquisitive stoop, and nervous manner, was not an attractive or sympathetic personality, and such details as might be gathered from her lips would come with a cold dryness which Nanny, sensitive from recent wounds, shrank from encountering.

The young wife said to herself that she knew the worst Mrs. Calverley had to tell—that Dan had been married before, and that his first wife, Lady Ellen, was alive. This was dreadful enough, certainly; but as Nanny naturally refused to believe Mrs. Calverley's further assurances that Captain Ryder was a bad man, and the central figure in a "tragedy," she persisted in saying to herself that there was an explanation which would set matters right; and this explanation, unpleasant as it would be to ask for it, Nanny now felt that she must have as soon as her husband was well enough to give it.

In the meantime the poor child felt that life in this mystery-haunted house was difficult.

If she could only confide in someone! Nanny wanted to pour her story into the sympathetic ears of kind Mrs. Bambridge, but she was restrained by a fear lest this might include Mr. Bambridge, and in time the boys and girls. As for Meg, loving, devoted sister Meg, who was sure, in spite of all her efforts,

to find out from the tone of her letters that something was wrong, the hot tears came fast down Nanny's cheeks at the thought of her. Confidence in old Meg was at this stage of affairs not to be thought of. For Nanny knew perfectly well what the result would be. Up Meg would come from Edinburgh by the next available train, in a tornado of passion. Profiting by Captain Ryder's illness, she would next administer a fiery-tongued reproof to old Mrs. Ryder, as the only representative of the family whom she could get at ; and then, regardless of the inevitable scandal, she would insist on carrying Nanny back to Edinburgh without waiting to hear Captain Ryder's version of the story, or what he had to say in his own defence.

So Nanny resolved, until her husband was well, to keep her own counsel.

She got back to the house just as the doctor was leaving it. He was holding a conversation with old Mrs. Ryder at the door, and Nanny was annoyed to see on what very confidential terms they seemed to be. She could see them, under cover of the darkness, as they stood in the lamp-light at the open hall-door long before she reached it. Their voices were very low, and by their gestures it seemed that the lady was giving the doctor a long account, to which he listened assentingly.

"Yes, don't trouble yourself about him. He is going on very well. Good-night," said he, as soon as Nanny came near enough to announce her presence with very firm steps upon the gravel.

The younger lady passed him with only a cold salutation, for, with perhaps excusable prejudice, she looked upon every friend of her mother-in-law as her enemy.

"Dear me! where have you been, my dear?" cooed out the old lady softly, not without some apprehension in her voice. "You shouldn't be out so late without something round your shoulders. You——"

"I am all right, thank you," said Nanny coldly.

But the gentle old lady was not the sort of person you could avoid against her own wish. She followed Nanny upstairs, and asked permission to come into her room for a moment. The younger lady with a wry face, had to comply.

"I have been thinking about you, my poor child, all the afternoon," she bleated out with a little sigh.

"It is very kind of you."

"Now, don't be sarcastic with a poor old woman. It is not like you. You will make life too hard, my child, if you shut up your heart against everybody who loves you and wishes you well. Can't you learn to confide your troubles to me, dear? You have no mother, and I would be a mother to you."

"Thank you."

"Oh, you are hard! You forget your husband, whom you have taken away from me, remember; for I can't help seeing that you have got my share of his heart as well as your own."

Nanny's mouth softened, and a moment's irresolution came into her pretty eyes. The other instantly took advantage of it.

"What does Dan care for his mother now? Nothing. Through you, yes, through you, I am now all alone in the world."

"Oh, don't say that. I——"

"But I know it, and I don't complain. I know very well that it is only right, and in the natural order of things, that the wife should come first. It is only when I see my poor boy in danger of being deserted by the wife he adores that my heart grows sore for him. If I were only sure—you—you would not leave him——"

The old lady, whose voice was really breaking, sank on to a chair and put a very delicate scrap of lace-edged cambric to her eyes. Her emotion was real; the hardest thing you could say about it was that it came easily, and showed itself more easily still.

Nanny did not fall on her knees and caress her

mother-in-law with the impulsive warmth she would have felt ten days before; she moved one step nearer to her, and said curiously:

“Leave him! I am his wife, am I not? Why should I leave him?”

The old lady was for a moment rather disconcerted. Then she said half pettishly:

“Well, my dear, you have **been** so busy lately ferreting out old stories, that I **thought** perhaps you were anxious for an excuse for **leaving** him.”

“Ferreting—out—old—stories!” repeated Nanny slowly, while an indignant flush rose in her cheeks. “I think, considering what I have learned from one person and another, I might be excused if I did want to do a little ‘ferreting,’ as you call it. But I don’t intend to try. I am going to wait until Dan is well, and then tell him everything that I have heard, and ask him to explain it all. I can trust my husband.”

This was a brave speech, as the resolution of which it was the fruit had been hard to make. But old Mrs. Ryder did not seem to see the trust and self-sacrifice it implied. She remained sitting with her tiny pocket-handkerchief in her hands, while an expression of annoyance and perplexity came over her features.

“And when he gets well—you will tell him—what will you tell him? Why not leave these old stories alone?”

“I can’t—I can’t,” broke out Nanny passionately, out of patience with the old lady’s demands. “I shouldn’t be human if I could be satisfied with knowing just what I do and no more. Why I don’t even know whether——”

“Sh! sh!” hissed old Mrs. Ryder, glancing around her nervously. “There are servants in the house now, remember, new servants, all eyes and ears. Now, listen,” and she dropped her voice till it was scarcely louder than a whisper: “I have something to tell you—about Dan.” She paused, and drew her

handkerchief across her lips, which were dry and parched through her excitement. "He will be about again before long, we hope. But," and she raised her eyes in pleading terror to her daughter-in-law's face, "it will be months before he is quite himself. The doctor thinks this illness—will affect his mind—his memory—and that unless he is kept very quiet and free from all excitement—he may never wholly recover, but remain in a half-childish state—for the rest—of his life!"

Nanny, white even to her lips, received this announcement in dead silence. Then came a moment of doubt. She looked nervously at her mother-in-law.

"The doctor told you this, you say?"

"When he had heard what I had to tell him about his life in India—yes."

Nanny drew a long breath.

"I see. Thank you. Don't tell me any more!"

The poor child put her hands to her ears. She felt she could not bear another word. Her mother-in-law had the sense to recognise this: and quietly, in a shamed-faced sort of way, as if remorseful for having had to deal such blows, she went away.

There was happily, as in most women who are good for anything, a strong practical side to Nanny's nature. Having once said to herself that she would do nothing and say nothing in the matter of the family secret until her husband was well enough to be consulted, she devoted herself to nursing him, taking her share of waiting and watching with her mother-in-law and the nurse, and found by so doing a time-worn relief from her troubles. In the intervals of nursing she made a systematic inspection of the house from garret to cellar, animated partly by girlish delight at having a home of her own, and partly by the nascent housewifely instinct, which told her that something more ought to be done to it to bring it up to date.

Two days after that final scene with her mother-in-law, since which Nanny had resolutely declined to

re-open the old subject with her, the young mistress of The Grange was sitting on the wide, shallow stairs, which led from the first to the second or attic story, surveying with a meditative and distasteful air a vast expanse of wall on her left covered with paper of that singular pattern known to our immediate ancestors as "marbled."

"Why 'marbled'?" asked Nanny with a shake of the head, addressing Laura Bambridge, who was laboriously winding up a piece of string with which the two ladies had been measuring the exact length of the gallery for an "art" wall-paper.

For the lads and lasses at Brent Lodge were still Nanny's chief consolation, and each day she found some excuse for having at least one of them to share her loneliness.

"For that matter, why 'art'?" retorted Laura. "It doesn't really want more imagination to see a likeness to blocks of marble in those prosaic blue zigzags on a butter-coloured ground than to see the connection between art and a pattern of pink cauliflower. Our papas and mammas read Byron and Tom Moore, and liked to fancy themselves living in marble palaces. *We* go to South Kensington and imagine ourselves 'arstistic.' And all the time we are just the same stodgy old Britons underneath it all."

"You are severe and misanthropical this morning," said Nanny, laughing.

"I am consumed by a sense of the vanity of all things, just because I can't get my own particular 'vanity,' as Mr. Weller says," admitted Laura. "We can't get papa to see that, in order to carry out the great principle of 'the survival of the fittest,' our sealskin jackets absolutely must be 'done up' for this winter. He says this 'doing up,' costs so much; that we had better throw the sealskins aside and make our old cloth coats do instead. Now, what is the use of training us up to appreciate scientific theories if we are not allowed to put them in practice?"

"It's very hard," said Nanny. "If I had known you to be smarting under the sense of such an injustice, I would not have asked you to come and share my woes about wall-paper."

"Never mind," said Laura, with an exaggerated sigh. "In the contemplation of your sorrows I can forget my own."

And she skipped along the gallery towards Nanny so quickly that she tripped in a hole in the worn carpet, and was thrown headforemost against the wall at the end. To the surprise of both, the wall yielded a little, and the despised marble paper cracked.

"What have I done?" cried poor Laura. "I thought this was the outer wall. Surely my head isn't hard enough to make a passage through into the garden."

They both began to laugh with the immoderate merriment one can enjoy at twenty, even with a mysterious secret hanging over one's head. And both began to tap on the wall and to examine it.

"I thought it was the outer wall, too," said Nanny, as they discovered beyond a doubt, by the sound their knuckles made on the wall, that there was a hollow space behind it. "But now, of course, I remember that there is an attic above this corner, and—yes, the study is right underneath. Then there must be a room or a space behind here: the question is, how to get at it. There is certainly no door from the inside, unless, indeed—" and she began to feel more carefully—"there has been one here and it has been blocked up."

She tore a small piece of the paper off, enough to show that behind there was a wall of lath and plaster. They had just discovered this when they caught sight of old Mrs. Ryder at the other end of the gallery. She had just come upstairs.

"The old lady looks scared; she thinks we're pulling the house down," whispered Laura, under cover of stooping to pick up her handkerchief.

She *did* look scared. Nanny ran to meet her, afraid that something had gone wrong.

“What’s the matter, mamma? has anything happened?”

“No, dear, no. I don’t grow any younger, and the stairs try me. That’s all. What are you girls doing up here?” she continued, as she shook hands with Laura.

“I want to have a new paper on the wall here, as soon as Dan gets well,” said Nanny. “This is so dreadfully ugly and common-looking, isn’t it?”

“That is what you young people think of everything chosen by your elders, I suppose,” answered the old lady, with as near an approach to tartness as her general amiability permitted.

There was a pause. The young ladies both felt snubbed. As a diversion, Laura again tapped on the hollow-sounding wall.

“There seems to be a bit of wasted space here that we can’t account for,” she said lightly.

“Yes, mamma, is there a room there, do you know? And if so, where is the door?”

“There is no room,” answered the old lady quietly. “This is the east end of the house, and it was a fancy of my poor husband’s that by having a double wall we should be protected against the east winds. That is all.”

“What a strange idea! And what a pity to give so much space up to it!” exclaimed Laura.

“It is not much—not more than a couple of feet.” A shadow passed upon the old lady’s face. Evidently she did not care for her late husband’s whims to be laughed at. She hastened to change the conversation, and assuming a more conciliatory tone towards the views of the young people, she continued: “Perhaps this paper is rather ugly; though, having been used to it years ago, I did not look at it with your æsthetically cultivated eyes.”

“Then you won’t be offended if I have it repaired, mamma?”

“Of course not, my dear. This is your home now, not mine; you can do whatever you like in it. But if you will take my advice, instead of repapering the wall, you will hang it with curtains all the way up the stairs. That will be more modern still.”

“Oh, that would be lovely! But wouldn't it be frightfully expensive?”

“Not if you have printed cotton curtains, I think. I am going up to town this afternoon, you know. Shall I call at Liberty's, and see what they would come to?”

“Oh, if you would, mamma! What is the length, Laura?”

“Here is the string, with a knot in it at each end of the exact length. It is not exactly what you would call scientific measurement, I'm afraid; but we couldn't find a yard measure.”

“The worst of it is,” remarked Nanny, with a touch of gloom, “that if the curains *do* prove too expensive, we shall have missed an afternoon's enjoyment. Laura's brother Arthur has a half-holiday to-day, and we were going to buy some paper in the village, and make him turn paper-hanger.”

“It would have been such fun,” added Laura wistfully.

“But amateur paper-hanging would never answer. It is very difficult indeed to do properly,” said old Mrs. Ryder quickly. “Look, Nanny. If you will promise to leave the wall alone till I come back I will bring you the curtains, whatever they cost. If they cost more than you think Dan would approve of your spending, I'll pay half of the money myself.”

“Oh, how good of you! But I don't like to——”

“Yes, yes, I should like to get them. I want to see the old house look nice. Only—don't meddle with the wall till I come back.”

“No. We promise,” said Nanny.

“Will you come downstairs with me now, and see me to the station? And I suppose, Nanny, you mean to spend the rest of the time in Dan's room?”

The younger ladies followed her downstairs, and after luncheon, which was just served, they accompanied her to the station.

As soon as the train had started, however, sharp-eyed Laura pursed her mouth up knowingly, and said :

“ Now, I wonder if that dear old lady imagines that we don't see through her little artifice ! She wouldn't have been so fond of our society if she had not wanted to keep us out of mischief, and she hoped that by the time she had started we should have forgotten all about that wall.”

“ Yes. She didn't want us to paper it, did she ? ” said Nanny doubtfully. “ I wonder why ! ”

“ I know. She wanted us to leave that wall alone because there *is* a room behind it, which she doesn't want us to see into. And of course, as long as human nature remains what it is, that is the very way to make us want to see.”

Nanny stopped short, and stared at the girl as if she had received a great shock.

“ Oh ! ” she gasped. “ You don't think that, do you ? ”

“ Don't take it so tragically,” cried Laura, laughing. “ There's a room that somebody or other would like to block up in every old house, you may be sure of that. And Mrs. Ryder, being a woman of strong will, has had her own way about it. Most likely it is the room in which her husband died,” she added in a graver tone.

“ Very likely,” assented Nanny with surprising eagerness. For Laura could not know what a load of irritating mystery the young wife had had to bear already. “ I never thought of that. I wonder if there is a room there ? ” she added after a pause.

“ It is very easy to find out,” cried Laura, with girlish eagerness for the undertaking. “ The old plan—you know. Put a handkerchief, or a book, or a flower, anything, in every window, and then see from the outside whether there's a window left out.”

"Ye—es, we might do that," said Nanny hesitatingly.

"Do, do let us do it. It will be such fun! It is your own house, you know, though I dare say that old lady doesn't mean it to be so any more than she can help. At any rate, there can be no harm in finding out about the windows—can there?"

"No—o, I suppose not."

So it was settled that a book, being a heavy thing which the breeze could not blow away, should be placed in every window; and when they reached The Grange, Laura forced the still half-reluctant Nanny to carry out the plan. Before they had half finished their task, Arthur Bambridge, who had been invited by Nanny the day before, arrived and entered with great zest into the occupation on hand. That is to say, he stood in the garden and directed them from point to point in a hoarse whisper, which was supposed to be less irritating to the nerves of a convalescent man than speech uttered in a natural voice. Nanny, however, had ascertained that her husband was asleep before joining in this dubious frolic.

At last the task was done; and the two ladies stood together at the window in front of which old Mrs. Ryder had found them that morning. Nanny was shaking like a leaf as they put their heads out, and saw Arthur standing on the grass below trying to prop a ladder against the wall. His face was flushed with boyish excitement, although he affected a manner which was a cross between that of the bored man-about-town and that of the scientific investigator.

"What are you doing?" sobbed out Nanny in a frightened voice.

Laura turned round quickly to look at her. The young wife's hands hung down at her sides; her face was wet and cold.

"Oh, you are ill! You have have got too much excited about this nonsense," cried Laura.

Nanny shook her head.

"Stop him," she whispered.

Laura put her head out of the window, and frantically made signs to her brother, who had already ascended two or three rungs of the ladder, to go down again. Recovering herself, Nanny too looked out and smiled faintly at the astonished lad.

"Wait till I come down," she said, after clearing her throat with difficulty; "I want to go up first."

She knew that she was very foolish to be so much moved without cause, and by the time she and her companion got down into the garden she had recovered herself sufficiently to laugh almost naturally at her own fright.

Still, the sight of two empty windows at the end of the house, with the thinning trails of Virginia creeper swinging gently in front of them, filled her again with alarm which she could not have explained away to her companions without letting them into the secret of the shock she had already suffered in that house. Arthur was looking very cross; he was not old enough to be very chivalrous, and he put down her desire to go first to "feminine nastiness," and to jealousy of his masculine superiority.

"All right," he said rather haughtily; "of course you can go first if you like, Mrs. Ryder; but don't blame me if there's a stray rat, or cat, or bat in the room that flies out at you and gives you a fright. I can't catch you if you fall down, you know; for I shall be holding the ladder."

"You are not very courteous, Arthur," said his sister reprovingly.

"Never mind. I shall be all right," said Nanny.

And seeing there was no help for it, and being herself on fire with curiosity, she at once began the ascent of the ladder in spite of the expostulations of Laura, who was afraid that she might faint.

"Here's something to pull back the catch of the window with, Mrs. Ryder," said Arthur, handing her his pocket-knife.

Nanny got up the ladder nimbly and neatly enough, having been "a bit of a tomboy," as her nurse used

to say, and not disdainful of the art of tree-climbing. She opened the pocket-knife, drew back the window-catch, and with some difficulty raised the sash. Then she turned round to look down, with a white, excited face.

“It is a room,” she whispered. “I’m going to get in.”

Laura began to remonstrate, frightened by her paleness. But Arthur “shut his sister up” with a remark of curt brotherliness, delivered in an undertone. When they looked up again, Nanny had disappeared inside the room. There were a few moments for the two people below of breathless, delicious excitement. Then young Mrs. Ryder reappeared at the window.

Nay, was it young Mrs. Ryder? A creature with haggard ghastly face, staring eyes, and shaking white lips, who made signs to the two below, but without speaking.

“Go up to her, or let me go up to her, Arthur! She must not come down this way alone, at any rate,” whispered Laura, much shocked.

But Nanny had caught the words, and before either could mount one step, she was out on the ladder, shutting the window with a sudden accession of nervous force.

“Don’t come! don’t come!” she cried in a firm voice. “I will come down.”

CHAPTER XI.

IT was quite clear to both Laura and Arthur Cambridge that something she had seen in the long-concealed room had given young Mrs. Ryder a terrible shock. She came down the ladder firmly, but very slowly, and quick-witted Laura wondered whether she had seen something she did not wish to speak about, and was trying to invent some story to account for the fright she had evidently received.

This, in truth, was the case. Nanny, sick at heart and terror-struck, knew she must not confess what had frightened her and yet shrank from telling an absolute falsehood. Arthur, who was entirely lacking in his sister's delicate perception, helped her out of her difficulty by his first question.

"Well, Mrs. Ryder, you were boasting the other day that you didn't believe in ghosts, that you were never frightened unless there was real reason for fear, and——"

"There was real reason for fear," said Nanny, plucking up spirit to answer him. "You might have run away with the ladder."

"It wasn't that fear that made you look so frightened. You've only just thought of that. Now, what was it really?"

"A cat, or a rat, or a bat, Mr. Inquisitive."

"Now, Mrs. Ryder, you're only putting me off. I shall go up and see for myself."

Nanny's face changed, and she laid her hand on his arm to restrain him; while his sister, with less ceremony, pulled the ladder away from the wall, and so shook him off.

"Why mayn't I go up? Why mayn't I go up?"

asked he eagerly, like a spoilt child. "If there are really rats there, let me get Harrison's terrier—Harrison, the blacksmith, has a first-rate ratter, and——"

"Really, Arthur, you don't suppose Mrs. Ryder wants all the village ringing with the exciting story of a rat-hunt at The Grange!"

Arthur was about to answer in a lofty tone of offended dignity, for he considered himself to stand on a more elevated plane of refinement than Laura did. But Nanny broke in with a very gentle voice:

"A terrier would be of no use, Arthur, because I don't even know that there are any rats. That room is only a lumber-room."

"But something frightened you! Lumber wouldn't frighten you—old boxes and things like that."

"Lumber did frighten me, you see. Now, don't go about telling everybody that I went into hysterics at the sight of a few boxes piled on one another, or they will say that Mrs. Ryder has a bad conscience, and that there is something wrong at The Grange."

But she could not quite keep up the light tone she had assumed. Her face quivered on the last words. Then she caught Laura's eye, and saw that the girl's face was full of kindness and sympathy, whereupon she had to turn away abruptly to hide her tears.

"Let us go in," she said; "it is getting cold."

But it was not cold; although it was late October, the sun was bright and warm. Laura frowned and nodded energetically at her brother to signify to that obtuse youth that he was to second her in what she was going to say; and then she told Nanny that they had to be home early, and marched Arthur off before that young gentleman had made up his mind in what manner to show his displeasure at the liberties which were being taken with him.

They left Nanny on the lawn, under the cedar-trees, and there she remained, quite benumbed and helpless under the fresh blow which had fallen upon her, with eyes which had lost their capacity for seeing anything but those long shut-up windows and the secret

behind them. And yet what had she seen? Nothing but a pile of lumber, as she had truly told her light-hearted companions of a few minutes before. But then it was lumber which told a tale, and a ghastly tale. Nanny saw the apartment now as plainly as she had done ten minutes ago; smelt again the mouldy, close smell of a chamber long shut up from the outer air.

It had been a bedroom, and in use at the time when it was suddenly closed. A large washhand-stand stood in one corner, with a piece of dried-up soap in the uncovered soap-dish, and traces of water in the displaced jug and in the washhand-basin. Everything else in the room was in confusion—not the confusion of accident or of neglect, but the evident result of a mad access of passion. Pictures had been torn from the walls, and lay, the frames shattered, the glass almost powdered, on the ground. A chest of drawers had been overthrown, and the contents, deep in the dust of many years, lay in a heap, with a broken looking-glass on the top of all. The window-curtains had been torn down, the mantelpiece ornaments swept off. But all this formed only the blurred background to a picture which Nanny felt that nothing would ever obliterate from her mind. The bed, one of the old-fashioned mahogany erections of which there were many more in the house, had been dragged into the middle of the room, and was the most conspicuous object in it. The bed-clothes had disappeared, or lay lost among the disordered heaps of clothing on the floor. But the paillasse remained, presenting a spectacle so horrible that Nanny grew cold at the recollection, for it was dyed with a stain which spread down the side of the bedstead and over a wide space of the carpet, and discoloured by time and the accumulation of dust as it was, Nanny knew that it showed where there had once been a pool of blood.

This awful discovery had shocked her so much that the thought of penetrating into a second and

larger room beyond, the door of which was kept open by a fallen chair, had not even occurred to her. Her one idea had been to escape from the sight, and to hide it from the others. Now left to herself, however, she half wished she had gone further in her researches. What could she have learnt, indeed, to lessen the horror of what she knew? Might not even uncertainty be better than certainty? For conjecturing busily in spite of herself, there came a horrible suspicion into the poor young wife's mind. A crime had been committed in the shut-up room. Was it murder? With new meaning, a half-forgotten sentence in the letter Meg had written to her on first hearing of her engagement to Dan, came back to her mind, about a certain Ralph Ryder of Brent of evil reputation. And then Mrs. Calverley had talked of a tragedy.

But how to reconcile this with what she knew of Dan, the kindest and most devoted of husbands, the gentlest and most chivalrous of men? Could even madness change a man so much?

She started guiltily on hearing the trail of a woman's skirt over the grass. It was the nurse, who came up to her with a smiling face.

"You look as if you wanted some good news, ma'am, and I've brought it," she said. "The Captain's woke up quite sensible, and much better, and he says would you please come and see him. I had half a mind to tell him you were out, because he wants to talk, and he didn't ought to excite himself yet. But he seemed so wistful, I hadn't the heart. You'll be careful, and not let him talk too much, will you, ma'am?"

Nanny promised, and returned to the house with the nurse very slowly. Mrs. Walters, who had been shrewd enough to discover that there was a skeleton in The Grange cupboard, and who, of course, took the part of the submissive young lady against the strong-willed one, ventured on another remark.

"I'm glad old Mrs. Ryder isn't here just now, when

the poor gentleman is able to talk sensible for the first time," she said, with a sidelong look.

"Yes, I would rather have his first words myself," assented Nanny discreetly.

"I shouldn't wish to say anything disrespectful of her," went on the nurse, "but I don't hold with worrying people when they're ill, and I'm sure the way that old lady used to hang over his bed, listening to his words when he was not himself, must have worried Captain Ryder, even though he didn't, not to say know what was going on."

"Yes, yes, I've thought so too," said the young wife. "And there was nothing to listen to. There was nothing important in what he said."

There was a half-questioning inflection in her voice. Mrs. Walters answered promptly.

"Nothing whatever. It was mostly all about you, ma'am. Only once——"

"Well?"

The nurse hesitated, and then went on with her speech, believing, good soul! that she was giving the pretty young lady a useful warning. This seemed the more probable that Nanny's face was full of excitement and interest immediately.

"Once he did say something about a letter." Nanny stopped short, but then, recovering herself, went on, tottering in her walk. She made a sign to the nurse to go on. "Some wicked letter that somebody must have written to him about you, ma'am, I think, for he seemed afraid that they would take you away from him. He seemed in a dreadful state about it, and old Mrs. Ryder didn't seem to like it. I dare say she is a little jealous of his being so fond of you. Mothers mostly are of their sons' wives: don't you think so, ma'am?"

"Yes, I suppose so," answered Nanny mechanically.

She entered the sick-room like a mouse. The curtains of one window had been drawn back, and the light fell through the white blind on Captain

Ryder's pale face. He looked so different without the sunburn, so old and worn and gray, that the discrepancy between the age he owned to and the age he looked struck Nanny with overwhelming force. And if he had deceived her in that one particular, why not in others?

In the very moment that this thought occurred to her she was seized with remorse. For the look on her husband's face as he held out his arms touched her to the quick.

"Nanny, my darling!" he said in a weak voice.

And the next moment he was holding her head between his trembling hands, devouring her little flower-face with eyes luminous with tenderness.

"Oh, Nanny, I can't talk to you, child. I—I shall make a fool of myself if I do. It is horrible to be ill, Nanny, and to feel that you are a long way away from—from the creature you want—that you are always going farther—farther—that something—somebody is drawing you away. I want you to stay by me, little one. Don't let me feel it again. Don't tremble, child; don't look frightened. Somebody—my mother, I think it was—always seemed to be coming between you and me, whispering to me, and—what was it I wanted to say? I—I can't remember."

His head, which he had raised from the pillow, fell back upon her shoulder. The exertion had made his face moist, and caused his breath to come quickly. Nanny was moved to tears; she was frightened also, both by his physical condition and by his last words. What was it he wanted to remember?

For a few happy moments, with his head in her arms, he forgot the thought which had been worrying him. But suddenly he looked up again.

"Nanny," he said, in a husky, weak voice, scanning her face with wistful eyes, "what was it? Can't you help me to remember what it was? My head seems confused still—and—and——"

"Don't try to remember," whispered Nanny,

alarmed both by what he half remembered and by what he wholly forgot. "Don't think of anything until you are stronger except *me*."

With a sigh which seemed to shake his weak frame, he looked up in her face, and passed his trembling hand over the hair which fell in little silky rings over her forehead.

"Not think of anything except you? Oh, Nanny, you need not tell me that! Whether the dreams I had were pleasant or unpleasant, they were always of you—you—nothing but you."

"You mustn't have unpleasant dreams about me," said Nanny, smiling.

"No, dear, no. I need not dream about you at all now that I can have you beside me. But——"

He paused, and his wife saw, by the look which came over his face, that his thoughts were going back again to the subject which had been worrying him. He frowned painfully, as if trying to recollect lost impressions, and at last, in spite of her entreaties that he would not trouble himself about anything until he was quite well, he seized her left hand, and, clasping it tightly in his, said:

"Tell me, Nanny, have you seen anything about the house—to trouble you, or—or perplex you, while I have been lying here? Have you seen—or fancied you have seen—any *person* who, according to all reason, *could not have been there*? Answer me, Nanny—answer me!"

But for a few moments she could not. Her lips were parched, her tongue seemed powerless, while her head swam with wild conjectures. At last, however, she seemed to understand. He had believed Lady Ellen to be dead, and he had seen her alive. Nanny's breath came fast. She threw a rapid glance at her husband's face, saw how excited he was, and, remembering the nurse's warning, resolved at all hazards to keep her fears and her fancies from him for the present. Fortunately, too, she could say with truth she had not *seen* anyone.

“Answer me, dear,” repeated Captain Ryder.

“No, Dan, I have not seen anybody,” she said simply at last. “But if I had, I shouldn’t let you talk about it now, dear.”

He smiled at her and pressed her hand to his lips. He believed her, but yet he did not seem satisfied.

“I think, Dan,” she suggested gently, “that you had ugly fancies when you were ill—a sort of nightmare, in fact. But now you’re getting well, and you won’t have them any more.”

For a moment he was silent, looking at her fixedly. At last he spoke in a hesitating, uncertain manner.

“I suppose you are right; I had fancies because I was ill. And yet”—again his eyebrows contracted and the look of perplexity came back into his eyes—“I felt so sure that it was before my accident I saw——”

Nanny watched his lips eagerly, wondering whether he was going to confess. But, after a pause, he only added, in a dreamy tone: “what I saw.”

There was silence for a few minutes. Captain Ryder seemed to be struggling with his dim recollections; Nanny was afraid to speak: afraid, on the one hand, to allow him to excite himself by this talk—
anxious, on the other hand, for him to utter just the few words which would make his whole meaning clear. A bell rang somewhere, and husband and wife looked at each other in a startled manner.

“My mother, I suppose,” remarked Captain Ryder, in a tone of some annoyance.

At the name Nanny, as if caught in some guilty act, tried to withdraw herself from her husband’s arms; but he instantly fell into a paroxysm of excitement, and detaining her with all the force he could use, he stammered out;

“No, no, no! That is just what I knew, what I felt, what I feared! She is standing between you and me, Nanny; she has some secret which she is holding over our heads. Sometimes I feel that I hate her——”

“Oh, hush! don't say such things, Dan,” cried Nanny, terribly alarmed by the wildness of his words, and by the glow which excitement was bringing into his cheeks and into his eyes; for it seemed to the poor child that the passion she was stirring made the crime which she suspected seem more probable. She had never seen him so angry before, and her fears made the sight of his frowning face a torture to her.

“I don't think it is mamma, Dan,” she said at last, in a timid voice. “She would have been in here by this time. Let me go and see who it is.”

She drew herself away, and had reached the door, when she was startled by Dan's voice.

“I know!” he cried, in tones much stronger than before. “Someone was with me—a young fellow; yes, Bambridge! Send for young Bambridge, Nanny; he saw what I did.”

“Very well, dear, I will,” said his wife, as she left the room.

One of the maids met her in the hall.

“A gentleman is in the drawing-room who wishes to see you, ma'am,” said the girl.

“One of the young Mr. Bambridges?” asked Nanny.

“No, ma'am. Mr. Eley, he said his name was.”

Valentine Eley! Nanny made her way to the drawing-room slowly, not at all anxious to see this gentleman who held the Ryder secret, whatever it was, as a marketable commodity.

The big drawing-rooms were almost dark when Nanny reached them. The household not being yet in full working order, the lamps had not been brought in. The moment she entered, almost before she was well inside the room, in fact, the young man rushed impulsively towards her, and said:

“Oh, Mrs. Ryder, my sister wants to know if she may leave Teddington and come up to The White House.”

It was plain that in the darkness Valentine, expecting to meet old Mrs. Ryder, had taken it for granted

that he was in her presence. Nanny, not anxious to undeceive him yet, sank at once on to a seat, lest her height should betray her.

The young man, who was evidently much excited, babbled on at breakneck pace.

“You know that Captain Ryder has been ill, and that after an illness he always has one of these attacks, when nobody can manage him but my sister. Well, he is sure, living so near, to come straight back to The White House again when the fit comes on and then what am I to do? The Captain is strong enough to murder me, and, without being a coward, one may dislike the prospect. You see——”

Valentine stopped short. His eyes having now grown accustomed to the gloom, he had perceived his mistake, and was overcome with consternation.

“I suppose it was the other Mrs. Ryder, old Mrs. Ryder, whom you wished to see?” said Nanny quietly.

“Yes—er—it was; certainly it was. I should never have thought of troubling you, though I suppose,” he went on, with some hesitation, “it is not indiscreet to infer that you know all about the—the Ryder secret, as I may call it?”

“I know something of it, certainly,” she answered in a dull voice.

Valentine was silent for a few moments. He had the wit to guess that she did not know everything, cool as she was, and he was wondering how far his own indiscretion had enlightened her, and whether it would be to his advantage to let her know still more than she did. He decided not to tell her the whole truth, but to make a bid for her gratitude by pretending to do so.

“Pray don’t think me impertinent,” he began, “when I say that I think you are being very unfairly treated. If the affair could have been kept from your knowledge altogether, I should have said: ‘Keep it from her by all means.’ But since something was bound to leak out, it would have been much fairer to do at

first what I propose to do now — make you fully acquainted with all the details of the story.”

Nanny, who, with youthful timidity, had sat down thus allowing him to take a seat also, sprang upon her feet again. She could not risk hearing allegations against her husband from the lips of this creature.

“Excuse me, Mr. Eley,” she said, in a trembling voice, but full of passion and fire; “I cannot hear them. I do know there is a secret, and I dare say you know more of it than I do. But, as you only learned it by accident, you have no right to communicate it to any one else.”

“But if they are wronging you in keeping you in ignorance?”

Nanny shook her head, at first unable to speak in answer, since this suggestion seemed to point unmistakably in the direction of her worst fears.

“I will wait until my husband is well enough to tell me himself,” she said.

Valentine Eley came a step nearer to her.

“But your husband doesn’t know as much as I do,” said he in a low voice.

Nanny turned upon him quickly.

“Doesn’t he know that his first wife is alive?” she exclaimed.

Valentine paused before answering discreetly;

“All I said was that Captain Ryder doesn’t know as much as I do.”

“Well,” Nanny answered with spirit, “he shall find it out as soon as he gets well, and then we will get rid of the army of blackmailers together, whatever it may cost.”

“Oh,” said Valentine, quite coolly, and with no trace of indignation at her uncivil suggestion, “if all the world knows, it won’t cost much. Only a length of rope to one member of the family, and a consequent shock to the feelings of the rest. Good-evening. I am so sorry to have intruded upon you.”

He was quite easy, quite happy, and seemed un-

conscious that his conduct was at all open to question, as he smiled upon his hostess with benignant blue eyes, and bowed himself out with a sidelong look at a mirror in which it was too dark for him to see more than the outline of his figure.

Nanny remained where he had left her for nearly an hour, until she heard another ring at the outer bell, and ran out into the hall. As she had expected, the arrival was old Mrs. Ryder, whose face fell at sight of her.

"I've brought the curtains, dear," said the old lady with nervous haste.

"Oh, have you?" said Nanny.

"Yes, dear; I got them at a shop in Oxford Street, where they are selling off, and they were *so* cheap."

"That's right, thank you. Thank you very much."

"How is Dan, dear?" went on the old lady, fidgeting with some small parcels, and not looking her daughter-in-law in the face.

"Oh, he's—he's much better. He has been awake a long time. We've been talking."

The old lady started. After a minute more past in fumbling among her purchases, she said:

"Talking! Not—not about anything too exciting, I hope?"

"No. What I have to say that is exciting I kept for you."

It was a challenge. Standing upright, the old lady turned to her.

"What do you mean, dear?" she asked falteringly.

"Are you going upstairs? If you are, I will go with you, if I may."

Without another word they went upstairs, but, on reaching old Mrs. Ryder's bedroom-door, Nanny passed it and went straight on to the end of the corridor, where the built-up door was.

"I found out to-day," she said quietly, "that there is a room behind here."

In the few moments of silence which followed, she

could hear the silk dress the old lady wore rustling as she stood.

“Well,” she said at last, “that is not a great discovery.”

“And I found out why it is shut up. There was a murder committed there.”

The old lady staggered, taken utterly off her guard. Turning sharply upon her daughter-in-law, she faltered out in a terror-stricken whisper :

“*Who told you ?*”

CHAPTER XIII.

NANNY received very quietly her mother-in-law's involuntary confession. For it was a confession. The vehement words, "Who told you?" forced out of her in a moment of terror, could not be explained away. Old Mrs. Ryder felt this, and she walked to the nearest window with tottering feet, pushed up the sash, and leaned out, with her drawn face exposed to the night air, and to a fine rain which had just begun to fall.

"You will get wet," said Nanny, very gently.

She felt a pang of pity for this fragile-looking old lady, who had borne the weight of a hideous secret for years and years.

The old lady started back, and for a moment Nanny thought, as the wrinkled face appeared to soften under the gaze of her sympathetic eyes, that her mother-in-law was going to do the only wise and honest thing, and to tell her frankly the whole story. But the habits of a quarter of a century are not broken through in a moment; she was secretive by nature, as most women are, and her tendency to undue reserve, instead of being checked by an intelligent modern education, had been fostered by years of brooding over a tragic story. She seemed to withdraw into herself again as she wrapped the long black velvet cloak she wore more closely round her, and drew a gentle, affected little sigh. All hope of her confidence was over.

"There really was something dreadful done in that room many years ago, I believe," she said, without again meeting Nanny's eyes. "But I need not tell you, my dear, that we don't talk about it. You may guess how old the story is when I say that Dan has

never even heard of it ; and I particularly beg you—though to a woman of your sense it is scarcely necessary to insist on this—not to mention it to him.”

And so the matter ended, old Mrs. Ryder walking back to her room as if there was no more to be said, Nanny returning, restless and unsatisfied, to her husband's room.

For the next few days the young wife was chiefly occupied by the delights attending her husband's gradual return to health and strength. There was the excitement of his sitting up in bed for the first time. Next followed the enjoyment of seeing him in a chair. And last of all came the pleasure of lending him the support of her arm when he left the sick-room for the first time. Not that he needed this support. Captain Ryder was not much pulled down by his illness, and recovered quickly. But Nanny liked to think that he wanted her help.

Old Mrs. Ryder had kept out of her daughter-in-law's way since the day on which the latter had discovered the shut-up room. The only event which had broken the monotony of these few days had been a formal call on the part of the Vicar. The Reverend George Melladew was a Broad Churchman, with no more salient characteristic than a tendency to let all the work of the parish slip out of his own hands and into those of his curates, except on such occasions as a smart wedding or grand funeral, when he would conduct the service himself, to the admiration of all the old ladies, who thought much more of him than they would have done of a man weaker of voice, but stronger in the Christian virtues. Nanny found him rather a stilted, dry sort of person, and felt more awkward and girlish in his society than she had done since her marriage. She felt annoyed with herself, and expressed a fear to her husband that the Vicar had found her stupid.

When, however, Mrs. Bambridge and two of the girls called, two days later, they said that Mr. Melladew had called her a charming woman.

“ He didn’t seem charmed,” said Nanny dubiously. “ He kept letting the conversation drop, and as I wasn’t clever enough to pick it up again, and Dan wouldn’t talk at all, most of the time was like the last few minutes, when the service is over, before one goes out of church.”

“ Well, he must have thought your silence arose from awe of him, and felt flattered by it,” suggested Laura. “ He wants you to take a district.”

“ Take a *what* ?” cried Nanny.

“ A district,” broke in Adela glibly. “ It’s quite easy. You knock at the door of the cottages, and the woman who opens the door looks you up and down and dusts a chair for you. But if it’s a child who comes, it turns it’s back upon you and shouts ‘ *Mo-thur!* ’ And you mustn’t be frightened, but stand still till ‘ *Mo-thur* ’ comes.”

“ But I shan’t know what to do or what to say !”

“ What to do is very simple : you have only to sit still and smile. As for what to say, if you see an old woman about, or an old man, you ask after their rheumatism. They’re sure to have rheumatism, but they’ll be delighted, and think you must have been asking about them to have learnt that. Then you ask the names of the children, and what standards they have passed. When you’ve been told, you wag your head and look surprised, as if you thought it wonderful for them to have got on so fast. Then you leave a tract, and you come away.”

“ Oh, I could never leave tracts !” exclaimed Nanny ; “ it seems so impertinent.”

“ You don’t understand,” said Laura, shaking her head. “ Leaving tracts at cottages is just like leaving cards at your friends’ houses : they’d be awfully offended if you forgot. The only difference is that you leave the tract whether they’re at home or not. They read just as much of the tract, too, as your friend does of the card—the name. It’s a matter of etiquette merely.”

“ Dear me ! dear me !” broke in poor Mrs. Bam-

bridge, with a distressed face. "You will think them very flippant, Captain Ryder; but I assure you my girls are really very good at parish work, and the Vicar has said over and over again he doesn't know what he should do without them."

"I don't want to be assured that they do everything they undertake in the very best possible way. They carry their characters in their faces, and their work is done none the less well that they do it with smiles instead of sour looks," he answered.

The good lady beamed upon him, and proceeded to treasure up that speech from the great man of the neighbourhood, for use among her friends. He then asked her at what time in the evening her son Charlie came home from the City. To the great relief of Nanny, who knew on what subject her husband wished to question the young fellow, Mrs. Bambridge answered that he had gone to Germany on business for the firm he was with.

"His faculty for learning languages is something quite extraordinary," added the fond mother. "He mastered German thoroughly in three weeks."

And with this astounding statement, uttered in the simplest good faith, Mrs. Bambridge looked at Laura and prepared to take leave.

The girls, meanwhile, had succeeded in persuading young Mrs. Ryder to "take a district," and they left feeling very proud of their success.

Nanny entered upon the new duties which she had thus hastily undertaken that very week. Her husband encouraged her to do this, as it would give her an occupation while he himself was busy with an exhaustive study of the state of his affairs. The losses entailed upon him by his mother's singular management of the Brent and Bicton property, and the extensive inroads which her allowance made upon his income, made this a very unsatisfactory work. For the elder Mrs. Ryder's dainty little porcelain hands had been used all her life to grasp and to retain, as a matter of right, such good things as came

in her way. And although she now offered most gracefully to do without a brougham, and even to sell her jewellery, her hold over her son had become, through long custom, so secure that he rejected the notion with horror, as if it had been proposed that he should send her to the workhouse or commit some other act as shockingly unfilial.

Meanwhile, Nanny had entered upon her new duties, which proved much more congenial than she had expected. Brent was not a place where the worst, the most appalling poverty abounded; the most distressing cases of want were to be found in the mushroom growth of small houses which had sprung up on the borderland of Bicton. But this part of the parish was not in Nanny's "district." From the technical point of view, she did not make a good "visitor." She hurried over her visits to the people she did not like—the whining widow who never thought anybody did enough for her, and the lady whose piety in the morning was only exceeded by her inebriety at night. And she saved up her smiles and brightness for the families she found congenial to her. So that the second Miss Hutchins, who was an ideal "visitor," stumping round her district like a clockwork train on circular rails, staying exactly ten minutes at each cottage, except in cases of illness, when the infliction lasted fifteen, felt at last bound to remonstrate.

"You must excuse my taking the liberty of speaking to you, Mrs. Ryder," she went on, when she had opened her subject. She had met Nanny at the corner of the green, as she herself was squelching along in her goloshes to a mothers' meeting at the school-room. "But I am so much older than you are, and I am sure your intentions are good, and so I venture on a little suggestion. Now, Mrs. Wheeler says that no one has been near her for a fortnight, and as she is in your district——"

"But last time I went she slammed the door in my face. I couldn't very well shout good advice at her

through the keyhole, could I? And I couldn't even scream out 'How are you?' For I knew how she was—tipsy."

The second Miss Hutchins looked grave.

"My dear young lady, you will never gain sufficient influence over her to be any check upon her unfortunate propensity if you treat the matter in that way. Remember, the sunshine and the rain fall equally upon the good and upon the wicked. You should try to act upon that precept. Now I treat all alike. I have a formula for each occasion, and I use it irrespective of persons."

"And what is your formula for a closed door?" asked Nanny, with a mutinous look.

"I am afraid you are not taking my remarks in the right spirit, Mrs. Ryder. While those people you do like," she went on, more severely than ever, "you treat exactly as if they were your own friends. Now, the day before yesterday you were at Mrs. Pegg's for three hours."

"Yes," Nanny was obliged to admit humbly, "so I was. Mrs. Pegg had been offered half a day's washing, and the bigger children were at school, and her old father was in bed with rheumatism. She didn't like to leave the little ones in charge of Bobby, because last time when she did, he tried to put the baby in the copper. So I offered to look after them till school was over."

"Well, of course it was kind," conservative Miss Hutchins allowed. "But it isn't usual, and it might lead to jealousy."

"It isn't usual to have eight children and only nineteen shillings a week to keep them on—at least, I hope not," corrected Nanny dubiously. "And certainly *that* wouldn't lead to jealousy."

"You are very smart with your tongue, and of course I know I am taking a liberty in speaking to you," began the elder lady stiffly.

Whereat Nanny broke in gently enough:

"No, no, no; please don't speak like that. Indeed,

I know as well as you do that I don't do my visiting properly. And you are one of the pillars of the parish work, and it is very good of you to try to help me to do better. But I can't. It's all new to me, and I feel shy. You have weight among them, while I have none. Mrs. Wheeler wouldn't have dared to shut the door in your face. I was asked to take this work, you know, and I do it in the only way I can. I know very well I can't do much good. But I hope I don't do much harm, and I should be sorry to have to give it up, as part of it I like very much."

Indeed, since Nanny could not help brooding over the gloomy family secrets, she did feel it a relief to have Mrs. Pegg's welfare to think about as well as her own. As long as her husband was with her, she troubled her head very little about anything. For she grew fonder of him every day, more appreciative of his devotion, more sceptical as to the possibility of his having ever done anything wrong. But when her husband had gone to town to see his solicitor, and she was left alone in the house with old Mrs. Ryder, whose visit to The Grange was not yet at an end, then Nanny would rejoice that she had something better to do than worry her head about the family skeletons.

Nanny had, indeed, been on her way to Mrs. Pegg's when she was attacked by Miss Hutchins; and when the encounter between her and that lady had ended rather lamely on both sides, she went on her way to the cottage stubbornly, in spite of the lecture on favouriteism which she had just received.

Mrs. Pegg was an industrious, kindly creature, the only blame attaching to whom was the fact that she was the mother of eight children. This, however, had soured the old maid district visitors against her. She was delighted to see young Mrs. Ryder, whose lively, youthful manner and kindness to the children had already warmed the heart of the hard-working woman to the pretty lady from The Grange.

"Come in, do, ma'am, out of the rain," she said,

with a courtesy. "You won't mind the place being a bit untidy-like. My old father he would come down to-day, because he said he must see the Captain's lady, and so I've had to see to dressing him when I should have been scrubbing my kitchen. You'll not mind his chatter, will you, ma'am? He's not exactly soft, but he just jabbers on—all about his graveyard mostly, for he used to be sexton at Bicton till they pulled down the old church and built a new one eight years ago—'restoring' they called it. We don't take much count of what he says."

Nanny saw now where Mrs. Pegg's own conversational fluency came from. She followed her hostess into the kitchen, which was also the general living-room; for this was one of the old-fashioned cottages, without the modern bay-windows and parlour.

A white-haired old man, with the vacant, far-away look of the aged poor in his eyes, raised himself slowly and with difficulty in his chair by the fire at her entrance, and instantly began muttering to himself, with his gaze fixed upon her face. Nanny started at sight of him. It was the old man whose words had alarmed her so much on the day when she and her husband first came to Brent together. She came up to him, shook him shyly by the hand, and asked if he was well. He shook his head slowly from side to side, without once removing his eyes from her face.

"Ah'm very weel," he said, with a slight North-country accent—"considerin', that is."

And he continued to stare at the young lady, still muttering to himself, with a persistency which made her blush.

"There, Ben," at last broke in Mrs. Pegg, whose bump of filial reverence did not seem to be well developed, "don't sit lookin' at the lady as if she was stuffed. Sit down, ma'am—do sit down!"

And she brought forward a chair, which Nanny took still feeling nervous and awkward under the steady gaze of the old man's eyes. At last he gave a portentous nod and spoke again aloud.

“Ay, ay, it do seem strange, it do, that I should live to see the second wife o’ the man I buried myself seven-and-twenty years agone come next harvest-toime.”

“Why, father, what nonsense are you talking? You’re enough to frighten the lady, with your gaping mouth and your silly tales.”

She saw that the lady had grown quite white, and that, although she laughed, it was with an effort.

“That wasn’t Captain Ryder, my husband,” she said, in a quavering voice. “The one you buried was Lieutenant Ryder, my husband’s father.”

The old man shook his head obstinately.

“Lieutenant Ryder and Captain Ryder’s t’ same mon. He never had no son—only one daughter. You may see her grave in t’ owd churchyard now. She died o’ toyphoy fever, and I buried her.”

Nanny listening intently, was shaking from head to foot.

“But it’s that Captain Ryder’s son I’ve married, Ben,” she said, in a broken voice.

Ben shook his head again.

“He hadn’t a son. They lived here all their married lives together, him and Lady Ellen, and I ought to know. And folks said as how he was not in his right mind at times, and as how it were on account o’ Lady Ellen bein’ a bit flighty like. A fair lass was Lady Ellen! And when the child died, it was supposed he died too. And there was a funeral, and Lady Ellen lived at The White House like a widdy. And presently, when all the old folks had left Bicton, and t’ owd tale was forgotten, there came a brand-new Vicar along o’ the brand-new houses and brand-new folk. An’ they must needs have a brand-new church, and t’ owd one was pulled down, an’ a sight o’ t’ owd stones was destroyed. An’ the big tomb o’ Lieutenant Ryder was moved, and his coffin with it, to make room for the new vestry. An’ the side of the coffin fell in, or were smashed in—Ah don’t rightly remem-

ber which way it was—an' inside were no body, only bricks and such-like."

Mrs. Pegg, who had run out into the wash-house after one of the children, heard a scream, and ran back into the house, to find young Mrs. Ryder standing up, transfixed with terror.

"Now, what have you been a doin' of, frightenin' the lady like that, you silly old man!" began Mrs. Pegg.

But Nanny made a gesture to her to be silent, and, sitting down again spoke to him in a quiet tone :

"But, if such a thing had happened, there would have been a great deal of talk, a great sensation."

"Nobody knowed about it but the Vicar an' me. I was bad with the rheumatiz, and past work, they said ; so they paid me off, and here I be, and nobody takes no manner o' notice of what I say, and——"

"And a good job too!" interrupted his daughter. "He's been telling you his old story of the coffin full o' bricks, I suppose, ma'am."

"Isn't it true, then?" asked Nanny quickly.

But her heart failed her, even as she put the question.

"It's not easy to tell, ma'am, for that part of the churchyard where the Ryder tombs are has been cut off by an iron paling, for it's not used now, as you may have noticed, ma'am. But it's not likely to be true, for where's the sense of buryin' a coffin without yourself in it, unless you've done somethink dreadful? Let alone that there must be servants or undertaker's men or somebody to find out the truth, and it's human nature to talk. And if there had been a great talk and a stir there'd be some old tales told in the parish yet, I should think, though so much of it is new, to be sure."

"Ay, that's it. I'm one of the last o' t' owd ones. And I mind there was some talk when he died, when he was supposed to die, that is, mostly about Lady Ellen ; and folks said she was out of her mind, or

nigh it, and had to have some one allus about to see she did no harm to herself."

"And—and what—according to your story—has become of—Lady Ellen?"

The old man shook his head again. That was no part of his story.

"Ah don't know ; Ah don't know." And then, his narrative having come to an end, it seemed to dawn upon him for the first time, as he glanced at his listener's face, that it might not have been altogether pleasant to hear. "But them's owd tales," he said consolingly ; "you've no need to take on about them, ma'am. He's a fine gentleman still, is the Captain, for all he's grown a bit white about the head ; and if he chose to bury himself before the time to get rid of a light wife, why, I don't blame him, seein' he's known how to get a better."

Nanny laughed faintly, and rose to go, speaking a few words to the old man on indifferent subjects in the hope of hiding the effect his story had made upon her. But she looked so white and woe-begone that Mrs. Pegg followed her to the door solicitously, with an expression which portended a lecture for the old man by-and-by.

"Don't scold him," whispered young Mrs. Ryder, as she went out.

Then, not forgetting to ask after those children who were at school, she bade Mrs. Pegg good-bye, and hurried home.

The strange story she had heard to-day, which, if not absolutely true in all its details, had, she felt sure, a measure of truth in it, disturbed her again, just as, with the elasticity of youth, she had got over the effects of her former discoveries, in the sunshine of her husband's affection.

Although she had the strength of mind to resolve to say nothing to her husband about old Ben's story, she was unable to recover from the effects of it before meeting him, since he had returned from town during her absence from home. She found him, too, in a

very angry and gloomy mood. He had missed an appointment in town, to begin with ; on returning, he had asked his mother for some details concerning some property he had on the Thames, and had received a very unsatisfactory account. Out of ten good-sized cottages which he owned in that neighbourhood, he had, for the last half-year, only received the rents for two. When Nanny came into the study, therefore, she found Dan frowning over the accounts, and his mother sitting at the opposite side of the table, looking white and worried.

“They have been cheating you, mother,” Captain Ryder said, as he rose abruptly upon his wife’s entrance. “It’s quite early. I’ll run down there to-day and find out what the real facts are. And you, child,” turning to his wife, “look as pale as a lily. I’ll take you with me ; it will do you good. It’s going to clear up and be fine for the rest of the day.”

Nanny expressed herself delighted to go, none the less that she saw a look of acute terror pass over her mother-in-law’s face. She ran upstairs to change her boots for a cleaner pair, and was not surprised to hear old Mrs. Ryder’s knock on the door as she was buttoning them. Metaphorically, Nanny placed herself in fighting attitude as she cried “Come in.” She guessed what sort of encounter was in store for her.

“Do you want to send your husband mad ?” was the old lady’s abrupt opening.

“No,” answered Nanny, springing to her feet and crossing to the door, “neither do I want to go mad myself, mamma. But I have gone near it lately in the maze of mysteries I’ve been living in. I am hoping that to-day may be the end of some of them.”

“You silly, headstrong girl ! Can’t you trust the experience of a woman old enough to be your mother ? I tell you there is some one living at Teddington who must be warned before Dan goes there.”

“Warned ! Of what !”

“Of—of the change in him which his illness has brought about.”

“What change? I can see none.”

“You! You have no eyes!” cried her mother-in-law contemptuously. “But there is a change. He is ill; he is not himself. If he should meet——”

Dan’s voice broke upon them, calling loudly that if Nanny did not come down at once they would lose the last available train, and have to put off their expedition till next day. A light came into old Mrs. Ryder’s face. She turned quickly, and made for the door, with the evident intention of delaying the journey by stratagem. Nanny, however, was wily enough to guess her intention, and was outside the door in an instant.

“Good-bye, mamma; I’m sorry I can’t wait now,” she cried, as she flew down the stairs.

Her husband was standing at the bottom. He held out his hands, and she took them and jumped to the ground like a child.

“That’s right, child. Why, what is the matter with you? You seem all on fire.”

“It’s—hurry,” panted Nanny, as she dragged him along and out by the front door, madly eager to be out of range of her mother-in-law’s wiles.

Her heart beat high with excitement. If the old lady were right, and if there should be some tragically interesting encounter in store for them, was it not better than this eternal suspense, this frightful uncertainty whether she was legally Dan’s wife or not?

Yet, when once she found herself in the train with her husband’s loving face opposite to her, a panic of terror seized her lest this might be the last hour in which she might hold him truly as her own.

CHAPTER XIV.

CAPTAIN RYDER was very silent and thoughtful during the whole of the journey to Teddington. Almost the only remarks he made on the way were expressions of regret at his own folly in having allowed his mother to have control over his affairs for so long. Nanny did her best to appease his anger against the old lady, believing, as she did, that the latter had probably only retained the management of the property on account of her son's attack of insanity.

"I suppose, Dan dear, she only thought she was saving you trouble," suggested Nanny timidly.

"I suppose so. And being a lazy man, with a hatred of business, I have only myself to thank for the fact that she has made a hopeless hash of it. Here's a row of ten cottages at Teddington, which we are going to see; eight of them are admitted to be inhabited, and yet I am getting rent from only two of them. And the strangest part of it is that my mother does not err in ignorance. She seems to know exactly what is going on in every corner of the property, and yet to be quite satisfied with a state of things by which three-fourths of my tenants live rent-free at my expense!"

This was a little difficult to explain, certainly. Poor old Mrs. Ryder could surely not be paying blackmail to as many as six families in order to guard the family secrets!

"I don't even know the name of the man who is supposed to look after the place," grumbled Captain Ryder presently. "Only that he lives at Clairville. What a name to give to a cottage! Of course, he

lives rent-free. And equally of course, it is fair to suppose, the rents which he collects diminish greatly in filtering through his hands. Here we are. Now to explore."

Captain Ryder had never been to Teddington before, and did not know which way to turn until he had asked for directions. Nobody, however, had heard of a cottage called Clairville, and they might have returned to Brent without having found the place at all had not Nanny suddenly suggested to her husband not to ask for it as a "cottage."

"Perhaps they would call it a 'house,' down here," she said, rather timidly; for, indeed, the idea was born of some mistrust of old Mrs. Ryder's truthfulness.

Captain Ryder frowned at this hint, but he took it, and with instantaneous success. For a passing tradesman, on being asked if he knew a house called Clairville, assented at once, adding:

"Bob Hanks's place. Go right down through the village, and then it's the turning to the left, by the church—a good way along, facing the river."

Captain Ryder, after having received this direction, walked on in silence so gloomy that Nanny wondered what there could have been in the man's words to cause such a change in him. At last he spoke.

"Robert Hanks," he said suddenly, "was the name of a man who was for many years butler in our family. He was always writing to my mother while we were abroad. But she never explained the position he held here. I can't understand it."

Poor Nanny shuddered, and wished her husband would go back without prosecuting his inquiries any further. If this Hanks, an old servant of the family, was now installed here as caretaker and rent-collector, with a liberal allowance as to perquisites, there must be some strong reason for such generosity; and since Dan was evidently ignorant of the reason, he would do no good, but might do much harm, if he indulged in any such expression of his feelings as he

apparently meditated. She dared not, however, do more than expostulate very faintly, and her husband paid no heed to her gentle words.

They took the turning by the church, and came presently—not to a row of cottages, but, as Nanny had feared, to a terrace of pretentious “villa residences,” with bay windows, broad flights of steps, and a “private road.”

Nanny stopped before the first of these and glanced timidly at her husband. On the glass above the door was the name “Clairville,” in gilt letters.

“So this is what my mother calls a cottage!” said Dan, as he pulled angrily at the bell.

An old man came to the door in his shirt-sleeves, with a pipe in his mouth and a child in his arms, There was the “cut” of a servant about him still, and Nanny guessed that it was Robert Hanks. The man seemed startled at sight of Captain Ryder, whom he saluted with instant recognition, which did not, however, appear to be mutual.

“Are you Robert Hanks?” asked Captain Ryder.

“Yes, sir. Will you walk in?”

He had taken his pipe out of his mouth, and he stepped back and stood aside for the lady and gentleman to pass into the front room, the door of which he opened as he spoke.

“I suppose you don’t know who I am,” went on his visitor.

“Oh, yes, sir,” answered Hanks readily, lowering his voice, however, as if there might be something unwelcome in the admission. “You’re Captain Ryder, sir.”

Although the man’s manner was civil, there was in it that suggestion of latent insolence which the consciousness of power over their superiors gives to the vulgar.

“How did you know that?” asked Captain Ryder abruptly.

The man seemed rather reluctant to go into details.

“I heard lately from Mrs. Durrant, sir, as how

you were—you were—about, sir. And I'm very happy to see it, I'm sure, sir."

"Perhaps, you won't feel quite so happy when I tell you that I've come to inquire into the management of these houses, cottages, or whatever you call them," said Captain Ryder, who did not appear to be favourably impressed by his agent's manner. "I see there are only two boards up, and yet I am only receiving rents for two. That leaves five houses to be accounted for. Now, how is that?"

"If you will ask——" Suddenly the man, in whose tone there was a rising note of insolence, glanced at Nanny, stopped, and then framed his answer differently. "I've given in my accounts in the usual quarter, sir," he said, "and no fault has been found with them."

"Well, but who occupies the other houses?" asked the puzzled landlord, who began to perceive that there was rather the insolent firmness of conscious right in the man's attitude than the uneasiness of fearful roguery.

"Mrs. Durrant has one, sir, and the rents of two of the others——" began the man.

Captain Ryder echoed his words in astonishment.

"Mrs. Durrant has one, and the rents of two of the others—— Why what on earth——"

He stopped suddenly, and after a pause, during which the expression of his face grew more and more angry, while Hanks continued to look demurely at the carpet, he said in a dry tone:

"And the rents of the remaining two—you take them, I suppose?"

"Why—er—yes, sir," answered Hanks, with perfect assurance, still keeping his eyes on the ground as if he feared they might betray a knowledge which would infer a lack of respect if he raised them to his landlord's face.

Captain Ryder stood for a few moments lost in consideration of these remarkable disclosures. Then, as if mechanically, he turned to the door. Hanks opened it respectfully.

“You are satisfied, I hope, sir, now that you—that you understand.”

“I don’t understand,” interrupted Captain Ryder shortly, as he walked through the hall towards the front door.

“Well, sir, there’s others that do,” said Hanks, with the nearest approach to open impudence that he had shown; “and it’s from them, sir, that I look for the wages I get for my—discretion.”

Captain Ryder, who had reached the steps, turned quickly.

“I’m afraid you will find,” said he quietly, as he met the man’s eyes with his own, “that that quality has gone down in the market.”

Nanny followed her husband, with her heart full of dread. What was he going to do next? There was on his face an expression of mingled bewilderment and anger which alarmed her, and made her ask herself in terror whether he was on the brink of another outbreak of the mental malady which had before clouded his life. His lips moved as he walked along with bent head and flashing eyes, and he seemed to be talking to himself and to have forgotten her presence altogether.

“Where are you going, Dan?” she ventured to ask at last.

She had to repeat the question before he stopped short to answer her.

“I’m going to see this woman, this Mrs. Durrant, to hear what she has to say for herself.”

But this proposal filled Nanny with alarm. Dan was angry, Mrs. Durrant was vindictive: what good could come of their meeting just now? This woman had rendered him important services, she had cared for him when he was unable to care for himself. It was ungenerous, it was unlike Dan, to haggle over the payment now. The mere fact, too, that he appeared for the moment to have forgotten these services, and to speak of Mrs. Durrant as if she had been a stranger, frightened Nanny. His mother, Pickering,

Valentine Eley—all had uttered warnings as to the effects his late illness might leave upon his mind. Were not these effects already manifest in this unnatural ingratitude towards the woman who had tended him in his illness? Nanny, who was even now a little jealous of Mrs. Durrant, remembering the meeting she had witnessed in the grounds of The White House, felt that there was something suspicious about this altered attitude towards her. As he had forgotten to ask Hanks in which house Mrs. Durrant lived, however, Nanny was hoping the interview might even yet be avoided, when, just as they reached the end of the private road, she saw the lady who had been caretaker at The Grange coming towards them.

Nanny hung back, feeling a strong reluctance to be present at the meeting between her husband and the woman who was identified with the period of his insanity. Captain Ryder had turned round and was looking at the terrace they had just passed, as if wondering which was the house he wanted. As he stood thus, his wife nervously watching him from the other side of the road, whither she had hastily retreated, Mrs. Durrant, who had no companion but a small fox-terrier, sauntered up. She was so much occupied in calling to the dog which, being little more than a puppy, had not yet learnt to follow very well, that she took no notice of either of the two visitors. Nanny noticed that Dan continued to stare at the houses, without appearing to recognise the lady's voice.

It was not until Mrs. Durrant was close to him that he turned round, being, indeed, obliged to move then, as he was standing in the middle of the narrow footpath. As they thus met face to face, she uttered an exclamation of amazement, and then, putting her hand on his sleeve, said in a loud, hearty voice:

“Ralph, my dear old Ralph, what on earth brings you here?”

Captain Ryder drew himself up and stared at her with a frown.

“I have come here to look after my rents, madam,” he answered simply.

Mrs. Durrant started, withdrew her hand from his arm, and retreated a couple of steps, staring at him in her turn. Then from him her eyes wandered to Nanny, who had come a little nearer, and was standing in the middle of the road. So they all stood for a few seconds, which seemed interminable to Nanny. Captain Ryder continued to look with frigid amazement at the lady, who, on her side, seemed at first to be struck dumb with dismay. Recovering herself speedily, however, she burst out into loud, hysterical laughter, reeled from the path into the road, and fell down unconscious.

Captain Ryder looked down at the figure prostrate in the dust with an expression of contempt and disgust, which changed to one of deep annoyance as he glanced at his wife, as the latter stooped to raise the woman's head.

"Don't touch her, child. I'll call Hanks. Perhaps he can tell us where the woman lives."

Appalled by his callousness, Nanny glanced up at him, uncertain what to do.

At that moment, however, the door of one of the houses in the terrace flew open, and a white-capped maid ran down the steps towards the group.

"Oh, she's fainted! Oh, what have they done to you, ma'am?" cried the girl.

To Nanny's surprise, she saw, as she looked up, a look of recognition pass between Dan and the servant, who was an exceedingly pretty young girl. It was not a nod or a smile on either side, but it was a quite conclusive sign that they had met before. Indeed, the girl's next words confirmed this impression.

"Oh, sir," she said indignantly, "to think of your leaving her to lie in the road like that!"

"Is she your mistress?" he asked, with an appearance of sudden interest.

The girl did not answer him. She was busily lifting Mrs. Durrant's head from the ground.

"Come, Nanny; she is all right. We can do

nothing more," said he impatiently to his wife, as he raised her from her stooping position over Mrs. Durrant, who had now opened her eyes.

Nanny felt stupefied with terror at his strange behaviour. But she obeyed without a word, and allowed him to draw her arm through his and lead her away, as she saw Mrs. Durrant was rapidly recovering.

"Hadn't we better stay, Dan, until she can go into her house? I thought—I thought you wanted to speak to her," faltered Nanny.

"So I did, but then I did not expect to find her in this condition."

"Condition! What do you mean by 'this condition,' Dan?"

"Why, that the woman is undoubtedly tipsy. Didn't you see her seize me, and hear her call me by my Christian name?"

"Yes," whispered Nanny hoarsely.

"Well, could you want any further proof that she was tipsy? A woman whom I never saw before in my life!"

Nanny almost staggered. Was he trying to deceive her? Or had he really forgotten? The poor child did not know which to believe, or which to hope. There was in his manner, and in the expression of his face, an absorption which was quite new to her. He said little, and she was equally silent, as they retraced their steps along the road as far as the church. From time to time, however, he shot down at her grave, frightened face a keen, suspicious glance, under which her eyes fell. At the corner by the church he stopped.

"You must be tired," he said shortly. "We must try to find some place where I can get you a cup of tea. Let me see, the river runs on the left. If we take this road, then we are sure to find an inn or some place for refreshment on the bank."

His guess proved a safe one. The road they took led past another terrace of red-brick villas on the one

side, and a row of picturesque cottages on the other, straight to the ferry over the river ; and close to the water's edge, on the right hand, was a trim garden running up to a snug little riverside inn, where, at this late season of the year, only a couple of local idlers were holding revel.

Captain Ryder and his wife had the coffee-room to themselves.

It seemed to the latter, who, however, took care not to appear to be watchful, that Dan was restless and uneasy. He complained, too, of headache, which Nanny knew to be a bad sign, and although he made no further reference to the events of the afternoon, he evidently brooded over them, and glanced furtively at his wife from time to time as if wondering what she thought of it all.

When they had had some tea, Nanny, who saw that her husband was very tired, persuaded him to lie down on the little horsehair sofa. He had done too much in one day for a man who had been recently ill, and she was afraid of the combined effects of fatigue and excitement upon him. To her great relief, in a few minutes he fell asleep.

Nanny stole to the window and looked out. The darkness of night was coming on. Already the dahlias and chrysanthemums had lost their bright colours, and the green of the trim lawn and of the evergreen shrubs had melted into gray. The October evening breeze shook the yellowing leaves off the trees until they sprinkled the grass and lay in little heaps on the gravel-walks. The river ran, like a glistening thread of silver-grey, not fifty feet away from the window, and the sound of the rushing water at the weir made an unceasing accompaniment to the rough voices of the men at the ferry.

A voice which Nanny recognised startled her by asking a question of someone who stood near the inn door.

“Has my son been round? I expected him at home before now.”

It was the voice of the old ex-butler Robert Hanks. Nanny, in desperate excitement, drew back a little. But it was too dark for anyone outside to see her as she stood behind the muslin curtains.

The answer was in the landlord's voice.

"Your son? Yes. He was in the bar just now. Said he was going to have a pipe in the garden before going home. Hi, Thomas!" he went on, raising his voice, "here's the old man come after you."

A youngish man in a light suit, who, to judge by his face and bearing, belonged to a far less respectable type than his father, sauntered up from a summer-house at the bottom of the garden. He was smoking a pipe with the air of a man who rarely did anything more laborious. His father, who was evidently still at a high pitch of excitement over the visit of his landlord, seized him by the arm, and, thrusting him into a seat on the lawn, began to pour into the younger man's ear, in a low voice, the history of the visit he had had that afternoon.

The window of the coffee-room was a little way open, and Nanny did not scruple to push it up a little higher, and to listen with all her ears.

At first, however, the old man, mindful of the near neighbourhood of the house, and consequently of possible listeners, kept his voice so low that Nanny could scarcely catch one word. But as his excitement rose, his tones rose also, and at last she could plainly hear his indignant protests at the treatment he had received.

"If I'd been just a old servant, and nothing more, it would be shabby," was the first sentence which she could clearly make out, "to wish to deny me the means to pass my old age in comfort. And them as well able to afford it as the Ryders too! But when it comes to a family as I may say I hold in the holler of my hand!"

"Eh?" ejaculated the young man, half stupidly, "the what?"

"The holler of my hand," repeated his father

doggedly. "That's what I said, and that's what I mean. Do you think the old lady, who was always a near one, would have let me have the rents of two of these houses and the use of a third for all these years for nothing? Not she!"

"No, of course not. I always understood it was for holding your tongue about the old gentleman's goings on when he was off his head."

"That's not all, not half all. What would that matter at this time of day if that was all?"

"Why, it wouldn't be nice for the family for it to be known that the old gentleman, in a fit of D. T., killed his own child!"

Nanny listening, with white, parted lips and starting eyes, at the window, scarcely repressed the cry which seemed to tear her breast.

The old man laughed hoarsely.

"Why, that's nothing to what *I* know—that's nothing to what *I'm* paid for keeping quiet!" cried the old man, as his voice became tremulous with excitement. "And keep it quiet I have, even from you, my own son; and would have done till my dying day if they'd only treated me fair. But now I'm threatened with being turned out after all these years, I've done with them! And I don't care who knows what I know, and that is that the gentleman who murdered his little daughter Ellen in the corner-room at Brent Grange never died at all, though he is supposed to be buried in Bicton Churchyard!"

Nanny felt her knees give way under her. She clung to the window-sill, leaning her wet face on her hands. The darkness had set in rapidly during the last few minutes; the colours of the garden had all sunk to gray and black; and the river, with the last rays of daylight upon it, shone more brightly in the dusk.

The younger man was startled also.

"Come, I say, gov'nor, ain't that pitching it rather strong?"

"It's as true as I'm sitting here, returned the old

man, slapping his knee. "They managed it, Lady Ellen and her people, very careful and clever, and even the undertaker's men didn't know but what there was a man in the coffin. But somebody always finds out these things, and that somebody was me. They paid me off handsome, and handsomely I've kept their secret till to-day, when in walks the very man who was supposed to be put underground, and says, says he, 'Discretion's gone down in the market,' says he. And with that he threatens, or as good as threatens, to turn me out."

There was a pause, during which the elder man slapped his knee again, and the younger ejaculated from time to time, "Well, I'm blest!" and similar sympathetic observations. He was a practical young man, however, and not needlessly vindictive.

"Well, but what good will it do you to round on 'em now?" he asked presently. "Nobody would believe you after all this time. You can't do rich folks like that no harm, unless you're richer than them."

The old man shook his head knowingly.

"There's somebody else will do that for 'em," he said drily. "That Mrs. Durrant—she's a party that can keep a thing close, too—she's been treated just the same way. And she's simply packed up her things and gone off, with a look in her eye that bodes no good to somebody. She didn't not to say exactly confide in me, but she just said that if the Ryders had treated me rough, I needn't fret; for she was just going to set about such a revenge on 'em as they'd never forget. Ay, and she looked as if she meant it, too!"

Nanny shivered. Every word these men uttered was like a fresh blow.

"I might be sorry for him, knowing the life her ladyship used to lead him, and how it was that that drove him to drink, if he hadn't had the impudence to bring with him this afternoon a little lass as pretty as a picture, and calls himself her husband I'll be

bound! And me knowing her ladyship's alive all the time! I say it's a shame, and it'll serve him right if Mrs. D. do make him suffer."

Nanny fell back half fainting, and lay for a few minutes in a heap on the floor, with her head against a chair.

Then Dan's voice startled her, almost drawing a cry from her dry lips.

"Nanny, Nanny, my darling, where are you?"

CHAPTER XV.

At the sound of her husband's voice Nanny dragged herself to her feet and tottered unsteadily across the room towards him.

There was no light in the room, the service, in these off-season times, being of a very perfunctory kind.

"Are you ill, Nanny? What is the matter? Why don't you answer me?"

His tone was pettish and irritable.

"No, I am quite well, dear," she answered, trying hard to steady her voice, but not entirely succeeding.

A murderer! The murderer of his own child! She did not want the light to come, dreading as she did, to look again upon his face. But yet she must make some excuse to keep away for a few minutes from the touch of his hands. So she crossed the room to the fireplace, and pretended to fumble for the bell-handle.

"You have been asleep, dear, I think," she said; "and I did not want them to wake you by bringing the light in. But I think we really must have some illumination now."

He muttered an assent, and, raising himself slowly from the sofa, went towards the window.

"Why, I do believe there is that rascal Hanks!" he exclaimed, peering out into the dusk. "I have a great mind to go out to him and——"

Before he could utter another word, Nanny had flown across the room to him, and was hanging on his arm. The thought that he might, by further rousing the anger of the ex-butler, be running ignorantly into danger, brought back in a moment enough

of her old feelings of affection and loyalty to make her eager to protect him. Looking out, she saw that Hanks and his son had left the seat near the window and had strolled down as far as the water's edge. She pulled down the sash, saying as she did so :

“I shouldn't trouble myself any more about the fellow, Dan. Or, if you must take any further steps in this matter of the rent, why, I am sure it would be better to put it in your lawyer's hands.”

She ended this speech in a low voice, for the girl who now filled the places of waiter, barmaid, and chambermaid had come in with candles. Nanny herself pulled down the blind; she did not want Hanks to see her husband again.

Dan looked at her in astonishment. It was quite a new *rôle* for his girl-wife, that which she was now playing—of adviser. And that half-tremulous assurance of manner with which she was moving about, surely that was something new also. To the newly-married husband, however, every change of mood in his young wife was adorable, and, as soon as the girl had left the room, Dan followed Nanny to the glass, before which she was putting on her hat. She blushed with fear. He would see the change in her face, she was sure. She herself saw it, and knew that the horrible definite knowledge learned in the past half-hour had made her older, years older.

But Dan saw only the charm of a fresh mood, and he came behind her, and clasped her in his arms, and laughed at her for her sermons. Nanny's eyes filled suddenly with tears as they met his, and he asked her, with tender solicitude, what was the matter.

“Nothing, nothing, nothing,” she answered, laughing almost hysterically. “It was only a silly thought that came into my head.”

“Well, and what was the thought? Of course it was silly, coming through that little head; it acquired the head's own quality. But what was it?”

Nanny hesitated, and hid her head on his shoulder trembling convulsively.

"I was only thinking—that one must always like people—for what they are to one's self. That is all one must trouble about. So you like me," she went on in jerks, with her head still buried, "because of what I am to you; and you don't like me any the less because I was a rather tiresome and disobedient daughter. And so I—like you——"

Her voice broke, and Dan finished the sentence for her in a grave and rather preoccupied tone :

"So you like me, little one, even if you think it is a shame that I should turn out a lot of lazy ruffians who have been allowed for years to draw a comfortable income for doing nothing whatever."

"But, Dan dear, your mother must have known what she was about. I don't think she is particularly openhanded, and if she paid these people highly, I expect it was 'for value received.'"

It was a difficult suggestion to make, for Nanny could not tell with what half-memories he might be struggling. His face clouded, indeed, and with frowns he seemed to be trying to recall some lost impression. However, he only said abruptly :

"Of course. We must get back home, and wrestle with her constitutional inability to tell more than one-sixteenth of the truth."

And he seemed on the instant to burn with impatience to be home, rang the bell, paid the bill and hurried Nanny up through the village to catch the next train.

They were only at the station just in time. But Nanny saw, as they ran along the platform and dashed headlong into the nearest compartment, the face of Mrs. Durrant at the window of the next carriage but one.

They came face to face with her at Bicton Station, where she secured the only fly, and loudly gave the direction to The White House. Captain Ryder heard this, and looked at her with an expression of strong

disapprobation, but he made no remark. Indeed, his manner puzzled his wife greatly. She saw that he was both perplexed and annoyed. From time to time he would put his head in his hands, and remain for some minutes without uttering a word. Then presently he would start up and smile at her, or address to her some remark full of playful affection, but without the slightest allusion to the matters which were evidently troubling him. The poor child, with her heart bleeding with pity for him, could only wait and watch.

On arriving at Brent Grange they were met by a piece of news which surprised neither of them. Old Mrs. Ryder had left for town. She had written a pretty little note to her daughter-in-law, and put it on the latter's writing-table. Having just heard, the note said, of the illness of a dear old friend, the writer felt bound to return to Kensington for a few days, but she hoped that, now Dan was well again, they would not mind. She would be back again in a week, or before then if they wanted her; and she remained, with a thousand kisses, her dear Nanny's affectionate mother.

Dan read the missive through without a word. Nanny wished he would not be so silent. This taciturnity seemed to her ominous. She dressed for dinner, which had been kept back for them till nine o'clock, in her prettiest frock; she exerted herself to be lively and sweet to him. But during the progress of the meal a heavy gloom seemed to settle upon him, before which at last her efforts grew faint and weak, until at last, when dessert had been placed on the table, and they were left alone together in the big room, they sat on in a dead silence, and there was no sound in the room but the soft little splash of a rose-water table-fountain, one of Nanny's few wedding presents, and formerly the delight of her heart.

"Shall we go, dear?" she said at last.

For the candles, with their pretty little silk shades, the sparkling glass, the great silver shells piled with fruit,

had begun to swim in a mist of tears before her eyes. There was a wicked spirit haunting her husband, the young wife felt, which might rise and seize him at any moment from out of those remote dark corners where sombre family portraits kept guard over ancient presses and chests.

Dan looked up with a start, and Nanny, trembling, repeated her words.

“Oh, yes, yes, we will go,” said he absently.

And he held open the door for her, and followed her out. But before she could turn to take his arm, as she meant to do, to take him to the drawing-room, where she meant to try the effect on him of such musical accomplishments as she possessed, he had slipped away quietly to his study, and she was left alone.

The study! Nanny did not like his going into the study, which, from the frights both she and her husband had suffered there, had acquired in her eyes the character of a haunted room. He had not been in there since his accident, and it was with a superstitious feeling that there was something unlucky, uncanny, about the apartment, which boded ill to her husband, that Nanny, after a little hesitation, went slowly across the hall towards the passage which led to the study. Even the rustle of her frock, a light gray silk, Nanny’s very best, frightened her, and made her hurry faster along the polished floor.

But when she got to the study-door, she felt too timid to knock at it. After all, what excuse could she give? It was the very essence of the poor young wife’s trouble that she dared not confess to her husband what it was that distressed her—dared not even hint to him that she knew his secret, and shared his evident fear lest his madness should return.

She heard him throw open one of the windows—heard him unlock his cigar-cabinet, and presently strike a light. Should she go in now and try to persuade him to smoke in the drawing-room, as his mother had always forbidden him to do? Or, at least, should she ask that she might stay with him in

the study, pleading that she felt lonely, as she asked herself these questions, and brought her little knuckles, ready for the knock, nearer and nearer to the door, she heard a sudden and loud noise inside the room.

A chair had fallen with a crash into the fireplace, and Dan had uttered a loud cry and an oath.

Then: "Who are you? What are you? It's gone—gone!" she heard him say in a husky whisper.

The next moment she was in the room.

Dan was leaning back against the wall by the window, with his head bent on his breast, and wild eyes. A couple of candles were on the table, flickering in the draught. There was no one else in the room, no one in the darkness outside. Nanny shut the door, came timidly up to him, and tried to put her white arm, which was bare to the elbow and shining with diamonds he had given her, through his.

He looked up at her with a heavy, gloomy face, and shrank away, repulsing her, but very gently.

"Go away, child!" said he hoarsely. "I—I have seen—seen—something. I—I am afraid, Nanny, my darling, darling wife, I have done you an awful, unspeakable wrong!"

In a paroxysm of anguish, the man thrust his head into his hands, sobbing aloud, pressing his fingers, his nails, into his flesh as if he would tear it from the bones. Nanny shook from head to foot, but it was with no selfish distress, but with pain for him, with sympathy for him, the man she loved, in his fearful distress.

"Don't push me away! Oh, let me come near you—let me comfort you, Dan! I am your wife—your own loving wife!" she cried imploringly. "What you say doesn't matter. What you have done doesn't matter. Nothing in the world matters to me but this—that I love you, that I am your wife!"

But he hardly seemed to hear her. As she pressed herself against him, trying to twine her arms about

his neck, he suddenly looked up, and, seizing her arms in his hands, held her away from him and looked into her eyes.

“I—I have delusions,” he said, in a low voice,

But to Nanny this was no fresh blow. It was with only a more tender note of pity in her voice that she said :

“Have you, Dan? Then let me comfort you. See, Dan, my love is no delusion. While I am with you it will be all right. You will see nothing but my face.”

But he drew back, and, looking into her eyes with plaintive intentness, said :

“Nanny, you have seen this coming upon me! Tell me, you have, have you not?” Then, as she did not answer, but lowered her eyes, he sighed, and went on : “There is no need for you to answer me. I have seen it in your face.”

After a few moments of silence, during which she tried, by gentle caresses which he scarcely seemed to notice, to impress him with a comforting feeling of her watchful love, she spoke again, in a very low, tender voice :

“I think you are not well yet, Dan, and that is why you fancy strange things,” she said. “I think you ought to see a doctor—not Dr. Haynes, but some one who has known you longer, who attended you when——”

She stopped, unable to utter the terrible words in her mind. Dan seemed to be roused into a little more life and energy by the suggestion.

“There is some one I ought to see,” he said—“some one who will understand this ; at least, I think so. I will see her to-morrow.”

Nanny’s face clouded. She could not doubt that he alluded to Mrs. Durrant, whom he had that very afternoon treated with so little ceremony. What treatment could he now expect at the hands of this woman, whose vindictive expression of face, as they met at the station, had impressed Nanny so strongly?

Dan went on, after a short pause, as if thinking aloud :

“And then I will go straight on to Durham, and find out how things are managed there : whether, for instance, there are any more old pensioners eating up the rents, by my mother’s special favour.”

“Perhaps the change will do you good, Dan, if you don’t worry yourself too much about things you find going wrong. When shall we start?” asked Nanny.

Captain Ryder looked down at her inquiringly ; then laughed and patted her on the shoulder.

“*We start!*” echoed he. “I am not going to take you, child. I have taken you on one of these inquiry expeditions, you see,” he went on in a coaxing tone, as he noticed the sudden change on her face to blank disappointment, anxiety, and even suspicion, “and I find it does not answer. I can’t relieve my feelings by bad language when you are present, you know, little one.”

“You could leave me at the hotel when you wanted to scold the people,” suggested she. “Wouldn’t you miss me, Dan?” she went on imploringly. “Are you so anxious to go away from me already?”

Dan looked down at her tenderly.

“I shall miss you, Nanny, every hour that I am away. But—I must go alone.”

She attempted no more persuasion. Her arms fell away from his neck, as a torrent of passionate suspicion overwhelmed every other feeling in her heart. If she had not had so much foundation for her doubts of his straightforwardness, his firmness in this matter would have appeared only consistent with his usual adoring but autocratic attitude towards her. But his flat denial that he had ever seen Mrs. Durrant before that afternoon, and his evident recognition of her servant, had prejudiced in Nanny’s mind every statement he might make. She was too miserable, too heart-sick, and withal too much afraid of what the consequences might be, to make any open accu-

sation against him ; but she drew herself away from him and sat down on a chair by the bookcase with a look on her face which ought to have been eloquent enough for a newly-married man to read.

Captain Ryder, however, seemed blind to looks and deaf to tones. With his eyes for the most part fixed straight in front of him, as if the delusion of which he had spoken was again upon him, he mentioned mechanically some details of his proposed journey : the time at which he would start next day, the number of hours he would be in the train, which showed her that he had arranged this expedition beforehand.

And this again woke suspicions in Nanny which he could not lull to rest.

What was the "delusion" of which he had spoken ? She asked herself this question a dozen times that night as, uneasy and wakeful, she lived through again, in many distorted shapes, the events of the day. Had he really seen Lady Ellen again, as he had seen her on the occasion of his accident ? And had she really been married to him ? Nanny felt comparatively little uneasiness on this last score. If Lady Ellen were Dan's wife, would she content herself with these stealthy, abortive visits to The Grange, and allow a younger woman to fill her rightful place without one open protest ? It seemed to Nanny that this idea was absurd. On the other hand, why should the sight of her—if, indeed, he had seen her—fill Dan with so much horror ?

After a restless night, both Captain Ryder and Nanny, heavy-eyed and unrefreshed, sat like spectres over an almost untasted breakfast. Both were disturbed and unhappy, though neither made further confession to the other. Both felt a sensation of relief, mingled with the pain of their first parting, as they bade each other good-bye at Bicton Station.

"You'll write to me, won't you ?" said Nanny, as she looked up wistfully, and yet with trouble in her eyes, to her husband, as he stood at the window of

the railway-carriage. "Because I shan't know where to write to myself till you do. But perhaps you don't want my letters—perhaps you would rather not be bothered," she added, with a touch of half-plaintive coquetry, as he did not at once answer.

"Well, you know," said he at last, "I shan't be gone long, and I may be moving about."

A shade crossed the young wife's face. He did not want her to write to Durham! Why? Suspicion, jealousy supplied the answer.

As the train moved out of the station, an idea—a miserable, tormenting idea—returned to her. He had let out, perhaps accidentally, the fact that it was a woman whom he intended to consult about his "delusions." Nanny had at once jumped to the conclusion that this woman was Mrs. Durrant. Where and when, then, was he going to meet her? Or was it by letter only that this consultation was going to take place?

Nanny pondered these things as she was being driven back to The Grange in her little brougham. On the way she saw the object of her speculations, Mrs. Durrant, with a small bag in her hand, evidently on a shopping expedition. She stopped the carriage and jumped out.

"Oh, Mrs. Durrant," she cried humbly, "may I speak to you for one minute."

She did not know what she was going to say, and she stood before the other woman, feeling miserably awkward and uncomfortable, remembering that most unsatisfactory meeting of the previous day. Mrs. Durrant looked at her with a bold and supercilious stare, compressing her lips meanwhile with an expression of undisguised malice.

"I am quite at your service, Mrs. Ryder, for as long as you please," she said, with elaborate mock-courtesy.

Poor Nanny did not know what to say.

"I am so sorry," she began, "for what happened yesterday. And I can't understand it at all. The

only explanation I can think of is that my husband didn't want me to know that he had ever been—been—ill in his mind," mumbled the poor young wife, trying in vain to find a more euphemistic phrase, "and so he pretended not to know you. Of course, I know very well that he did know you, and—and that he is not really ungrateful to you. You do understand, and—and you won't blame him, will you!"

During this speech Mrs. Durrant's face had grown impenetrably cold. Nanny's heart sank as she looked at her.

"You do me more than justice, Mrs. Ryder," she said. "What gratitude the Ryders have to show me will be for favours to come."

It was only the threat of an angry woman, but it was uttered in such a white-heat of revengeful feeling that it struck terror into Nanny. She was so much afraid, however, of any harm which this woman might do to Dan, and so anxious for an explanation about the mysterious Lady Ellen, that she persevered in attempting to soften her.

"Indeed," she began again gently, "you would find it very easy to earn mine if you liked to try. There are things which puzzle me dreadfully, and about which I can't ask my husband, which I should be so very grateful to have explained to me."

Mrs. Durrant's mouth relaxed a little. From curiosity or some other cause, her attitude became more conciliatory.

"Things explained!" she said. "What things?"

"About—about Lady Ellen, for one thing," answered Nanny simply. "Who is she? Where does she live? Why does she haunt the place, without ever openly coming forward? Twice she has alarmed my husband by appearing to him——"

Mrs. Durrant became, on the instant, all closest attention.

"At least," corrected Nanny cautiously, "I think it must have been she. Who else could it have been

to alarm him? And why did it alarm him? These questions puzzle me all night and all day."

And Nanny put her hands up to her head. A minute after, as there came no answer, she suddenly looked up, and caught on Mrs. Durrant's face an eloquent, unmistakable look of mingled amusement, delight, and malice. The young wife grew hot and cold. What had she done? What secret had she betrayed? Her companion seemed to recollect herself, and answered demurely :

"I should be very happy to afford you the information you require if it were in my power, Mrs. Ryder. Unfortunately, I have never even heard of Lady Ellen Ryder, and therefore I cannot tell you why her appearance, or her supposed appearance, alarms your husband. Good-morning."

"Good-morning," said Nanny, trembling, as she got into the brougham.

What had she done? Had she played into the hands of this woman, and betrayed to her something she had better have kept to herself?

Nanny passed a day and a night of torment. She received a telegram from her husband, sent from an hotel in Durham, and so far her suspicions were set at rest. He had gone up there as he had arranged.

But as the second day wore on she again grew suspicious and uneasy. Why did he not write?

By the evening post, however, she got a letter. Affectionate, but short and unsatisfactory, it roused again all her vague fears.

"Don't expect another letter from me for a few days," so ran the latter part of the note: "an old friend has offered to take me on a cruise, and I may not have a chance of posting to you for some days."

"For some days!" For some days! Where was he going for those some days? Suspicion grew in the young wife's breast until, taking definite form at last, it took shape in this thought: Supposing that, feeling his malady returning upon him, he was going to put himself again under supervision, as he had done

before, and made the yachting cruise an excuse for not writing to her!

Nanny flew across the long drawing-room, where she was sitting alone at her work, as this thought darted into her mind. The White House! The White House! That was where he must have been shut up. Mrs. Durrant's return thither had probably been planned by her husband himself. This last idea maddened her, but it could not be stifled.

She must go there at once; she must find out whether her husband was deceiving her, whether this horrible curse had indeed descended upon him again.

Quickly, silently, she crept up the stairs of the big and now lonely house, put on a cloak and bonnet, and ran out into the grounds by a side-door. Like a hare, she fled in the dusk through the avenues of yellowing trees and along the lonely roads towards The White House.

When she reached it dusk had fallen; the great mansion, still looking more than half deserted, seemed to glare at her in the faint light. There was a lamp in one of the rooms, and Nanny saw between the curtains the figures of Mrs. Durrant and her brother. She crept close to the barred iron gates, and looked through into the tangle of shrubs in the garden. Something—some one was moving there—creeping slowly through the bushes. Nanny kept quite still, and held her breath. The figure came nearer. It was a man's. Was it Pickering?

No, no, no! This word seemed to ring through her brain like the din of a hammer. The man came nearer; she remained quite still. He passed close to where she stood, and Nanny had the self-command not to cry aloud. But it was partly because she felt stunned.

For the face that looked out, with haggard, restless, mad eyes, through the bars in the fading light, was that of Ralph Ryder.

“Dan! My husband!”

The words were formed by her lips, but not sounded. Slowly he went on, forcing his way painfully through the tangled shrubbery, while the heartbroken woman clung to the bars with a face as wild and haggard as his own.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE road was deserted. There was no near sound but the crackling and rustling of the shrubs as the unhappy maniac slunk away from the gate, to the bars of which Nanny was clinging. The great white house was growing gray as the twilight faded rapidly into night. The figures of Mrs. Durrant and her brother Valentine were more plainly visible than ever through the curtains of the room on the first-floor in which they were sitting.

Nanny at length found voice enough for a hoarse cry; "Dan!"

There was no answer, but the rustling and crackling amongst the shrubs ceased.

"Dan!" she repeated. "Oh, Dan, answer me! Come, let me speak to you for one moment, only one moment, Dan!"

The noise among the boughs and the dead leaves began again, and the stealthy steps returned. Peering through the bars into the deep black shadow under the wall, Nanny saw the figure of Ralph Ryder among the brushwood, saw the gleam of the wild eye intently watching her.

"Oh, my husband! come nearer, nearer! I am not afraid of you, dear. Nothing in the world could make me afraid of you. Why didn't you trust me, Dan, your own wife? I would nurse you and care for you better than these creatures could ever do. Come near me, dear."

She thrust her hand through the bars of the gate towards him. He seemed touched by her appeal, and he moved a step nearer. But suddenly stopping short, when almost close enough to the bars for her to touch him, he uttered a groan, and, turning sharply,

disappeared from her sight among the evergreens in the opposite direction.

Nanny could not go away without more satisfaction than this. She ran under the wall to the gate habitually used, and rang the bell. She would see this Mrs. Durrant again, and insist on a proper interview with her husband. She felt that if she could only sit by his side, and take his hands in hers, and look with her own tender, loving eyes into his poor stricken ones, that her affection would be able to break down the barrier his malady had raised between them, and he would spare her and himself at least this last most bitter pang of estrangement. What, after all, could this boasted care and watchfulness of Mrs. Durrant's, be worth, when she let him roam about the grounds alone so late at night?

Nanny suddenly asked herself whether Mrs. Durrant and her brother even knew of the patient's return. Supposing, as she now could not but do, that not only the yachting expedition, but the visit to Durham, were a mere blind, Dan, feeling that his malady was returning upon him, must have returned almost as soon as he had written the letter warning her not to expect to hear from him. Perhaps he had only just arrived, and, obtaining an entrance with a private key, had shut himself into the grounds without having yet shown himself to anybody.

Nanny waited a long time before her ring brought anybody to the gate. When at last rapid steps were heard coming along the narrow path between the bushes, they proved to be those of Mrs. Durrant's pretty maid, the same girl whose recognition of her husband she had noticed on the previous day. She unlocked the gate quickly, but uttered a cry on recognising the visitor.

Nanny took advantage of the maid's evident surprise and consternation to put a remark to her abruptly, before she had time to consider what she ought to say.

"Captain Ryder is here!" she exclaimed decisively.

Even with the evidence of her own senses to confirm this fact, the acquiescence of the servant gave the poor young wife a fresh shock.

"Yes, ma'am, he is here." Then, perceiving by the lady's involuntary start what she had done, she tried clumsily to retract. "Oh, I mean—at least——"

But Nanny interrupted her impatiently :

"Captain Ryder is here, you say, walking about these grounds."

The girl drew a long breath, and threw a hasty glance back over her shoulder. In a whisper she answered :

"Ye—es, ma'am."

"You—you are afraid of him?"

"No—o. At least, I shouldn't be if Pickering was here. I was hoping it was Pickering when I came to the gate. Pickering can manage him when he has his fits on better than anybody, better even than Mrs. Durrant."

"Where has Pickering gone to, then?"

"To see Lady Ellen, I expect, ma'am."

"Lady Ellen!"

The servant saw directly, by the visitor's excitement, that she had said too much. She tried to close the gate.

"There! Oh, dear, I thought you knew. You did speak as if you knew. Now I shall get into trouble. Oh, do go, ma'am, and don't say how I told you anything. And I didn't, indeed."

"No, but I want you to tell me something," said Nanny very quietly, taking care to stand within the gate. "I won't get you into trouble. I promise. But I want to see Captain Ryder, my husband. You must let me come inside."

"Oh, no, ma'am. Indeed I couldn't."

But Nanny had settled that question by springing suddenly well within the gate. The servant was going to scream, but the lady stopped her.

"What is the good of calling out now?" she said.

"You would only get scolded for letting me in. But

if you go quietly back to the house it won't matter to you even if I am seen. For there are other gates to the grounds, and it will be taken for granted I got in by one of them."

Almost sobbing, the girl let herself be persuaded, and relocked the gate.

"And now only tell me," said Nanny, turning to her again, "which room does Captain Ryder sleep in?"

"I don't know which one he is going to use this time," answered the girl sullenly. "He's only just come back to the house."

"But which one did he use before?"

"The back ground-floor room in the left wing."

Nanny remembered the barely-furnished apartment into which she had peeped on the occasion of her former visit to The White House. She was making her way without further remark towards the open back door of the house, through which she thought she would slip in quietly, and secreting herself in her husband's apartment, wait for his return to it. But she heard the servant running after her, and then she felt the girl's hands seizing her cloak.

"No, no, no, you mustn't go in! Look here, ma'am, I'll tell you something if only you'll be reasonable and go away. Mrs. Durrant is rather—well, rather *excited* herself to-night, and I wouldn't go in if I was you. And she's been saying the most awful things about you, and how she meant to give you such a fright as you never had in your life before. And if you was to go in now, and she was to see you, and all that lot of wine and spirits about, as she's been going backwards and forwards to all the evening——"

Nanny cut her short, saying very sharply:

"Wine! spirits! Not where Captain Ryder——"

She stopped. But the girl guessed her thought, and replied to it.

"I'm sure I hope not, ma'am. For last time when he was bad he got hold of just a glass or two of wine,

and it made him that wild I declare we all thought he was going to murder us. And so he would, I believe, if Mr. Valentine and Pickering hadn't stopped him, and pushed him into his room and locked him up in it. But now Pickering's away I'm sure I do hope Mrs. Durrant will be careful."

Her words only encouraged Nanny in the course upon which she had decided. It was plain that Captain Ryder, in his helpless state, had fallen into bad hands, and that at all risks she must do something to protect him against both himself and his so-called guardians. As the servant still clung to her cloak, therefore, and paid no attention to either her pleadings or her protests, Nanny quickly unfastened the clasp of her mantle, and leaving that garment in the girl's hands, dashed through the open back door into the house.

She found herself, of course, in the servants' quarters, but they were deserted, the establishment kept up by Mr. Valentine Eley in the absence of his sister being apparently of that modest kind which depends on outside labour. Nanny ran, hither and thither through kitchens and passages until she lighted upon the way to the great hall. This was sufficiently illuminated for her to have no difficulty in finding the door of that back room which the servant had indicated as Captain Ryder's.

The door was ajar. Nanny, with a loudly-beating heart, pushed it open a few inches further. No one was in it, but it was clear that an occupant was expected, for a floating wick burned in a little glass suspended by a chain from the ceiling. She noticed now, too, that iron bars had been placed before each of the windows. Having given the maid-servant the slip, Nanny thought she had better find some hiding-place in which she could secrete herself until her husband either came or was brought in. There was not much choice. The only possible place of concealment was the large wardrobe which stood against the wall nearly opposite the door.

Nanny opened it, found one long compartment nearly empty, and at once took her place in it.

Then the minutes seemed to drag on like hours. She almost thought it must be drawing towards morning, and that no one was going to use the room after all, when sounds of voices and of the slamming of a door on the floor above made her push open the wardrobe door further to listen. Mrs. Durrant and her brother were disputing, he protesting, she insisting on some course of conduct which he disapproved. Still talking loudly and angrily, they came down the stairs, and Nanny heard Valentine say :

“Do you know what you’re doing, you mad-woman? Don’t you know that to give this man drink is like putting a match to a petroleum-store? You’ll have him raving before morning if you do. And then whom do you injure? The poor devil himself, perhaps, but much more likely ourselves. For he’ll do some mischief, and it will be found out, as sure as fate, who put him in the way of it. Now, be reasonable, there’s a good soul !”

All the time brother and sister were evidently drawing nearer to the room where Nanny was in hiding. Mrs. Durrant interrupted her brother occasionally by ejaculatory remarks, but for the most part she only kept up a running accompaniment of malicious and derisive laughter.

“Poor fellow !” she said at last in a mocking tone. “Why should he be deprived of all the pleasures of life, while others get more than their share? And if he does get a little excited, and give some of the good people at The Grange a fright, I’m sure I shan’t blame him. So you please leave me alone. I know what I’m doing, and I will undertake that we shall come to no harm through my diversion. So now go to bed like a good boy, and mind your own business.”

She spoke so sharply at last that her brother seemed to leave off attempting to dissuade her from her wicked project.

“I shall fasten the case up, then,” said he sullenly.

“If he gets at that we shall have the house set on fire, or something.”

“Not a bit of it,” she answered lightly. “If he breaks out, it will be straight for The Grange, he will go after his wife. However, you can do as you like about that.”

She burst open the door of the room where Nanny was hiding, put something down on the table, still laughing maliciously to herself, and went out again. Valentine Eley was vigorously using a hammer in the hall. There was a little more wrangling discussion between them, and then both went upstairs again.

Nanny came out of her hiding-place, and looked to see what Mrs. Durrant had brought. On the table she found a spirit-decanter containing whisky, and a glass. She at once opened one of the windows, emptied the whisky over the tangled flower-border outside, and carried the decanter out of the room. In the hall she saw the case of whisky which Valentine had fastened up. It was standing away from the wall, where nobody who entered the hall could fail at once to catch sight of it. After a moment's hesitation Nanny determined to try to move it, to place it somewhere where her husband, on coming towards his room, should not be able to see it. It was an unpleasant thing to do, to wander secretly about another person's house and move about things which did not belong to one; but Nanny felt that her husband's safety, perhaps his life, was concerned, and, after all, The White House was only lent to these people in return for their proper guardianship of Captain Ryder. So she put the decanter down on the hall table, and began to push the case towards the furthest corner of the hall.

While she was thus engaged she heard sounds overhead, and before she had finished her task Mrs. Durrant's voice called to her from the top of the staircase.

“If you please, Mrs. Ryder, may I learn to what

fortunate circumstance I am indebted for the honour of this visit? And you might let me know, at the same time, if there is anything else in my brother's house which you would like to have moved?"

Nanny came to the foot of the staircase and looked up. Mrs. Durrant was not intoxicated, but on the other hand she was certainly excited, and a little harder of manner and more reckless of speech than usual.

"I must apologize for what I have done," said Nanny, in a voice that was unsteady in spite of all her efforts; "I wanted to see my husband, and I was afraid you might not like to let me see him. So I got in like a—a burglar, without asking. But I only want to see him, indeed, and, if you will only let me, I shall be quite satisfied."

"And what are you doing with that case, may I ask?"

Nanny hesitated. Surely the woman, who was not, she thought, altogether without feeling, would soften if she pleaded to her.

"I—I was afraid," she said. "I wanted to put it out of the way—where he could not see it."

"And don't you think it is taking a good deal upon yourself to move about other people's property?"

"Oh, don't be so hard! You know why I did it. It was for my husband's sake. Can't you understand how I feel for my own husband?"

"I don't know anything about your husband, I'm sure; nor why you should think he must be so anxious to tamper with other people's property."

"Sh!" whispered Nanny. "He is coming!"

She had heard a step in the gallery which led from the hall, through the left wing of the house, to the garden. The next moment Captain Ryder, putting his hand before his eyes as if dazzled by the change from the darkness outside to the lamplight, stumbled past her.

Nanny wanted to put out her arms to him, to raise the head bent with grief, to tell him to take comfort,

for she would nurse him back to health and reason. But a strange reticence had seized her. In the presence of that coarse, vindictive woman she could not make one step. She felt, too, now for the first time, a chill doubt whether even her love would avail to break down the barrier which his malady had raised between herself and him.

This man, who slunk past her with head hung down and shuffling steps, scarcely seemed the same Dan who had held her in his arms and looked with wistful, tender, yearning love into her face only the previous morning. Nanny felt that she had said good-bye, for the time at least, to the Dan whose love had made her happiness ; but to the restless, unhappy creature before her must be paid the debt of gratitude she owed for the sunshine of her early married days.

When he reached the middle of the hall, he stopped, looked up at the lamp, and passed his hand through his curly gray hair as Nanny had often seen him do. Should she go to him now? The poor child was so much afraid of being repulsed in the sight of Mrs. Durrant; if they had been unwatched, she would have flown to his side, encouraged by the familiar action. But now she hesitated. Suddenly he moved forward with quicker steps. Nanny watched him, trembling and heart-sick. He had caught sight of the case of spirits which she had not had time to push quite into the corner she had destined for it.

In a moment Ralph Ryder had seized the case, examined it, turned it up on end, and was trying with his fingers to force the rough planks apart. He dragged at the wood until he tore the flesh off his hands ; he raised the case and knocked it against the wall in a furious attempt to loosen the well-driven nails. Finally he dashed it down on the ground, evidently in the hope that the bottles would break, and that some of the precious liquid would run out, to be scooped up as well as might be. But it was too well packed ; his efforts were all in vain. He looked around him, either not seeing or not caring that Nanny

stood, with tightly-clasped hands, at the bottom of the staircase. Fortunately, Valentine Eley had taken the precaution to take the hammer away with him when he fastened up the case.

But the fact scarcely brought relief to Nanny. She saw in the glowing gray eyes an expression of resolution which she knew in Dan ; and she knew that, mad as he might be, he would not rest until he had attained his object.

A low cry escaped her lips. Even the callous Mrs. Durrant was moved, or interested, or alarmed.

“Ralph, Ralph !” she suddenly called to him, with a sharpness which commanded attention, “put that case down, there’s a good fellow—put it down, I say !”

But he only glanced up, paying no heed. Then Nanny summoned her failing courage, ran across the hall to him, and put her hand upon his arm. He staggered back, looked at her, and, with a sudden, not loud, but most piercing cry, turned and fled out of the hall into the grounds.

Trembling like a leaf, Nanny followed. Not knowing her way, she stumbled blindly along, and, more by chance than by judgment, she at last found herself out in the grounds, with the night-air blowing coldly upon her.

Where was he going? “To the Grange? She hoped, and yet feared, that it might be so : hoped, because she still clung to the belief that love might do more than medicine ; feared, because in that one moment when her eyes had met his, she had seen with frightful clearness what a change in him his malady had already wrought.

At first, coming from light to darkness, she could see nothing ; she dashed her face against the sharp little leaves of a yew-tree, and tore her dress in a tangle of thistle and bramble, before her feet sank in the long, soft damp grass of an overgrown lawn. Then she had to stop, for she had lost sight of the object of her pursuit, and she could hear nothing but

the tree-tops rustling in the night-wind, and the faint sound of Mrs. Durrant's discordant laughter in the house behind her. Nanny felt so desolate, so frightened on finding herself thus alone in this wilderness, out of which she knew no way of escape, that her heart failed her, and she burst into childish tears. A full sense of her calamity seemed to fall upon her for the first time; she was a widow in the first days of marriage, with an awful secret in her heart at which she scarcely dared to look. Her sobs, however, did reach a not un pitying ear. She was still close under the wall of the house. Raising the window of one of the kitchen offices ever so softly and ever so little, the maid-servant who had let Nanny in hissed out, in a loud whisper:

“Don't take on so, ma'am. If you're looking for the Captain, I saw him go by, and I think he's gone off to Pickering's cottage, just inside the grounds, away to the left. Right through the trees and everything you must go until you come to it.”

“Thank you—oh, thank you!” cried Nanny, as she dashed off in the direction indicated by the girl.

Difficult enough it was in the darkness to stumble through the jungle-like growth of grass and thistle, shrub and tree. She shivered, more with fright than cold, as a gust of wind would come and bring down upon her head and shoulders a shower of dried leaves. At last she came upon the cottage, a good-sized one, entirely hidden from the outside world by trees, and by the high wall which enclosed the grounds. A flickering light, which fell from two of the ground-floor windows on the foliage outside, showed Nanny that in all probability the girl had directed her rightly. Since Pickering was away, this illumination was probably the work of Captain Ryder. She stole round the cottage and looked in through the first window which had a light in it. She saw a tiny room, containing a chair-bedstead not in use, and a few simple articles of furniture. There was a lighted candle on the mantelpiece, but no one was in the room.

From the adjoining apartment, however, there came a loud noise, like the dragging about of a heavy box. Nanny looked in through the next window.

The second room was a small kitchen, and in it Nanny saw Captain Ryder, dragging a box along the floor. With a key taken from the dresser, he unlocked this box, which proved to be a tool-chest, took from it a heavy wooden mallet and a small hatchet, and slammed the lid down with an exclamation of triumph. Then, with the rapidity of a fixed resolution, he kicked away from him the tool-chest, overthrowing the lighted candles in his haste, and quitting the cottage by a door on the other side, dashed past Nanny on his way back to the house.

She leaned back against the cottage wall, for the moment too sick with fear to move away. She knew the purpose for which he had got those tools; she knew that he meant to prise open the case of spirits. But that was only the beginning of what she feared. A madman, brooding over his misfortunes, excited by strong drink, with those tools in his possession! What would it mean? what would it mean?

And a hideous whisper came to answer her: It would mean again what it had meant before, when the drink-frenzy had seized him and urged him to a crime which he had only been able to wipe out by a supposititious death. It would mean again as it had meant before—murder!

CHAPTER XVII.

As Nanny leaned against the wall of Pickering's cottage, with her heart full of the most terrible fears, listening to the rustle of the dried leaves on the ground as the unhappy maniac made his way through them towards the house, she was startled by a sudden flash of light on to the trees opposite the cottage windows. She looked into the kitchen, whence the light seemed to come, and saw that the place was on fire. Ralph Ryder had overturned the candle without extinguishing it, and the flame had caught an old newspaper which had been lying on the floor, and had spread thence to the nearest leg of the table, round which smoke and flame were now playing.

Nanny found the door and hurried in. Already the atmosphere was thick and stifling. She had passed a pump outside the cottage, and luckily a pail was at hand; so with some difficulty and much exertion she succeeded in putting out the fire, not, however, before she had drenched both the floor and her own clothes with water. This work had for a time chased away even the terrors which had possessed her. It left her so much exhausted from fright, as well as unusual exertion, that she was glad to sit down, still coughing and panting in the smoke, on a chair in the flooded kitchen. The only discoverable box of matches had been burnt in the conflagration, so that all the light she had came from the candle in the adjoining room. But from the manner in which it flickered and jumped, Nanny perceived that its end was near, and that she would soon be altogether in darkness.

Just as the candle spluttered and went out, a man's footsteps sounded on the stones outside, and the next moment Nanny heard Pickering's rough voice, crying angrily :

“Hallo ! what's up? Who's there?”

“It is I, Pickering—Mrs. Ryder,” Nanny tried to say ; but her voice was still hoarse from the smoke, and she only succeeded in uttering a wheezy husky whisper, at the meaning of which the gardener had evidently to guess.

“My lady ! Here ! *Is it my lady?*” cried the man in astonishment. But he took it for granted that it was, for he went on ; “Well, and to think of my having gone all the way to-day for to see you, and then to think you was here all the time ! And a bad job it is I had to tell you about, too. But what's happened here? It smells o' burning, and—and the place is full of water ! Dear me, it's the Captain been up to his tricks again, I suppose.”

“You would have been burned out, Pickering, if I hadn't seen it through the window,” said Nanny, still hoarse and choking. “What—what was it you had tell to me?”

She felt that it was mean of her to take advantage of the mistake he had made, but this old matter of the identity of Lady Ellen was so vitally interesting to her that the hope of finding out something concerning her mysterious rival proved too strong for Nanny's honesty.

“I went to tell you, my lady, as how Mrs. Durrant had come back, and that there was mischief brewing. And as how she'd got the Captain back to the house again, with one of his fits threatening, and as how she drinks more than she ought, and if the Captain gets hold of the stuff when he's in one of his tantrums, even she won't be able to manage him.”

Nanny uttered an exclamation of horror. Pickering went on :

“And I was going to make bold to say to you, my lady, as how, no offence to you, somebody at The

Grange ought to be told how the land lay. The little lady there will get such a fright some of these days as'll do her no good. Now, if so be——”

He stopped, startled. Nanny had sprung up, with her fears full upon her at this suggestion; and even in the darkness the old gardener perceived, as he hunted about the room for his matches, that he had made a mistake.

“Bless my soul!” he muttered to himself, “if I haven't been and made a thundering ass of myself——”

Without another audible word he went on groping about, until presently he produced from a cupboard a candle and matches, struck a light, and came face to face with young Mrs. Ryder.

“I thought so,” said he, shaking his head; “but it was an unkind trick to play an old man, ma'am.”

“No,” said Nanny, whose white face confirmed the truth of the words he had uttered concerning her, “I did tell you who I was, and it was not my fault that I was too hoarse for you to understand me. And I cannot be blamed for using any means to find out what you yourself confess I ought to be told. Now, who is Lady Ellen? And where does she live?”

Pickering shook his head again.

“I've served the family forty years, ma'am,” he said respectfully but firmly, “and I've taken Lady Ellen's part through thick and thin for thirty of them. And I can't play turncoat now. I wish she'd be open with you; I do indeed, ma'am. But it's not for me to speak when she keeps her mouth shut.”

“Will you tell me just this: when you went to see her to-day, they told you she was not at home?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Now, where did they say she had gone?”

Pickering hesitated.

“I don't know, ma'am, as I ought to tell you even that.”

Nanny stepped forward to one side of the burnt and blackened table, as the old man stood on the other.

Leaning upon it, she gazed across at him with a look in her large gray eyes which no man could have resisted.

"I have no friend in the world to tell me anything," she said. "I am left to struggle with the most frightful trouble all alone. Can you deny that? Can you refuse to tell me just that little thing?"

Pickering was not demonstrative. He gave one shy side-glance at her unhappy face, and promptly turned away from her.

"She's gone to Edinburgh," he said shortly.

"Edinburgh!" echoed Nanny in great excitement.

For was not Meg there, who might be set to play detective.

"So they said. I can't answer for it that it's true."

"No, of course not," agreed Nanny, suddenly moderating her transports in fear lest he should grow too cautious again. "And do you know to what part of Edinburgh?"

"No, ma'am."

"Nor the name of the people to whom she was going?"

Pickering moved from one foot to another uneasily, still with no more than a side view of his face presented to the lady. But all at once he seemed to make up his mind, and, turning swiftly round to face her, though he judiciously kept his eyes from encountering the plaintive look on her face, and fixed them instead on the dresser behind her, he brought his hand down on the table with a force which cracked and splintered the burnt leg:

"Now look 'e here, ma'am. I'm not going to answer one more question after this, and I don't know as I'm doing right to answer this one. But I will. And if, like a many of you ladies, you are clever enough to find out more from a nod than plenty men would from a day of talk, why, that's not my fault. They told me as Lady Ellen had gone to Edinburgh to see a Miss Anstruther, but I don't

know whether her ladyship goes by her own name up there."

Nanny remembered the name of Miss Anstruther as that of the lady who had given Meg only too accurate information about the secret of the Ryders. She must, then, have returned from her Australian voyage. Here was a clue at last by which to discover the mysterious Lady Ellen. If Meg could find out the lady who was staying with Miss Anstruther and give a description of her, Nanny felt that she would be able to find Lady Ellen out on her return to the South, under whatever name she chose to pass. She stood speechless with excitement at the thought.

Pickering glanced at her with pity in his eyes. He was curious to know how much she had gleaned of the family secret, and he was exceedingly anxious, on the other hand, to have her safely out of the domain of The White House.

"May I make so bold as ask how you got in, ma'am?" he asked at last.

"The servant this Mrs. Durrant brought with her from Teddington let me in. It was not the girl's fault," Nanny hastened to add, as she saw the old gardener frown; "she thought it was you. She wanted you because—because he—Captain Ryder—was at the house, and there was a great case of spirits about. He came here just now and opened your tool-chest and——"

"The Captain it was who opened it!" cried Pickering in alarm. "I must be off to the house, ma'am, begging your pardon," he went on, as a rapid inspection of the chest told him that it had been rifled.

"He's not to be trusted with such tools as he's taken when there are spirits about, and one of his fits coming on him."

Nanny trembled at this confirmation of her fears.

"Oh, Pickering, you don't think——" she began, and stopped.

"You must let me put you safely outside first,

ma'am," he said, signing to her respectfully, but peremptorily, to precede him out of the cottage.

But Nanny lingered one moment, and shook her head.

"No," she whispered hoarsely, "I am going up to the house with you. I must see him again. I don't feel afraid of him even now. I believe that, if I can only speak with him alone for a few moments—not before that woman, but alone—I could quiet him better than she, or than you, or anybody."

Pickering shook his head with apparent surprise at her boldness. She had left the cottage, and was making her way, he following, through the wilderness of shrub-growth towards the house.

"No," he said. "What could you do, ma'am? It takes a lifetime o' knowledge of mad folks and their ways to do any good with 'em."

"Not if you love them, not if you love them," she answered earnestly. "If he were just a stranger, I am sure I should feel dreadfully frightened, and I should enrage him the more by showing it. But as it is, knowing all the while that he is my own husband and that he loves me, I only feel as I did when he was ill and didn't know me. And if he were ever so violent, I should feel certain he would not hurt me."

Pickering listened to this speech in great perplexity. For a few moments he followed her silently. A light rain was pattering through the half-bare trees on to their faces, and behind the great square house flimsy little clouds could be seen driving swiftly across the face of the moon. A light was being carried about backwards and forwards, apparently from one room to another, on the first-floor, and a second light could be seen travelling upwards through the staircase window.

"That's Mrs. Durrant's servant going upstairs to bed," said Pickering, clearly glad to change the subject. "But the second light—I don't know what that is, unless it's Mrs. Durrant and her brother quarrelling again."

He quickened his steps, being evidently anxious. He tried as he went to dissuade the lady from entering the house again, but, failing in that attempt, he was silent with an obstinate silence which Nanny did right in not mistaking for acquiescence. For, on arriving at the back door of the house, and finding it locked, he said quietly :

“ You see, ma’am, we can’t either of us get in to-night, however much we might want to. We’re locked out.”

“ No, we’re not,” said Nanny quietly. “ I heard that wicked woman say that he would make straight for The Grange and frighten me, so it is certain she will have left open some way for him to come by.”

Pickering was shocked.

“ Did she say that ? ” he said incredulously. “ You must have mistaken her meaning, ma’am, I’m thinking. It’s not natural for one woman to talk so of another, barring she’s suffered great wrong.”

“ Let us look about,” Nanny went on, “ and we shall find a way of getting in.”

She was curious, but no longer so anxious, as to what was taking place inside the house. Pickering’s presence had done much to reassure her. For, on reflection, it seemed pretty certain that Valentine Eley would have taken advantage of Captain Ryder’s expedition to the cottage to hide the case of spirits, and having done so, he would be discreet enough to take himself out of the way of the maniac’s revenge.

Pickering, evidently alarmed by young Mrs. Ryder’s revelations, left her with an exclamation of dismay to try another side-door from the garden into the house. Nanny, thus left for a moment alone, went up the steps to the raised veranda which ran from end to end at the back of the building. She had to tear her way through a tangle of wistaria, clematis and Virginia creeper, the luxuriant growth of which, unchecked by any sort of care, almost blocked one end of the veranda. Forcing her way through, Nanny discovered that one of the long French windows, of which

there were several on this side of the house, was open, confirming her fears. She slipped inside, and found that she was in a small room, opening on the other side into the hall, and close to the door of Captain Ryder's apartment.

Overhead she heard sounds of rapid footsteps, and of voices in loud discussion. Only Mrs. Durrant's tones could be distinguished, as they rose from time to time to a pitch at which they almost became screams. It was clear that, as Pickering had surmised, a quarrel was taking place. Mrs. Durrant was apparently continuing with her brother the angry discussion about Captain Ryder the beginning of which Nanny had overheard. But surely they were growing very violent! She listened to the noise of footsteps going hither and thither until it seemed to her that there must be a chase going on. She wished Pickering had come in with her. Running to the window, she called to him; but he was out of hearing, and she got no answer.

In the meantime, the noise above was increasing so greatly as to cause Nanny considerable alarm. It seemed to her that some sort of scuffle must be taking place almost immediately over her head; and she came to the conclusion that Valentine, finding persuasion of no avail against his sister's obstinate intentions of mischief, was constrained to use physical force in order to restrain her. At that moment the noise of some heavy piece of furniture being thrown to the ground startled her greatly, especially as it was accompanied by a sound like a woman's cry.

Nanny rushed out into the hall, and was making for the staircase, when her attention was arrested by the figure of a man standing in the shadow of the drawing-room door, which was half open.

"Dan!" she cried at once. And, believing the man to be her husband, she followed him as he at once softly disappeared into the room. "Dan! dear Dan!" she repeated, as she groped in the darkness, half afraid of her own venturesomeness, but deter-

mined to profit by this chance of an interview alone with him. Had not Mrs. Durrant herself said that the poor fellow, in his frenzy, would "go straight to The Grange *after his wife*?" What, then, had she to fear, in the face of this proof that, even in his madness, he thought first of her? The noise upstairs, moving now away, as if the scuffle had again given place to a chase, continued and grew, if anything, louder than before. Nanny was impressed by the necessity of coming to terms with her husband before the quarrel upstairs should end, and one or both of the disputants break in upon their privacy. Again, as she pursued him through the bare and silent rooms, he eluded her, creeping round by the walls, so that sometimes she could only track him by the creak of a board, or by the sound of his foot brushing against the strips of damp paper that hung down over the wainscoting.

It cannot be said that the unhappy young wife felt no pangs of nervous fear as she continued to call her husband's pet name in vain, and to pursue from end to end of the long suite of rooms the stealthy figure. Was he, in his madness, luring her as far as possible out of the reach of human help, only to turn upon her in an access of senseless fury, as he had done upon his own child? She remembered the mallet he had taken from the chest: one blow with it might easily be fatal. The thought was such a horrible one that poor Nanny stopped for an instant, with the blood running cold in her veins. The next moment she had recovered herself, and was again pursuing him. If, indeed, his poor mad brain should prompt him to this, would not death at his hands be better than the fate which was now before her, the life of the living tied to the dead?

In that one moment's pause she had missed him again, and she presently found that he had doubled, passing her in the darkness, and was making for the door by which they had both entered.

He would escape her again.

“Dan, my husband, stay one moment, and listen to me!” she cried again in her tenderest tone.

And, springing forward in her eagerness to detain him, she did indeed touch the man’s hand, only, however, to withdraw her own with a cry. For the fingers she had touched were wet, and a subtle, unaccountable instinct told her that it was with blood.

They were both near the door. Nanny ran out into the hall, where there was light. Her instinct had been a right one: there was a horrible stain on her hand.

While she still stared at it in mute horror, the steps of the man she had pursued sounded softly behind her.

It was Valentine Eley. His collar was gone, his coat was torn, and the hand she had touched was cut and bleeding. His face was ghastly, and his voice hoarse as he answered her.

“Not Captain Ryder!” she hissed out. “Then where is he?”

“With my sister—upstairs.”

“What?” cried Nanny, drawing a long breath of terror. “My husband—upstairs—with your sister! Then he is *kill*ing her!”

And turning towards the staircase, with a few swift steps she had almost reached it, when Valentine’s hands, seizing her arm with a firm grasp, from which the comparatively feeble woman could not escape, held her back.

“Don’t go, don’t go!” he cried. “What is the use? She can manage him if any one can. It is death for anybody else to go near him.”

“But they have been struggling. I have heard them. It may be life and death for her. I believe it *is*,” quavered Nanny, still striving with all her might to mount the stairs.

“Listen!” cried Valentine; and his white face seemed to grow livid and gray as he spoke. “Listen! He is like a wild beast to-night. It is her fault, and she must suffer for it. He cannot hurt her much;

she is strong, and she can seize moments to calm him. There was spirit brought into the house as you know. While he was gone just now—I didn't know where to ; I thought to The Grange—I hid the case. But when he came back and did not find it, he missed it, and was angry. He ran upstairs into the room where I was sitting with my sister. And to pacify him, as she said, she let him taste the whisky. I told her she was mad, and she laughed at me. Of course he became excited; he wanted more ; he would have more ; it intoxicated him at once, made him dangerous—murderous. I tried to seize the decanter, to take it away. The action enraged him. He had a mallet in his hands, brought, I think, to open the case with. He flew at me, seized me, struck at me ; you can see for yourself what he did to me before I managed to escape."

"Yes, but your sister ! How could you leave her ? She is not safe with him ! "

Valentine looked troubled.

"She said she was. She herself helped me to get out of the room, and locked the door."

"But that has enraged him. I implore you, I entreat you, come upstairs ! Call to Pickering. He is outside. We must break in and save her."

It was cowardice, personal cowardice, Nanny felt sure, which induced Valentine to believe, or to affect to believe, that their interference would make matters worse. As a matter of fact, she was wrong. Having an enormous trust in his sister's power both of will and of management, the young man had, as usual, allowed himself to be a mere cipher in her hands ; and it required all Nanny's entreaties and menaces to induce him to let her interfere. At last most reluctantly he let her go, and followed her upstairs.

They had scarcely reached the landing, however, when sounds reached their ears which told both him and his companion that they had not come a moment too soon.

Rapid footsteps, heavy breathing, followed by the

throwing up of a window-sash, half stifled cries as of a person gagged and helpless, a savage growl like that of a wild animal, and then, shrill and clear, the woman's cry of: "Help! help! It's murder!"

The madman and his victim were struggling in a death-grapple. Of this there could be no doubt. The door was locked. Nanny flung herself with all her force upon it, and dragging Valentine forward, made him do the same. It shook, it rattled, but it stood the strain.

The frightened woman inside, hearing voices, and hoping that help was at hand, rushed to the door, only to be dragged back and flung on the floor. A hoarse, horrible laugh—a laugh so fiendish that Nanny never forgot it—broke from the madman's lips.

Nanny rushed to the staircase window, smashed a pane with her bare hand, and shrieked at the top of her voice:

"Pickering! Pickering!"

A shout answered her.

"Quick! quick!" she cried, in a voice of agony.

But even as her cry rang out through the air, another and yet more piercing scream came from the locked-up room: the sound of a heavy blow, another struggle, a feeble cry, and a heavy, sliding fall.

Then came dead silence.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It seemed to Nanny and to Valentine Eley, as they stood outside the door of the room in which the death-struggle had taken place, that the few minutes which followed would never end.

They could hear nothing more from within the room except the heavy breathing of the maniac, who was

evidently standing near the door. Intently as they listened, there was not a sigh nor a breath from the unfortunate Mrs. Durrant. Valentine, with his ear to the keyhole and a face distorted with terror, whispered suddenly to his companion :

“He has killed her! He has murdered my sister!”

“Oh, no, no! We must hope, we must hope,” returned she, in a voice so low, so broken, that it was scarcely audible.

And, indeed, her own hope was so faint that it cost her a great effort to utter even these poor words of attempted comfort. There was in the present tranquillity of the madman an only too eloquent suggestion that he had done his work. They heard Pickering hammering on the back door downstairs, and Nanny started up again and called to him through the window she had broken, telling him to come in by the way she had come, through the open French window on the veranda. But he could not hear her, being deafened by the noise of his own efforts to break in the back door. Nanny turned to Valentine Eley.

“I must go downstairs,” she said, “and let him in.”

The young man started violently. He was in a state of such terrible nervous excitement that the thought of being left alone at the door of this fatal room unmanned him completely. His teeth chattered and his breast heaved as he answered her.

“No, no!” he quavered, shaking his head, while with his restless fingers he clutched at the edges of his torn coat. “I—I will go down. I—I can’t—stay here.”

He tottered and staggered on his way to the head of the staircase like a drunken man, and had to seize the banisters for support as he made his way down. As Nanny watched him, she knew intuitively that he would not return. Indeed, he buoyed himself up with no delusive hopes that his sister had escaped; and, having unlocked the back door for Pickering, he remained shivering downstairs, waiting to learn,

through some way less shocking than ocular demonstration, the intelligence he dreaded.

Meanwhile, Nanny remained by the door of the room in which were the madman and his victim. She could do nothing until help came, but she was fascinated with horror and unable to move away. As Valentine Eley's slow steps sounded fainter and fainter on his way downstairs, her ears, always on the alert for sounds from inside the room, caught a noise as of some weight being dragged along the floor, away from the door.

But there were no more cries.

Very slowly the burden was drawn along, with many short pauses. Then there was a different sound, a sort of low groan as of a man lifting a heavy weight, and Nanny, stiff with terror, heard a cracking and rustling in the garden below, followed by a very faint sound, such as she would have scarcely heard if she had not been listening for it. The burden which had been dragged across the floor of the room had been thrown out of the window, and its fall had been broken by shrubs and brushwood before it reached the ground.

Then she started up, white and wet and trembling. She heard the sash go down softly, as if the perpetrator of this fearful crime had known its appalling nature, and wished to hide all traces of it. This idea, the most awful of all those which had crowded into the young wife's mind throughout this fatal evening, found her scarcely capable of another shudder. What Ralph had done, if not the work of absolute frenzy, was crime so black, so horrible, that even pardoning love and pitying forbearance must turn to loathing at the thought of it.

For Nanny was entirely ignorant of the psychology of madness, of the cunning which alternates with its frenzy, or of the changes by which the raving maniac becomes the crafty calculator. She knew, indeed, before this awful experience of the fact, that madness can lie dormant in the blood like a sleeping

demon, break out into fury, and then go to rest again for awhile ; but of its moods and varieties she knew nothing.

While she still stood, appalled, by the door, hearing no further sound from within the room, Pickering came up the stairs. He was alone, as she had expected. He held a lamp in one hand and a hatchet in the other. Now that he had come, and that she knew he was too late, for the first time there darted into her heart the wish to delay, if only for a few moments, the discovery that her husband was a murderer. And quickly on the heels of this wish there came the remembrance that this was a vain one, for was not this his second crime? Still, instinctively, she stood a foot or so from the door, with her back to it, and spoke to Pickering, not attempting to move out of his way.

Perhaps the old gardener, who had grown, in the service of this ill-fated family, used to tragedies, guessed her thought and respected it. Perhaps he could read in her dry eyes, with their glazed, dead look, the last agony of her dying love for the husband whose very existence was now only a nameless horror. At any rate, instead of at once attacking the locked door, he stood before the young lady, shamefaced, irresolute, as if on the point of saying something to her to which his courage proved unequal.

Seeing that he paused, Nanny spoke. It surprised her as much as it did Pickering to find that her voice was steady and sounded cold. She was discovering, indeed, as we all do at supreme moments, that her power of emotion was unequal to the demands made upon it, and that its very intensity for a short time had now left her, as it were, inert and lifeless.

“ You are going to break open the door,” she said, “ with that hatchet ? ”

“ Yes, ma'am. It is my own. I found it at the bottom of the stairs. He must have taken it out of my tool-chest, and dropped it.”

“ Oh—yes.”

"I beg pardon, ma'am," he said after an instant's pause, as he intimated his wish to pass her.

Nanny stood out of the way. Pickering listened at the door for a few minutes, and then turned.

"Wouldn't you be better downstairs, ma'am? There's no good of your going in here, and—and we don't know how he'll be."

But she shook her head. A distinctly feminine yearning, as of one mourning over a dead love, prompted her to wish to see this man, who had been all the world to her. Even now she had no personal fear of him.

"He may be violent still. He seems to have pulled Mr. Eley about a good deal," went on Pickering. "The poor beggar couldn't speak."

A ray of a sort of sickly hope crossed Nanny's mind. Valentine had said nothing about his sister to the old gardener. It was a little respite that he would not learn the fact of this second murder at once.

Nanny stood back a little way, having refused to go downstairs, and watched Pickering as he used his hatchet on the door. Half a dozen blows, and the door yielded by the forcing of the lock. He signed to her to remain where she was, snatched up the lamp with his left hand, still holding the hatchet in his right, and entered the room with cautious steps.

Nanny held her breath and watched him, her impulse to follow him at once having been checked by the manner in which he stopped short and looked down at something on the floor at his feet. She shuddered, for she knew what it was that had lain there, and what sort of stain it was on which his eyes rested. Then slowly, and moving a little to the left, as if to avoid the fatal spot, Pickering advanced into the room. She stepped forward hesitatingly as far as the door, and looked in.

It was a large room, and had been formerly one of the best bedrooms of The White House. But Mrs. Durrant and her brother had turned it into a sort of study. It was plainly and barely furnished with little

more than a couple of tables, a rough bookcase, a sofa and a few chairs; and all these were in disorder, bearing witness to the struggle which had taken place there. Fragments of a broken decanter and glasses glittered on the floor in the lamplight; one of the old-fashioned window-curtains, of many-times-cleaned chintz, had been torn down. The only article of furniture which was in its place seemed to be the sofa, which was at the far end of the room, in a corner against the wall.

By this sofa Pickering stood still, with his lamp held low. He paused thus for so long that Nanny, gathering up her skirts and treading carefully and with fear, came into the room and stood first behind and then beside him.

There on the sofa lay at full length Ralph Ryder, his handsome face flushed, his curly gray hair disordered, fast asleep, with the hands which had worked such murderous mischief only a few minutes ago lying, the one above his head, the other thrown across his breast. The sight was so unexpected to Nanny that, for one happy moment, all the horrible experiences of the last hour seemed to fade into unrealities, and she saw before her the adored and adoring husband of her first few weeks of marriage. She started forward, and was only prevented by Pickering's warning hand from throwing herself on her knees beside the sofa.

"Sh!" he whispered gently. "You mustn't disturb him, ma'am. He'll sleep on like that till morning, and then he'll be better. I remember last time he broke out it was just the same."

Nanny shuddered and left the room. Pickering looked round. The lamp in his hand blinded him a little, so that he did not see what Nanny did—the dark stains of blood upon the window-sill, over which, as she knew, the dead body of the unfortunate Mrs. Durrant had been thrown out. He went quickly and lightly back to the door, and his next words showed how entirely ignorant he was of the tragedy which had taken place.

“It wasn’t Mrs. D. and her brother, then, that we saw from the ground scuffling in here, ma’am. It must have been Mr. Eley and the Captain. And a nice mess the Captain must have made of the poor chap by what I see in here, enough to have settled him altogether!” and he jerked his head in the direction of the pool of blood on the floor. “No wonder he wasn’t in the talking mood when I met him! I suppose by this he’ll have gone and told his sister.”

Nanny said nothing. She could not be the first to tell what her husband had done. Pickering would find out to-morrow. Mrs. Durrant was dead, and past help. Even as these thoughts flashed through her mind, she heard a muffled cry from the grounds below, and, looking out, saw Valentine Eley bending over something which lay among the shrubs. Pickering had returned to the side of the sofa, for a last look at the sleeping man, so the brother’s cry on finding his sister’s body escaped him.

The old gardener came out on to the landing, where he found Nanny still looking through the window.

“You had best come back home, ma’am,” he said gently. “You can do no good here now, and you will be losing your own senses if you bide in this mouldy old place much longer.”

But Nanny hesitated. How could the unhappy maniac be left alone in the house, one of his responsible guardians dead, and the other emphatically untrustworthy?

“Will you stay here with him, then, Pickering?” she said.

“I’ll come back and look after him, ma’am, as soon as I’ve seen you safe home.”

“Oh, no, oh, no, never mind me. I can quite well get back by myself,” cried Nanny earnestly. “I want you to promise me, Pickering, that you will watch by *him*, and that you will not leave him until—until——”

She stopped. There opened before her the vast expanse of careful devisings and arrangements which

would be necessary now that his guardian was gone, and now that his malady had grown, by this second crime, more to be feared than ever.

“I’ll look after him, ma’am, be sure of that. But I don’t like you to go back alone. It’s lonesome-like so late, at the best of times, and now——”

But Nanny longed for that walk, longed to be out of this haunted house, and in the cold night air again. Before the old gardener had finished speaking, she was half-way down the stairs. He followed her, however, and, as he opened the front door to let her out, addressed her again in a troubled voice :

“I shall make bold to come and see you to-morrow morning, ma’am,” he said, with his eyes on the ground. “You will want to know how the Captain is, and—and—I shall have something to tell you, ma’am, something that—that will relieve your mind a little, I make bold to think.”

Nanny dared not trust herself to answer. What could he tell her that would give her any comfort when she knew more than he? By the morning she could not doubt that he would have discovered the murder of Mrs. Durrant, and then she must consult him as to what steps were to be taken. Must there be an inquest, a scandal, a trial, and must her unhappy husband be shut up for life as a criminal lunatic?

As these horrible ideas passed through her mind she could not have spoken, however much she might have wished to do so. She bowed her head in assent to Pickering’s words, and hurried out of the house. He followed, and unlocked the little gate which was used instead of the big entrance to the drive. On the point of going out she stopped, and, recovering her voice with an effort, asked :

“Are you sure, Pickering, that the other gates of the grounds are locked?”

She remembered Mrs. Durrant’s words about the likelihood of Captain Ryder’s making straight for The Grange, and reflected that, as the unfortunate woman had left open a window of the house by which he

could escape, so she had probably not forgotten to afford him a means of egress from the grounds.

“Yes, ma’am, I think so,” said he.

“Will you go round and see?”

“Yes, ma’am, I will certainly, if it will make you feel easier-like.”

“Thank you, Pickering. You are very kind. Good-night.”

She hurried away down the broad white road, keeping well in the middle, with a lurking fear of the black shadows under the hedge on one side and the wall on the other. She was so glad of the wind and of the fine rain which it blew in her face as she walked. The cold and wet refreshed her burning cheeks, and even the rain-water which splashed up from the pools and puddles was welcome for the momentary distraction it afforded from her gloomy thoughts. She felt forlorn, desperate. What was she returning to? A house haunted by memories as horrible as those which now clung about the dreary mansion she had just left! Her first impulse, now that the night-air had lifted a little the heavy paralysis which had deadened her while inside The White House, was to return at once to her friends in Edinburgh. All her instincts of courage and loyalty, however, rose against this suggestion. Dan—poor, poor Dan! had done her wrong in marrying her; but she was his wife, and she would stand by her colours. Her interests lay now with the Ryders, and she must do what she could for them before she thought of herself—for the sake of Dan’s kindness in those few short weeks of happiness.

The housemaid, finding that her mistress had gone out, had sat up for her, and the girl was alarmed by the ghastly pallor and altered expression of the lady’s face.

“Oh, ma’am, whatever has happened? Has anybody frightened you? You do look so white! And your dress! Oh, you’re all wet! Did you have a fall, ma’am?”

“No, Emily,” said her mistress, trying to smile reassuringly. “I’m all right. But it’s raining.”

This was not a sufficient explanation of the state to which her efforts at putting out the fire at the cottage had reduced Nanny’s dress; but there was something in her manner which stopped the servant’s further inquiries, if it did not extinguish her curiosity. She helped her mistress off with her cloak and hat, and then said :

“One of the young ladies from Brent Lodge was round here this evening, ma’am, with some flowers. I put them in the drawing-room, ma’am.”

Nanny went to the drawing-room, where the housemaid, casting inquisitive glances at her mistress, lit some candles and retired. On a table was a big rush-basket tied with a bow of broad ribbon, full of dainty orchids arranged to the best advantage by the clever fingers of the Bambridge girls. Attached to the basket was a tiny cocked-hat note in Laura’s handwriting.

“DEAR NANNY (since you say we are to call you so),

“We have had these sent to us, and as they are much too good for anybody but you, we humbly offer them, together with kind regards and love and compliments, in assorted parcels, which your discrimination will enable you to apportion to the rightful senders. Only papa says the love is from him. With our condolences on your temporary widowhood (which we think the orchids will help you to bear with fortitude),

“Yours affectionately,
“LAURA.”

Nanny burst into tears over this note, and sobbed long and violently, hugging the basket of flowers. She was touched to the quick by this graceful act of girlish attention and kindness, coming as it did at a moment when some relief to the tension of her feel-

ings was almost necessary for her to retain control of her reason.

When the outburst had subsided, she got up, feeling dizzy and sick, oppressed by a sudden sense of the horror which hung over the house. She was very tired, but she knew that sleep was for a long time out of the question.

Glancing fearfully about her into the shadows of the corners of the long, low-ceilinged room, she took up the candles and carried them to her writing-table. Here she sat down and began a letter to Meg. It was not because she was so very anxious for her sister to find out Lady Ellen ; the events of the past few hours had dwarfed the importance of everything but the horrible crime committed almost before her eyes. But in her loneliness she felt that there would be consolation in the act of writing down words which would be read by loving eyes. She meant to betray nothing concerning her state of mind ; but in her misery the poor child betrayed more than she intended to do.

“MY DEAREST MEG” (she wrote),

“I am afraid you will think I have been a long time answering your last dear letter, and you will think something dreadful must have happened to me. But I have had a great deal to do, visiting in my district, and preparing for a garden-party which we have promised to give to please the Bambridge girls, whom I have told you about. You need not be jealous of them. Laura is a dear girl, but she can never be my own Meg. Nobody ever could. There is no one else I long for so when I am lonely, or want to see so much when I am unhappy, or, rather, there wouldn't be if I ever were unhappy. But this is a most beautiful place, you know, much handsomer and bigger than any house which I ever thought I should live in. But I have told you all that before, and I don't know why I am saying it again, except to 'fill up,' and to make you think you are getting a long letter when you are really only getting a short one

spun out. I want to write to you to-night. I feel I must. And there is a thing you might do for me. You remember writing to tell me, just before I was married, about a Miss Anstruther who knew a certain Lady Ellen Ryder. Well, this Lady Ellen is a distant connection of my husband's family, and she has gone to stay with Miss Anstruther, and I should like you to try and see her, and write to tell me what she is like. I have heard some stories about her, and I feel curious to know what she looks like. This is not important, of course ; vulgar curiosity, you will say. But if you should come across her, do let me have one of your funny descriptions. With love to papa, and my best, best love to your dearest old self.

"Your ever loving sister,
"NANNY."

She re-read this letter and sealed it up, without perceiving how eloquent it was in its bald childishness, and, above all, in its absence of any mention of her husband, of the constraint under which she had written it. Then, being by this time quite worn out, she crept mournfully upstairs to bed, hoping that she was too weary to keep awake.

Of course she was disappointed. Restless and weary, she tossed from side to side, frightened by each one of the night-noises which, in an old house, and one, moreover, fenced in by trees, sound continuously through the quiet hours of darkness.

Sometimes she fancied she heard footsteps on the gravel-walk in the garden below ; at other moments it seemed to her that thieves were trying to make an entrance by violence at the back of the house.

So vivid did these impressions at last become, that she gave up all idea of sleep, and, springing out of bed, put on her dressing-gown and went, candle in hand, downstairs. A sharp gust of wind, sweeping along the hall and passages, blew out the light she carried before she reached the ground-floor. A minute later the banging to and fro of one of the garden-doors told

her where the wind came from. She hurried, rather reckless than fearless, in the direction of the open door, looked out, saw nothing outside but the trees and bushes shaking in the wind. The appearance of the door itself, however, frightened her. It had been safely secured, but then burst open from the outside. And on the ground lay the very hatchet which she had seen Ralph Ryder take from Pickering's chest, and with which the old gardener had forced open the door of the fatal room at The White House.

Nanny secured the door as well as she could by the single bolt which remained uninjured, and turned quickly, attracted by the sound of some person moving about in the library close by. In the darkness she had to grope her way to the door. For a few seconds she listened, with a violently beating heart, to the slow movements of the intruder. She relit her candle, and then, turning the handle, she looked into the room.

Sitting at the table, helpless, aimless as a babe, with his head resting sleepily on his arms, quiet, worn out, all his passion and fury over, was the murderer Ralph Ryder.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN the course of the evening she had passed at The White House, and of the subsequent night-terrors she had experienced in her own home, Nanny seemed to have worn out, for the time, her capacity for emotion. She stood gazing in silence at the bent head in front of her, until Ralph Ryder, moving slightly, became aware of the light in the room, and raised his head sleepily.

Nanny uttered a low-voiced exclamation, and he turned to look at her. For some minutes they remained gazing at each other as if they now saw each other's face for the first time. Already the feverish

light which had glowed in the madman's face while his passion was at its height had given place to a dull, almost gentle, expression, as if a film had passed over his eyes. In the short time which had elapsed since he committed the murder, he seemed to have aged so rapidly that Nanny, for the first time, saw that he was an old man. For although her husband's hair was gray and his manner somewhat grave and dignified, the ring in his voice, the vigour and activity of his movements, and the freshness of his sunburnt complexion, had given her, in spite of the doubts cast by Mrs. Calverley and the old gravedigger, an impression of youth and strength.

Now, however, this was gone. The furrows in his handsome face, the lack-lustre eyes, the slow, heavy movements, all spoke of the weight of years. He pushed his curly gray hair back from his forehead, and began stroking his moustache as he looked at her with restless, wandering eyes. He scarcely seemed to know her.

Nanny, seeing, as she believed, that she had no reason to feel afraid of him, came a step nearer to his chair.

"Why have you come here?" she said gently.

She did not know why she asked this question, except that she wanted to hear his voice, and to learn whether he really recognized her. He frowned a little, as if her words puzzled him.

"This is my home," he said presently, in a voice so changed, so old, that Nanny started as she listened.

"Oh, yes," she said, and then paused. He still stared at her, almost as if he wondered why she stayed. "Are you going to stay here?" she asked timidly at last.

"Yes," he answered; "I think so. Then rising, he went on pettishly, "They don't make me comfortable at the other place. I have been very uncomfortable. And I—I must see my wife, I must see my wife!"

"Your wife!" faltered Nanny.

And half involuntarily her eyes wandered to the bookcase in which had lain the books containing Lady Ellen's name. After a short pause, Ralph Ryder's eyes wandered thither also."

"Is Lady Ellen your wife?" asked Nanny tremulously.

"Yes. Of course."

"He stood for a few minutes staring vacantly at the wall. Then he asked, in a timid voice, like a child:

"Is she alive? I never see her now. Is she alive?"

"I believe she is alive," answered Nanny, in a perfectly steady voice. "But she is not here."

Silence again. Nanny, in a dazed way, as she stood watching him, fell to analyzing her own feelings. So her short married life had been a dream to him—just a short vision of sanity and happiness, to end in this horrible dead sleep of the poor diseased mind. The tears rolled down her cheeks. She forgot herself, forgot the meaning to her of these shocking facts. Consciously or unconsciously the madman had ruined her life. She knew this, but in feeling for him she did not, for the time, feel for herself. The change, indeed, was so striking from the vigorous man in the prime of life, who could not look at her without betraying in his glance the depth of his passionate affection, to the unhappy, broken-down creature before her, that a generous nature could not consider the contrast without being appalled.

Suddenly she perceived, through the tears which were filling her eyes, a rising restlessness in the madman which she took for the premonitory symptom of another outbreak. He began to march up and down the room, and, to Nanny's horror, the springing, martial tread came back, he held his head erect, she saw again the figure and carriage of which she had been so proud in her husband.

"Oh, don't!" she murmured, her very teeth chat-

tering. And she sank upon a chair, trembling and sobbing in spite of herself. She could control herself as long as the man before her seemed a different person from the husband she had loved, but that first glimpse of the man who had been all the world to her broke her down. She tried in vain to repress her tears and her sobs, and as she heard his steps stop in front of her, she could not help whispering, though without looking up :

“Oh, Dan ! oh, Dan ! After all our happiness !”

He put his hand on her head, and heaved a heavy sigh. But when she looked up, hoping in spite of herself for one comforting glance, one gleam of a tender memory, she saw nothing but the blank, mindless gaze of a man in whom the past, the near past, at any rate, was dead. Even the kindly impulse of consolation was exhausted almost as soon as it rose. With a shiver Nanny got up.

“I am very tired,” he said childishly, “and I am hungry. I think they have forgotten to give me anything to eat.” Then, in a sombre voice, he added : “It is my wife’s doing. Ellen does not care if I starve.”

And again Nanny saw in his face, in his restless movements, something which made her dread another outbreak.

What should she do with him ? Where should she put him ? Some restraint must be put upon him, and the servants must not see him. For Valentine Eley would be spreading abroad the news of the murder, and he would certainly not be reticent concerning the perpetrator ; indeed, he could not afford to be, lest suspicion should fall upon himself.

“I will bring you something to eat,” she said, “if you will stay quietly here till I come back.”

As he seemed inclined to be submissive, she made him sit down again in the chair he had occupied by the table, and then she went in search of food. There was a gas-stove in one of the kitchens, so she boiled some eggs and made some cocoa. She did

not think this would make a very nice meal, but she thought it would be one of which the traces would be easily disposed of. When she got back to the study with her tray, Ralph Ryder had fallen into a heavy sleep, from which, after some debate with herself, she roused him. He was quite gentle, however, ate what she brought him ravenously, and then asked, in the same childlike way, where he was to sleep.

Nanny had had time to consider what to do. But how to break to him the plan she had in her mind?

"I am afraid," she began cautiously, after a pause, "that, if the servants were to find you here in the morning, they would think it very strange."

To her surprise, he assented readily.

"They might give me up," he said.

This implied knowledge of the risk he ran from the crime he had committed made Nanny feel sick with horror. It was comparatively easy to be kind and gentle with him, in the belief that he was as ignorant as a babe of the wrong he had done. But to shield a conscious murderer was a different thing!

"Where shall I go?" he asked, with all the signs of nervous trepidation. "Tell me, tell me! Put me where you like—only somewhere where I shall be safe."

But this emotion on his part very nearly drove the poor little woman's plans out of her head. It seemed to make her an accomplice in his crime. He came up to her, and touched her elbow impatiently as if to stir her up to action. She shrank away, deadly white and very cold.

"I—I—I thought," she began in a tremulous voice, "that perhaps you would not mind—of course, it is only for a day or two—before you go away for a change—a change of air—you might stay—not in the house exactly, there is a room close by—over the stable. It was used last week while the roof was being repaired over the servants' bedrooms, so it is quite aired and fit to sleep in. Would you mind——"

He did not wait for her to finish the sentence, but stood already outside the door. Nanny softly drew back the bolt of the garden-door close by, and led the way, by a pretty path hedged in completely by trees and shrubs, to the stables. The brougham her husband had promised her had, at her earnest request, not yet been bought. The long red-brick building, with its picturesque chimneys and gables, and its now raggedly-hanging threads of red Virginia creeper, was still deserted. They crossed the moss-grown yard, and Nanny, producing the key, which her husband had confided to her care before starting on his melancholy journey, entered the building, telling her companion to follow.

Although Nanny felt by no means free from the fear lest a paroxysm of fury should again possess him, she behaved, on the way through these dark paths and deserted passages, with philosophical calm. For if, she argued with herself, a murderous impulse should again seize him, nothing in the world could save her; and as her ignorance concerning the phases of his malady was complete, there was nothing for her to do but to behave quite simply and straightforwardly, and to trust to Providence for her safety. As it proved, however, it was the best way to treat him. When they reached the room on the upper story which she proposed to put him in, she held the candle high and asked him if he thought he would be comfortable.

“Yes,” he answered, without looking round or showing the least interest.

And he sat down on one of the plain rush-bottomed chairs, and seemed to sink into a reverie.

“I will bring some bedclothes,” she said. “Shall I leave the candle with you?”

“Yes,” he answered as before.

Not quite certain whether she was doing right, Nanny left the candle with him, and went away. But when she returned from the house with a heavy bundle, he was in exactly the same position as she

had left him in. He looked up, however, as, panting, she let the great parcel of blankets and sheets fall upon the floor.

“You ought not to do that,” he said wonderingly.

Nanny’s eyes met his, and she asked herself what thought could be moving in his poor clouded brain. But the next moment his head fell upon his breast, and he sat in silence while she made the bed and put out soap and towels for him.

At last her task was done, and she stood before him diffidently, wondering how he would take the next suggestion she had to make.

“I have done all I can to make you comfortable for the night now,” she said. She wished she could say “Dan,” but the old pet name seemed to choke her. “Don’t you think, for fear any of the servants should come this way in the morning, you know, that you had better—that I had better—turn the key in the lock?”

“Yes,” said he at once, but with a trifle more interest than before. “Or course, they mustn’t find me out.” Then, throwing a furtive glance round the room, as an animal in confinement does round its cage, he whispered: “But they won’t—they won’t! I was so very careful—ha, ha!—so very careful!”

And he uttered a laugh which froze his hearer’s blood. It showed the madness in his blood more plainly than anything he had done or said since his arrival under the roof of The Grange. Nanny stood before him, too much shocked to find more words. As she turned away, he suddenly put out his hand and caught hers, which shrank at his touch.

“You are very cold—and white,” he said. Then, with a sudden burst of rising excitement, he cried: “Go away—go away! The dead look like that. White—and—cold. And we hide them away—and no one will ever know. No one, no one!”

His voice had sunk to a whisper which chilled Nanny. She drew her hand quickly away, and tottered out of the room, groping for the door like a blind

woman, for the strain upon her had been too much, and the tears were welling into her eyes.

“Good-night,” she whispered at the door. “I will come to see you in the morning.”

He did not answer, and Nanny quickly and quietly turning the key upon him, crept down the stairs and out into the air. She was so cold that she could scarcely feel her feet. Shivering and weeping, she made her way back into the house and stole up to her bedroom, into which the first rays of morning were penetrating. She was so utterly worn out in body and mind that, contrary to her expectations, she fell into a heavy sleep almost immediately.

Nanny was roused next morning by the housemaid, who came to tell her that Pickering, the gardener, was waiting downstairs, and that he wanted to see her particularly. She dressed hastily, and, passing through the hall, beckoned to the old man to follow her into the drawing-room. By his first words she knew that he had not yet discovered the murder.

“The Captain’s got away, ma’am,” he said. “And Mrs. D. and her brother have disappeared too.”

“The Captain is all right,” she answered, in a tremulous voice. “He escaped and came here in the night. I have shut him up in a room over the stable. He was very quiet, and seemed to understand that he must hide.”

Pickering looked at the young lady with astonishment and concern.

“You do bear up most wonderful, ma’am,” he said at last; “but it’s telling on you, all the same, if I may make so bold as to say so. You look five-and-thirty this morning, ma’am, that you do.”

However deep her griefs might be, this was scarcely the sympathy she would have asked. Nanny laughed faintly.

“Oh,” she said, “you see, youth and beauty are not of so much use to me now as some other qualities. So I’ve exchanged them.”

Pickering looked uneasy as well as compassionate.

He began twisting his cap in his hands like a nervous boy, and shifted his glances from the lady's face to the carpet.

"You know, ma'am," he said at last, with a tone and manner which betrayed conflicting feelings—"you know—that—er—that things aren't so bad as they might be for you."

"Well, I think my prospects might be rosier than they are, Pickering," responded Nanny dubiously.

"Oh, yes, ma'am, I'm not saying that; but——" A long pause. Then, as if his feelings were too much for him, out came a burst of confidence. "But, as I said, they might be worse. Look'e here, ma'am, I'm a-going to do for you what I never thought to ha' done for anybody, and that's break faith with one I've kept true to thirty years. I thought Lady Ellen was hardly done by, but now I find somebody else harder done by still. Why, it's more'n I can stand to see it!"

Pickering was getting, considering his natural stolidity, much excited by his own eloquence. He was preparing himself for a grand climax to his oration.

"For see here, ma'am. It's a bad enough thing to be mixed up in a business with a madman, but it's better than being the wife of one. And what I've come to tell you, ma'am, and what you may take my word for, though you mustn't ask me no questions, is this: you've been thinking he's your husband, ma'am, but he's *not*."

In spite of the need of caution in making these very delicate disclosures, Pickering was so much moved that he brought out the last word in a voice of thunder. Poor Nanny, to whom this statement was far from being the surprise he expected, could not forbear from smiling at his grotesque vehemence.

"I know that, Pickering, I know that," she said quietly. "His wife is Lady Ellen Ryder."

"Why, ma'am, how did you find it out!"

"He told me so, for one thing."

“Well, ma’am, and ain’t that fit to be called good news?”

“Why, ye—es, perhaps it is. But I’m still bound to keep watch over him till this Lady Ellen turns up. And why is she so strangely shy of appearing?”

“Well, ma’am,” said the old man diffidently, “they do say—though, mind you, I’ve never held altogether with that way of thinking—that it was her flighty ways made the Captain take to the courses he did. And then, of course, ma’am, it’s in nature not to care to be tied to a mad husband.”

“But he’s only mad sometimes. I’m sure when——”

She faltered and broke down. She could not discuss that happy time, the remembrance of which added one more horror to her present position. The old gardener shook his head grimly.

“Well, ma’am,” he said grimly, “that only makes him more dangerous-like, don’t it?”

She could not deny this. She walked to one of the windows, and looked out through choking tears at the pretty lawn, the border of bright dahlias and chrysanthemums fresh from the rain of the night, at the piles of brown and yellow leaves which the wind had swept down and swirled into little heaps on the green grass. But Nanny had not come to meditate on the scene. She turned presently in a tornado of indignation.

“I will make the woman come,” she cried passionately. “It is her folly and wickedness in hiding herself all this time which have led me into this misery.”

Pickering could not contradict her. She walked briskly to her writing-table.

“Will you send off a telegram for me at once?” she asked, as she took up a pencil.

“Yes, ma’am, certainly.”

In a few moments she handed him a telegraph-form, with this message written :

“MISS MAY,
“— Clark Street, Edinburgh.

“Find out and wire immediately name of lady staying with Miss A.”

Pickering scratched his head dubiously, as he made no scruple of reading this message, but he agreed to send it off, and started at once, promising to return later to visit the Captain.

Nanny then breakfasted hurriedly, and afterwards with unspeakable reluctance went to the stable, according to her promise, carrying on her arm a covered basket which she often used when she went out to cut flowers. Into this she had put a cup of tea and food from the breakfast-table. She entered the stable by the back way, unlocked and opened the door of the madman's room without having obtained any answer to her knock, and found him still asleep. She put the food beside him, and left the room without waking him.

The day passed quietly, but in the evening Pickering, with a face as white as that of a dead man, again came to The Grange. Nanny, seeing that he was unable to speak, said :

“You have found something?”

“Oh, ma'am, surely you don't know!”

“I am afraid I do,” she answered, as calmly as ever. “You have found the body of Mrs. Durrant.”

They compared what they knew—she telling of the struggle she had heard, the noise of the opening window; he of his discovery of the dead body among the shrubs in the garden underneath.

“I have locked up the place, ma'am, and left the body to lie,” he said. “I daren't touch it, and I daren't go on living at my cottage there. So, if you please, I'll stay at the stable here, and look after the poor master. But there'll be difficulties and dangers yet, ma'am, over this awful business. For there's two people knows of it besides us. There's Mr. Eley, who's got no wits to live on now his sister's

gone; and there's the servant, who's gone, and who must have known something. For there's a lot of the poor dead woman's things missing."

Before Nanny's eyes floated an awful vision of a trial, a conviction, and a sentence upon her husband as a criminal lunatic. Her husband? No, not even that. All the dreadful shame would come out, to add to her misery. She stood transfixed, having nothing to say. Pickering glanced at her with respectful sympathy; he had, however, no consolation to offer.

While he still stood there a telegram was brought to Nanny. It was from Meg, in answer to hers. This was the message:

"MRS. RYDER,
"Grange, Brent.

"Your mother-in-law, Mrs. Ryder, arrived at Miss A.'s day before yesterday with a lady whose name I cannot discover.

"MEG."

Nanny did not show this telegram to Pickering, nor did she offer any comment on it. She simply walked to her writing-table, and wrote out another telegram:

"MRS. RYDER (c/o MISS MAY),
"— Clark Street, Edinburgh.

"Come to Brent Grange at once, and bring Lady Ellen. Her husband wishes to see her."

This message she offered to the old gardener to read. But the perusal of it scared him. He looked up at her with a deprecating glance.

"I daren't send off that message, ma'am."

Nanny did not attempt to argue with him.

"Very well. Then I will," said she.

She would not listen to the faint offers he then made, being resolved not to trust to unwilling hands.

Dismissing him, therefore, she ran upstairs, put on her hat, and went herself to the station.

She went inside the telegraph-office just at the moment that a train drew into the station. When she came out on to the platform, the few passengers had alighted or taken their places, and the train had moved on again. Absorbed as Nanny was in thoughts full of terror and sadness, she was conscious that the figure of a plainly-dressed lady, walking away from her, struck her with a sense of familiarity. She, however, attached no importance to this impression, which she would have ascribed to the direction of her own thoughts. When she got outside the station, the lady in front of her hailed the solitary fly on the stand outside, and her voice, as she spoke to the driver, was distinctly audible to Nanny.

“Do you know Brent Grange?” asked the voice.

Nanny drew a long, choking breath. She tried to articulate, but could not. Then, springing forward as the other was getting into the fly, she caught her arm.

It was her sister Meg.

“Oh, Meg, Meg!” she sobbed, when her sister had with difficulty stifled a scream at the sight of her white face: “I—I don’t know why you have come, and I’m quite—quite well and—and—and happy. But, oh! Meg, Meg darling, if you hadn’t come, I believe I should have died to-night!”

They were driving to the Grange now, and she sank into her sister’s arms, sobbing bitterly.

CHAPTER XX.

WHEN her first outburst of joy at her sister's coming was over, Nanny drew herself back from Meg's arms, overwhelmed by the increased difficulties of her position. Not only had she now to conceal her husband, and keep him from escaping into danger, but she had to do it all under a pair of watchful eyes. For, struggling with the temptation to open her heart to her sister, and pour out the whole story of the terrible troubles which had fallen upon her, Nanny resolved still to keep her own counsel. Warm-hearted, strong-willed Meg was too impulsive to be trusted unreservedly with such delicate secrets as those which were burdening poor Nanny. If she were to hear of Dan's madness and previous marriage, she would want to consult a lawyer about the possibility of having her sister's marriage annulled.

Now, this course might be inevitable. But yet Nanny shrank from it. Besides the shame of confessing the miserable mistake she had made, there was down at the bottom of her heart still a wild, vague hope that "things would come right, after all." It seemed to her, now that she again felt a pair of affectionate arms round her, that such absolute ruin could not come upon her life so early, and without any fault of her own. Dan would get well, and Lady Ellen would prove never to have been his wife at all, and——

Then before her eyes rose, like a black mist, the remembrance of the crime which had been committed almost before her eyes. She shuddered, and Meg's arms closed lovingly round her again.

"What made you come, Meg?" she asked suddenly, wondering whether she had made unconscious admissions in her weekly letters.

“Your telegram,” answered her sister promptly. “I knew by the tone of your letters that there was something wrong, and when I got that telegram I knew it was very wrong. So I came at once.”

“And you found out the name of the lady who is staying with Miss Anstruther?” asked Nanny, with as much composure as she could muster.

“I hadn’t time. I tell you I came away at once, with hardly any luggage, catching the next train. Luckily, I had saved enough out of the housekeeping money for my ticket.”

“Poor Meg! How you must have scraped!”

“I did. I’ve never wasted a match or an end of thread. But I knew very well you would have trouble sooner or later, and I was determined that I would be able to come.”

Nanny trembled. How would she be able to keep her secret under such tender yet resolute care as this?

“Of course, too, I know what the trouble is. I knew as soon as I got the telegram. He *was* married already, and this lady you asked about is——”

“Oh, don’t, don’t!” interrupted Nanny with a groan. “Meg, don’t make me sorry you have come.”

There was a short pause, and when Meg spoke again it was in a very low and gentle voice.

“I won’t say a word that you don’t wish to hear, dear. You will know what you asked by to-night. I commissioned old Mrs. Bruce to find out the name of the lady who is staying with Miss Anstruther, and to telegraph it to me at once. You know how discreet Mrs. Bruce is. She would never say a word about it to any one, and she visits Miss Anstruther so often that she could find out better than anybody else.”

“Yes. Thank you, Meg.”

Another pause.

“Captain Ryder is away still?” asked Meg presently, in a distinctly colder tone.

“Yes.”

“Do you expect him back soon?”

“I—don’t—know.”

Nanny’s trembling voice, and an unmistakable constraint in her tone, would have betrayed clearly enough that there was some cause of estrangement between husband and wife. Meg was wise enough to say no more on the subject; and, as they had by this time reached the Grange, both were glad of a natural opportunity of changing the conversation.

“Nanny, what a lovely place!” cried the elder sister enthusiastically.

And it crossed her mind, with a sharp pang that Nanny must indeed have suffered deeply here, since her letters had contained so little praise of her beautiful new home. Young Mrs. Ryder tried to throw herself into the pleasure and pride of showing the place, and of listening to the expression of her sister’s admiration. But at the very outset she received a shock which made it hard to maintain her composure.

On entering the drawing-room, Nanny found lying on one of the tables a note directed to her in a man’s handwriting which she did not know. A servant had come into the room with a lamp, and Nanny turned to her and asked who had called in her absence.

“Noone, ma’am,” said the maid.

“Who brought this note in here, then?”

“I don’t know, ma’am. But I’ll ask the others.”

She left the room; and Nanny, first taking care to turn her sister’s attention to the view of the garden from the window, went close to the lamp and tore open the note. She saw that it had been scrawled hurriedly in pencil on a half-sheet of her own note-paper taken from her writing-table, which stood near the window. This was the note:

“DEAR MADAM,

“I am sure you will not refuse to give me assistance when you know what the consequence of your refusal would necessarily be. I must get away from here, or I shall be presently arrested on suspicion

of having caused the death of my unhappy sister, whose body cannot fail to be found in a few days. I know that Captain Ryder was not responsible for his actions at the time he committed this crime. But if the truth were to come out about it, the story about his killing his own child could not fail to be discovered also, and he would be confined by the State as a criminal lunatic, which is just what your mother-in-law has incurred so much trouble and expense to avoid. Now what will you and she do for me? I am willing to go away, right out of the country if you like, but of course my expenses must be paid. Will you please confer with her as quickly as possible? I don't know her address, or I would write to her myself. I shall wait about the grounds, and you will perhaps be kind enough to come out and speak to me this evening. I spent last night in town, but I was obliged to come back here this afternoon, as I have no money left.

“I am, madam, yours obediently,

“VALENTINE ELEY.”

Nanny read this letter through and put it into her pocket. Then approaching the window at which her sister was standing, she perceived that it was not fastened. Remembering that she had left it open that afternoon, she knew by what means Valentine had left the note upon her table. She had scarcely finished reading it when the parlour-maid returned to say that none of the other servants had brought a note in or opened the door to a visitor that afternoon. Meg, who must have noticed this incident, made no remark upon it. She seemed to have grown preternaturally discreet. Even when, during dinner, a message was brought that Pickering wished to see Mrs. Ryder for a few moments, and Nanny, turning white and cold, immediately left the room, Meg made no remark, and seemed not to notice the perturbation which was visible in her sister's manner.

Pickering was going, he said, away for a day or

two, and he had come to warn Mrs. Ryder that, in the meantime, "the Captain"—and here he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the supposed direction of the stable—would be dependent upon her for his food.

"You won't find him difficult to manage, ma'am," said he. "Now the fit's over he'll gradually get himself again, and in a day or two he'll be as right as ever, and you'd never guess there had been anything wrong with him. And what's more, he won't know it himself."

Nanny, far from being reassured by this intelligence, listened with dread. That would indeed be the most terrible trial of all, when, never guessing the frightful experience to which he had subjected his wife, he would claim her love and duty without a doubt or a suspicion.

"But, Pickering, can't you stay a little longer? Is it really necessary that you should go away just now?"

"Indeed it is, ma'am, and, to say true, it's mostly along of you I'm going. This here business must be found out in a day or two, and there'll be an inquest, and all sorts of questions asked. And I'm a-going to make Lady Ellen take her share of the bother this time, instead of shoving it all on to your shoulders."

"Oh, Pickering, don't! I'd rather not see her. At least—I don't know what to do."

The poor child put her head in her hands.

"Don't you give way, ma'am. It's better for you than her, after all, ma'am, you see. For she's his wife, and she can't get out of that. And for you, why, it's only just an unpleasantness, after all."

It was the philosophical way of looking at it, but it brought no comfort to Nanny, whose heart was sore with an irreparable loss, an unmerited shame. She told Pickering that the brother of the murdered woman was about, again levying blackmail. The old man advised her to help him, as otherwise he might be suspected of the crime, and might have to tell what he knew to save himself.

“You see, we must keep it dark as long as we can, ma’am ; and then Lady Ellen, who is a famous hand at that game, may hit on a plan for hushing it up, as she did last time. I don’t know what the servant-girl knows, but as she’s run away and taken a lot of her poor mistress’s things with her, she’s not likely to trouble us.”

Nanny bade the old gardener good-bye with a heavy heart, and returned to the dining-room, where Meg received her without a single question. This delicate reserve on the part of her impulsive elder sister was becoming disquieting to Nanny. What did she suspect? Meg had left the dinner-table, and was sitting by the fire eating grapes, the yellow flames throwing into high relief a head of hair which her enemies, if she had had any, would have called “carrotty.” She only glanced up when her sister entered, and went on eating.

“This is a jolly house !” she said voluptuously, as she settled herself a little further back in her chair and glanced at its carved arms.

“Jolly !” echoed her sister, in a tone of mingled bitterness and indignation.

“I repeat—*jolly* !” said Meg, more emphatically. “Of course I have heard of ‘splendid misery’ and ‘hollow hearts beneath crowns,’ and the rest of it. But after twenty-two years of happy penury, or penurious happiness, whichever you like to call it, I unhesitatingly say, Give me misery and millions. Put me in a big, beautiful house, and then neglect me as much as ever you like.”

“I’m not neglected,” said Nanny slowly. “And I am not sure that I would go back to the old days, although”—and her voice faltered—“I admit that I’m not very happy. But you see, Meg, it changes one so to be frantically happy and then frantically miserable, that to talk of the Nanny of the old days is like talking of some small, insignificant dead thing that I didn’t know or care much about. Now, can you amuse yourself while I write some letters ?”

“Certainly. Where shall I bestow myself?”

“Will you come into the drawing-room? The fire will have burnt up by this time, and it will be warm and cheerful. I can write my letters in the study.”

Meg’s suspicions were roused at once. For Nanny’s writing-table was in the drawing-room. However, she got up with unquestioning docility, followed her sister, and submitted to be left in solitary state in the midst of the brocaded chairs and sofas with gilt legs, which filled her simple soul with admiration and envy.

She had, however, something more interesting than furniture to occupy her thoughts, being determined to find out the whole reason of her sister’s evident unhappiness without teasing her by any more questions.

There was some mystery, she felt sure, beside this rumour of a former wife, hanging over The Grange, and clouding the life of its young mistress.

Meg heard Nanny go upstairs, and, putting the drawing-room door ajar, she presently heard her come down. Peeping out, she saw that Nanny had on a hat and cloak, and that she went down the corridor which led past the study to a side door into the garden.

Meg would not follow her; it would be too much like playing the spy. But at that moment the front-door bell rang, and Nanny ran back into the hall. A minute later she brought Meg a telegram. It was from Mrs. Bruce, and this was the message:

“Two ladies staying with Miss A. One is Mrs. Ryder; cannot learn name of second.”

Nanny snatched the telegram from her sister’s hand and read it. The second lady, she could not doubt, was Lady Ellen. And she was staying in the same house with old Mrs. Ryder. Nanny was more utterly perplexed than ever by this discovery. What, then, could the position of Lady Ellen be? She ran to her writing-table, seized a telegraph-form, and wrote this message:

“MRS. RYDER (c/o MISS ANSTRUTHER),
 “—— Street, Edinburgh.

Come here at once, and bring Lady Ellen with you.”

“ANTONIA RYDER.”

She had kept the boy waiting, and she now ran into the hall to give him this telegram with her own hands. Then, without returning to Meg, she went into the garden to meet Valentine. Poor Meg longed to detain her, for it was raining fast, and the wind was keen and cold. Nanny, however, scarcely knew this.

Valentine Eley, who had been waiting about, heard the garden door shut, and came to meet her immediately. He wore no overcoat, and was wet through and shivering. His voice, when he spoke, was hoarse and weak.

“Why didn't you go under some shelter?” asked Nanny, on perceiving the plight he was in. “There is the summer-house or the stable.”

He shuddered convulsively.

“I went into the stable,” he whispered. “But there were noises—voices there, and—and—I—I couldn't stand it.”

Nanny, knowing whose voice it was that he had heard, asked no further questions.

“I don't know what to do for you,” she said doubtfully. “I have hardly any money, unless a cheque would do.”

“I'd rather not have a cheque,” he said. “If you can give me some money. I—could get away—by train—somewhere—anywhere—away from here. This place gives me the horrors.”

Nanny was seized with pity for the poor wretch. The death of his sister whose stronger mind had subjected his entirely, seemed to have broken him up. He was not threatening or blustering in voice or manner, but pitifully weak, ill, and shattered. And he was not without a consciousness that this was the attitude best calculated to secure him the sympathy of his hearer.

“Will you go away to-night? You don't seem well enough to walk.”

“Oh, I shall get to the station somehow, and into the first train that starts. Or, if I can't I should sleep under a hedge and start to-morrow morning. There would be questions asked if I were to go to an hotel.”

There would undoubtedly. On the other hand, it seemed hard that this man, worthless as he might be, should creep about like a hunted creature in consequence of a crime in which he had had no hand. Besides, he was scarcely in a fit state to walk about, and his appearance would be sure to excite remark at the station.

“I think,” said Nanny, “you had better come into the house and have your clothes dried first. And I will find you an overcoat and an umbrella.”

Valentine assented gratefully, and followed her into the house. As she went, it occurred to her that Valentine's appearance, and also this back-stairs sort of entrance, might set the servants talking. So she led him into the nearest room, which was the study, and, inviting him to sit by the fire, went upstairs and hunted out some clothes of her husband's for him. Then, the maids being all at supper in the servants' hall, she returned to the study, and directed him to go up into one of the spare-rooms, where he could change his clothes. She was alarmed to see that he at first scarcely understood her, and that he staggered as he rose from the chair.

“You are ill,” she cried in alarm.

“I—I'm afraid I am.”

“I must send for a doctor,” cried Nanny.

“No, no!” said Valentine, supporting himself against the mantelpiece. He foresaw the difficulties, both for her and for himself, to which this would give rise. “The warm room has made me giddy, that's all. Let me wait here a minute, and I can go.”

Almost unconsciously they had been talking in whispers. Nanny came a step nearer to him, looking anxiously at his haggard face.

“You can’t go,” said she. “It would not be safe for you. You must stay until you have seen a doctor, even at the risk of everything’s being found out.”

These last words fell on the ears of the astonished Meg, who, believing her sister to be still out of doors, had come in search of a book to while away the time.

Nanny sprang back as her sister, who had found the door ajar, pushed it open and showed herself.

“Meg,” said Nanny briefly, “don’t scream out and alarm the servants. Will you go for a doctor?”

“Yes,” said Meg promptly, “if you’ll tell me the way.”

Nanny, who saw that Valentine was growing worse each moment, hurriedly gave her sister the necessary directions; and Meg, taking her sister’s hat and cloak, started off at once. She had miscalculated her own acuteness, however, for, although she managed to find her way safely to Brent Green, the trees in the gardens hid the houses so completely that she found it impossible to identify the “large white house with a brass plate on the door.” She retraced her steps, therefore, and, finding that the first house on the green was a white house, went into the garden to see whether there was a plate on the door. Finding that there was none, she was returning to the gate, when a young fellow ran quickly through and met her face to face.

“Oh, will you be kind enough to tell me which is Dr. Blundell’s?” cried Meg.

The young fellow stopped and looked at her in momentary bewilderment. It was Charlie Bambridge. He recognised young Mrs. Ryder’s hat and cloak, and certain tones of the voice.

“I will take you to the gate,” said he, turning to accompany her. “I hope nobody is ill at The Grange?” he added solicitously.

“Oh, no. At least——” Meg hesitated, and then she changed the subject. “How did you know I was from The Grange?”

“By your voice. You are Mrs. Ryder’s sister, are you not?”

“Yes.”

Meg noticed a warmth of interest in his tone which gave her a clue to his identity.

“Oh,” she said suddenly, “you are one of those nice people she is always writing about. Your name is Bambridge, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Charlie Bambridge.”

“Are you the one who rows, or the one who has a bicycle?”

“I am the one who has a bicycle,” said Charlie.

“And you have a sister named Laura, whom my sister is very fond of, and who is very fond of her?”

“I hope that description applies to all of us. Certainly the last part does. We are all fond of her, if I may be allowed to say so; and we are all awfully sorry to see the change which has come over her since she has been here.”

He blurted out this last sentence hurriedly, feeling that it was better to let this sister know at once that something was wrong. Meg, hurrying along beside him, guessed that he knew more than this.

“She does not seem very happy, I am afraid,” she said.

“No. I am very, very glad you have come. I—I should like to tell you something. Here we are at the doctor’s. May I wait for you and see you home to The Grange?”

“Oh, yes, please do.”

Meg’s simple straightforwardness of speech and manner struck the young man with a quaint pleasant sense of novelty. It was not a bit like the self-conscious brusquerie of those London-bred girls who claim to be strong-minded and matter-of-fact. When she had delivered her message for the doctor, Meg ran down the steps and quietly accepted Charlie’s suggestion that she should share the shelter of his umbrella, as she had come out without one.

“I think you would get along better if you were to take my arm,” he said.

“Thank you, I will,” she answered, again accepting the suggestion. “And now,” she went on, as they got outside the garden-gate, and the rain pattered down through the almost leafless trees above them, “will you please tell me what it was you had to say?”

“Well,” said Charlie judicially, “I wouldn’t tell what I am going to tell you to any other woman, because they generally get so hysterical over anything important.”

“How do you know that I shall not get hysterical? You have scarcely known me half an hour!”

“I must take my chance of having made a mistake. I don’t think I have, though.”

“And this that you have to tell me concerns my sister?”

“You shall judge for yourself. I stayed late in town last night to go to the theatre. Just as I was turning out of the Strand into Villiers Street to catch the last train home by the Underground, a man who was coming from the station staggered up to me and slapped me on the back. It was a fellow named Eley who lives at The White House, near here—an awful cad, whom I detest. He had been drinking, and looked awfully upset. I tried to pass him, but he wouldn’t be shaken off, and when I got away by telling him I should lose my train, he suddenly turned from maudlin to angry, and said that ‘if he was to be treated as a pariah he would make somebody pay for it, and I was to tell my friends the Ryders so.’ Now, the fellow spoke like a desperate man, and—there is an awkward secret in the family.”

“What is the secret?” interrupted Meg, in a tone of suppressed excitement.

“I cannot tell you. I learned what I know about it by an accident, and I am under oath not to divulge it.”

“Under oath to whom?”

“To Captain Ryder.”

They had entered The Grange gates, and were going through the winding avenue of trees which led past the stables to the house. Suddenly a wild laugh, which sounded unearthly in the darkness and the silence, seemed to ring out from the ivy which hung in thick wreaths on the old stables. Meg with difficulty suppressed a shriek.

“It sounded,” she whispered, as she and her companion hurried on through the splashing rain to the house-door, “like a *mad* laugh, didn’t it?”

But Charlie, whom she had requested not to ring the bell, was too busily employed in finding the handle of the door to make any answer.

CHAPTER XXI.

“Do you think I can be of any further use to you or to Mrs. Ryder?” asked Charlie, standing on the steps of The Grange, as Meg held out her hand to him. “The doctor may give you a prescription which you will want made up. I could knock up the chemist for you.”

“It is very kind of you,” said Meg. “But——”

“Don’t say ‘but.’ I should be so glad if I could do anything. Captain and Mrs. Ryder have been very kind to all of us. May I wait and see?”

“Yes, if you please. I will go and tell my sister you are here.”

“It is not she who is ill?” said Charlie again.

“Oh, no. I—I will go and tell her.”

She left Charlie in the drawing-room, and ran to the study, where she found Nanny, looking anxiously in the direction of the sofa, on which Valentine was lying. He was already half unconscious, and was seized from time to time by severe fits of shivering, which left him inert and weak.

“Have you brought the doctor?” asked Nanny, whose face was furrowed with anxiety and distress.

“He is coming. Mr. Charles Bambridge is in the drawing-room; he says perhaps he may be of use. I’ll go and watch for the doctor.”

Nanny said nothing, and Meg left her with a kiss of sympathy. When Dr. Blundell had seen the patient, he said it was impossible to move him that night, as Valentine was on the verge of a fever.

“His sister had better be sent for,” he added, recognising Eley, whom he had seen about the neighbourhood.

Valentine’s eyes opened with a wide stare.

“Dead, she is dead,” said he in a hollow voice.

The doctor turned to Mrs. Ryder, who had grown in an instant ashy-white, and raised his eyebrows with an interrogative glance. After a moment's pause, and not before her ghastly face had given an affirmative answer, she bowed her head silently. Valentine startled them by a hoarse laugh.

"Nobody is to know anything about it, of course," he said bitterly. "It is part of the secret—the great family secret—that Captain Ryder is a lunatic—and murderer."

The doctor was startled by these words, absurd as the statement naturally seemed to him. He glanced from his patient to Nanny, and was still further astonished to see the look of blank horror on her face.

"He—he is delirious—raving," she whispered hoarsely.

"Yes, yes," said the doctor, instantly shifting his glance back to Valentine.

But he was not quite satisfied. He wrote a prescription, which he gave to Nanny, and then asked her who was going to sit up with the sick man.

"I am," said she quietly.

"Had you not better let me send Mrs. Walters in? She is at home now, I know, and—she is a most discreet woman, you know."

"No, no," said Nanny quickly; "I would rather not. You see, doctor," she went on, after a moment's pause, "if he is going to talk nonsense like that, and if anybody except ourselves hears him, the whole neighbourhood will be ringing with silly stories presently."

"Not through Mrs. Walters, I am sure," said he. "At any rate, I shall send her, for I could not think of leaving you alone with this man, who, as you see, will be difficult to manage presently. I am very glad," he continued, as he went along the corridor, "that you have someone with you. Your sister looks like a capable little person, and it is fortunate she is with you at this awkward moment. Good-night."

He was at the front door by this time. As he shook hands with Nanny, he asked carelessly :

“By-the-by, when do you expect your husband back, Mrs. Ryder?”

“I don't quite know,” said Nanny quietly. “He wrote that he was going on a cruise with a friend, but he did not say for how long.”

“Ah, well, I hope he will be back soon to look after you. You don't look well.”

He ran down the steps quickly, and disappeared in the darkness of the avenue, while Nanny went to the drawing-room in a state of high nervous excitement. In the midst of her distress at the disclosure Valentine had made, she felt a throb of relief that her terrible secret had, as it were, tickled the ears of a man of experience and judgment like Dr. Blundell. She even debated with herself whether she should take him altogether into her confidence on his next visit, and had half resolved upon this important step when she reached the drawing-room.

Meg and Charlie had been entertaining each other very well, Meg being interested in the young fellow's account of Captain Ryder, whom he liked, and of whom, therefore, he reported most favourably ; and Charlie, on his side, being more and more attracted by Meg's simple directness. He took the prescription from Nanny's hands, and was going to leave the house with it, when Nanny, who accompanied him through the hall, said hurriedly, in a low voice :

“I don't want you to tell anyone at your home that there is some one ill here. Except Mrs. Bambridge—I don't mind her knowing ; but nobody else. You can keep a secret, I know. You did keep one for my husband ; now you must keep one for me.”

“Very well, Mrs. Ryder.” He hesitated, and then said : “May my mother come and see you?”

Nanny's breath came and went fast. It was a great temptation, but she thought she had better not confide her secret to any fresh person until after she

had seen Mrs. Ryder and found out the mystery concerning Lady Ellen. So she shook her head.

"Not yet," she said. "Thank you heartily for your kindness. Good-night."

But Charlie still stood on the steps. At last he said:

"May I know who it is that is ill, Mrs. Ryder?"

After a moment's hesitation she told him. He received the information very quietly, and then bade her good-night and left her.

But the moment the door closed he seemed to become a different man. Instead of walking calmly down the avenue, as he had done while Mrs. Ryder could still see or hear him, he set off running as fast as he could, and never stopped until he reached Dr. Blundell's house. The doctor was at home, having just returned from Mrs. Walters' cottage, where he had called himself on his way to his own house.

"Doctor," said Charlie at once, "what is that fellow Eley doing at The Grange?"

"I'm sure I should like to know," said Dr. Blundell. "He says his sister is dead. Have you heard anything about it?"

Charlie answered in the negative, and related the circumstances of his meeting with Valentine the previous night.

"I feel sure the rascal has been imposing in some way on little Mrs. Ryder," said Charlie. "I am going round to The White House to see if there is any truth in what he says."

The doctor stared at the young fellow, in whose face and manner he saw evidences of more exact knowledge than he professed.

"Going round there to-night—in the rain? You have something more than mere vague suspicion of this fellow to go upon, then?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever hear Captain Ryder called a lunatic?"

"No."

A flash of sudden apprehension illumined his face, however.

“But you are not surprised at the question?”

“No, doctor.”

“I should like to accompany you on your expedition.”

They went forth together, therefore, and less than half an hour's sharp walking brought them to the gates of The White House. They rang again and again, but got no answer. The house was quite dark, and the only sound to be heard was the patter of the rain against its many windows. Just within the gate was a can of milk which had evidently been passed through the bars that morning, and had remained there untouched ever since.

“Looks as if something was wrong,” muttered the doctor. “The Grange gardener lives in a cottage in the grounds. We had better make for that. Straight on, and up an avenue of trees to the right.”

They walked on in silence, very quickly, like men prepared for some grim discovery. A little sodden path through the underwood, branching off from the avenue, brought them to a wooden door in the high wall which surrounded the grounds. On this door was roughly painted, in weathern-worn letters, “Gardener's Lodge.” There was a bell-handle at the side, which Charlie pulled vigorously. The bell clanged loudly, but there was no response; they pulled again and again, with always the same result.

“If you will give me a hand, or rather a shoulder, doctor, I'll climb the wall,” said Charlie.

“Too deep a drop on the other side, isn't it?”

“I think I can manage it, and then I can, perhaps, open the gate for you.”

With the doctor's help, the young man had little difficulty in carrying out his first suggestion, but the opening of the gate was another matter. It was secured by a couple of padlocks fixed in strong iron staples, and it was not until after a long burglarious search in the cottage, which he entered by pushing

up the catch of a window with his pocket-knife, that Charlie discovered a bunch of keys, one of which proved to be the right one.

Then they stood a few instants inside the gate in a sort of awestruck silence. Their feet were in long, thick, wet grass, and damp leaves from the trees above fluttered down upon their faces.

“ Shall I fasten up the gate ? ” asked Charlie, in a would-be careless tone.

“ No, no ; I don't think it is necessary. We shall be going back in a few minutes, and nobody is likely to get in. ”

“ Well, I—I thought I heard footsteps behind us in the avenue just now, ” admitted the young fellow reluctantly. “ I looked round, and I didn't see anybody, but—— ”

“ It may be the gardener himself, ” said the doctor. “ Anyhow, to tell you the truth, I shall feel more comfortable if we have a clear way out of this place before us, with no bolts or bars to hinder our progress. ”

“ So shall I, ” said Charlie briefly.

Both men, indeed, began to feel the gloomy influence of the long-neglected place. There was no proper path from the gardener's lodge to the house, which stood dark and square against the cloudy night sky. It was so dark under the trees, thinly-leaved though these now were, that the two men could not even see to choose their way, but stumbled on as best they could through the rank and straggling vegetation, thistle and holly, long grass and broken-down holly-hock, which a thousand trailing weeds had bound into a compact and treacherous mass.

“ Seems a pity to have abandoned a nice place like this, and let it get into such a state, doesn't it ? ” said the doctor, recovering himself as his foot slipped on a heap of wet, decaying leaves.

“ Ye—es, ” said Charlie dubiously. “ If it was abandoned ! ”

“ Oh, ho ! ” cried the doctor. “ You don't think it was quite as deserted as people thought, then ? ”

“ I know,” answered Charlie, “ that when Arthur and I were small boys we used to throw stones over the wall, and that one day they were thrown back. And the gardener was not in the grounds, for we met him on our way home.”

“ And you never tried to get in and solve the mystery ? ”

“ Well, we often *talked* about doing so, and decided exactly what we should do if we came across the mysterious thrower of the stones. But the long and the short of it is that we were afraid. To tell you the truth, I feel afraid now. I don't know whether it is a bit of my childish fright haunting me, but I could swear, every now and then, that I heard some one moving alongside of us. There, there, to the left ; didn't you hear ? It is somebody.”

“ I—I believe you're right,” said the doctor.

They stood still and listened. After a few seconds they both distinctly heard a crackling and rustling, too near to the earth to be caused by the wind.

“ Perhaps it's a dog,” suggested the doctor. And he whistled softly. The sound was answered from the road outside.

“ By Jove, there are two of them ! ” said the doctor softly. “ Perhaps this old place has become a meeting place for thieves.”

The suggestion seemed a not unlikely one. And the two gentlemen stood still a few moments longer to consider their next step. The doctor did not take long to make up his mind.

“ I shall go through with this business,” he said firmly. “ We came here to find out whether this Eley's story of his sister's death is true ; and I for one don't leave until I have satisfied myself that there has been no foul play here.”

“ Right you are, doctor.”

They pressed onward quickly to the left, towards a spot where they saw an opening free from trees. The undergrowth was thick here also ; they were on the borders of what had been a lawn. Between the two

gentlemen and the house there was now only a tangle of shrubbery, which had once been a wide rhododendron-bed. To the left of this bed there was an open door, leading into the house. As they were debating whether they should trust themselves inside the building at once, or do a little reconnoitring first, a man slipped by them at a little distance, and passed through the door, closing it after him.

“Did you see him?” asked Charlie in a whisper.

The doctor nodded. Then, struck by something in the young man’s tone, he asked:

“Do you know who it was? You seemed to recognise him.”

“I did,” answered Charlie. “But don’t ask me any more, for I’m bound by my word not to tell you.”

The doctor looked at him curiously.

“Perhaps you can also tell,” he said in a low voice, “who that other man is whom I can just see under the trees?”

Charlie turned, and they both watched for a short space in silence—keeping perfectly still—the movements of a figure under the trees they had left, who seemed to be watching them in his turn.

Suddenly the door creaked, and the man who had gone into the house came out again. He was carrying a light, which, however, the wind at once extinguished. He stood in a listening attitude for some moments, during which the doctor, and Charlie, and the third watcher kept perfectly quiet. Then, in a voice which sounded hoarse and broken, as if with some strong emotion, he cried out:

“Catherine, where are you?”

“Catherine is Mrs. Durrant’s Christian name,” whispered Charlie to the doctor.

The man at the door seemed to catch the sound of this whisper, for they could just see that he turned his head in their direction. As they kept very quiet, however, he presently stepped out hesitatingly, and began searching about on the ground, as if he had lost something. As he did so he came within nearer view of the doctor’s watchful eyes.

“By Jove,” whispered the doctor in great excitement, “it is Captain Ryder!”

The exclamation was made under his breath, and did not reach the ears of the searching man, who began to peer about among the rhododendron-bushes, muttering to himself as he did so. Suddenly he drew himself erect, and threw up his arms with a cry. Then he plunged among the shrubs and disappeared altogether for a few seconds, uttering hoarse lamentations the while. At last his hearers managed to catch a few words in the midst of his incoherent wailings.

“Catherine, Catherine,” he cried, “wake up, look up, speak to me! What did I do? What was it? I can’t remember. I didn’t mean to hurt you; I am sure I never meant to hurt you. Look up, look up!”

Then, with a long moan, he drew himself up again.

“Dead, dead, dead!” he muttered, clasping his hands above his head with an insane, meaningless gesture. “Dead, dead! Of course, I killed her! I remember—yes, I remember.”

With a wild laugh he scrambled back into the path, and immediately broke out into violent sobbing.

The doctor and his companion looked from the madman to each other in dismay.

“What are we to do, doctor?” asked the younger man.

But Dr. Blundell had already moved forward; in another moment he had reached the rhododendrons, and was forcing his way through them. At the same instant, the half-seen figure of the third watcher appeared beside him, and the doctor and Charlie uttered exclamations of astonishment and horror. For the light of a bull’s-eye lantern, thrown suddenly on to the ground among the shrubs by the unknown watcher, disclosed the mangled body of the dead woman at their feet.

“The police!” exclaimed Charlie.

“Yes,” said the constable, who appeared to be more delighted with his own acumen than shocked by the

discovery, "I thought there was something up when I see you two gentlemen stopping in front of the house, so I follered you. And after you'd come in, I see this here gent slip in after you, so I watched, and I see what you see."

He had laid his hand on the arm of the madman, who seemed utterly cowed, and remained motionless in the centre of the group.

"You'll have to come along o' me, sir, please," continued the constable, examining the madman scrutinizingly by the light of his bull's-eye. "And you—oh, Dr. Blundell, beg pardon, sir, I didn't see it was you—would you mind coming to the station, sir; and you, sir," turning to Charlie, "just to say what you know about this business?"

Both the doctor and his companion, whom the policeman did not know, assented very unwillingly, being burdened by the exceedingly unpleasant duty of giving evidence which would bring disgrace and ruin upon a family with which they were intimate. Dr. Blundell turned to the unhappy madman, and spoke in a voice which betrayed the deepest distress:

"I regret most bitterly that I should be in this position——"

He was interrupted by a hoarse, dreary laugh from the unfortunate man, who still stood inert and motionless, and seemed to have lost all interest in the matter in hand. The policeman, glancing at him, and seeing him so passive and submissive, made a step forward and gave another look at the body, which, however, he did not recognise. While he was stooping over the dead woman, he suddenly felt himself flung on his face among the shrubs; and when he recovered his equilibrium, which he did very promptly, it was to find that his prisoner had escaped. By the aid of his lantern, he discovered the retreating form of the madman, as the latter made for the door in the wall; and, plunging into the tangled undergrowth, the constable gave chase, calling rather sharply upon the two bystanders to help him.

Now, the doctor and Charlie had both witnessed the blow by which the madman had thrown the policeman down; and, feeling that they had laid themselves open to suspicion by their remissness in neglecting to seize him, they now felt bound to make, at least, a great show of ardour in joining in pursuit. But it being clear to both that the constable had not known or recognised the offender, they secretly hoped that the latter would manage to outstrip them, and, by reaching some place of concealment, save himself from capture, and them from the most awkward predicament in which they had ever been placed.

The constable, however, was nimble of foot, and though he did not at first gain ground on his prey, he kept it in sight. Out at the gate they all went, like hare and hounds, all silent, all doing their best in the life and death chase, the wind now blowing keen in their faces, now following and aiding them, according to the direction they took as the madman led. The rain still fell lightly, but they did not feel it. Strung up to a pitch of high anxiety, Charlie and the doctor soon found that the hunted man was heading for The Grange.

Avoiding the highroad, and taking many a short-cut over fields and waste places, which showed him to be thoroughly familiar with the neighbourhood, the madman came, in an incredibly short time, to a small private door in the wall of The Grange garden. His pursuers, being not far behind, saw him enter, and the doctor and Charlie stopped short.

“Mrs. Ryder!” gasped out the younger man, out of breath. “This will frighten her to death!”

Then they ran on again, but more slowly, and passed in their turn into The Grange garden.

In the meantime the hunted man had made a short-cut through the grounds to the house, and tried the garden door outside the study. It was fastened. He saw, however, that there was a light in the study, and knocked sharply upon the window.

Nanny was sitting at the table inside, with her

head upon her hands. The nurse sent by Dr. Blundell had arrived, and had taken Valentine upstairs to one of the spare bedrooms. On hearing the tapping on the pane, Nanny started up and opened the shutters. In the darkness outside she saw the wild, haggard face of Ralph Ryder.

“Open, open ! For Heaven’s sake, let me in !”

CHAPTER XXII.

ON first seeing the white face, hearing the hoarse voice, Nanny could not repress a cry. The next moment, however, she opened the window. Ralph Ryder instantly climbed over the ledge, and stood before her in the room.

“Hush!” he said, “hush! They are after me—the police! Three of them. They are in the grounds; they are coming here. You must hide me—hide me!”

Nanny was perplexed by his astuteness, for he turned at once and closed the shutters.

“They will search the house. Where will you put me?” he asked.

Already, indeed, both he and Nanny heard sounds in the garden, which told them that the pursuers must be near. There was no time to lose. An inspiration came to her. Dashing across the room to the other window, she opened the shutters, and then the window itself. She could hear a rough man’s voice—that of the constable—calling to his companions to ‘Come on,’ and directing one of them to watch the gate. Then she bade Ralph get out of this window, telling him not to speak, but to obey her directions as quickly as he could, and he would be safe. She then extinguished the lamp, leaving no light in the room but the dying embers of the fire, and in her turn jumped out of the window. The hunted man, hearing the voices of his pursuers, was trembling with fear, and called to her piteously to “Make haste, make haste!”

There was a cellar under the study, before the window of which was a small underground window, the area in front of which was fenced in at the top by a grating. It was this grating which had given

way on the occasion of the accident to Captain Ryder. Quick as thought, Nanny went down on her knees on the ivy-covered earth, raised the grating, and signed to Ralph to descend. He did so without a moment's hesitation, and she replaced the grating.

"You will be quite safe there for the present," she said. "And as soon as I dare, I will come back and let you out."

He made no answer ; and Nanny, hearing a knock at the front door, sprang back into the study, shut the window and the shutters, and ran upstairs to change her dress, the front of which was soiled with the earth on which she had knelt. To wash the dirt from her hands, to fling on a dressing-gown, and to go down to the door was the work of very few seconds, so few that the policeman's knock had been only once repeated when she drew back the bolt, let fall the chain, turned the key, and opened the door a very little way.

"Who is it?" she asked, in a tone of great surprise.

"Very sorry to disturb you, ma'am," panted the constable, out of breath with his run ; "but we're after a murderer, and we must ask your leave to come in."

"A murderer!" echoed Nanny, who had not, indeed, to feign horror at his words.

She took care at the same time to throw the door wide open. The constable's whistle had summoned two more policemen, who stood behind their comrade.

"Who is it?" she went on for the manner of the man's announcement suggested a hope that he was ignorant of the name of the criminal.

"I don't know, ma'am," was the reassuring answer. "But I had a good look at him, and I should know him anywhere. He ran up to this house. How many gates out of these grounds are there, ma'am?"

"Three," answered Nanny, who saw that in an appearance of great candour lay her best chance of deceiving the police. "The principal one, a small door in the wall there," and she indicated the direction

of the door by which the men had entered; "and another small one to the north, opening on the green."

"Thank you, ma'am. That's all right, then.— Bealby," he went on, turning to one of his two comrades, "you go to the north door, and look out. The doctor and the other gentleman are watching the two other gates, so we've got him. And now, ma'am, with your permission, we must search the house."

"The house! Certainly you can search, if you like. But how could he have got in?"

"Don't know, I'm sure, ma'am," said the policeman cautiously. "But, you see, I myself *heard a window open and shut*, though I wasn't near enough to tell which window. But it looks as if some one about was 'in the know,' don't it?"

"It is very extraordinary," said Nanny. "But I am quite sure you will not find the man here, for we always fasten the shutters at night."

The two constables then proceeded to make an exhaustive search throughout the house, even examining every corner and cupboard in the room where Valentine lay ill. Nanny felt no great concern during this proceeding: the question which troubled her was how to get the hunted man out of his hiding-place and into a nook of safety after the constables' departure. Her fears began, nevertheless, to rise, when she found that the men insisted on the opening of a door in the servants' quarters, which led to the underground cellars. She had not contemplated the possibility of their search being so thorough as this; and having made her one objection that she had not got the key, which they met with the rejoinder that they could force the lock, she dared say no more.

So the lock was forced; and Nanny, with a loudly beating heart, followed the men down the narrow stone staircase into the cellars. They were not very extensive, unfortunately, these underground regions; and after glancing into the wine-cellar, the key of which had been left in the lock, they entered the waste place which lay underneath the study.

If they would only keep away from the window ! Nanny in the background with a light in her hand, talked volubly in the attempt to divert their attention. It seemed to the anxious woman that they had some suspicion of this corner of the house, for they became slower and more careful than ever in their search. The heaps of damp lumber lying in the old room they peered about, they dived into ; not a corner was left out. Step by step, going cautiously along, they reached the window. Nanny's heart stood still. Snatching the candle from his comrade's hand, the man who had been spokesman throughout the affair peered out, pressing his face close to the glass. Then he threw up the window, and felt with his hand round the area-walls.

If the man had turned to glance at young Mrs. Ryder at that moment, her looks would have betrayed her guilty knowledge. White, trembling, with staring eyes and quick-coming breath, Nanny bent forward, waiting for a shout of triumph or a groan of despair.

But she heard neither.

Slowly the policeman drew in his head, shut down the window, and gave a final keen glance round the room.

“Now, I could have sworn it was to this end of the house he came,” he muttered in a bewildered and disappointed tone ; “and it would be just the place to make for, too—about the only window without bars or shutters, I suppose.”

“But there is a grating outside, above—at least, I think so,” said Nanny, leading the way out.

She was perplexed and desperately anxious. Where had Ralph gone to ? How could she have been so silly as to depend on the patience and prudence of a man mentally afflicted ? He must have grown tired of waiting and have left his hiding-place, in which case he would inevitably be arrested while wandering about the grounds or trying to escape through one or other of the well-guarded gates. For the gaps in the

old-fashioned high wall, which shut in the grounds as carefully as if the house had been a convent, had been repaired, and to climb it was now impossible.

“You must have been mistaken about the window,” she said, as she and the two policemen reached the hall.

The man shook his head sullenly and obstinately.

“Can’t say yet, ma’am,” he said shortly and, as it seemed to her, suspiciously. “But, anyhow, he won’t get through the gates. We’ll have a regular cordon round the place before I’m an hour older, and we’ll starve him out like a rat in a hole.”

Nanny’s heart sank. She thought that, in all probability, Ralph was even now in custody at one or other of the gates—arrested in a vague attempt at escape. Even the gentlemen whom the constable had mentioned, without giving their names, as being stationed at two of the gates, would not dare to connive at the escape of a man accused of murder.

“I’ll go as far as the gates with you!” cried Nanny suddenly, as the men were on the point of leaving the house. “I should like to know whether he’s been caught.”

She took the great front door key, locked the door, and ran down the steps after the policemen, who were making their way cautiously, hunting, searching at every step, towards the door in the wall by which they had entered. A subdued hubbub of voices met their ears as they drew near. Had they caught him already? poor Nanny asked herself. On reaching the door, however, they found that the voices were those of Dr. Blundell and of another policeman, whom his comrade’s whistle had attracted. No one had passed out by this gate, so Nanny, who kept in the background, not wishing to be seen by the doctor, heard them say.

Then she and the two constables passed on to the principal gates, which were guarded by Charlie Cambridge. No one had passed out by this way either.

There remained the north gate, which was in charge

of a policeman whom Nanny knew by sight. This being the entrance farthest from that by which he had come into the grounds, would be, she feared, the one Ralph would choose for an attempt to pass out. She hung back as the two constables approached their comrade and asked if he had seen anyone. The answer made Nanny's heart beat madly with mingled joy and terror.

"Nobody's been by but Captain Ryder himself. He went out about ten minutes ago," said the policeman, who knew the master of The Grange, but had heard nothing about his reputed absence from home.

The constable who had found Ralph Ryder by the body of the murdered woman, being a Bicton man, did not know the Brent people, and had no suspicion of the identity of the murderer with the head of the Ryder family. The madman, with the strong instinct of self-preservation which he had already shown, had passed out boldly as if in search of the criminal. The policemen consulted together about details of the watch which was to be kept, without a suspicion that they had been tricked.

As for Nanny, she returned to the house in a state of bewilderment at the cunning which Ralph had displayed. It seemed to point to his having recovered the full use of his mental powers, a contingency which the poor child regarded with dread rather than with hope. For if his return to sanity were to involve not only forgetfulness of the crime he had committed, but the re-awakening of his love for herself, the difficulties before her would increase tenfold with the hideous explanations which would have to be made to him. Through all her recent troubles it had been Nanny's small consolation that his affection for herself was quite dead. In his madness it was only "Ellen" whom he remembered.

In the meantime, where could he have gone? And what chance was there of his keeping out of the clutches of the police much longer?

It was with a shock of surprise that Nanny, on un-

locking the front door to let herself in, came face to face with Meg. Not one word of awkward questioning did that young woman, grown prudent by reason of her affection, utter to her sister. She only hurried her to her room, so that Nanny might quickly change her wet shoes; and divining, on very slight suggestions, that young Mrs. Ryder did not wish to meet Dr. Blundell, Meg interviewed that gentleman herself next day, when he called to see Valentine.

Some words which the patient uttered, in the delirium of the fever which was upon him, increased the mystery of the tragedy at The White House. Discreet Mrs. Walters added a few more revelations, gathered in the same way. The result of this was that he became as anxious as Nanny or as Pickering to have an interview with old Mrs. Ryder, through whose ingenuity it was that the family secret had been kept so long. He intimated that wish to Meg, who was able to give him the old lady's present address.

"I am afraid," continued the doctor, with a side-long, interrogative glance, "that your sister was disturbed by some sort of 'row' there was in the neighbourhood last night."

"I shouldn't wonder, doctor," said Meg demurely. "To have a man-hunt going on in your house, and a cordon of police round it, is a little upsetting—until you're used to it."

"Oh, oh! So you are in the secret!"

"Only so far as painstaking eavesdropping can make me."

"And what have you learnt?"

"Never to marry a man whom you haven't known from your cradle, and then not unless you have satisfied yourself that all his people, for three generations, have been Sunday-school teachers and regular communicants."

The doctor laughed, but Meg had tears in her eyes: she only spoke jestingly to cover the bitterness which was in her heart. The doctor grew grave again immediately.

“Your sister has not taken you into her confidence at all, has she?” he asked.

“No. The poor child is too proud to own that she has made a mistake.”

“I suppose you never heard any suggestion as to there being insanity in the family?” asked the doctor.

“No.”

“Yet my question does not surprise you?”

“It would have done before last night, when I heard what sounded like a madman’s laugh as I came up the avenue.”

“And you have some idea who the madman is?”

“I would rather not answer that question yet.”

The doctor and the young girl exchanged glances of intelligence; and the doctor went away with the warning that young Mrs. Ryder needed as much care as the fever-patient.

Nanny remained in the house all that day, keeping as much by herself as possible, an inclination which Meg thought it best not to thwart. There could be little doubt that The Grange and its grounds were still being watched by the police, and Nanny thought it very likely that she might be followed if she went out, so that any attempt on her part to search for Ralph would bring him into danger. Towards evening, the parlour-maid came to Nanny, suffering like the rest of the household from panic, the result of the rumour that a murder had been committed in the neighbourhood, and that the murderer had been seen in The Grange grounds.

“If you please, ma’am, Pickering wishes to know if he can see you for a few moments.”

“Show him into the study,” said Nanny, and a minute later she hurried down to see him.

The old man looked haggard and anxious.

“You know,” began Nanny in a low voice, “that the body has been found?”

The old man assented, and she went on:

“Have they any idea yet who did it?”

“Not the slightest, ma’am,” he replied promptly.

Nanny heaved a sigh of relief.

“Did you see old Mrs. Ryder?” was her next question.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And—Lady Ellen?”

Pickering hesitated. At last he admitted, with his eyes on the ground, that he had.

“Together?” asked Nanny sharply.

Yes, ma’am. And you can see them together, too, if you will go round to the George Hotel in the High Street. And if I may make so bold to advise you, ma’am, insist upon knowing everything. I’ve said plain enough as how you ought to be told, and as how if you wasn’t told I’d tell you everything myself.”

For a few minutes Nanny was dumb with excitement at the thought of the interview she would have to go through. Then she said in a whisper:

“You know he has escaped?” Pickering signified assent. “Can you guess where he has gone?”

“He is at my cottage,” answered the old gardener in the lowest of whispers. Nanny started. He went on: “Don’t be frightened, ma’am. It’s the safest place he could choose. And he knows that, for he’s quite himself again. And when he’s had a shave, and his hair cut, and been smartened up, he’ll look as handsome a gentleman as ever; and the policeman who saw him by the body, not knowing who he was, will never recognise him for the wild figure he must have looked then.”

Nanny was trembling with excitement.

“At your cottage!” she repeated slowly. “Surely, surely he is not safe there!”

“Yes, ma’am, he is; you needn’t trouble about that. The police are searching the house and grounds. They are ferreting out what they can for the inquest, which is put off till the day after to-morrow, so as they may get what evidence they can first. So my place is just the last where they’d look. I have a bit of a cellar, too, where he can go if we’re

hard pressed. It would be a shame for him to be caught now, after escaping all these years ! ”

“ But what is to become of him ? ” faltered Nanny.

“ Well, I think, ma’am, you’d better try to persuade the old lady herself to take charge of him. ”

“ Old Mrs. Ryder ? ”

“ Yes, ma’am. It’s only fair she should, after all. And you know yourself, ma’am, there’s nothing in the world to fear from him when the fit’s off him. ”

“ I will see Mrs. Ryder, ” said Nanny, with an impulse of new energy. “ You say she is at the George Hotel ? I will go at once. ”

Dismissing the old man, she ran upstairs and hurriedly dressed for her walk. She passed Meg on the stairs as she came down, but, as she gave no explanation of her movements, her sister asked no questions.

It was five o’clock when Nanny reached The Grange gates. A thick fog had brought on the night prematurely, and, as she could not see half a dozen yards in front of her, it was some time before she reached the High Street, where the little hotel was. On asking for Mrs. Ryder, Nanny was told that “ the ladies were out. ” She thought this was probably untrue, but, after inquiring which were the rooms occupied by Mrs. Ryder, she went away, saying that she would call again. Crossing the street in front of the hotel, Nanny then ascertained that the rooms indicated as Mrs. Ryder’s were lighted up, and that there were figures moving about in them. She could not doubt that they were those of Mrs. Ryder and of this Lady Ellen, who had been so carefully kept out of her way. If she could once come face to face with the latter, Nanny felt that the mystery about her would dissolve.

Rendered reckless by the disclosures of the last few days, Nanny decided, on the impulse of the moment, to brave her mother-in-law, and to have an interview with the concealed Lady Ellen with her will or against it. Recrossing the road, she slipped in

through the hotel door, passed through the quiet and still unlighted hall, and up the stairs. On the landing she stopped, hearing women's voices in conversation, and recognising one as that of her mother-in-law. Stepping quickly to the door of the room whence the voices came, Nanny knocked softly on the panel.

There was a hush in the talk, and Nanny heard the sound of women's dresses brushing quickly against the furniture, and the soft closing of a door. Then old Mrs. Ryder let Nanny in. On seeing who her visitor was, she showed no surprise, but some confusion and annoyance. Nanny passed her, without waiting for an invitation to enter.

No one was in the room but old Mrs. Ryder.

Seeing that there were folding-doors leading into another apartment, Nanny, who had given her mother-in-law only the curtest and coldest of greetings, proceeded to cross the room quickly in that direction. Old Mrs. Ryder, with a sort of terror in her face, interposed her small person between the folding-doors and the tall form of her visitor, who seemed to have acquired an unwonted dignity during the days in which she had had to struggle alone with misfortune.

"What—what is the matter, Antonia?" asked the little old lady in an agitated voice. "What do you want, my dear?"

"I want to see Lady Ellen, whom you have kept out of my way so carefully," said Nanny.

And avoiding, by a rapid spring on one side, the little pleading yellow hands, Nanny ran lightly across the intervening space and threw open the folding-doors.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE fog, which was thick out of doors, had penetrated into the hotel bedroom, filling it with a murky darkness which quite overpowered the feeble illumination of a couple of candles on the dressing-table. As Nanny burst open the door, a woman, who had been standing by it, holding the handle in an attempt to keep it closed, sprang back into the middle of the bedroom as if afraid of personal violence on the part of the intruder. Nanny, with a few rapid steps, came up to her and examined the face of the shrinking woman with eager scrutiny.

"Don't be afraid," she said coldly, "I am not going to hurt you. But you must answer my question: Are you Lady Ellen Ryder?"

"No—o," answered the woman in a trembling voice.

"Did you ever go through a ceremony of marriage with Captain Ralph Ryder?"

"No! Oh, no, no! I don't know anything about him—I don't indeed! Ask Mrs. Ryder."

And she appealed helplessly to the little old lady, who was now standing by Nanny's side, her face wearing the scheming, calculating expression which her unhappy daughter-in-law knew so well.

"It is of no use to ask Mrs. Ryder, for I want to hear the truth," said Nanny bitterly.

"Well, I don't know anything about it. Do, do take her away!"

She turned appealingly to the old lady, who had watched this interview with bright, sharp eyes, and who now turned to the intruder with a little laugh.

"Are you satisfied?" she asked.

“Of course I am not.”

“Will you come and hear what I have to say?”

Nanny hesitated, and, turning again towards the other woman, examined carefully every detail of her appearance, in order that she might retain a faithful impression on her memory. What she saw was a tall, thin woman, of middle age, very plainly dressed, with a faded complexion, light eyes, colourless hair, and no trace of former good looks. Could this be indeed the brilliant, heartless Lady Ellen who had broken her husband's heart, and driven him to insanity by her levity and coldness? The only explanation which seemed possible to Nanny was that remorse had at last turned the woman's own brain, and reduced her to a helpless shadow of her former self, thus making her an easy prey to old Mrs. Ryder's strong will.

Perplexed and agitated, Nanny, with a last look at the shrinking woman, followed her mother-in-law into the outer room. The door closed, the younger woman faced the elder with sudden passion.

“Why can't you be straightforward with me? Why can't you tell me the truth?” she cried, in a vibrating voice. “Why must you always torment me with unnecessary little mysteries? Can't you see that, since I have had the misfortune to enter your family, I am bound to keep its secrets?”

“Misfortune!” echoed the old lady haughtily. “You should not have been in such a hurry to get married. You seem to forget that I did my best to prevent it.”

This was true. Nanny, overwrought and despairing, felt that the tears were gathering in her eyes.

“Well,” she said, in a low voice, “if I was foolish in marrying a man I knew very little about, at least I have had my punishment. You have not tried to make it any lighter. Your *protégé*, Valentine Eley, is at The Grange. You had better go there. Your staying here will only make people talk.”

“I did not know whether you would care to receive

me there," said Mrs. Ryder, in a tone in which a little compunction, a little shame, might have been noted.

Nanny drew herself up with a sudden impulse of indignation.

"No, indeed. I would never again receive you in any home of mine. You have treated me too ungenerously. I suggested your going to The Grange because it is not my home any longer."

"Not your home! What do you mean? Where are you going?"

"That," said Nanny coldly, "is my affair."

"But you have no right to go away like that. I am surprised that a well-brought-up woman like you should think you can neglect your duty as soon as misfortune touches you!" cried old Mrs. Ryder, in much agitation. "Is that how you keep the vows of a wife?"

"But I am not your son's wife."

"You *are* my son's wife. I swear it."

"Then who is the woman in the next room? Who is Lady Ellen?"

"The lady in the next room is my companion. Lady Ellen is——" She stopped, and seemed to debate with herself whether she should be straightforward for once. But the habits of a lifetime were too strong, and she finished at last by saying petulantly: "I know nothing about Lady Ellen."

Nanny shrugged her shoulders and walked to the door. She saw that she was only wasting her time with the prevaricating old lady, to whom the excitement of weaving a web of irritating little mysteries filled the place which religion and active philanthropy occupy in the minds of other elderly women. Going out of the room and down the stairs without another moment's delay, Nanny was on the doorstep when, having followed with an activity which a girl of eighteen could not have exceeded, her mother-in-law detained her with a strong grip.

"Wait, wait," she said in a rapid whisper. "Do

nothing rash or hasty, I beg you, I implore you ! Listen. I know my son better than you do. — Listen, listen.” For Nanny moved impatiently, anxious to get away. “Only wait quietly till Dan’s return——”

“Return ! No. That is just what I cannot wait for,” burst out Nanny passionately. “That is just why I am going away as quickly as I can. It is of no use trying to deceive me. I know the truth from Pickering. I am tied to a homicidal lunatic who had a wife living when he married me. I know he will return home cured and ignorant of what he has done. But do you think I can forget it ? Forget what I saw in the bricked-up room ? Forget the dying cry of the woman he murdered ? If he were my husband, I would stay—in spite of everything. But he is the husband of Lady Ellen ; it is her duty, not mine.”

She had stood quite still while she poured these words fiercely, passionately, into the ears of the old lady. But when she had finished, without giving the latter a chance of replying, she wrenched her arm from the little claw-like hand, and disappeared quickly into the fog.

The atmosphere was so thick that Nanny, who had never been inside the hotel before, forgot that she had come out by the side door ; and, imagining herself to be in the High Street, she turned to the left and ran straight on. She was too much agitated to find out her mistake ; she could see the lights glaring in the shops on either side, she could hear the shouts of men in charge of carts, some of whom got down and led their horses. Then the shops ended, sooner than she had expected, and it flashed through her mind that she must have come much faster than she had thought. The hill, which came next, did not seem as steep as usual. Still she ran on, and, at the first turning, turned to the left, meaning to take a back street past the station, where there were shops, the lights of which would guide her.

Instead of reaching these shops, however, Nanny found herself, after passing three or four blocks of

houses, in an open road, with a hedge on each side. She stopped short, feeling rather frightened, knowing that she had lost her way, and having been too much occupied by her own thoughts to remember how this had come about. Therefore, not knowing that her very first step had been wrong, she imagined that she must be in the right direction, and walked straight on. But the hedges grew thinner and more straggling, until one broke off altogether, and there loomed before her suddenly the gaunt branches of a cluster of tall trees. She took a few steps more, and then her heart seemed to stand still with horror: she was close under the wall of the grounds of the White House.

This was the back wall of the plantation, she knew. By skirting it, she would reach an avenue which led, past Pickering's cottage, to the highroad. It was horrible to have to remain so long in the vicinity of the scene of the tragedy; but she dared not return by the way she had come, not being sure of the road. So she ran as fast as she could, reached the bend of the wall out of breath, and turned the corner so sharply that one foot came in contact with the fallen branch of a tree, which caused her to stumble and fall. On raising herself from the ground, Nanny discovered that she had hurt her ankle, the pain being so great as to reduce her pace to a limping walk. The road at this end of the avenue was very bad, being, indeed, a slough in wet weather and a succession of hard ruts in dry. It was now in the former condition; and as trees overhead and fog all around made a choice of path impossible, Nanny floundered on through the mud, occasionally putting out her hands to save herself from abrupt contact with the wall or the trunk of a tree.

She seemed to have gone a long way in this fashion, when suddenly she came upon the door in the wall which led into the grounds and to Pickering's cottage. The knowledge that she was near the place where Ralph was concealed filled her, upon the instant, with

a longing to see whether he was safe, to look on his face once more before she went away. The door was securely fastened on the inside, however, and she had no means of getting in. Nevertheless she lingered, and presently fancied that she caught a sound as of someone moving about on the other side of the high wall. She listened intently, keeping perfectly quiet herself, and presently she heard the sound repeated. These noises were so slight, so intermittent, that she conceived the idea that they must proceed from Ralph. There was no reason why Pickering should move about in this stealthy fashion; so that it could hardly be he, she said to herself. So strong did this belief grow, that she was on the point of calling to him softly by name, when suddenly she felt a hand placed over her mouth, and her person dragged rapidly away from the door. Her assailant had approached so quietly that his footsteps, even to her intently-listening ears, had been entirely inaudible. She began to struggle violently in the endeavour to free herself, when she perceived by the cuff of his coat that it was a policeman who had seized her; guessing that he was on the track of the fugitive, therefore, she ceased both to struggle and to attempt to cry out. At the same moment the policeman, having taken her some yards away from the door, spoke in a low whisper.

“ Beg pardon, ma’am, but I have orders to watch this place. I hear something going on inside, and if you was to cry out or fumble at the door, it would put ’em on the look-out at once. Asking your pardon, ma’am, and sorry if I’ve hurt you,” ended the man, who did not recognize Nanny as the mistress of The Grange.

As they were standing now, the policeman had his back to the door, while Nanny could see it over his shoulder. Perceiving that the door opened a little, she hastened to enter into conversation with the policeman in order to keep his attention diverted.

“What are you watching the place for?” she asked. “Are not these the grounds of The White House?”

In spite of herself, she felt that her voice faltered on the last words. For even as she spoke, the door opened a little further, and Ralph Ryder himself peeped out.

“I thought,” went on Nanny incoherently, not caring what she said as long as she kept the policeman from looking behind him, “that the tramp who murdered the woman had been caught already!”

“No, miss,” said the man; he’s not been caught yet. And we ain’t so sure it’s “a tramp, neither.”

The suspicious dryness of the man’s tone might have alarmed Nanny at any other time. Now, however, all she cared for was that he should go on talking. For she saw, through the fog, Ralph’s face, haggard with anxiety and bearing the furtive look of a hunted man, as he stepped out among the trees of the lane and crossed the cart-track, becoming in a moment a mere shadow in the thick mist under the hedge.

“Perhaps, then,” suggested Nanny, “the poor woman threw herself out of the window she was found under.”

The man smiled, with a little supercilious, official smile, turning as he did so again towards the door. In an instant he was on the alert, perceiving the door to have been opened; and Nanny took advantage of his action, as he ran back, to limp along towards the highroad, for it was in the opposite direction that Ralph had gone. Having taken a few steps, she stopped, partly because the pain of her ankle was great, and partly because she feared the policeman might suspect her connivance at the escape. As she turned she saw the figure of Ralph gliding rapidly away among the trees until he was lost to sight in the fog. Then she returned to the open door, at which the policeman was standing with a perplexed expression.

“I think you’d better go away, ma’am,” said he

rather gruffly. "You've done enough mischief. Along o' my talking to you, it looks precious like as if he'd got away. That door was locked on the inside!"

He stared up and down the lane as he blew his whistle; and Nanny, glad not to be called upon for an explanation, mumbled some words of apology and then went on her way. She was very uneasy, guessing as she did that there must be more police on the look-out, from whom even the astuteness Ralph had so far shown might not enable him to escape. Of course he would go to The Grange, true to the instinct which always led him to his old home. But this dodging of the police from the one place to the other and back again could not long be practised with success. It seemed to Nanny to be a proof of the insanity from which Pickering declared him to have recovered.

The poor little lady was full of miserable doubt. If his mental balance was restored, she must leave him, for she was not his wife. And even if, through the machinations of his mother or Lady Ellen, he had believed himself free when he married her, yet there remained against him the fact that he had done her an unpardonable wrong in marrying her when he knew that he was subject to periodical attacks of insanity of the most violent kind. If, on the other hand, he had not yet recovered his reason, it would be her duty to remain with him until his personal safety was assured.

The avenue seemed miles long to Nanny, who could now find her way with difficulty in the darkness of a foggy night. At last she reached the high-road, and, turning to the left, passed the desolate-looking front of the White House on her way towards Bicton High Street. It was a slow and tedious walk. Nanny hoped that she might be overtaken on the way by a small railway omnibus, which ran between Bicton and the nearest town. But the only vehicles which passed her were two builder's carts, following

each other at a snail's pace, while the drivers, walking beside their horses, shouted alternately as a warning to approaching passengers.

When the first shops were reached, with their lighted windows, her journey became less hazardous. And here, on the opposite side of the way, she caught sight of something which gave her a faint suggestion of hope and comfort. It was Dr. Blundell's brougham, drawing up in front of the garden wall of one of the few remaining large houses of the town. She hobbled across the road, and intercepted the doctor as he was passing through the gate. He at once noticed her halting gait.

"Yes, I have hurt my ankle. But it is not that. I want to speak to you—I must!"

He saw the deep anxiety in her face, and his heart went out to her, knowing as he did something of the troubles which surrounded her. He helped her gently into his brougham, and went into the house, telling her that he should not be long gone. In a few minutes he returned, his visit over, and directed his coachman to drive to The Grange.

"Doctor," she began, as soon as they had started, "I heard to-day that you were present when the man was found beside Mrs. Durrant's body. Tell me—who was the man?"

"Well, really, Mrs. Ryder, it was quite dark, you know—and——"

"That is enough. I see. Then it was my husband?"

The doctor saw that the truth would give her no shock of surprise.

"I am afraid it was," he said in a low voice.

"You think he killed her?"

"His own words condemned him."

"You know that he is at times not responsible for his actions?"

As Dr. Blundell did not answer, she repeated the question.

"I am afraid I cannot agree with you," he said.

“Then why,” said Nanny, struggling successfully to repress her emotion, “should he kill her?”

Again the doctor hesitated to tell her exactly what he thought.

“You think she held some secret of his?”

“It is possible,” said the doctor guardedly.

Nanny laughed bitterly.

“Well, so she did,” she admitted. “Dr. Blundell, you know all the people about here; you know Mrs. Calverley. Has she never told you anything about me and—my—my—husband?”

“She has made certain suggestions which I particularly warned her not to repeat, as they were libellous.”

“But they were true, I think. This Lady Ellen, whom she must have told you about as having been my husband’s first wife, *is* alive.”

“Are you sure of this?”

“She is staying at the George Hotel here with Mrs. Ryder. I saw them to-day. But neither will admit or explain anything. They have nearly driven me mad.”

“What nonsense! They must explain. I know old Mrs. Ryder, and her little stories and mystifications. She is, I am sorry to say, a very dangerous old lady.”

He was looking out of the carriage-window on the left, and he suddenly pulled the check-string, and opened the door as the brougham stopped.

“Now,” said he, “you wait here while I have a ‘go-in’ with the old lady.”

He ran into the hotel, but quickly came out again, and, just calling out “Now to The Grange!” jumped into the brougham.

“The ladies have paid their bill and left,” he explained, “and the Boots says they directed the cabman to drive to The Grange.”

“Then I would rather not go back there. I don’t want to meet them again. They won’t tell me anything,” cried poor Nanny, shrinking back into her corner.

“They shall tell us something, or bundle out!” cried the doctor indignantly. “Look here, Mrs. Ryder; you are much too brave a lady to be cowed by an adventuress and an old woman. Take my word for it, this Lady Ellen will turn out to be no wife at all, and Captain Ryder’s little indiscretion—let us call it—will never be found out.”

“The murder?” cried Nanny in a hissing whisper.

“Say indiscretion. It sounds much better. If he is mad, or if he allows himself to be taken, I’ll eat my head.”

“But——”

“But listen. I went into the station just now to get a paper, a few minutes before you came up. And just outside I met your husband, Captain Ryder, walking towards The Grange with a cigar in his mouth.”

“Then he got past the police all right,” murmured Nanny below her breath.

“I could not help an exclamation of surprise,” went on the doctor; “but he took it very coolly. He said he had just come back from a yachting cruise, and asked if there was any news. I told him about the murder of Mrs. Durrant, and he affected not even to have heard of it, but suggested at once that the brother had done it. I felt, I must own, rather disgusted, and I came away. But I have not the slightest doubt that he will carry the thing off with a bold front, and that nobody but you and me and Charley Bambridge will ever know by whose hand the poor woman really came to her death.”

The brougham stopped at The Grange gates. The doctor got out, and helped Nanny to do so, and they passed through into the grounds together, she supported by his arm.

“There!” exclaimed the doctor in a whisper as they came in sight of the house, and heard Captain Ryder whistling softly to himself as he stood on the doorstep waiting for admittance. “Does that man look like a murderer going in fear of the police?”

CHAPTER XXV.

ON hearing her husband's voice, Nanny, still leaning on Dr. Blundell's arm, stopped short in the middle of the avenue.

"Doctor," she whispered, "I must go in alone. No one can help me in that explanation which he and I must have. I know it, I feel it, now that I hear his voice again. If—if I go away," and her voice faltered, and the tears began to come, "I will call on you to-morrow before I go. Thank you very, very much for what you have done."

"That is little enough; I wish I could have done more for you, Mrs. Ryder. But I think you are right to depend entirely on yourself if you can. At the same time, we mustn't forget this ankle of yours. I must see what is wrong with that before I leave you. That, however, won't take long."

By this time Captain Ryder had disappeared into the house; but, before shutting the door, the servant who had let him in perceived the doctor and her mistress, and notified their arrival. Nanny shrank back as her husband ran down the steps towards her. Captain Ryder, on seeing who her companion was, however, suppressed his emotion, and exchanged a cold greeting with the doctor.

"Mrs. Ryder has hurt her ankle, I fear," said Dr. Blundell.

"How did you do that, Nanny?" asked Captain Ryder, in a rather constrained voice.

He had already been sharp-sighted enough to notice that her greeting of himself was nervous and uneasy.

"It was in the fog—I turned my foot on a stone," she said. "It is nothing,—nothing indeed, Ralph."

He glanced at her quickly. Why did she not use his pet name? the look said. They all entered the house together, and Captain Ryder opened the door of the dining-room, which was the nearest apartment. Here Dr. Blundell examined the injured foot, assured himself that the sprain was not a very severe one, and applied a cold-water bandage to the ankle, giving directions for its renewal to Captain Ryder, who undertook to continue the treatment with his own hands.

The solicitude which Captain Ryder showed for his wife, the wistful, jealous tenderness with which he hung on the back of her chair, watching every movement of the doctor's hands in his anxious wish to become as deft as he, softened the latter a little towards him. But still it was with some constraint that the doctor made his farewell, shaking hands only with Mrs. Ryder.

Then Nanny was left alone, while her husband escorted Dr. Blundell to the door. Regardless of the injunction to keep her foot on the low arm-chair which had been brought forward for the purpose, she sprang up, and stood irresolute between the fire and the door, torn with conflicting impulses. On the one hand her heart, touched, melted, utterly subdued by the glimpse she had had of the old love which had been so dear to her, cried out that he was her husband, that he loved her, that nothing else in the world mattered at all to her. On the other hand, she knew absolutely that another woman, claiming to be his wife, was actually at that moment in the house, that he had deceived her, that he was a murderer. Should she stay, and have now with him that terrible, crucial interview which she so much dreaded? Or should she try to escape it, for the present at least, and, foregoing his caresses, forego also those terrible questions which she saw in his eyes, questions which demanded that the whole truth should be dragged out from her in her unwilling answers?

While she yet hesitated, the time for choice was

over. Captain Ryder's step sounded in the hall, his hand was on the door. With one rapid glance her eyes took in the whole scene around her. As if she had been looking at a picture, she saw the red fire reflected in the tiles of the hearth, the lamplight shining on the embossed paper, the ferns, the glittering glass on the white tablecloth. Then, with a throbbing heart, she felt Ralph's arms round her, and knew, without one look into his face, that her love was stronger than her own will.

"Ralph! My *husband!*" she panted out, between her set teeth, with such a wild impulse of passion that he seized her face in his hand and turned it towards the light with a look almost of fear.

"Child! My Nanny, you have been frightened—you have been ill! What is this change in you, my wife? If I had been away four years instead of four days, the change in you could not have been greater! Tell me, my darling, what is it?"

But Nanny could not answer. She was crying her very heart out on his breast. For a long time his utmost efforts to soothe her availed nothing. He made her sit down in the wide chair by the fire from which she had risen, and with loving whispers, gentle caresses, and soft reproaches for her tearful welcome, bade her confide in him the cause of this violent distress.

"Nanny, Nanny," he whispered with playful gravity, which only half concealed the deepest concern, "this is insubordination to your superior officer. I shall have to put you under arrest—I shall indeed, my dear—lest the disaffection should spread in the ranks."

"Oh, Dan, Dan," cried Nanny, finding a remnant of voice half choked by sobs, and clinging tightly to his arm, "take me away! Let us go away somewhere, at once, quite quietly, and forget. Take me, take me, or I shall die, Dan! Don't ask me why—don't ask me anything; only take me away."

"But, my darling, why is it? Won't you tell me why it is?"

"No, no. Don't let us have any questions—any explanations. If we don't go now, and slip out of the house at once, your mother will come in, and——"

"My mother!" interrupted Captain Ryder, in a harder voice, as he sprang up from the floor, on which he had been kneeling. "Is she here? She has been making mischief again, then, I suppose. It's very astonishing that no old lady can live without that occupation. Now, what has she been telling you?"

Nanny was alarmed by the alteration in him. All affection had gone out of his face and voice. He was looking down at her with a frown.

"It is nothing—nothing that she has said," faltered Nanny. "It is what she has not said, what she will not say. She has brought with her Lady Ellen."

"Lady Ellen!"

Nanny gazed up at him, full of passionate interest and anxiety. For, as he slowly repeated the name, he seemed to be searching in his mind for some half-forgotten recollections suggested by it.

"They are coming—they are coming in here!" cried Nanny in great excitement, as she rose and clasped her hands round one of his arms. "Tell them—no, tell *me*, Dan, that *I* am your wife!"

Before Captain Ryder could recover from the bewilderment into which her appeal evidently threw him, the door was opened by old Mrs. Ryder, who started back and abruptly broke off the remarks she was addressing to her companion.

"Ralph! Antonia!" she cried in surprise and confusion. "I—I thought you were in—I—I mean, I didn't know you were back, Ralph."

Her companion, less bold, had hastily retreated on catching sight of the occupants of the room. The old lady, however, recovered her self-possession almost immediately, and held out her arms towards her son, apparently not at all disturbed by the frown of anger and annoyance on his face.

"My dear boy," she said, with a side-glance at Nanny, whose tears had left very evident traces, "I

am indeed glad to see you back again. The little wife here told me you had appointed no day for your return, so that she did not know when to expect you. And such a fright as the poor child has had!" ran on the cunning old lady, retaining with one hand the fingers of her son, while she raised the other with an expression of horror. "Just think, my dear boy, a murder in the neighbourhood—in the grounds of The White House, too! Did she tell you about it?"

"No, but I have heard of it—Dr. Blundell told me," said Ralph, still rather icy, but carried away by the flowing stream of his mother's talk.

"Wasn't it shocking? The work of a poor maniac, who found his way to the grounds here, so that Nanny was disturbed by the police in the night! Now, what do you think of that?"

"I think the whole business wants inquiring into," said Ralph, without enthusiasm.

"I should think so, indeed," she assented warmly.

As she was speaking, Nanny, still holding her husband's arm, took a step forward.

"The lady who was with you," she said in a high, tremulous voice,—“where is she? Why didn't she come in?"

"Oh, she is only my companion. She did not want to intrude upon what she saw was a family meeting," said old Mrs. Ryder, with a sharp look.

"But it would have been more of a family meeting if she had come in, wouldn't it?" asked Nanny, in the same tone as before.

Her mother-in-law drew in her lips rather spitefully, but, before she had time to reply, Ralph spoke abruptly:

"Never mind her now. Let us have something to eat. I should like a little conversation with you presently, mother—after dinner."

The old lady agreed, but it was evident that his abrupt manner made her feel nervous. He turned at once from her to Nanny.

"My dear," he said, his voice altering at once, "I

think you had better not move, for the sake of your foot. We will excuse your dressing for dinner."

"But I must, my skirt is damp, I should feel uncomfortable like this," eagerly protested Nanny, who had reached the door.

She was afraid of his discovering, without preparation, the presence in the house of Valentine Eley, of whom he had always expressed a strong dislike. So, finding that she would not yield, Ralph made her lean on his arm, and led her slowly upstairs. She, meanwhile, was debating with herself how best to break to him the story of Valentine's coming. She was in a fever of doubt, of perplexity. At one moment Ralph's calmness of manner, and the answering emotions which his tenderness had awakened within her, almost persuaded her that her eyes and ears had deceived her, and that he was innocent of all the charges brought against him. An instant later, however, reason spoke again, and overwhelmed in its cold waters all the suggestions made by her affection. At last, overcome by her doubts, her fears, and her despair, she uttered a low cry, which pierced her husband's heart. He bent down over her solicitously, and began:

"My dearest, does it hurt you so badly? Am I going too fast?"

These words, however, were scarcely out of his mouth, when she felt that he was seized by a terrible shock, which communicated itself to her, and set her trembling violently. She looked up quickly into his face, and saw there an expression which in a moment destroyed the vague hopes which she had, in spite of her judgment, begun to allow herself to entertain. For it was the wild, helpless stare of the man to whom the air is haunted by phantoms, illusions of his own brain, the look of the face which had appeared to her at the study-window on the previous night.

"Oh, Ralph, Ralph," she whispered hoarsely, "what is it? What do you see?"

For answer he suddenly seized her head with his

right hand, and forced it down to the handrail of the banisters. She felt his breath hot against her ear as he said :

“Look—down there. What do you see? What do you see?”

Nanny could see nothing whatever. A ghastly fear had seized her lest, in the apparent return of his madness, he was about to make her the third victim of his homicidal mania. She did not cry out—indeed, she could not ; but she clung with all her might to the railing, crouching over it, and trying to form with her dry lips a prayer that he would spare her. Before she could regain command of her tongue, his grip suddenly relaxed, and he repeated his words in a calmer tone :

“What do you see, Nanny?”

Without another glance at him, she bent her head down over the banisters, and peered into the hall beneath obediently.

“I see nothing, Ralph,” she whispered tremulously. “What—what do you see?”

But at first he made no answer. She ventured, perceiving that he had grown calmer, to glance timidly at his face again. He looked bewildered, like a man who had just woke from a nightmare-haunted sleep.

“I see nothing either—now,” said he slowly. Then, seeing the alarmed expression on Nanny’s face, he tried to laugh the matter off. “I am tired and stupid, and as fanciful as a sick child,” he added. “I am afraid I frightened you, darling.”

Nanny affected to be reassured by his words, but she saw that he hung behind her, peering into the dark corners of the hall. When they reached the bedroom, he put her gently down into a chair, rang the bell for her maid, and went into the dressing-room. But Nanny heard him pass softly by the second door on to the landing, and go downstairs. She suddenly remembered that she had found no opportunity to tell him about Valentine’s being in the house. In the state of mind in which he now was, hovering as it

seemed between sanity and insanity, the danger attending a sudden discovery of that kind would be even greater than she had feared. She limped as far as the door, but on opening it found herself face to face with her maid, who detained her by offers of assistance, being in great distress at her mistress's lameness and at the terrible pallor of her face.

"I am quite well, Jane," said Nanny trying to smile. "The pain is not so great as you think, and I must go down to speak to Captain Ryder."

"Let me fetch him, ma'am!" cried the girl eagerly.

And her mistress was constrained to let her go on this errand. As soon as the girl had reached the bottom of the stairs, however, Nanny was out again in the gallery, wondering where Ralph could be, and what sort of greeting Jane would get from him. She was leaning on the balustrade, when she heard footsteps behind her, and before she could turn, there came a whisper close in her ear:

"I am afraid to meet Captain Ryder. What had I better do?"

Nanny could not repress a sharp cry. Stepping quickly back, she saw that the whisperer was Valentine himself, looking ill indeed, but considerably less infirm than he had seemed a few hours before. Meg and Mrs. Walters, the nurse, stood a little distance away, watching this interview with some apprehension.

"He would get up, ma'am," said the nurse, "as soon as I told him the Captain was about. There was no way of keeping him quiet. And he's not as bad as what he looks," she added, in a low voice, as she got closer to Nanny, while Meg uttered another remonstrance to the patient.

"Here he comes!" cried Valentine, in a voice of terror. "Where shall I go?"

"Back into your room!" cried Nanny, in a frenzy of fear lest the two men should meet.

She thought, as her blood seemed to run cold in her veins, that the sight of the brother of the woman he

had killed might excite Ralph to a fresh outbreak, and Valentine's hysterical utterances would only serve to exasperate him further.

Unluckily, Captain Ryder's ears, as he entered the hall below from one of the corridors, caught the sound of a man's voice, and being in a state of uneasy and restless suspicion, he ascended the stairs in a few bounds, and saw the door of the spare room occupied by Valentine close. There was just enough of conscious guilt in the faces of all three women to make him sure that something was being kept from him.

"Who went in there?" he asked sharply.

There was ever so slight a pause before Nanny tried to speak, but it was enough for Ralph.

"I heard a man's voice. Who was it?" he asked.

Then he very quietly crossed the gallery to the door, and was on the point of opening it when Nanny, hurrying like a hare to meet him, laid her cold fingers upon his hands.

"It is a man, Ralph," she said. "A man who is ill with a fever, brought on by exposure and—and grief. Listen! and I will tell you all about it."

The nurse had disappeared, afraid of a "scene," and discreetly anxious to have no part in it. Meg, in alarm for her sister, remained a little way off with hands clenched, ready to fly at Captain Ryder's throat if, in his mad anger, he should attempt to hurt Nanny. In the dead silence she heard the poor wife's laboured breath, as the latter tried to steady herself for her recital, and to choose the most persuasive words for it.

Before, however, she had done more than clear her throat in preparation, Ralph maintaining an awful silence, the door was burst open in their faces, and Valentine, with a hectic flush on his face, stood panting before them.

"It is I, Captain Ryder," he said, in a low, thick voice. He did not look like a man, Meg thought, watching him from the background. He looked like a frightened wild beast, seeking a way of escape from danger. "I've come here because it's upon the

people in this house that I have the greatest claim to compassion, on account of the death of my sister. I don't wish to say anything unpleasant, or to hurt anyone's feelings. But I must be helped, of course. And if *you* don't understand why, ask your mother; she is in the house, and she will uphold what I say. Ask her."

"I shall ask my mother nothing, answered Captain Ryder slowly, in the coldest, most decided of tones. "I shall ask you to remove yourself out of this house immediately."

"Ralph, Ralph, take care. He is ill. And—and take care!" sobbed out poor Nanny, who noted the menacing look in Valentine's eyes.

The young man laughed shrilly.

"Don't interfere on my account, Mrs. Ryder," said he in an ironical tone. "I can take my own part, and, what is more, I can get the law to back me up. I'm going, I'm going, Captain Ryder. Just let me have two minutes to put on my own clothes."

He disappeared into the room he had occupied, and husband and wife were left facing each other. Nanny tried to utter some feeble expostulations, but Ralph seemed not to hear. Meg, in the meantime, had slipped swiftly past them, and gone downstairs to summon old Mrs. Ryder. She found that lady in the drawing-room, with her bonnet and mantle on. Before Meg could declare her errand, the old lady, who had taken a strong dislike to one whose interference she feared, at once addressed her.

"You will be kind enough to tell my son and his wife," she began, with a glance at her mysterious companion, who was standing trembling behind her, "that I cannot remain in a house where——"

Meg nodded, and cut her short.

"Come upstairs," she said abruptly. "Your son is quarrelling with Valentine Eley. I don't know if you can do any good, but you can try."

But it was too late. The old lady, with a face blanched to a death-like whiteness, followed Meg into

the hall. They were just in time to hear Valentine's last words as, now safely out of Captain Ryder's reach, he ran across the hall to the front door.

"Yes, I'm going, I'm going," he cried, with another shrill laugh. "But you had better have kept me under your eye, for I shall go straight to the police-station, and if I don't get the distinguished Ralph Ryder locked up by to-morrow night my name isn't Valentine Eley."

Meg kept her eyes fixed upon the little old lady. At first the latter seemed turned to stone, but the noise made by the front door as Valentine slammed it behind him roused her into life and activity. She crossed the hall after him almost as quickly and lightly as a bird, and, following in his steps, disappeared into the darkness outside.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE cold night-air blew in through the front-door, which old Mrs. Ryder, in her pursuit of Valentine Eley, had left open behind her. Meg crossed the hall, shut the door, drew the bolts, and turned the key. Then she ran upstairs to the gallery.

Nanny and her husband were still there—the former sitting, in a scarcely more than half-conscious condition, on the ottoman under the window; while the latter stood some distance away, leaning over the balustrade. Meg felt afraid of him, as she glanced up and saw that the expression of his face was angry and hard. He did not seem to see her, or to hear his wife's voice whispering faintly to her.

“Come to your room, Nanny,” said her sister. “You are ill, dear, and you ought not to be sitting out here in the cold. Let me help you along; put your arm in mine. That's right.”

She glanced, as she spoke, towards Captain Ryder, thinking that these words would bring him to his wife's assistance. But he did not move. The two ladies, the one leaning on the other, passed close behind him, without his giving the slightest sign that he was conscious of their presence. Just as they reached the bedroom-door, Meg, turning with a last glance in his direction, saw him go slowly downstairs.

Jane, the maid, scurried quickly away from the keyhole when she heard the ladies approaching, and was discovered busy at the dressing-table when they came in. Her face, however, betrayed the intense interest with which she had listened to such scraps of the conversation in the gallery as had reached her ears.

“You won’t change your dress to-night, will you, Nanny?” asked Meg, glancing at a pretty frock of gray brocade with steel trimming which Jane had put out.

“Yes, yes, I will,” said Nanny, as, with a sudden change to feverish energy, she began to hurry Jane’s movements. “Go, go, Meg, and get ready for dinner. The bell will ring in a minute.”

Meg left the room, and met her sister a few minutes later on her way to the dining-room.

“Have you seen Ralph?” asked Nanny, looking about her rather anxiously.

“He went downstairs, dear, just as I opened the door of your room.”

At that moment the second dinner-bell rang. When they reached the drawing-room door, Nanny stopped.

“I know old Mrs. Ryder has gone,” she whispered. “Do you know,” she went on in a faltering voice, “whether the—the lady who was with her has gone too?”

Meg shook her head.

“I don’t know,” she said; “I didn’t see her go. But I don’t suppose she would stay without her friend.”

However, on entering the drawing-room, they saw the supposed Lady Ellen, in her walking-dress, sitting on a chair close to the door, with an expression of pathetically helpless anxiety on her face. She rose as they came in, and stood before them so nervously, so humbly, that she disarmed hostility.

“I am afraid you look upon me as an intruder, Mrs. Ryder,” she said in an apologetic tone. “But I am old Mrs. Ryder’s paid companion; I have to accompany her wherever she pleases. I am only waiting for her return to go away. And——” She hesitated a moment, and then added quickly. “And, indeed, I am not the person you suppose.”

“Yet you drew back just now, instead of meeting Captain Ryder.”

“Yes. But it was because old Mrs. Ryder did not wish me to meet him.”

“Would you have any objection to meeting him now?”

She shrank back.

“Mrs. Ryder would not like——” she began.

Nanny smiled incredulously, and turned to the door.

“Mrs. Ryder’s wishes have been respected too long,” she said coldly, as she left the room.

She supposed that she should find Ralph in his study, and proposed to bring him face to face with old Mrs. Ryder’s companion without delay. But when she opened the study door she forgot everything in dismay at the spectacle which greeted her eyes.

Crouching by the fire, like a dog which has been forgotten by its master, was Ralph Ryder: not the loving, tender husband of an hour ago, but the dull-eyed fugitive of the night before. As he looked up on her entrance, Nanny searched his countenance in vain for one spark of the devotion which had shone in his eyes, or even for a sign of the passionate anger he had shown towards Valentine. In vain; his face was as blank as a clean slate. With one short, uninterested glance at her, he resumed his gazing into the fire.

“Ralph,” said she timidly. He looked up again. “Dinner is ready. Won’t you come?”

He seemed surprised by these words. But he rose, and followed her submissively to the door. As she opened it, however, his confused mind began to work again, and, detaining her by a touch on the hand she had laid on the handle he said:

“I thought I heard Ellen’s voice. Is she here?”

Nanny’s breath came quickly.

“Yes,” she said, almost in a whisper, “I will take you to her.”

He followed her in silence until they reached the drawing-room, the door of which Nanny threw open. He entered with slow and hesitating steps, and cast a half-apprehensive glance around. But it travelled over both Meg and old Mrs. Ryder’s “companion,” and rested again on Nanny.

“Where is Ellen? You told me I should see her,” said he irritably.

Had she changed so much that he did not recognise her? Nanny asked herself as, advancing into the room, she addressed the shrinking stranger. The voice, which he had already recognised, would betray her again, Nanny thought.

“Captain Ryder wishes to speak to you, madam,” she said.

The stranger had drawn down her veil, and was sitting with her head turned away, as if anxious to escape observation. Thus challenged, however, she rose in desperation, pushed up her veil far enough to display her features, and said :

“It is not I to whom Captain Ryder wishes to speak. Are you satisfied now?”

Nanny was dumb with astonishment. For Ralph heard her words without excitement, and shook his head.

“No,” he said. “It is Ellen I want to see.”

And again his eyes roamed searchingly round the room. Nanny, pale and trembling, turned to the stranger.

“I beg your pardon,” she said, in a tone of contrite apology. “I—I have been deceived. But—I think—I begin—to understand.”

She could scarcely control her voice. Meg, afraid that her sister might faint, came to her side. But Nanny showed plenty of self-command.

“We are just going in to dinner,” she said to the unknown lady. “Will you do us the pleasure of dining with us, and excuse this hasty invitation?”

The lady hesitated for a few moments, and then said simply :

“If I were not so hungry, I would thank you and decline. But Mrs. Ryder has been in such a disturbed state all day that she has eaten nothing, so I have fared very little better. You will excuse my leaving you abruptly if she should return and want me, will you not?”

“Certainly,” said Nanny.

Courtesy now forced the latter to abstain from further questions to her guest, although the words she was longing to utter burned in her breast.

It was a sombre party that sat down to dinner in the soft glow of the shaded silver lamps. Even this light seemed too bright for the gloomy host, who turned down the lamps on each side of him, and sat with bent head in his place, eating little, and only looking up from time to time to cast a furtive and startled glance, not at his companions, but into the shadowy corners of the room, where the circle of light round the table did not penetrate. None of the ladies looked at him. Only the servants in attendance cast furtive, frightened looks at him, seeing that something was wrong. Nanny and Meg exerted themselves to keep up some sort of conversation, in which, however, the stranger joined but little, and Ralph not at all. As soon as desert was reached, however, and the departure of the servants relaxed a little, the general feeling of constraint, the perfunctory talk dwindled into silence. But Nanny dreaded to give the signal to move. The passion of fear within her as to what was to follow had grown to its height during the progress of the meal, for this gloomy, imbecile silence on Ralph's part confirmed every moment more strongly the fact that his madness had returned upon him.

But at last, glancing nervously at the other ladies, she arose and, as they passed to the door, touched Ralph lightly on the shoulder. He started violently, drew back his right hand, which had lain on the table, and glared up at her with an expression of so much fierceness that she was for the moment appalled and unable to speak. At last she said :

“Won't you come with us into the drawing-room?”

She dreaded leaving him alone with the wine, which she knew was a danger to him. He paused an instant, and then slowly rose without speaking. The other ladies had passed out of the room, but Meg,

apprehensive on her sister's account, lingered near the door. Nanny signed to her to go, but, as she did so, Meg uttered a horror-struck exclamation and stood transfixed, with her eyes upon Ralph, who walked quickly to the door.

"I am going to the study," said he briefly.

And without waiting for any rejoinder, he passed the ladies and left the room. As soon as they heard the study-door close, Meg turned to her sister.

"He has a knife," she whispered. "I saw him take one from the sideboard as you turned to look at me. Nanny, Nanny, this is dreadful! Let me go for Dr. Blundell."

Nanny assented by a movement of the head. She, too, knew they were in danger—a houseful of women shut up with a homicidal maniac.

"And don't you go near him while I'm gone. Be sure of that," went on Meg, as she ran for her hat and cloak.

To this injunction Nanny made no answer, for she had determined to make one more effort to regain that influence over him which she seemed so strangely to lose whenever his malady attacked him. As soon, therefore, as Meg was out of the house, she, having made her apologies to the unknown lady in the drawing-room, went to the study-door and knocked.

"Come in," cried a voice, so unlike Ralph's when in health and happiness that she was startled, and almost doubted who was within.

On opening the door, however, which she did somewhat timidly, she saw the handsome head of Ralph Ryder leaning in his hands, as if the weight of it was too heavy for his body to support. He looked up at her with a frown, and a glance almost of non-recognition.

"Can't you leave me alone?" he said. "What do you want?"

"Nothing, dear Ralph, but to know whether you can lend me a knife—a penknife—anything, to cut this piece of string?"

She had conceived this pretext for trying to get his weapon, and had provided herself with a twisted piece of string out of one of the drawers in the dining-room sideboard. He looked at the tangled cord in her trembling hands rather suspiciously.

“What do you want the string for?”

“To tie up a parcel. Do, dear, lend me a knife if you have one.”

Reluctantly he produced from his pocket a small table-knife, which Nanny took and thanked him for.

“Why!” she then exclaimed, with as much carelessness as she could assume, “what did you want with this? It is one of the table-knives. I will take it back to the dining-room.”

He said nothing, but Nanny saw that he glanced up at the trophy of yataghans, spears, and other weapons over the mantel-piece; in the centre of these were a cavalry-sword and a revolver. She hurried away with the knife, and took care to place it, with its fellows from the sideboard, in a place where he would not be likely to find them. Then she left the room, and stood where she could hear any noise in the study, waiting for her sister's return with the doctor.

At last there was a knock at the front door, and Nanny flew to open it. The doctor and Meg came in together, the former looking very grave, the latter much excited.

“Oh, thank Heaven you are safe, Nanny!” she whispered. “I have told the doctor everything that that man Eley said about sending the police, and about the knife and everything.”

“It will be a good thing if the police do come,” muttered the doctor.

“Oh, don't!” cried Nanny.

“My dear Mrs. Ryder, I beg your pardon. I didn't see how near you were,” cried Dr. Blundell, who had addressed his remark to Meg. “Oh, no, old Mrs. Ryder will keep that young man's mouth shut, never fear. But we must have another doctor

here to-morrow to examine Captain Ryder and to certify to his lunacy, and then get an order from a magistrate to put him into safe-keeping. You can see for yourself that, at present, the poor fellow is a danger to himself and to all around him."

They were all three close together, in a corner of the hall, talking in whispers. A wild, demoniacal laugh suddenly sent a shiver through them all. Looking in the direction whence the sound came, they saw Ralph Ryder, with his body bent forward in a half-crouching, listening attitude, nodding his head, and carefully hiding under his coat something which he held in his right hand.

"Shut him up, will you?" he said in a quavering voice. "Not again, not again!"

He went on muttering to himself in a lower and lower voice, and still staring at the group, he at last dropped into silence.

Then Nanny bravely sprang, in a few fleet steps, to his side, and spoke in kind and reassuring tones.

"Who talks of shutting you up?" she asked lightly. "Dr. Blundell has come to see you, because I thought you did not seem well. You are not well, now, are you?"

The unhappy man looked in a helpless, wavering manner from her to the doctor, and back again to her.

"I—I don't know. I—I am quite well, I think." But as the doctor took one step towards him, he suddenly drew himself erect, and again assumed a menacing expression. "I am not going to be examined by anyone," he said, fiercely. "Whether I am mad or sane is my business, and I'll put a bullet into any man who tries to make it his. Now, go back, you——"

Nanny interrupted him, clinging to his arm, as he advanced towards the doctor.

"But wait, wait Ralph. You know I have hurt my ankle, and Dr. Blundell is going to look at it before he goes. You don't mind that, do you?"

“Not if he keeps out of my way,” said Ralph, sullenly.

Dr. Blundell saw that it was useless for him to approach the maniac in his present mood, and he went with Nanny into the morning-room, while Ralph retreated to the study, and Meg remained by the front door.

“I have sent,” said the doctor in a low voice, as soon as the door was shut, “for young Bambridge to come round here. We may very likely have more to do with your unhappy husband to-night than one man can manage. And this young fellow is trustworthy, besides which he knows something about the affair already. I have set your sister to watch for him, and to let him in quietly.”

Even as they spoke, the door of the room was opened quietly by Meg, who led Charlie Bambridge into the room. He had, however, scarcely time to shake hands with Nanny before the prowling step of the maniac was heard in the hall. Quick as thought, Meg sprang up, pushed the doctor behind a large settee which stood across one corner of the room, and whispered to him to conceal himself there.

“If he comes in,” she hissed into his ear in a rapid whisper, “he will very likely calm down when he thinks you are gone. We will talk to him, and try to get him off his guard, so that you and Mr. Bambridge can secure him.”

With a piteous white face poor Nanny listened to and acquiesced in these arrangements, only begging them, in a quavering voice, “not to hurt him.” Then Charlie began to talk to Meg in a louder voice, and suddenly, after a little rattling at the door-handle, the maniac burst in. He was evidently by this time in a high state of excitement, and his right hand, thrust into the breast of his coat, twitched and trembled. His face looked haggard and lined, and his eyes looked as sunken as those of a very old man.

“Where is the doctor?” he asked, shortly.

“Oh, he is gone,” exclaimed Meg at once. “Mr. Bambridge was sent here for him.”

Ralph Ryder looked vacantly, and without any sort of recognition, at the young man. Meg, who mistrusted that nervous twitching of his hidden hand, made way for him to come to the sofa, by which she was sitting. If he would only do this, the doctor could seize him from behind, while Charlie was ready to secure him in front. He would not, however, fall in with their plans, being perhaps not without suspicion: he remained by the half-opened door, and presently said, in a very low voice:

“I want my wife.”

Nanny sprang up, breaking free from her sister's detaining hand.

“I am here, Ralph,” she said, as she came close to his side.

“*You* are not my wife!” he said abruptly. “I want Ellen—Ellen. She has deceived me, ruined me; she would have killed me if she could. And she has hidden herself away from me all this time—I don't know how long,” he continued, passing his left hand doubtfully over his forehead. Then he stared before him savagely. “But I will have my revenge now—that I have waited for—I will have it now! I have heard her voice—she is in this house—I will find her—I will kill her!”

Only Nanny, standing still close beside him, heard these last words; but his wild eyes told the rest what his lips told her. With an abrupt movement, he flung her back from him, disclosing, as he did so, the butt of the revolver in his breast.

“Is it loaded?” cried Meg to Charlie in a low voice.

“Sure to be—he's a soldier,” was the not very comforting reply.

“Oh,” moaned the girl, “won't you try——”

The young fellow silenced her, keeping his eyes on the madman, and waiting for a favourable moment to spring upon and attempt to disarm him.

At that moment the noise of wheels and hoofs was heard coming rapidly up the drive. Ralph started.

"The police!" he cried. "The police! Well, they must wait till I have done my work. Ellen! Ellen!"

The hoarse whisper in which he uttered this name, as he glided out of the room, filled the listeners with horror, which was changed to dismay when, looking into the hall, they saw that he had already disappeared.

"The study! He is sure to have gone to the study!" exclaimed Nanny.

Charlie drew her back, and proceeded himself to enter the dark corridor into which the study opened.

"Wait—wait till help comes," cried Meg. "The wheels are quite close now. Oh, wait, wait!"

She ran to the front-door to admit the arrivals. Whoever they were, they were welcome now.

But it was too late. Charlie had disappeared into the corridor, and in another instant sounds of a scuffle were heard, as the madman sprang upon him.

Up and down the corridor—brushing now against one wall, now against the other—they went, struggling for possession of the revolver. By the light of an oil-lamp at the end of the corridor, Nanny saw the figures slipping, wrestling, swaying. Then there was a report, and the figures were quite still for a second. Then one man fell, and the other knelt beside him.

There was a pause of death-like silence, but for the rumbling of the wheels outside getting nearer. Then, as the one man continued to kneel beside the other, Nanny, halting, tottering, with straining eyes and gasping breath, came along the corridor towards them.

The kneeling man was Charlie. The man lying on the ground was Ralph Ryder, quite still.

"He is dead," said the young fellow, trying to keep Nanny away.

But she was fascinated, drawn forward almost in

spite of her will, until, with breath so laboured that every gasp seemed to tear her body, and eyes grown wide with terror, she was close beside him, pushing back the curly gray hair, looking down into the dead face close to hers. Then, to the horror of the bystanders, she threw up her hands above her head and twirled round in a sort of mad dance.

“It is not Ralph! It is not Ralph!” she cried.

Poor Meg burst into passionate sobs.

“My darling, my poor darling Nanny, it has turned her brain!”

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SOLEMN silence fell for a few moments upon the group gathered round the dead body of Ralph Ryder. Nanny, after her first strange outburst of emotion, leaned against the wall as if stupefied, gazing vacantly at the form on the ground which a minute before had been a man. Meg stole to her sister's side, Dr. Blundell and Charlie making way for her to pass.

"Nanny, Nanny," she whispered, "come away. You can do no good here, dear. He is dead; your husband is dead."

But Nanny, still staring at the body, shook her head.

"No, no, no," she whispered in a faint voice—"not my husband. He—is—not—my—husband," she repeated emphatically.

The doctor, who was kneeling by the corpse, trying to intercept her view of it, turned to glance anxiously into her face. He had the same fear as Meg, that the horrors of the past few days had sent the unhappy lady out of her mind. But Nanny stepped forward, tottered, and, accepting the support which Charlie hastened to offer, said in a tremulous voice:

"Look, doctor, look at his forehead! Where is the scar under the hair? I tell you, he is not my husband—not Captain Ryder. And see, I am in my right mind; I am not wandering, as you think."

Charlie Bambridge was on the point of speaking, when the front door bell rang loudly. But the servant whose business it was to answer it did not come, for she and the other maids were herding together in the servants' hall, frightened by such breath of the tragedy as had already reached them. Meg glanced at the doctor.

"I am afraid," she whispered, "that it is the police."

"You must let them in. It can't be helped," said he.

So Meg, glancing once more with eyes full of solitude at her sister, walked reluctantly to the front-door, the bell of which had been rung a second time before the visitor was admitted.

As he entered, Meg sprang back with a loud cry. But before it had escaped her lips the door was closed.

"My wife! my wife! Where is she?"

It was the man whose tragic death Meg believed herself to have just witnessed who stood, alive and well, full of fire and energy, before her.

"Captain Ryder?" she faltered. "We—we thought—you—were—dead! We——"

He hurried past her, hearing his wife's voice. Nanny was struggling to escape from the doctor, who, having gathered from some words of Charlie's an inkling of the situation, was trying to detain her, fearing the effect upon her of this last, greatest shock of all.

When, however, her husband met her face to face, and Dr. Blundell withdrawing his supporting arm, anxiously watched her, she made no movement forward, she uttered no cry. Dazed, helpless, shattered, she seemed to shrink from her husband as he caught her in his arms.

"Nanny, Nanny, my poor wife!" was all he said.

But she only drew a heavy sigh, in which was no relief. She was worn out by the violent emotions which she had lately sustained, and her aching heart had for the time lost the power of joy. Even at this moment of reunion, however, the anxious husband was not able to give his whole attention to her. The dark heap on the ground behind her arrested his eyes. Drawing his wife hastily back with him, he took her to the drawing-room, and with a few tender words and an embrace, which she was still incapable of returning, he left her with Meg, and, taking one of

the lamps from a table, rejoined the doctor and Charlie by the dead man.

Kneeling down beside the body, Captain Ryder examined the upturned face with ever-increasing amazement.

"I seem," he whispered at last, "to see my own face."

But his two companions thought differently. Seen thus side by side, the living face and the dead, though startlingly alike in features and even in colouring, with a resemblance increased by the fact that the gray moustache and hair of both grew in exactly the same way, had one strong point of difference: the face of the living Ralph Ryder was young, while that of the dead Ralph Ryder was old.

"Who was he?" asked the doctor.

"My father," answered Captain Ryder in a low voice.

"Your father! I thought he died before you were born!"

"So did I—until to-night. Tell me," went on Ralph, after a moment's pause, hurrying his words out in fear lest his emotion should overcome him, "did he shoot himself?"

It was Charlie Bambridge who answered.

"Yes," said he. "I tried to get the revolver from him, but he shook me off, and, before I could prevent it, shot himself in the breast."

For a few moments there was silence again. Then Ralph looked up suddenly at Charlie.

"Do you remember," he said, "on the first night of our coming to live here, how you and I were alone in the study, and I leaped up suddenly, threw open the window, and, jumping out, fell through a grating and hurt my head?"

"Oh, yes," answered the young fellow.

"It was my father's face that I saw. I thought it was a delusion—that I was haunted by my own face—that I was going mad; and I begged you to keep the incident a secret."

“So I did,” said Charlie. “But if I had known what it was that alarmed you, I could have reassured you. For I saw it too.”

Ralph shuddered.

“Let us take him,” said he, in a husky voice, “into the study. It was his favourite room; he always came back to it. My mother told me so. Let him lie there now.”

They carried the body of the dead man into the little room, to which, indeed, as his son said, all his wanderings had led him back. Captain Ryder went to an oak cupboard, out of which he took an old military cloak, folded into many creases.

“This was his own cloak which I kept as a relic of him,” he said. “Let it cover him now.”

He stood silently by the body when he had gently drawn the cloak over it, while the other two men, respecting his emotion, dared not even disturb him by leaving the room. At last he moved.

“Poor father!” he murmured, in a broken whisper. “May Heaven forgive her who brought you to this!”

To the two listeners these words sounded more like a curse than a prayer, so harsh, so unrelenting was his tone. As he left the room, the absorbed look on his face gave place to one of deep distress as he turned to the doctor.

“Do you think my wife will get over the shock of this?” he asked in a voice tremulous with feeling. “It seems she thought that it was I who had gone out of my mind, and that she sheltered my unhappy father, believing him to be me!”

“I thought the same, Captain Ryder,” said Dr. Blundell in a low voice. “You see, the likeness was extraordinary, and we did not know of your father’s existence.”

“But you, Charlie, you say you saw him when I did! You did not think it was a delusion?”

“No, Captain Ryder, I guessed it was a relation of yours, and that he was mad, and shut up. But I thought you knew all about it, and as you bound me

to secrecy, I could say nothing to the doctor. But until a few minutes ago I did not know that he or Mrs. Ryder mistook the madman for you."

Captain Ryder stood for a few moments in an attitude of deep thought.

"You must hear the whole story, both of you," he said; "but not to-night. I haven't got it all clearly in my own mind yet. I thank you both most heartily for your friendship, your kindness. Good-night, good-night!"

For Dr. Blundell and Charlie, hastening to take themselves off now they feared that they might be in the way, had reached the front door, which the former opened.

"There's a cab out here, waiting. Did you know that?" said he.

Captain Ryder started.

"No," said he. "I'd forgotten all about her," he added to himself.

He allowed the two gentlemen to get some distance down the drive before he opened the cab-door, and said coldly:

"Will you come in?"

A smothered sob answered him, and old Mrs. Ryder, crumpled, downcast, looking as if she had shrivelled, under her son's displeasure, to about half her former diminutive size, got out, taking his arm even at that moment as a matter of course, with the natural instinct of making use of everybody within reach which had been born in and would die with her. Ralph led her indoors, dismissed the cab, and took her straight to the drawing-room, vouchsafing no word to her by the way. They found Nanny lying back in a low chair, with closed eyes. Ralph led his mother, who tried to draw back, straight to his wife.

"Nanny," he said gently, "you once asked me who was Lady Ellen? And I could not tell you. I have only just known. Let me introduce you to her."

But Nanny only glanced at her, shuddered, and shut her eyes again.

“ I know, I know,” she said bitterly. “ I guessed it—this evening. You kept your secret very well, Lady Ellen. I congratulate you.”

Captain Ryder’s masculine impetuosity had carried him too far. In his anxiety to have at once cleared away the mysteries in which his mother’s disingenuousness had entangled his wife and himself, he had treated both Nanny and the scheming old woman too roughly. The latter burst into hysterical tears, while the young wife rose, tried to walk to the door, and fell unconscious into her sister’s arms.

It was not until some days later, when the inquests on the bodies both of Mrs. Durrant and of Captain Ryder’s father were over, that Nanny learned the whole story of the mystery of Brent Grange. Ralph had in the meantime insisted on the fullest confession on his mother’s part, not being satisfied until the smallest detail was explained. Reluctantly enough, and with many sobs and sighs, which had no effect upon her son, Lady Ellen Ryder disclosed the arts by which, for thirty years, she had concealed her mad husband’s existence from the world, and tried to obliterate every trace of her own identity with the woman whose coldness and frivolity had been the cause of his ruin.

She confessed how, when the news reached her, that he had murdered their only child in a fit of insanity brought on by her desertion, she had returned to The Grange ; how, profiting by the fact that one of the servants had been ill of typhoid fever, and that the rest of them, with the exception of the butler, had left the house in a panic, she gave out that her husband and child were ill from the same cause, keeping the former, meanwhile, closely confined to the house. Then she gave out that they had both died ; and with the help of the butler and of Pickering, she contrived under the pretext of sparing the undertaker’s men the risk of infection, to fill the larger

coffin with bricks wrapped in old clothes, and to have it fastened down without arousing suspicion of the fraud. There was some gossip in the neighbourhood about the fact that no doctor had been called in; but this was explained by the well-known circumstance that the intemperate habits of the master of The Grange had caused him to quarrel with all the local medical men.

Since the fatal outbreak on learning of his wife's desertion, Mr. Ryder had fallen into a state of somnolent passivity, which made it easy for her to carry out her daring plan of shutting him up in The White House, the tenant of which had recently left it. In spite of Pickering's warning, she had persisted in this course, the success of which for many years justified her boldness. She caused the front part of the house, which faced the road, to be shut up, had two back-rooms furnished for her husband's accommodation, and set Pickering guardian over him. Then she herself went abroad, dropping for ever her title, and with it, she hoped, her identity with the wife of whom unkind things were whispered.

Six months after her husband's supposed death another child was born to her, the son who afterwards became Captain Ryder; and with his birth her real punishment began. She was seized with fear lest her child should learn her story, and reproach her with the guilt of her father's insanity and crime. Conscience began to prick her as it had never done before; and when he, as a child, found in an old newspaper an account of a ball, of which "Lady Ellen Ryder" had been the belle, she showed an emotion which stamped the name for ever in the boy's mind. Another fear which troubled the remorseful woman was lest the insanity of the father should descend upon the son; it caused her to inoculate the latter with the same morbid dread. The curse of her guilty folly, however, affected him in another way. The shock of her husband's crime, and the remorse which it brought to her, destroyed

her youth at one blow. From a beautiful woman, with porcelain complexion and yellow-brown hair, she shrank speedily into an aged caricature of her former self, gray-haired, lined and old : to this fact she ascribed the grizzling of her son's hair before he was five-and-twenty, and the prematurely old gait and manner which had made the likeness between his father and himself so striking.

As her son grew older, Lady Ellen's self-made difficulties increased ; yet still, haunted by the fear of the hatred he might feel towards her if she were to confess her story, she persisted in keeping up the secret of his father's existence. In the first place, her husband had begun to make various attempts at escape, which rendered it necessary to provide him with more constant guardianship. Having found, as she believed, a suitable person for this office in Mrs. Durrant, the harassed lady soon found herself burdened with expenses which were a heavy charge upon the estate. Thanks to the dutiful submission to her which her son had always shown, the management of her husband's property was entirely in her hands. But the demands of Mrs. Durrant, of the butler who had connived at the mock-burial, and, finally, of Mrs. Durrant's brother, became so excessive as to make her task to satisfy them a hard one.

And then came the trouble of Dan's marriage. Marriage would mean settling down at Brent or at Bicton, and a constant fear of discovery. The money difficulty, too, would be greater when there was an establishment to be kept up. The old gardener fore-saw this, and entreated Lady Ellen to tell her son the whole story. But her natural secretiveness had increased with years, and she argued with herself that, as she had succeeded in avoiding confession all these years, she would find means of avoiding it to the end. So she set about watching Nanny to find out what sort of woman she had to deal with, and, failing to persuade the young wife to give up the idea of settling at the Grange, she conceived a violent aversion for

her, which made the thought of an avowal of her own duplicity more unpalatable than ever.

This was the state of her mind when her son's accident brought her to The Grange. On her entrance into the sick-room, she had been startled to find Nanny reading the very letter in which, thirty years before, she had announced to her weak but adoring husband that she had left him for ever. It was the letter which had dealt the final blow in the destruction of his reason. Left by him between the pages of a book which he had given her, it had been found thirty years after, by their son, who was in the act of reading it when his father's face at the window caused him to believe himself the subject of a delusion.

It was from this point that Lady Ellen's selfishness allowed her to play havoc with her daughter-in-law's happiness rather than put herself to shame by a tardy confession. Finding that Nanny believed the writer of the letter to be a former wife of Dan's, she would not wholly undeceive her; and, in order to obtain possession of the incriminating letter, she secreted herself under the bed in Nanny's room that night, failing, however, in her endeavour. The last steps in the deception were her attempt to pass off her most innocent companion as the guilty Lady Ellen, and her flight from the house after Valentine, to make a final attempt to cajole him into silence.

Two or three minor points of the mystery were also cleared up. Although Lady Ellen's husband had never risen above the rank of lieutenant, it had been Pickering's custom to speak of him as "the Captain," and this habit had spread to Mrs. Durrant, thus increasing the confusion of father with son. Again, from motives of economy, Lady Ellen had caused her husband to be dressed in such clothes as could from time to time be spared from her son's wardrobe; thus Nanny had really recognised her husband's coats on the man she mistook for him. Finally, Nanny learned that a certain breast-pin, which was one of the means by which the girl at the hotel professed to identify Captain Ryder

with the lunatic, had belonged to the latter, but had been sent to his wife by Mrs. Durrant in consequence of his having attempted to sell it. This pin Lady Ellen had then given to her son.

There then remained to explain the visit paid by Captain Ryder to Brent on the day when he went to Aldershot. A little cross-questioning on Nanny's part proved that it was The Grange, and not The White House, at which he called, and that the woman he saw and took for the caretaker was not Mrs. Durrant, but her servant, between whom and Ralph Nanny observed a look of recognition to pass on the occasion of the visit to Teddington.

The journey to Durham, and the short cruise which he had then made with a friend, had been undertaken with a view to clearing his mind of the morbid thoughts induced by his supposed "delusions," the horror of which had increased when, on his return home, he had seen again, as he supposed, his own image in the hall below, this supposed "delusion" being again caused by the actual presence of his unhappy father prowling about the house on his way to the study, where Nanny had shortly afterwards found him. Captain Ryder had then left the house in pursuit of his mother, who was, he felt sure, in possession of a clue to Nanny's strange welcome, if not the cause of it. He had overtaken her at the station, where he found her with Valentine. In the deserted waiting-room he had forced from her and her companion enough of the truth to send him back to The Grange in a mad passion of yearning love for his wife, and fierce indignation against his mother, whom he insisted on bringing home with him to repeat her avowal to Nanny.

As for Valentine, he tossed him a ten-pound note, and warned him that it was given for his necessities and not for his merits, told him to go to the police-station or any place in the world he pleased, provided he kept away from The Grange and its occupants for the future.

Nanny, who was staying in the house of Mrs. Bambridge, where she had been ever since the death of the unhappy Mr. Ryder, listened to the long story from her husband's lips almost in silence. She was lying on a sofa near the drawing-room window, having, indeed, been completely prostrated by the succession of shocks she had sustained since her first arrival in Brent. Dan, watching her white face intently, at last burst out in an angry undertone :

"I will never forgive my mother for inflicting all this upon you !"

"Yes, you will, Dan ; yes, you will !" said Nanny, turning her blue eyes to him. "It is worth while—almost worth while—to have gone through it all, to know that it is over. And when you take me away, as you have promised to do, I shall be quite well again directly ; and—and very soon able even to come back and live in this place."

"Do you mean that ? I could not. As a matter of fact, I have already had the two places advertised as to let in building lots."

Nanny jumped up with a flush of delight in her face.

"Now," she said, "I feel quite well already. I did dread the thought of going back," and she shuddered. "I could never again have gone into that study without feeling that it was haunted—as it used to be. Dan," she began afresh, in a whisper, "you know that night when you had your accident ?"

"Yes, dearest."

"I found someone in the study, who closed the door upon me, and then escaped. Of course it was your poor father ; but how was it I found on the bushes outside the window a piece of a woman's veil ?"

"It was a scrap of a veil my mother had worn, I expect," said Dan. "I found it in the same book with the letter—the book which my father found on the table. It must have blown out as he got out of

the window. You remember that the book was found dropped in the area below."

"One more thing I have to tell you, Dan: Mrs. Calverley called this afternoon when you were out."

"That spying old busybody! I hope you didn't see her."

"Yes, I did, Dan, and I am very glad. She came to apologize, and to tell me that, having known your father very well, she had some suspicions as to whether you were really he; and the event, she hopes, will excuse her curiosity. You see she had never heard that Lady Ellen had a son born after she went away."

"I don't think she was justified at all in first insulting you and then spying upon us."

"Neither do I. But she wanted me to tell you this, and I promised. I wanted to get the very last of this dreadful business over."

"And now give me your word of honour that you will try to put it right out of your mind and never allude to it again."

"I do—oh, I do! On my word of honour!" cried Nanny energetically.

She had risen from the sofa, and was on her knees beside him, supported by his arms.

"Oh, Dan, Dan, you can't guess how I feel, now I know that you are really my own, my very own, again!" she whispered.

They were silent for some time, absorbed in their recovered happiness. Then Nanny spoke once more.

"I want, as soon as our year abroad is over, to give a grand ball, Dan."

"A ball!" echoed Captain Ryder in astonishment.

"Yes, to blow away the remembrance of all these horrors, and to make Laura and Jessica and Adela happy."

"And Meg! Have you forgotten Meg?"

"Oh, Dan, you needn't trouble about her, dear. It

is already a question between her and Charlie whether it is to be a flat in town or a little house in the suburbs!"

"And you and I, Nanny? Where shall we live, my darling?"

"Near the sea—near the sea. Then I can look out and see more of the sky when—when the greatest happiness of all comes. And—it is coming, Dan," whispered Nanny, as she buried her face in her husband's breast.

THE END.

RALPH RYDER OF BRENT

A NOVEL

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN

AUTHOR OF

"A WITCH OF THE HILLS," "THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH," ETC.

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