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*My
Child
and I*

NOVEMBER
152

Florence Warden

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NOVELS

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Child
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By
Florence
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MY CHILD AND I.

A WOMAN'S STORY.

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN,

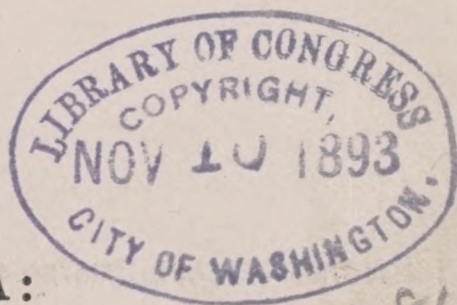
AUTHOR OF

"THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH," "RALPH RYDER OF BRENT," ETC

*F. A. P.
D. J. P.*

35

"O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!"



PHILADELPHIA:

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY.

1894.

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MY CHILD AND I
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BY

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MY CHILD AND I.

CHAPTER I.

A LARGE white house, in a beautiful garden, stables as extensive as and much more important than the house itself, and a big paddock beyond: all this shut in by a high wall, which kept us as well sheltered from the stare of our neighbours as my father's profession kept us from their society. For he was a trainer of race-horses; and association with the equine race has always been held to denote moral degradation. Indeed, I think the people who lived near Ardernes Court, who were particularly sedate and humdrum in their lives, would have been terribly scandalized if they had witnessed the gaiety and enjoyment of those within the high walls.

Not that the scenes which took place there were in themselves shocking; but a constant succession of lively visitors, with whom every trifle was the subject of laughter, light music, and card-playing into the small hours of the morning, easily became the basis of rumours that Ardernes Court was a very den of infamy.

Of the gaiety I myself saw but little. The house was large enough for a whole wing to be given up almost entirely to me and my governess, a pleasant lady, no longer young, who, when she had superintended my retiring to rest, used to go down into the drawing-room, being a brilliant musician, and play the piano for the entertainment of the visitors. But she had never anything to tell me next day about the guests. I remember that sometimes, when I was old enough to become curious, I used to get out of bed and steal in my night-gown along the corridor, go through the door which shut off our rooms from the body of the house, and, reaching the head of the principal staircase, used to crouch down and take

a vivid interest in what little I could see of what went on down-stairs.

I could hear the music in the drawing-room, the laughter in the dining-room, and see the men-servants go in and out with the dishes and plates. And then the ladies would come out, when there were any, always very much alike, I thought, with the same coloured light hair and very bright complexions; or, if there were no ladies among the guests, my mother would go by herself to the drawing room. And always, whether she was alone or not, I was struck afresh by my mother's grace of bearing and stately beauty, and asked myself bitterly why I had not inherited her beautiful glossy black hair and long, soft dark eyes.

I doubt whether this question would have come spontaneously into my childish mind; but the absence of any likeness to herself in her daughter and only child was a source of vexation to my mother which she did not keep to herself. I was large-boned, awkward, pale, freckled, and sandy, and it was certainly not for my good looks that my father idolized me as he did. I don't know whether he shared his wife's disappointment at having no son, but if so, he never let me know it; while my mother never even looked at me, after I became old enough to understand, without my seeing in her eyes a tacit reproach for my sex. So little did I see of her, in fact, that her death, when I was twelve years old, seemed to make hardly any difference in my life.

For some months, while she had lain ill, I had seen less of her than ever. She used to say that my "stealthy way of creeping about the room"—the unhappy result of my endeavours to be quiet and gentle—"got upon her nerves." So I was banished from her sight, taking my sentence meekly enough but with tears; and when I saw her lying dead, her beautiful face looked no colder than it had looked in life to me.

I have said that at first there was little difference in my life. But when my father had recovered from the shock of his loss, he had me with him even more than before. I was even introduced to a select few of his friends and clients, among whom one, whose name was Lord Wallinghurst, soon became a special favourite with me, as he was with everybody.

A man still in the prime of life, neither tall nor handsome, but with a distinction of manner and a good-humoured ease which I have never seen since in the same happy combination, Lord Wallinghurst had reached middle age without losing any of the attractions of youth. As for me, I loved him only less than I did my father; and he returned my affection sincerely, and never failed when he visited Ardernes Court, where he kept his race-horses in training, to ask for his little sweetheart Perdita.

"Her mother was wrong, Farbrace," I remember his saying to my father one evening, when, after dining together, the two gentlemen had sent for me to give me fruit at dessert. "She was altogether wrong. Perdita's going to grow up a beauty; aren't you, Perdita?"

The suggestion, contradicting as it did all the prophecies which had ever been made concerning me, took me by surprise. I laughed and hung my head foolishly. My father stroked my head with a caressing hand.

"She's a beauty already, I think," said he.

"And I too. Isn't she my sweetheart?" went on Lord Wallinghurst. "But I mean that she will be a beauty for the photographers, and that all the most dashing young fellows of her time—not ours, mind—will go mad about her. You and I will be old fogeys then, and we shall have to take a back seat, for she won't have any time to give to us then."

"Oh, yes, she will," I said, impulsively. "I shall never, never like any one as much as I do you and papa, and I should never care for any one who was not like you and like him."

Both the gentlemen laughed, evidently pleased by my sincerity. For, indeed, this was a point upon which I had quietly made up my mind long ago.

"Now, here's a chance for one of my sons," cried Lord Wallinghurst, carrying on the jest with great good humour. "One is married already unluckily; and being the eldest, he would have been the one most worthy of your choice. As for the second, he's not handsome enough; hasn't even the modest good looks of his father."

"Haven't you a third son?" asked I, not indeed with any anxiety to book a husband so far ahead, but because I had seen one day, inside Lord Wallinghurst's watch, the portraits of a group of three boys.

The cloud which instantly passed over his face showed me at once that the question was an indiscreet one. He answered me gravely but kindly.

“Yes, I have a third son, but he’s not good enough for you; not good enough for anybody. He’s in Australia now, and I suppose he will die there,” he continued, turning to my father, to whom his succeeding remarks also were addressed. “I wonder how it is that in our family there is, in each generation, a very good woman and a very bad man. I’m the sinner of my generation, and my unmarried sister is the saint. My youngest son succeeds to my position; I wonder who will take my sister’s.”

I listened to these words all but open-mouthed. At the end, as he turned to me again with one of those smiles of his which I, in common with every one else, found so charming, I could contain my astonishment no longer.

“Oh, if you call yourself a wicked man, I think I should like your third son the best of the three,” I said.

At which they both discomfited me by laughing outright.

When I returned to my governess my head was so full of the strange things that I had heard that I could not forbear indulging in some comments on them to Miss Greatorex. To my surprise, there was something in her face when I mentioned Lord Wallinghurst’s opinion of himself which told me that his own view of his character was a general one. To me this discovery was confusing, shocking. I had been taught that wicked people were to be avoided; but how was it to be done if they bore no distinguishing mark save an unusually sweet smile and particular kindness of manner? Miss Greatorex, who was growing elderly and acid, would, I felt, not be the person to answer the question satisfactorily. She disapproved highly of the new *régime* under which my seclusion was less conventual than in my mother’s lifetime. In her opinion “the gentlemen put ideas into my head.” And I gathered that ideas were the wrong sort of contents for a young and feminine mind.

I saw Lord Wallinghurst many times after that, and never without being disturbed by fresh ponderings of those wonderful problems: how it was that he seemed so good when he was really so wicked? and whether

niceness and wickedness always went together in this confusing way?

Meanwhile I learned to ride, which my mother would never let me do, since she herself had been forced by ill-health to give up that once favourite exercise of hers. It was the only thing I could do really well; and my father, who was exceedingly proud of my success in this accomplishment, never lost an opportunity of showing me off. I had a beautiful little chestnut mare of my own, and at fourteen, long before my prophesied beauty had become apparent in any other situation, I already looked well on horseback. I was by this time old enough to notice signs and expressions on the faces of those about me which a year or two before would have escaped my notice. I observed that on Lord Wallinghurst's still frequent visits both he and my father were less cheerful and good-humoured than they had been before, and that, while both drinking more wine, they became more silent instead of more lively as the evening went on.

In the year that I was fifteen I understood that there was great anxiety in the minds of both about the coming Derby. A horse belonging to Lord Wallinghurst and trained by my father was the favourite, and I soon learned that upon the success or non-success of that animal there depended great things. I used now to accompany them sometimes on their visits to the stables, to me an enchanted place, which always seemed to me cleaner and sweeter and more interesting than any other corner of the earth with which I was acquainted. Little as I knew about racing matters, for about them my father never gave me any information, I became conscious that it was a great honour for me to be present when Fabricius was stripped for the inspection of his owner and trainer; and as the eventful Wednesday approached, I really think that my excitement over the great race must have been almost as great as theirs.

So eager was I to learn whether Fabricius had won the Derby that I, not being permitted to be present myself on the Downs, extracted from my father a promise to telegraph to me at once "that Fabricius had won." Three o'clock came, half-past three, four. I became sick with suspense and anxiety. At last I put on my hat, and, evading my governess, slipped through a side-door

in the garden wall out into the road to learn the result of the race from the passers-by, some of whom were already returning from Epsom. There was no need for me to ask a question. "Corncrake! Corncrake!" was passed from mouth to mouth. I burst into tears, and crept back into the house, cut to the heart, though I did not know what the full meaning of the catastrophe was to my two dearest friends on earth.

I did not see my father that day; they would not let me. But on the following morning, having possessed myself of a newspaper to read the full details of the favourite's defeat, a heading, to me full of terrible news, caught my eye.

CHAPTER II.

THE shock was an appalling one. The earl, who had been in serious difficulties for some time, had hoped to retrieve his position by plunging heavily on the Derby, for which his horse Fabricius had been a hot favourite. I remember now how widely it was said that Fabricius was the best horse of his year after all, and that Corncrake's victory was a fluke, how accounted for I forget now. I suppose this is always said on such occasions, but I believed it with all my soul, and I grieved over the defeat of the beautiful creature I had admired so much and been so much afraid of, not only for his master's sake but for his own.

There were other fortunes besides that of poor Lord Wallinghurst involved in the defeat of Fabricius. I believe my father himself had a heavy money interest in the race; but more than this, the ruin and death of his principal patron, who was his debtor to a large amount, affected him severely. From that day the fortunes of Ardernes began to decline.

Gradually as the change came about, I felt our descent unmistakably, noting in particular the furtive, anxious eyes, the harassed, worried look which soon became habitual on my father's face. He was kind to me to the last, and to the last, when retrenchment set in, he refused to sell my little mare, even when I begged him to do so,

saying that I no longer cared to ride. He smiled very sadly when I told him this innocent little untruth, and told me to enjoy myself while I could. It was the only warning that his lips ever gave me of the awful change which was soon to come. I don't know whether he guessed himself how it would end. One day in September he was out shooting with some friends, when, in getting through a hedge, his gun went off, and he was found lying on the ground, bleeding to death. He only lived long enough to recognise the friend who found him.

It was an accident, it was said, and a common one enough. But I never believed it. How could I, when I had seen his face that morning, felt that there was something unusual in his farewell kiss, and heard a strange ring in his voice as he bade me good-bye?

I was stunned by the blow: and long before I had recovered from it there came upon my life such sudden and violent changes that I seemed to lose my old identity altogether. Surely it was not I, Perdita Farbrace, who found herself a month later in a dingy little back bedroom on the top floor of a small hotel in a street off the Strand? Broken down by the misfortunes which had fallen upon me so suddenly, I used to sit for hours shivering in the dingy little room, while the tears rolled unceasingly down my face, and I told myself again and again that the girl who used to live at beautiful Ardernes Court, with every comfort and every pleasure a loving father could provide, was not I.

My poor father had died so deeply in debt that there was absolutely nothing left for me; so the only near relation I had, my mother's sister, had been obliged to come forward and offer me a shelter. It was, however, given with less heartiness than I thought I had a right to expect. For Mrs. Morgan, my aunt, had received much kindness of a practical sort from her sister's husband. I nourished a little secret resentment against her for the persistent way in which, when she used to visit Ardernes Court in her own husband's lifetime, she had persistently advised that I should be sent away to school, instead of being brought up "in such an absurd way" at home. Luckily for me, my father's objections and my mother's indifference had successfully opposed her plans for my welfare. When her husband died, Mrs. Morgan

had found herself very scantily provided for, her own extravagance having combined with his to this end. She had, however, shown great energy, and with the liberal and prompt assistance of my father, secured a lease of the gloomy building to which she afterwards took me, and set me up in business as the manager of a private hotel.

I had seen little of my aunt since the days when she used to come, beautifully dressed and brilliant of manner, to Ardernes Court. Therefore it was with a shock of surprise that I found myself in a dingy, ill-lighted back room on the ground-floor of the hotel near the Strand, face to face with an undistinguished-looking woman in a brown stuff gown, who, with a water-bottle in one hand, was engaged in "letting down" the milk for some hapless customer's tea!

"Oh, aunt!" I foolishly exclaimed, in horror, "how can you!"

"Must be done, my dear," she answered, lightly. "It's one of the duties I shall depute to you very soon. So be prepared."

She was not unkind to me, but she was certainly not sorry to have the chance of "taking me down," as she called it, and of letting me know that I had been absurdly spoilt and that the time had come for me to suffer for it. I soon found, in fact she told me, that I was expected to "make myself useful," to become, as I resentfully told myself, a kind of handy drudge. Then it was that I first discovered that I had a "character." My father had lent her a large sum of money, only a small portion of which had been repaid at the time of his death. Although an honest and honourable specimen of her type of womanhood, my aunt chose to consider that in taking charge of her creditor's daughter she was doing much more than discharging the debt, she was making a sacrifice. And in order that the bargain might not, according to her estimation, be too one-sided, she had decided that I was to be a sort of assistant house-maid, under-housekeeper, and runner of errands. Then, to the surprise of both of us, I at once made a firm stand. I would not make beds; I would not dust rooms; I would not go out with a big black bag on my arm to bring home the butter. Now I see that I was foolish not to

have tried, as my poor performances would probably have soon disqualified me for these distasteful duties; but I was only sixteen, and still smarting from the great change I had so lately suffered, and from grief at a loss which I felt more instead of less as the time went on.

I remember that I caught sight of our two figures in the large glass which stood over the mantel-piece of her sitting-room as I made my protest. I remember seeing my very tall, gawky, stooping figure, and a face dead white with excitement above it, shaking with agitation; and the much shorter, much stouter form of my aunt, with her hard but still handsome face, as stolid and rigid as mine was limp and flexible.

"You *won't* do this, and you *won't* do that! Do you know to whom you're speaking? Do you know that you're dependent on me for every mouthful you eat, and that if I liked I could turn you out to-morrow?" cried my aunt, in a loud, strident voice, looking at me with cold, steely grey-green eyes.

"I don't think you can, aunt," I remember answering, in a shaky voice. "If you do, it's not my fault. I will mend the linen, keep accounts, do anything that I can do; but I've not been brought up to do a servant's work, and I can't do it, and I don't think you ought to ask me to try."

This was my aunt's opportunity, the first she had really had, for letting loose upon me her long pent-up wrath at the way in which I had been brought up.

"There!" she exclaimed, triumphantly, "that's the result of your father's beautiful system of bringing you up. Here's the proof of what I was always saying to him. Let her go to a good school, I've said to him a thousand times, where they bring girls up usefully, and teach them to cook and to sew and to be a help in a house, instead of just a useless burden."

"An industrial school, I suppose you meant," I rashly ventured.

My aunt drew herself up and glared at me.

"Don't dare to answer me, you lazy, impudent girl," she said, harshly. "The idea of your thinking yourself too good for anything I choose to tell you to do! Do you think I can afford to keep you living here in idleness while I myself am slaving from morning till night?"

Perhaps you think you do me so much honour by living here that the sight of your sallow face and round back ought to be pleasure enough?"

I was too angry to cry, miserable as her words made me. I said, in a low voice,—

"No, I don't think that. I'm ready to earn my own living; I want to. But it must be at something that I can do."

"There isn't anything you can do!" broke in my aunt, contemptuously.

But I went on:

"They used to say I had a taste, a talent, for drawing."

"Pshaw!" said my aunt.

"If I could study a little while at South Kensington I might be able to earn my living as a teacher of drawing."

"Drawing? Rubbish!"

"I will go and see Mr. Robertson, the lawyer who managed poor papa's affairs, to-morrow. I will ask him to arrange with you that you shall pay me a small sum every week out of the money you owed poor papa, and——"

My aunt's face changed. She had been ignorant how much I knew, and this discovery alarmed her while it made her angrier than ever. For while one person the more in an establishment like hers makes no appreciable difference in the weekly expenses, it was inconvenient for her to pay out a definite sum on a definite day, especially as the solicitor was not likely to let her off too easily, knowing her obligations. In a harsh tone she told me to go to my room, a command which I obeyed with as much promptitude as meekness. My next meal she sent up to me, as an intimation, I suppose, that I had disgraced myself too deeply to enter her presence. But before night came she sent for me, and in a cold voice, while she looked at me with a hard and disagreeable expression, she told me that I could begin to study at South Kensington the following week if I liked, and that I could live on with her at the hotel as before.

Full of the sanguine belief that in a very short time I should be able to earn my own living in the way I had chosen, I accepted the offer with gratitude, and passed the evening darning table-linen with laborious neatness.

I passed the preliminary trial of my abilities easily enough, and entered the schools elated with my success. A very short experience, however, of the busy battalions of workers of all ages within the schools who ground away from year's end to year's end and never got any nearer to excellence than they had been at the beginning, was sufficient to dash my ardour. However, although I began to be conscious of how little practical value that "talent for drawing" was which had been so much insisted upon at home, I laboured valiantly on in the middle ranks, between those who did very well and those who did very badly. It was too far to go back to the Strand for my mid-day meal, so I lunched very lightly in the big museum refreshment-room, and then wandered about the galleries by way of relaxation before recommencing work.

It was during this pause in the labours of the day that the hordes of male and female students saw and criticised each other with the surface antagonism and latent attraction customary at such meetings of the young of the two sexes. Among the various types of womanhood there I was reckoned among the prudishly discreet, my almost conventual education having fostered in me both shyness and pride, the basis of feminine prudence. But before long I saw, I was always seeing, about the galleries a face which attracted me, a face at which I could not look without an involuntary blush. It was not only that the owner of the face looked at me with undisguised admiration: for there was at the time I speak of a devout cult at South Kensington of the immature and the angular, by which I profited to the extent of being considered quite a beauty. The man's face had for me an attractiveness, a charm I could not well explain, except by a feeling that it reminded me of something or some one pleasant whom I had known.

It was not a handsome face, nor had it the attraction of youth or freshness. It was the worn, lined, sun-dried face of a man prematurely aged by travel and exposure, the face of a man who had in every sense "lived hard." He was not a student: he was believed to be an illustrator of books and newspapers who visited the museum occasionally for the purposes of his craft. It was only

since I had been in the schools, so my observant companions told me, that his occasional visits had become constant.

Although I never spoke to him nor he to me, although I carefully avoided meeting his eyes, I soon found that the galleries and schools were haunted by the worn, brown face. I saw it on the paper before me while I drew; the expectation of meeting it made every walk through the galleries an adventure. At last his opportunity came, as it was bound to do.

I was in the reading-room, intent upon a book I was studying on Greek art, when, looking about for my pencil to make a note with, I found that I had dropped it. Somebody glided from a seat at a table behind me, and I heard a voice, a most pleasant voice, lowered to the discreet pitch observed in the reading room:

"I picked up this pencil from the floor, and I have been waiting to see some one hunt for a pencil. You have lost yours: is this it?"

I had cast one shy glance up, knowing what face it was that I should see, and finding it more attractive in speech than in repose. Then I looked at the pencil he held in his hand, and took it shyly.

"Yes, it is mine."

As it turned in my hand I saw that my own name, Perdita, had been delicately carved in the cedar wood. I glanced up again, with a hot blush.

"If you lose it again it will be more easy to identify," said he.

And he glided back into his seat, leaving me curiously perturbed and unable to fix my attention again on Greek art for that day.

My studies led me to the National Gallery. He was there. The second time this happened I found, on attempting to leave the building, that a smart shower of rain was falling. I had no umbrella, so I waited. Glancing round me as I stood in the entrance-hall, I saw my "bronzed traveller" coming out through the turnstile. A sort of terror seized me, perhaps an intuition of what he would do. So I ran down the steps out into the rain, choosing what I considered the less of two evils. But at the bottom of the steps he overtook me.

“You have no umbrella: pray let me shelter you with mine. As fellow-worshippers at the shrine of Art we may do so much, may we not?”

I was shy, unwilling, and distressed. But there was something in his quiet, well-bred manner which afforded me such a sense of pleasure and relief from the tones I heard at the hotel and the flippant slip-slop chatter of the students at the schools that I suffered myself to be persuaded to walk with him along the Strand. He said very little; indeed, the crowd was too great and collisions with other people's umbrellas too frequent for talking to be easy. When we reached the corner of my street I stopped short, and, blushing very much, said,—

“Thank you, thank you very much. Good-afternoon.”

“Why won't you let me go with you the rest of the way? Are you ashamed of your shabby escort?”

I glanced at his coat in surprise, and for the first time learnt that it was shabby. I got more red, and said,—

“No. I—I didn't want you to know where I lived. I—I'm ashamed of living there. Because—because,” I stammered, ingenuously, “you are not like the people I live among now.”

He smiled at me in some amusement, but with pleasure too.

“I understand, I think,” he said. “You are astonishingly discriminating for such a child. But you have apparently just failed to find out that, though I am possibly a gentleman, I am undoubtedly a scamp.”

Here was the same puzzling problem which had teased me in my childhood presented over again. He saw the look of bewilderment on my face, and laughed.

“I have distressed you, I'm afraid. Forgive me. In consideration of the honesty of my confession, will you shake hands?”

Very much agitated, I held out my hand without hesitation. He pressed it gently in his, looking up into my face, for I was taller than he, with a strange expression which moved me and made me blush with pleasure more than with shame.

Then he went away, and I walked quickly down the street.

Day after day passed, and I saw no more of him. For some time I tried to hide from myself how sorely I missed the sight of his face. I lost my interest in my work, I grew silent and despondent. Day after day my eyes searched every corner of the galleries in vain.

Two months had passed, and I had begun to give up all hopes of seeing my mysteriously interesting friend again, when one evening, when I was on my knees in the little front room which my aunt called her office, hunting in a box for a bill which she had mislaid, I was startled by a voice, the sound of which thrilled me through and through. I sat back on the floor to listen, and a moment later I heard my aunt come out of the back room, and my mysterious friend asked her if she had a room vacant, "a modest bachelor apartment, and not a palatial suite," as he said.

Then my aunt left him for a moment, and as she disappeared into the back room the front door opened, and a gentleman, whom I recognised as a solicitor who sometimes brought witnesses to stay at the hotel, entered. By this time I had risen, and, standing back in the as yet unlighted room, could see the two men through the little glass window without being seen by them. My mysterious friend turned round to make way for the new-comer, and as soon as he did so, both men started back.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the solicitor, in a low voice, "what are you doing here? Don't you know that if any one sees you it'll be penal servitude?"

"I know, and I don't care," returned my friend, recklessly. "I've got something better to think about."

The other man shrugged his shoulders, with an exaggerated groan.

"A woman, of course, as usual?" he asked, with contempt.

"No," answered my friend, with fire. "Not a woman. It's *the* woman, this time, by Jove!"

CHAPTER III.

I WAS so much startled by the short colloquy to which I had been an unwilling listener, that I leaned back against the wall, a prey to vivid sensations of pain which I could scarcely analyse.

Before the two gentlemen had time to exchange any more words my aunt came out into the hall again, told my unlucky friend the number of a room which he could have on the second floor, and then turned to the solicitor, who was a well-known customer.

When the hall was again empty, I crossed quickly into the back room, where my aunt was, and gave her the bill which she had sent me to look for. My mysterious friend was there, having already ingratiated himself so far with her that he had received an invitation to take a cup of tea. She remarked upon my appearance. Indeed, I was shaking like a leaf, and I saw in the glass as I passed that every trace of colour had left my face. My friend rose when I entered, but I would not look at him: I knew why he had come, and after what I had just heard, I felt bound to show my resentment at his pursuit.

In answer to my aunt, I said that I had a headache, and that I would have a cup of tea presently when I felt better. Then, without heeding her comment that the tea would do me good and that I had better have it now, I went up-stairs to my own room and locked myself in, suffering from the most acute agitation.

For, limited as our intercourse had been, absurdly ignorant as I was about him, I already cared for this man. His own confession that he was a "scamp" had, instead of quenching my liking, whetted my curiosity, and consequently my interest; and it is impossible to deny that my more recent discovery that there was some grave charge hanging over him had stimulated that interest. Still, young as I was, I had sense enough to understand that I must avoid any closer relations with so dangerous an acquaintance, and I resolved, by avoiding him and treating him when we chanced to meet as if we

had had no previous acquaintance, to show him that his further attentions would be unwelcome.

When I went down-stairs, I found my aunt full of the utmost enthusiasm about the new arrival, and I easily found out that it was by the arts of subtle flattery that he had obtained such an instantaneous and strong hold upon her heart. This proof of the adroitness with which he ingratiated himself with women confirmed me in my resolve to be on my guard. The name he had given, and this was the first time I had heard it, was Mr. Dare.

Nothing could exceed the coldness, the distant avoidance, with which I took care to treat him. I made it absolutely impossible for him to approach me, by maintaining, on all occasions when I was brought in contact with him, an apparent unconsciousness of his presence. As he had contrived firmly to establish his position as a great favourite with my aunt, of whose attractions he subtly suggested the highest admiration, I was severely scolded by her for my rudeness to him.

“It doesn’t become a girl without any prospects to be so stuck up,” was the text of her homily one day. “And let me tell you, you can’t make a worse mistake than to judge a man by the clothes he wears. Mr. Dare, whatever you may think, is as much a gentleman as anybody who comes here.”

Now, in my own mind, I not only endorsed this sentiment, but would have expressed it a great deal more strongly, and with a very different meaning from hers. For my aunt made habitual, vague use of the word “gentleman,” not to signify any special standard of refinement, but to intimate that the person designated by it for some reason met with her approval.

In spite of my prudent reserve, I soon began to see, even with the briefest and most furtive glances at Mr. Dare, an expression in his eyes which told me that I should not be able to put him off much longer. The crisis, however, came with unexpected suddenness.

My aunt was out, and I was left in charge of the house. This duty, which I very much disliked, I fulfilled inefficiently by secreting myself in the back room, and ringing the bell for one of the waiters when I heard any one enter by the front door.

Presently there came a soft tap at the door of the room,

and before I had recovered sufficiently from the agitation into which I was thrown by my knowledge that Mr. Dare was outside, he opened the door and looked round the screen which was just inside.

"I beg your pardon," said he. "I thought Mrs. Morgan was here."

"She will be back in a few minutes now," I answered, stiffly, springing up from the low seat which I had been occupying by the fire, and keeping my eyes fixed on the ground, while I felt a burning blush in my cheeks. "I will tell her, as soon as she returns, that you wish to see her."

But instead of being repulsed by my exaggerated girlish haughtiness, Mr. Dare came further into the room, and standing only a few feet from me, looked contemplatively at the fire. Of course I expected some gentle suggestion of sentiment, some whisper of reproach. But instead of that, he only remarked, in a grave and thoughtful tone,—

"These coals don't give out much heat, do they?"

"No," said I, with impulsive acquiescence. And delighted at this opening, I was down on my knees in a moment, and seizing a long-disused pair of bellows, left in the house by some former occupant, I began using it vigorously, and quickly succeeded in covering Mr. Dare, myself, and the hearth-rug with a thick layer of coal-dust.

"Very well meant, like all your actions, Miss Farbrace," said he, gravely, but with veiled amusement which annoyed me; "but, like some of your other actions, not so effectual as it was meant to be."

Of course he wished me to ask him what he meant. But I would not, for indeed I knew. But he did not mean to let me escape by this simple expedient.

"You thought, I suppose," he went on, in a measured tone, "that by seeming disdainfully oblivious of my existence you would force me to appear at last humbly oblivious of yours. But that, unluckily for me, is not possible. Now that you see that you have failed, will you not graciously descend from your pedestal and tell me how I have offended you?"

His voice was very sweet, more moving to my ears than any other I had ever heard. There was something

so touching, too, in the humility, the suggested pleading of his tone, that I found it difficult to steady my voice to give the sort of reply I wished.

"You have not offended me, Mr. Dare. I don't know you well enough to be offended by anything you do," I answered, in a strangled voice.

There was a short pause, and then he said, in the meekest of voices,—

"I see. You think I have in some way presumed upon my short acquaintance with you? At least you will tell me how I have done this?"

"Oh, you haven't done anything of the kind," I replied, hastily and rather petulantly, desperately anxious that he should not beguile out of me against my will the real reason for my reticence.

"Then why are you so unkind? For you know it is unkindness. You can't pretend not to know that you are making me suffer terribly."

He was trembling, and so was I. I was in a state of acute terror, expecting every moment that he would draw me into his arms, and that I should not be able to resist him. For I was so lonely, so friendless, that I could not be indifferent to the one person who in all the world seemed to care about me, let his character be what it might. My aunt was growing day by day less careful of my feelings in her complaints of the burden she had to bear. Was it wonderful that the voice of sympathy should be so powerful when at last it reached my ears?

Still I struggled.

"You are talking nonsense, Mr. Dare. How can you suffer by anything I do or say, when I haven't known you three months, and I have scarcely spoken to you three times?"

"You know that has nothing to do with it. Almost the first time I saw you I knew you well. I haven't been all over the world for nothing. I haven't noticed thousands of faces without learning to read some things at least in them."

"Why, what have you read in my face?" I asked, interested.

"That you are proud, shy, sensitive, and——" He paused a long time, so that I, standing by his side, looking at the fire and trying to seem less willing to listen

than I really was, felt that I was betraying impatience in a dozen little restless movements. "And—lonely."

I shivered at the word and at the tone in which he uttered it, and I turned my head, pretending to look at the clock which stood on a bracket against the wall, lest he should see that the tears were in my eyes.

"You see it is very easy for me to find out that, because I know so well what it is to be lonely myself," he went on, in a very low voice, as if coaxing me into kindness. "And why should you pour all the vials of your wrath upon me because I, a lonely man, like to be near you, a lonely maid? I don't deny that I came here to be near you: but have I forced myself upon you? Have I pestered you with my society? If not, why are you so cold?"

"Of course I have to treat the people who come to my aunt's house as strangers, Mr. Dare," I answered, in a voice which quivered a little, after a short pause.

"But you have not treated me as a stranger: that I should not so much mind. You have treated me as an enemy."

"Oh, no, indeed."

I stopped, and turned my head, listening to some strange voices which I now heard in the hall outside. Somebody was inquiring for Mr. Dare. And the inquiry, which was made in the rough and surly tone of a common man, filled me with suspicion and alarm on Mr. Dare's account. The next moment there was a tap on the open door of the room in which we were standing, I heard the strange man say, "Beg pardon," and then the tramp of heavily-shod feet behind the screen as the speaker came into the room.

I don't think Mr. Dare had heard his name uttered, for he seemed not to notice what was going on outside.

As soon as I heard the man coming in I made a rapid gesture of silence to Mr. Dare, and, seizing him by the shoulder, forced him down on to the floor in the corner between the screen and a large, high-backed arm-chair. Then I had only time to sign to him to lie close before a respectably-dressed man looked round the screen, and, saluting me politely, asked for Mr. Dare.

"I will ask if he is in," I said, unblushingly.

The man cast his eyes suspiciously round the room.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, but they told me outside that he was here."

"Yes," I answered. "He was here a few minutes ago. But he is not here now, you can see for yourself."

"Perhaps you can tell me where he's gone to?"

"He told me he was going to Devonshire."

This was quite true. I had heard him express his intention of starting for Plymouth in a day or two.

"I suppose you couldn't oblige me with his address?" went on the man, not yet quite satisfied.

"No; you must ask Mrs. Morgan about that."

The man appeared to hesitate a moment, and then retired, not, however, further than the hall outside. As soon as he had disappeared, knowing that there was no time to be lost, as my aunt would return in a few minutes, and the man would certainly waylay her for further information, I touched Mr. Dare softly on the shoulder, and pointed out to him a door leading to the back of the house, by which he could escape into another street. Then I sat down to a piano, horribly out of tune, which my aunt kept in a corner of the room, and proceeded to make hideous music upon it to cover Mr. Dare's retreat. He was only just in time. The door had scarcely closed upon him when the man who had been so anxious to meet him suddenly looked round the screen again.

"What do you want now?" I asked, turning coldly from the piano.

"Nothing, ma'am," replied the man civilly, as he took two steps round the screen, and actually looked over the back of the high arm-chair into the corner where Mr. Dare had lain a moment before. "Only you see, miss, I have partic'lar business with him. And as he's as artful a customer as ever I came across, and as he has a way of getting round the ladies, why, you see, miss, I thought I'd like to make sure myself that he hasn't been getting round *you*."

And as he spoke the man made a sudden dive across the room and opened the door by which Mr. Dare had escaped. Then he looked at me doubtfully; but I suppose he saw in my white face only the expression he would have expected to see on that of a girl very much frightened by his behaviour. At any rate his apologies

grew more profuse as he returned into the hall: but, in doing so, he cast one more glance at that back-door.

For the next ten minutes I moved about the room restlessly, unable to keep still. What had I done in helping Mr. Dare to escape? Above all, what had he done to render escape necessary?

When my aunt returned, she was, as I had expected, waylaid in the hall by the man I had seen and his companion. They went with her into the office and conversed in low tones. Presently I heard her letting them out, and then she came into the room where I was, with an expression on her face which I began to know only too well. She was in a very bad temper.

“What’s this I hear about your helping a criminal to escape from justice?” asked my aunt, whose language always became rather “literary” when she was annoyed. “It’s enough to get the house into serious trouble. It’s been as much as ever I could do to talk the men over, and to get them to believe that you had nothing to do with it. But Thomas says he did come in here, and that you must have let him out the back way. A pretty fellow to make a friend of, a man the police are after!”

“Why, aunt, he was your friend,” I ventured diffidently to suggest.

“Don’t answer me,” answered she, tartly. “It’s only to-day I’ve found him out in his true colours, but I’ve had my suspicions a long time.”

I was astonished. For my aunt was by no means so scrupulous as these words implied concerning the moral character of her male friends: indeed she had more than once assisted a customer “under a cloud” in a way which could only be called generous. I found out later that the reason of her change of feeling for Mr. Dare was her discovery that afternoon, through a common acquaintance, of Mr. Dare’s secret admiration for her niece, an admiration the more culpable that he had always carefully concealed it from her.

Surely she need not have grudged me my one most undesirable admirer! Yet she did; and during the next few days, during which Mr. Dare carefully abstained from making his reappearance, I was continually the object of sneers at my “police-court admirers” and “gaol-bird friends.”

To all my entreaties that she would tell me of what he was accused, however, she turned a deaf ear, saying only that he was not a fit person for me to make inquiries about, and that I should know soon enough through the newspapers when he was taken up. These words increased my unhappiness. Until I had heard something more definite about his misdeeds I could not help giving him the benefit of the doubt, and telling myself that he would not have been so daring as to come back to London if he had really been guilty of the crime, whatever it was, of which he was accused.

Although my aunt professed to have no further curiosity about him, I knew that this was a profession only, by the eagerness with which she hurried up to his room, after the departure of the detectives, in order to take possession of Mr. Dare's luggage. I couldn't help being maliciously delighted when she came down again with an angry and disappointed face, complaining that the wretch had managed to get off, "owing her a week's rent, too," without leaving so much as an old slipper behind him.

By chance, as I heard my aunt utter these words, I glanced at Thomas the waiter, who was standing in the room to receive some orders; and I fancied, from the expression of his face, that it was not Mr. Dare who was responsible for the disappearance of his luggage.

This incident brought to its full height the growing aversion from me which my aunt had long felt; and a few days after this, unable any longer to bear with patience her coldness and her taunts, I told her that I could not bear her treatment any longer, and that I would find a home somewhere else.

She replied that "she wished to goodness" I would, but that unfortunately it wasn't so easy as I supposed "to find anybody willing to take such a burden."

I went up to my own room in a fever of mortification and resentment, put on my hat and jacket and rushed out of the house. I did not know where to go, but I felt at that moment that the one spot in the world to be avoided was the building which held my aunt. I had not gone many steps from the hotel when I heard some one in pursuit. I would not look round, believing that the person following me must be sent by my aunt. But

my pursuer gained upon me, and then I heard the voice of Thomas, the second waiter, begging me to stop.

"I am not sent by your aunt, miss," the man was astute enough to add.

On hearing this I stopped and allowed him to overtake me.

"Begging your pardon, miss," he went on, in a very respectful tone, "I hope you'll excuse me taking the liberty; but if you should happen to see—to meet Mr. *Dare*,"—and he looked askance at me as he emphasized the name,—“would you be so good as to tell him his papers and things is safe: nobody's laid hands on them to pull 'em about and that. *I've* got them, and the gentleman can have 'em any time he likes; and—and if you'll be so good as add, miss, that mum's the word as to who he is and *what* he is, as fur as I'm concerned."

And Thomas, who was a thin, light-haired man, with a face like a ferret, turned on his heel, and ran back to the hotel before I could assure him that there was not the slightest likelihood of my seeing Mr. Dare.

CHAPTER IV.

THIS interview with Thomas, whose manner had never before been so respectful, again stimulated my curiosity about my fugitive admirer. What had the man discovered, in the luggage Mr. Dare had left behind him, to make him so anxious to find favour in the eyes of a person whose abrupt disappearance to avoid a couple of detectives the astute waiter knew of?

I puzzled myself by this and similar reflections as I walked fast along the Embankment, up Parliament Street, towards St. James's Park. It was dusk when I passed through the gate near the bridge where the ducks come to take bread from their visitors. There were some people standing about, but I did not notice them until I saw that a man had taken up his position quite close to me. I was moving away before he spoke and disclosed himself.

"How do you do, Miss Farbrace?"

I started violently, and was seized by a momentary impulse to run away and get lost among the people and the trees. I think he divined this, for he thrust out his hand as if to check me, and said, in a tone of entreaty,—

"No, no. Have a little pity on an outcast, and give him your society for another minute and a half."

"Outcast!" I echoed, gloomily. "You are not more of an outcast than I, Mr. Dare."

Surprised, he asked me questions about myself with some eagerness, and soon drew from me the details of my aunt's treatment, and an account of the taunts she had uttered that afternoon.

"Did she? Did she say that?" said Mr. Dare, with anger which did me good. "The wretched woman ought to be ashamed of herself! I can't imagine any joy, any honour in the world greater than that of caring for you, of protecting you."

"Indeed, I wish you could persuade my aunt to feel like that!" said I, with a rather tearful smile.

He said nothing to this for a little while, but stood beside me, pulling ferociously at his beard, in a state of evident excitement, indicative of a struggle which was going on within him. At last he turned abruptly away from me, and asked, shortly,—

"What other friends have you, or relations? You must not stay under the roof of that coarse woman any longer."

I shook my head, not answering at first, for the tears were rolling down my cheeks, and I was trying to dry them unseen.

"I have no other friends," I said, at last, "and no near relations."

There was another pause, during which he still kept his head turned away from me; and when he spoke, it was in quite a harsh, rough tone.

"Would you stay with a relation of mine? She's a trifle eccentric, and strict, very strict. But you have been well brought up; you wouldn't shock her. And—and I'm sure—at least I think, she would give you a shelter, for a few days, at any rate."

But the picture was not inviting enough to a shy girl, unaccustomed to strangers. The strict relation whom

perhaps I might not shock, and who might perhaps (though this seemed doubtful) give me shelter for a few days, seemed a personage even more to be feared than my aunt. So I hastily declined the suggestion, and held out my hand in farewell. He took it, but he did not let it go.

“You won’t accept my offer?”

“No; I can’t. Thank you.”

“You will go back to your aunt and be miserable?”

“Yes; thank you.”

“Why, then, you are a little fool, and there’s nothing for me to do but to marry you.”

He had by this time led me to a more secluded path, and as he uttered these words in a tone full of excitement and triumph, he suddenly took me in his arms. The words, the action, were so unexpected that I stood spell-bound, without an exclamation, without a struggle; and he drew my face down to his and kissed me on the lips.

Half an hour before this, if I had been asked whether, knowing as much as I did of this man and the circumstances of his disappearance from the hotel, I had any feeling of affection for him, I should, indignantly perhaps, have answered no. But when, for the first time, I felt a lover’s arms round me, a lover’s kiss on my lips, at the very moment, too, when I felt entirely alone and desolate, there sprang up suddenly within me an emotion quite new and sweet and strong; and all I could do, as my lips trembled at the touch of his, was to try to whisper a most piteous, plaintive entreaty that he would let me go.

He caught the sense of my incoherent words, and looked full into my eyes.

“Never, my darling,” he whispered, with an intensity which frightened me; “never, never, never! You must be my wife!”

But I had the sense, intoxicated as I was by the strange emotions to which I had just been subjected, to remember the mystery which hung over this man, and to understand that he had no right to utter such words to me until he had given me some explanation of it. Drawing myself away from him by an unexpected and energetic

movement, I panted out, while I trembled from head to foot at my own daring,—

“You forget that I don’t even know who you are. You have no right to say such things to me until you tell me.”

Mr. Dare looked at me with a smile of amusement.

“Why, what do you want to know more than you do know?” he asked. “You know that I love you; come, you do know that. And that is the great thing, isn’t it? You would say so if you knew as much of life as I. And you know that you love me, since you did a most bold and daring thing to save me from the police. What do you want to know more?”

His way of putting these questions made me almost ashamed of my persistency. However, I persisted.

“I want to know”—and my voice sank to the lowest of whispers,—“why the police came?”

Mr. Dare was quite unabashed.

“Oh, ye of little faith!” he said, lightly. “Years ago, when I was no more than a lad, and I was kept very short of money,—much too short, considering what my position then was,—I got into difficulties, and I forged a check to get out of them. So I was sent away abroad in disgrace, and told that if I ever came back this charge would be revived against me. Well, I came back for a visit only; and I stayed here—for love of you. There is no more story to tell.”

“And the position you were in,—what was that?” asked I.

“Ah!” said Mr. Dare, quickly, “that I shall not tell you. You must be satisfied to take me or leave me upon what you know.”

He paused, with the air of a man who has quite decidedly made up his mind. What I knew was very little, I thought; but I did not dare to say so. Neither could I bear at once to give up my lover, unsatisfactory as his position was.

“Well?” said he; and he put his face abruptly so near to mine that the tender look in his eyes almost got the better of my discretion. I drew back frightened, and said, hurriedly and with hesitation,—

“Let me have a little time, just a little. You have taken me by surprise. Let me think about it.”

Mr. Dare seemed impatient and rather astonished. He said I was very hard for such a young girl, and asked me how long I thought he could bear to wait.

"I suppose," he went on, with a change to a resigned air, "that you will hold out until your aunt is unkind to you again. Well, it's an ill wind that blows nowhere; and I sha'n't have to wait long."

He felt in all his pockets, and, after turning out the various contents, selected from among the rest a small key, while I watched him curiously. "The window of your little room," he went on, "looks out over a small back street. When you want me to come for you throw this key out of the window so that it shall drop as nearly underneath it as you can manage. I shall find it!"

"Indeed," said I, with a little flash of spirit, "it will be a very long time before you do, Mr. Dare."

But I took the key.

Mr. Dare seemed perfectly satisfied. He drew my hand through his arm, and led me slowly through the park, along Birdcage Walk, past Buckingham Palace, and through the Green Park to Piccadilly, talking to me about art, and the students at the schools, and adventures he had had abroad, all without a word concerning the great new subject which had so suddenly been sprung upon me, and yet in tender, low tones which made the most trifling remark a kind of love-making. Then, with less talk, while I, happy against my will, still hung on his arm, we worked our way along crowded Piccadilly and back into the Strand. At the corner of my street he left me, spoiling the gentle farewell he took of me by a rapid, involuntary glance at the church of St. Clement Danes.

For many days I saw no more of Mr. Dare, and I tried hard to think no more of him. But when I felt lonely, which was very often, or when my aunt was unkind, which was very often, I could not help remembering his kind voice, his tender eyes, and wishing that it were possible to meet him again without pledging myself to a step so alarming as marriage with a man of whom I knew so little.

Was I contemptibly weak to give way? Looking back now, and remembering the miserable hopelessness

of my life, I cannot help feeling that nine out of ten girls, indeed all but the strongest, would have done what I did.

I opened my window one evening, when my aunt had said something which cut me to the heart, and threw down my little key into the street below.

I watched and waited, and nothing happened, as far as I could see. No one came down the street to pick it up; no upward look from a stray passer-by told me that my action had been observed. So I presently closed my window, with tears, and told myself that my fancied resource was a vain one.

Next day I had quite made up my mind that Mr. Dare had failed in his threat, and, having recovered my spirits with the morning light, I was rejoiced to think that I was still free. My horror and astonishment were great, therefore, when, going out to fulfil some small commission for my aunt, I had no sooner stopped at the door of the shop I was to visit than I found Mr. Dare standing beside me. The shock was so great that I almost cried out. Then, as he at first said nothing, I took heart and told myself that this was but a chance meeting. He soon put me right. Holding out his hand, and seeing my frightened disinclination to shake it, he said, in a tone in which I detected a certain quiet resolution which alarmed me still more,—

“Did you think I should not come, then? that Mephisto would repent of his bargain? Look here.”

I could not conceal my horror when he took out of his pocket and unfolded before my eyes a marriage license.

“Oh, no, no!” I ejaculated, in the most discouraging tones an expectant bridegroom ever heard. “I—I did not mean that. I was only miserable. And so I wanted to see you, wanted to speak to some one who would be kind.”

“And do you think I will not be kind, my darling?”

I was paralyzed: I could say nothing more at first. So we stood there just inside the door-way of the shop, with the roar of the Strand in our ears, for a few moments in silence. Then, suddenly, in the midst of so many thoughts of more important things a trifle surprised me.

"But you haven't had time to get this since last night?" said I, with a sidelong glance at the marriage-license, which he still held in his hand.

He smiled as he answered that he thought it well to be prepared.

"Now, you see," he went on, "we can be married to-morrow morning."

But this I positively declined. I was alarmed by the predicament in which I found myself, and the most he could obtain from me was a promise that I would "think about it," which I interpreted as meaning that I would think about marriage in general at some far distant time. In the mean time, however, I would meet him that evening for the comfort of a talk.

When I got back to the hotel, however, I was suddenly brought face to face with a condition of things which threw me, helpless as I was, into the arms of the one person who cared for me. My aunt had heard from one of the servants that I had met Mr. Dare in the Strand, and had stood talking to him; and on my entrance I found my trunks in the hall, and I met my aunt with the steely look in her eyes which I knew so well. She informed me coldly that it was impossible for her to keep under her roof a girl who so far forgot herself as to make appointments in the Strand with men of bad character, and that she preferred in future to make me a small allowance, so that I could find a home elsewhere.

I could not help crying. I tried to tell her that I wanted some advice, some help, even if she turned me out the next minute. My aunt did not listen. She handed me a card containing the address of a friend of hers who, she said, had a room to spare, and then, with a short good-bye and no offer to kiss me, she left me in the hall.

She had given me some money, which I was obliged to take; and I drove at once, in the cab which she had ordered, to the address she gave, which was very near.

I found that my aunt's friend kept a lodging-house. She was a good-natured woman who made light of my distress, and told me, what was no doubt the truth, that my aunt only meant to frighten me, and was quite ready to have me back in a couple of days upon my

promising to be more discreet in the future. In spite of this, the effect of my aunt's ill-judged harshness was to make me choose to fly from the ills I knew to those that I did not know.

On the following morning I was married to Mr. Dare at the church of St. Clement Danes.

As we came down the church, after leaving the vestry, I saw, leaning over the gallery above our heads, a woman staring down at us with a white, angry face. My exclamation, and the convulsive touch I gave to my husband's arm, made him look up also. Every trace of colour left his face, the expression of which changed in a moment to one which filled me with terror.

He hurried me out of the church, jumped with me into a hansom, and directed the cabman to drive to Charing Cross.

And he kept a sharp lookout to make sure that we were not followed.

CHAPTER V.

As the hansom drove us to Charing Cross there were very few words exchanged between my husband and myself. He was occupied in watching to see whether we were followed, and I was in a state of dread, misery and bewilderment, much alarmed by the appearance of the woman, and yet lacking for some time the courage to inquire who she was. At last, however, as we got out at the station, and I saw my husband look down the Strand with another searching scrutiny, I ventured to say,—

“Who was she, *Mr. Dare*?”

His answer was ready enough, and was given with a smile.

“Why, *Mrs. Dare*, it was an old servant of my family whom I met the other day and offended by trying to avoid. If she had only got out of that gallery in time she would have kept us talking all day.”

“She looked very angry,” I remarked.

“Oh, yes; don't you know what old servants are like? They think they have as much right to an intimate knowledge of your affairs as you have yourself; and

because I did not tell her that I was going to be married, she considers my marriage as a personal grievance, I have no doubt."

Whether I was satisfied or not I hardly knew: but I asked no more questions. And in the pleasure of hearing that we were going into the country to spend the next few weeks among the hills and villages of Surrey, I began to lose the sense of dread and the disagreeable impressions to which I had been a prey that morning.

It seems a ridiculous thing to say, but the greatest surprise I ever experienced in my life was the discovery that for the next five weeks I was really happy. I had made my rash plunge into matrimony in despair, with little hope of anything better than a mitigation of my misfortune. But my husband was so devotedly fond of me, was such a charming companion, that the smallest incidents of every-day life with him became invested with a new charm by his cheerful and humorous temperament. We had very little money to spare, but the weather was beautiful, the country pretty, and we were good walkers: I for my part did not wish for money; and when my husband lamented the want of it I laughed at him.

The only drawback to our happiness was one which surprised me: my husband complained that my love for him was not as great as his for me. I thought him fanciful and absurd, and told him truly that I loved him with all my heart, and that he should be satisfied in having all the love I had to give. He persisted in thinking that there were depths of affection in me which he was unable to sound, and his jealous importunity and distress on this account, while it sometimes made me smile, more often drove me to tears. Still, as I said, we were happy: and when he said that the end of our holiday had come, and that he must go back to town and earn some more money, the thought of the change saddened me immeasurably. His jealous passion was up in arms in a moment. He was on his knees beside me, looking up into my face with fiery eyes.

"You see, you see," he exclaimed, half angrily, half sorrowfully. "All places in the world are the same to me as long as I have you with me, while your love is only a matter of the flowers and the sunshine."

“No, no, Harry, it is not,” I said, quietly. “It is only that we have been so happy; it doesn’t seem as if it could ever be the same in London in the fog.”

Whether my husband feared that the fog would be too much for my constancy, or whether he had some deeper reason for disliking the thought of a return to town, I don’t know: he assured me that he was no longer in danger of arrest, that that matter had been settled, but it was evident that he looked forward to the change with no more eagerness than I did. My husband earned his living chiefly as a journalist and artist, but he also received occasional sums of money from a source which he did not disclose to me. I knew hardly more about his affairs now that I was married to him than I had done before, the difference between his age and mine making it easy for him to put between us this slight barrier, which I on my side made few attempts to break. He took lodgings for us in a narrow street off Holborn. My sitting-room had an old-fashioned bow-window from which I could watch the traffic in that busy thoroughfare; and here it was that I spent most of my time when my husband was away.

I was watching for his return one evening in May when a circumstance occurred which filled me with alarm and with suspicions which I found it impossible to stifle. As he came to the corner of the street and I raised my hand as usual in sign of welcome, his arm was suddenly seized by a woman, whom I easily recognised, even at that distance, as the person who had been in the gallery of the church on our wedding-day. I saw him try to shake her off; in vain. I saw him then endeavor to draw her away, no doubt in order to be out of my sight. But she was determined to keep him just where he was, and, being a woman of fair stature and robust muscular development, she was able to prevail. For some minutes they stood there together, he angry and almost silent, she, as I judged by her gestures, entreating, pleading with him, and finally threatening him. When at last he managed to break away from her, he did not come up the street, but turned back into Holborn and disappeared rapidly, not only from my sight, but from that of the other woman.

I passed that evening in a frenzy of doubt, and the

night also. Next morning I received a letter from my husband telling me that he had been sent to France for a few days on business by the paper to which he chiefly contributed, enclosing me some money, and advising me to go down to the little village where we had spent most of our honeymoon and await his return, where I could be happy among the country fields and lanes.

But I felt ill and depressed, and was unhappy besides; I had not the courage to take even a short journey by myself. So I stayed on in our lodgings, now rendered dearer than ever by my loneliness, until I received another shock by seeing my husband on the other side of the street when I was out shopping.

I had that morning received a letter from him dated from Paris, and with the Paris post-mark, in which he said he should not be able to return for some days. This happened in Oxford Street, at a point where the throng both of vehicles and of foot-passengers was so great that I could not have recognised any figure less familiar than my husband even at that short distance. Had the street been less full of traffic I should most certainly have been able to overtake him. As it was, the first shock stunned me for a moment, so that I stopped short; when I had recovered sufficiently to venture across the street, to a girl of my country breeding always an alarming task, my husband was lost among the crowd. I returned home stupefied, opened and read the letters I had received from him within the last few days, and tried to find in them some trace of the coldness, the weariness of my society, which was the only possible reason I could imagine for the deception he had played upon me. But I could find not a trace, in his passionately affectionate words, of any feeling but the most acute misery at our temporary separation. It seemed to me, and young as I was I had the woman's keen and sure instinct upon this matter, that there was an absolutely genuine ring in every expression of fondness, that the very simplicity, almost foolishness of his terms of endearment were dictated by the strongest love.

I tried hard to convince myself that I had been mistaken, and that it was not my husband whom I had seen. But this it was impossible to do. The only alternative was to believe that he had been sent for back to

London as suddenly as he had been sent away, and that urgent business to be transacted for his employers had delayed for a few hours his return to me.

But the day went on, and night came, and he did not come. And in the morning came his usual Paris letter, full of the same expressions of yearning, devoted affection. My first thought, on the receipt of this, was to write back a letter full of reproaches for his treatment, and entreaties to him to explain his conduct. But before the letter was half written I was shocked by my own temerity, and tore up the letter, not daring to send it. Perhaps it was true, as he said, that my love was not strong enough to cast out fear. So I sent no answer, and thought that perhaps my silence would have a better effect than my most eloquent words. The next morning I received a letter which was an answer to the last I had written; and as he said that he had just received mine, I took this as a conclusive proof that it had been forwarded to him from Paris, and that this answer of his had been forwarded to Paris and sent on to me. I still, therefore, refrained from writing; and the next two letters I received were full of reproaches for my silence and expressions of anxiety about me.

Day after day, until far into the evening, I watched at my window, thinking that, even if he knew himself to be watched, and was therefore unable to come to me, he would at least find some opportunity of passing by the house in which I lived, to assure himself of my safety.

This state of things had continued for more than a week, during which time my husband's letters had grown more and more impassioned and imploring, when, late one evening, as I was still watching by my unlighted window, my heart leapt up on seeing turning the corner of the street from Holborn a man whom I recognized as my husband, in spite of a change of costume which seemed like an attempt at disguise.

I cannot pretend that the feelings with which I watched him approach were those of unmixed joy. Pleasure certainly had a large share in them, for he had been a kind husband to me, and I loved him. But fear, anxiety, doubt, and suspicion helped to raise such a tempest of anxiety within me that I sank on my knees

and clung to the window-sill, trembling and cold, unable at first to raise myself from the floor in order to run down the stairs to meet him. It was with tottering steps that I reached the door, ran down the stairs, and, opening the front door, stood just within to be ready to welcome him. I looked out, and saw him still some distance away, on the other side of the street. He crossed, on seeing me, but in a leisurely manner, not with the usual rapidity of his movements when impatient.

I heard his footsteps: I whispered, "Harry!" I was already leaning forward, expecting to be taken into his arms, when he reached the door and quietly passed it, whispering, as he did so,—

"Go in. Go in at once."

I had scarcely time to catch the sense of his words, to retreat into the door-way, and to half close the door, when I heard more footsteps outside, and had the curiosity to watch through the half-open door to see who it was that was coming.

There was a street-lamp near enough to show me the face of the woman, for a woman it was, who, fortunately without a look in my direction, passed me as my husband had done.

It was the woman I had seen twice before: once in the church, on my wedding-day, and once at the corner of this very street. I could have no doubt that she was following my husband.

CHAPTER VI.

ALTHOUGH this third occasion of seeing the strange woman who was pursuing my husband naturally filled me with the greatest uneasiness, it did not make me jealous. I could have no doubt that, although my husband had undoubtedly deceived me in representing her to be an old servant of his family, affection had no part in the feeling with which he regarded her. The tie which bound him to her, if tie there was, on his side was certainly fear alone; and I could have little doubt,

after what I had seen, that it was the fear of her alarming or injuring me. If my affection for my husband had not been sensibly altered in character under the trials to which it had been lately subjected, no doubt I should have been retrospectively jealous of this woman, whom he had possibly at one time loved. As it was, while I was anxious to know what hold she had upon him, my chief concern was the power she apparently possessed of keeping us apart.

On the following morning I received a letter from my husband, posted in London, but giving no address.

“MY OWN DARLING WIFE,—I cannot bear this terrible silence. You are angry at my deception in pretending to be in Paris. My dearest one, cannot you trust my love sufficiently to understand that I can do nothing, nothing, except with a view of sparing you unhappiness? My darling, I worship you. My arms ache for you: I cannot sleep at night for thinking of you, for sighing, for shedding tears sometimes, to think that your lips are no longer near mine, that you may be ill, dying perhaps, while I am away. Remember, to believe that I love you is all I ask. I don't say, believe in my noble character, my unblemished honour, or anything of that sort. Think what you like of my character, my conduct; despise me, hate me if you like for everything else, so long as you believe me and trust me for that one thing,—that I love you, I love you so dearly that no man has ever before loved a woman more dearly than I do you. I am a scamp, Perdita; a rascal if you like: but however bad your steady-going citizen may think me, I am punished for all and more than all I have ever done by what I am suffering now in not being able to come to you, my own darling wife. Pity me, Perdita. I am followed about wherever I go, so that I dare not come to you: it would only involve you in the ruin that must come. When I saw you last night I almost risked everything by taking you in my arms. Thank God, I had just strength enough, just courage enough not to do it. Wait a little longer, my dearest, and for Heaven's sake write a few lines to the address I gave you in Paris. It will reach me, as you know. Tell me you are sorry for me; tell me you

will be glad to see me, for see you I will, I must, or I shall fall ill and die. I am not well.

“Ever your devoted, adoring husband,

“HARRY.”

On receipt of this letter I burst into such a passion of tears that I tore up sheet after sheet before I could write one that was not too much blurred to read. I need not say what my answer was to such a letter. I entreated him to let me meet him somewhere, if only for ten minutes, promising to dress myself in such a way that I should not be known, and to be discreet beyond measure. But in his answer to this, which, allowing for the time taken up by sending my letter to Paris, I did not get immediately, he refused to let me meet him, although he expressed himself as warmed and comforted inexpressibly by my loving letter. He sent me some money, and told me to take great care of myself and to keep heart, for that he would contrive to see me soon.

But these assurances, tender and kind as they were, could not, in the circumstances, make me happy, or even afford me much comfort.

Two or three days passed miserably, during which I kept in-doors, afraid that my husband might arrive unexpectedly, and that I might be absent and so lose the opportunity of seeing him.

At last there came a day of such bright sunshine that, weary of my long imprisonment in two dark rooms, I ventured out, feeling sure that my husband would not choose the full daylight of such a bright day in which to pay a surreptitious visit. I went through the central squares towards Regent's Park; and as I passed one of the large, gloomy, severely respectable houses which abound in that district, I saw, coming down the steps, Mr. Wray, the solicitor who had met my husband at my aunt's hotel and warned him of the danger to which he was exposing himself by remaining in England. He recognized me at once, and insisted on shaking hands with me, although I averted my head and tried to pass quickly without speaking.

“Miss Farbrace!” he exclaimed. “Why, you weren't going to cut me, were you? After all the trouble I've taken, too, in helping your aunt to find you!”

"I don't wish my aunt to find me. I was not happy with her, and she turned me out of the house herself," I answered, coldly.

"Well, well, a moment's irritation, perhaps; nothing more. She has been terribly distressed by your disappearance, and if you would only go and see her——"

I drew back at once.

"Oh, well, well," went on Mr. Wray, quickly, perceiving that his persuasions would be thrown away, "of course you can do as you like about that. Only it is a pity, don't you see, to cherish ill-feeling after a misunderstanding of this sort, when by so doing you may lose a valuable friend. For Mrs. Morgan, though she has her faults, is a good-hearted woman, and can be a useful friend."

"I know she can—to other people," I answered, bitterly. "But she has not been a very kind friend to me."

"And so you won't try her again?" said Mr. Wray. "Will you let me have the pleasure of telling her that you are well and happy?"

Under his scrutiny my eyes fell. I was not happy, and he saw it.

"You can say that I am well, yes."

"And—happy?"

I could feel that I was blushing uneasily.

"Oh, yes," I answered. "At least as happy as a wife can be when her husband is away. For I am married now."

"Married! Indeed!"

I hesitated. This man's feelings towards my husband were friendly, as I knew. Could I do better than confide in him to some extent? I decided that at least it could do no harm."

"Yes. My husband is Mr. Dare."

But Mr. Wray did not seem to know whom I meant.

"Dare? Oh, indeed!"

"You know him," said I, quickly, with an uneasy throbbing at my heart. "You met him one day in the hall, at the hotel, my aunt's hotel. You told him that—that it was not safe for him to be in England."

Mr. Wray looked at me in stupefaction.

"You don't mean to say that—— Good heavens!"

And the expression of his face instantly changed to one of deepest pity. There was a short pause, during which I, in confusion and in some anger, looked everywhere but at his face. He then went on, in a kindly and persuasive tone:

“Look here, Mrs. Dare. You say your husband’s away. I suppose you don’t know where he’s gone to?”

“Yes, I do,” I answered, indignantly; and then I stopped short, blushing very deeply as I remembered that I had unconsciously said what was not strictly true.

“Well,” went on Mr. Wray, who was walking by my side, having insisted upon accompanying me on my way, “why don’t you go and stay with your aunt for a few days, until he comes back? It would be much pleasanter for you than staying in London lodgings by yourself, and I assure you your aunt would be delighted to see you.”

I persisted in my refusal, and it was only upon his most urgent assurances that he would not tell her my address that I was prevailed upon to give it to him. When he had left me I worried myself into thinking that even this was an indiscretion. But Mr. Wray, who was an elderly man, had always shown a kind interest in me, having known my father well by reputation, and being, though one would not have thought it from his dry-as-dust appearance, interested in all matters concerning the Turf. In my loneliness, therefore, I had yielded to the weakness of confiding in him so far as to tell him where I lived. As I went home I reproached myself a little for my indiscretion; but the greater trouble—that of wondering why Mr. Wray was so much shocked by my marriage—soon swallowed up the rest.

It must have been about a week after this, during which time I had been in the constant receipt of my husband’s letters, to which I could only reply in the same roundabout way as before, that I found that the card bearing the words “A Bed-Sitting-Room To Let” had been taken out of the window underneath that of my sitting room. As I never came in contact with my fellow-lodger, I did not trouble my head about him, until, returning home from a walk one day at dusk, I saw his face at his window and recognised it as that of the

detective who had come to the hotel in search of Mr. Dare.

This discovery naturally gave me a great shock, since I felt certain that he was again on the watch for my husband, who might at any moment, by returning to see me, walk, as it were, into the jaws of the lion. I instantly despatched a letter warning my husband of this new danger, and I set myself to watch, on my side, with more keenness than ever. I had this one advantage,—that whereas the window underneath mine was not a bow-window, I could see up and down the street very much farther than the ground-floor lodger could.

Feeling, as I did, that it was now my duty to spy as much as I could upon the detective's movements, I soon found that he lost no opportunity of ingratiating himself with the little, slatternly maid-of-all-work, who was constantly snatching a moment to converse with him in the passage or on the staircase. I at once divined that he had found out from her all the particulars she knew, few as they were, concerning my husband and myself. By a little coaxing and a little finesse on my side, I discovered also from Sarah that the great object of the lodger down-stairs was to try and obtain the key of the letter-box, which Mrs. Cook, being an experienced landlady, always kept herself. His plea was that his correspondence was very important, and that a delay of a few minutes in the receipt of his letters was a matter of serious importance to him.

“Which I told him, ma'am,” went on Sarah to me, “as I dursn't arsk Mrs. Cook for it, for she'd only scold like anything and say he had no right to his letters before the other lodgers. An' I'm sure as for gettin' it without arskin', there ain't no way for me to do it, even if I wanted to,—which I don't, an' so I told him.”

Now this revelation made me more watchful than ever, and I took care always to be in waiting at the top of the staircase when the postman came, and to watch from that dark corner all that went on in the hall below until my letter, if there was one for me, was placed safely in my hands.

From the moment that I discovered who my new fellow-lodger was, I never left the house until I had received an answer to my letter informing my husband

of this new peril. When, however, I had received his assurance that he would be on his guard, I yielded one evening to the longing for a little fresh air, and at half-past nine, when the last post was gone and I was therefore off guard, I put on my bonnet to go out for a walk.

I had scarcely got outside my room when I heard the front-door open to let some one out; and I got out of the house in time to see the back of my friend the detective, who was walking at a rapid pace, as if to keep an important appointment.

Then the idea darted into my mind that the best thing I could do with my time was to play the spy upon the spy, and to find out, if possible, where he was going, in the interests of my husband. This was the easier for me to do, as, on the one occasion on which I had caught sight of him, I had every reason to believe that he had not seen me, and that, therefore, even if he should turn round and see me walking behind him, he would not, at the distance I took care to keep between us, know that I was his fellow-lodger.

My great fear was that, being evidently in a hurry, he should get into a hansom; in which case I felt I should not have the courage to get into another and deliberately tell the driver to go in pursuit. Luckily for my plan, however, it was a very fine September night, and the man chose to walk. He went along Holborn, down Charing Cross Road, I following all the time and keeping him in sight without very much difficulty, along Shaftesbury Avenue and Piccadilly, never slackening his pace until he came to Hyde Park Corner. Here he loitered about for a few minutes, evidently waiting for some one. Then, still looking round him from time to time, lest he should miss the person whom he had to meet, he sauntered slowly down Grosvenor Place, keeping on the side opposite to the houses. It was necessary now for me to observe the greatest caution, but I managed to discover that one in particular of the tall mansions overlooking the grounds of Buckingham Palace was the object of his attention. I was puzzled and curious, and I wondered whether he had found me out and come to this place as a blind; for I had imagined that the goal of his journey would be some dingy lawyer's office. What business

could he possibly have connected with my husband at such a stately mansion as this?

Even as I asked myself this question a woman brushed past me as I stood in the crowd waiting at the corner opposite St. George's Hospital for their omnibuses; quickly as she passed, I recognized the woman whom I had on three occasions seen with my husband, and I knew at once that it was she for whom the detective was waiting. Moving slowly from where I stood in the midst of the crowd to the outer skirt of it, I saw, as I had expected to see, that the woman and the man met on the opposite side of the road. They walked down some little distance towards Victoria: I did not dare to follow; but in about ten minutes the woman returned alone, and, to my great astonishment, went up the steps of the mansion which the detective had been watching, and was instantly admitted.

I had seen enough to puzzle me completely, without a hope of finding a clue to the mystery which surrounded my husband's relations with this woman. He had told me that she was a servant of his family. But in that case she would not have gone in by the front-door of such a house as this. I lingered a little while in the neighbourhood, but saw no more either of the man or of the woman, and then I got into an omnibus and returned home.

On the following day the detective was still in the house, and still on the watch. In the evening the landlady went out, and when the seven o'clock post came round, I saw from my post at the top of the stairs that the detective had at last got his wish; for he came out of his room with the key of the letter-box in his hand. Not caring that I must now expose myself to recognition, I ran down the stairs and reached the front-door as soon as he did. He was taken by surprise, and fell back a step, retaining, however, the key in his hand. Looking through the glass of the letter-box I saw that the only letter it contained was one from my husband to me.

"Give me the key, if you please," said I. "The letter is for me."

I was bold, for there was a witness present in the shape of Sarah, who had appeared from the back premises on hearing my rapid descent.

“I will give you the letter, madam,” he said.

And before I could interfere he had turned the key in the letter-box, taken out my letter, and not concealing the fact that he examined the handwriting of the address carefully, he handed it to me.

“Thank you,” he then said, politely, “I have found out all that I wanted to know.”

I was much agitated, and I had come down the stairs very rapidly. When the man uttered these words, I turned suddenly so sick, so faint with disappointment, with dread, that I fell back against the wall helplessly, unable for the moment to stand alone.

Sarah was frightened.

“Oh, ma’am, don’t look like that!” she exclaimed. “You look as you was agoin’ to die this very minute.” And, in the excess of her feeling, the little maid turned against her whilom friend the ground-floor lodger. “Look what you’ve been and gone and done, frightening the poor lady like that!”

To do the man justice, he seemed himself concerned at the strong effect his action had produced upon me, and was anxious to make all the amends in his power. He sent Sarah for a glass of water, and took the opportunity to say, as soon as she was out of hearing,—

“Very sorry, ma’am, very sorry indeed to have upset you. But it’s all in the way of business, you know, and I’m bound to do the best I can for them I serve.”

“What good can you do here?” I answered, indignantly. “If you are following my husband you will not find him here; and you have no business to touch private letters.”

I was hardly myself yet, being very cold and weak, so that I had to sit down on the little bench by the hat-stand. The man received my indignant outburst very mildly, and looked at me with unmistakable pity. At last he said, quietly, when he had taken the glass of water from Sarah and sent her off again in search of something else, “I ain’t following him this time, ma’am. He’s settled that little matter I was after him for at the hotel down in the Strand.”

I started and broke out involuntarily,—

“Settled it? Settled the forgery?”

Again the man gave me a pitying look before replying,—

“Forgery! I don’t know anything about that, ma’am. We’ve been after him a many times for one thing and another, but he’s got friends who help him out of his scrapes, or he’d have been out of reach of making more mischief years ago.”

I leaned back, with my eyes fixed upon the man’s face, horror-struck and unable so much as to protest. The man hesitated, looked up, looked down, and then went on:

“No, ma’am. When I saw you in the Strand that day he gave me the slip,”—and the man looked at me in a shrewd manner which told me that he knew I had connived at the escape,—“I had a warrant against him taken out by the St. Pancras Guardians for the support of his wife, who had become chargeable to the parish through his leaving her destitute.”

But I utterly refused to believe this, and springing up, with all my energies recovered in a moment, I said,—

“His *wife*! Oh, no. You’ve made a mistake. You’ve been following the wrong man.”

The detective shook his head.

“No, ma’am, sorry to distress you, but I haven’t. Would he have paid up for her if she hadn’t been truly his wife? Sorry to say it, ma’am, but he’s as precious a rascal as you’ll find in a long day’s march, and if you’ll take advice that I give you honest, you’ll get away from here as quiet and as quick as you can, and never let him know where you’ve gone to. For his wife has a notion of the game he’s been carrying on, and it’s *she* that has set me to watch you.”

CHAPTER VII.

It seems strange to me now when I think about it, but the announcement that the man I had married was really the husband of another woman did not overwhelm me, indeed, came almost a relief to me. For the mystery

concerning him was at last cleared up: I knew who the woman was who had been watching us; I knew, in fact, the worst.

The detective was astonished, as well he might be, at the way in which I received the intelligence. There was no more fainting, no more helplessness; I just looked at him straightforwardly, and presently said,—

“Oh!”

“You take it very well, ma’am,” he said, with some admiration and still more astonishment. “I never knew a lady take a thing of that sort so cool before.”

I hardly noticed what he was saying, so deeply occupied was I in considering this new development. It must be remembered that my feelings towards my husband had undergone a change since the happy early days which immediately followed our marriage. His reticence, his deception had inevitably weakened my affection, so that this last blow was not the heart-breaking one it would have been if nothing had happened previously to shake my trust in him. For my own position I think I should have cared little, but for one secret reason. My thoughts turned to the other woman, the wife whom he had deserted for me.

“He deserted her? Left her destitute, you say?” said I.

“Yes, ma’am. She had to go the workhouse, along of her little girl.”

I started and flushed deeply. This desertion of his own child shocked me more than my husband’s treatment either of myself or of the other woman.

“He deserted his child, his own child!”

“Yes, ma’am. He’s a beauty, he is!”

But I did not want to hear the man’s comments, so I thanked him quite coolly for the information and the warning he had given me, as if the matter in hand were of no consequence, and then I turned to go up-stairs. Before I had taken many steps, however, I addressed him once more:

“Does this woman, his wife, hate him very much? She wants to be revenged upon him, I suppose?”

The man smiled.

“Why, no, ma’am,” said he. “The boot’s on the other leg altogether. It’s you she hates, and wants to be re-

venged on, as far as I can make out. That's mostly the way in these cases."

"Poor thing!" said I.

And I went up-stairs more thoughtful than unhappy; for I was no longer in the dark as to the dangers which hung over my head as well as my husband's.

My *husband's!* I repeated the words to myself half aloud, with something like a laugh. It was impossible for me to realize yet that they were a mockery only of his real relation to me. Had he then just tired of me and deserted me, that he lived in the same city with me and never came back? I could not believe this. I took out his letters and read them again, and felt assured that this was not true. His wife, I repeated to myself,—his wife, his real wife, the other woman, had got hold of him again, and she, poor thing, knowing that his heart was gone from her altogether, had set a detective to keep watch upon the miserable girl whom he had deceived, to find out whether her husband's infatuation still continued. How can she be so mean-spirited! thought I, with a curl of the lip. I felt that I would rather die than trouble myself further about a man who had treated me so ill. It may be taken as a sure proof that my love had diminished in a very marked degree, that I could take the other woman's part as well as I could my own.

In the mean time there was the practical question, What was I to do? But for my quarrel with my aunt I should have gone straight back to the hotel. Even now for one weak moment I harboured the idea, only to reject it when I considered how abject my humiliation would be, and, more than all, how vindictively she would be likely to triumph over my wretched story. As a matter of fact, I did my aunt the greatest injustice by these thoughts, as I presently found; but I had seen so much of the hard look her face could assume in displeasure that it was no wonder I shrank from the possibility of exposing myself to it.

So I ended by doing the simplest thing in the world,—remaining where I was. And it was not until I had solved the problem in this way that I remembered that I had in my possession a letter from my husband that I had not yet opened. When I did so, the story I had just heard suddenly took an altogether new complexion.

This was the letter:

“MY OWN DARLING PERDITA,—I am ill, very ill. It is possible that I may not live many more days. I caught a cold which developed into inflammation of the lungs, and my voice is gone. I am tortured with thinking about you, wondering whether you are keeping well and taking care of yourself, and whether, above all, you have been worried and alarmed by a person of whose very existence I kept you as ignorant as I could as long as possible. My darling wife, if this fiend of a woman should find you out in spite of all the precautions I have taken, do not pay the slightest heed to what she says, but wait till I can come to you, for come I will for one last look at your face, one last kiss before I die in your arms,—pay no heed to her, I say, until you can see me and hear my explanation. It is a very poor one, I have to confess: I have treated you badly, cruelly. My excuse is this: that my love for you swallowed up every other feeling, and that I trusted to my luck to ward off a danger which then only seemed remote. Wait, I say; do not judge me until you have heard me. My darling, I would have come to you long ago but that I have been watched by this woman, so that I could not have come to you without bringing her after me. But now I have devised a plan to get her away from her post of sentinel for long enough for me to escape to where my heart lies. Keep up your courage, my darling wife, and whatever you hear against me, keep your arms open and your heart warm for your dying husband.

“HARRY.”

I had not recovered from the convulsion of feeling into which I was thrown by this letter when a four-wheeled cab drew up slowly to the door.

There stepped out of it one of those carelessly-dressed, rough-haired men, good-humoured of face and inclined to be stout, of whom I had already seen enough to know that he belonged, either directly or indirectly, as a dabbler or as a genuine worker, to the ranks of Literature or of Art. He helped out of the cab with the utmost tenderness a feeble invalid whom, but for the fact that I expected him, I should scarcely have recognised as my

husband. Shocked beyond measure, prepared as I was, I ran trembling down to the door to let them in. It was quite clear to me from the first moment of our meeting that my husband had in no wise exaggerated the seriousness of his condition. His weakness was extreme; though he tried to speak, I could not understand him; and the tears rolled down his cheeks as we half led, half carried him up-stairs. Even the feeble and shaky handwriting of the letter I had just received from him had not led me to expect to see such a wreck as he had become. He wanted to remain on the sofa in the sitting-room; but in this he was overruled, his friend, the most genial, good-natured Bohemian in the world, telling him, with a kindly glance at me, that bed was the best place for him, so that he might be nursed back to health speedily, and not give me an invalid to look after longer than was absolutely necessary.

So his friend put him to bed, and then came into the sitting-room to exchange a few words with me.

"I'm afraid he's very ill, Mrs. Dare," he said, in a low, sympathetic voice. "Of course he ought not to have come here to-day. But he was so anxious to see you that it was impossible to refuse him. Indeed I think a refusal would have killed him outright."

"But why not have sent for me to go to him?" said I, quickly. "Surely he knew that I was ready to come!"

"Yes, yes, of course; it wasn't that. But—— Oh, well, I suppose something about it—— There was some one he didn't want you to meet who might have put in an appearance and made things unpleasant in spite of all precautions. That's how it was, you see."

I looked up at him inquiringly, but he would not meet my eyes, and he took up his hat and held out his hand, saying that he would look in again by and bye, and see, as he expressively continued, "whether things were going on all right."

"You are very good, very kind. I thank you very much, Mr. ——?" I hesitated, inquiringly.

"Oh, not Mr. anything. Just Tom, plain Tom, very plain Tom," said he, with a jovial laugh. "I've known your husband a long time now, and he never calls me anything but Tom; in fact nobody does."

I concluded from the way in which he spoke that the

friendship between my husband and him was one of many years' standing. I afterwards found that they had never met until five weeks before that day, but that, nevertheless, he had for more than half of that period nursed him and tended him like the most devoted of brothers. He had a surname, in spite of his objection to use it: it was Hertz.

When he had gone, I went back to my husband, whom I found so weak that he could not attempt to speak without coughing violently enough to alarm me. I insisted therefore upon his remaining silent, and sat beside him holding his hand, this being the only way by which I could induce him to lie still.

When I had got him to take some beef-tea I had caused to be prepared, he presently fell asleep.

I did not dare move, so I sat still holding his hand until I was cold and stiff, and until the daylight had faded away. A fog was coming on which alarmed me, for I feared it might make my husband worse. I was watching the dim cloud grow denser in the little space of sky visible to me above and between the chimney-pots, and counting the ticks of my husband's watch which was fastened to the rail of the bed above his head, when I heard a knock at the front-door, followed by a colloquy in the hall.

The blood rushed tingling up into my cheeks when I heard Sarah say, "This way, ma'am," and coming upstairs, knock at the door of my sitting-room. I released my hand without disturbing my patient and slid quietly through the folding-doors into the sitting-room. Sarah's head was by this time inside the door.

"Oh, there's a lady wishes to see you, ma'am," said she.

And the person announced pushed past the girl into the room and shut the door.

"You know who I am, I expect!" said my visitor, defiantly.

Indeed I had been prepared for this visit, so I only said, drearily,—

"Oh, yes, I think so. You are his wife."

It was my visitor who was surprised, not I. She stared at me in evident perplexity, and with some suspicion.

"Sit down, please," said I, "and I will light the gas. And I must ask you to speak low, as he is asleep in the next room. I dare say you know he only came here to-day, and the exertion has fatigued him so much that I'm in terror every time he draws breath."

She mumbled something in assent rather incoherent, sat down on the uninviting lodging-house sofa, and stared at me in silence while I got the matches, lit the gas, and drew down the blinds.

"Will you have a cup of tea?" I asked, as I rang the bell.

My visitor started, and drew herself up, scandalized by my coolness.

"Tea! Me!" at last she gasped.

"Yes. Why not? Why should you and I quarrel, or try to be disagreeable to one another? The misfortune which has happened to us both is neither your fault nor mine."

The woman looked at me incredulously, as if she found it impossible to believe that I was sincere.

"You take things very coolly!" said she, at last.

"Oh, I have got over all the worst part of it now," I said, wearily, as I leaned against the mantel-piece, looking into the fire. "You would not feel any bitterness towards me, I think, any more than I do towards you, if you knew what I have felt and suffered lately, knowing that there was some mystery about my husband's movements (you mustn't mind my calling him my husband, for it was only this morning that I learnt that he had a wife living when he married me), and——"

The woman started up.

"Only this morning—that you knew!" she cried, as she looked searchingly into my face.

"Yes. The detective told me. But you need not have set a detective to watch me. Why didn't you come to me yourself? It would have been much kinder to put me out of my suspense. And you need not have been afraid that I should have stood in your way for a moment," I went on, proudly, "when I once knew."

The woman uttered a rude little laugh, and glanced at the folding-doors.

"That's just what I felt, and what I was afraid of," said she. "If I'd been the means of parting you from him altogether, like that, he'd never have spoken to me again."

“And you would have cared!” cried I. “Why, if a man had treated me as he has treated you nothing would ever induce me to speak to *him* again!”

The woman shook her head.

“You young girls are like that,” she said. “When a man’s had the best years of your life, and when you’ve loved him above everything else, and slaved for him and put up with him for years, you don’t feel like that, and so I tell you. The world is all before you; you’ll have your chances of happiness yet. It’s all behind me; and if it weren’t that his people are kinder to me than he is, there would be nothing before me but starvation, either quick or slow.”

“But,” said I, astonished, “you talk as if you were afraid of him, and I understood that it was he who was afraid of you. So that I myself was afraid of your coming, thinking that you would be very violent and that you would say cruel things to me.”

The woman looked at me askance, and seemed rather confused. Then she laughed uneasily.

“Why, yes,” she said, hesitatingly, “but then, you see. I didn’t know how you’d take me. If you had begun to bluster, and to say you were his lawful wife, when all the time I knew that I was, you’d very likely have found me different. But—but as it is, you know, why, of course I can’t help seeing there’s something in what you say, that it’s hard upon you, too.”

She spoke with a touch of feeling in her voice, and then, looking at her, I for the first time perceived, what the hardness of her expression had prevented my seeing before, that the woman had had beauty. She had still the remains of a very fine figure; but she was one of those brunettes who, starting with more beauty of feature than of expression, lose all their charms when the pink and the olive tints of the face get merged, as middle-life approaches, into a uniform, unpleasing, leathery tint. The compassion I had felt for the woman when I first heard her story grew stronger as I looked at her and listened to her. Although she was not a lady, she was not by any means vulgar. She absolutely looked the woman she described herself to be: a faithful, hard-working, a moreover thoroughly respectable drudge, weary of the hard life she had had to lead, and divided,

for the rest, between fidelity and bitter jealousy. For it was evident that she was by no means able yet to bring herself to feel for me as much as I did for her.

"Then, if you are so much afraid of him," I said, pressing the point curiously, "why have you come here to-night?"

She looked down and hesitated.

"I—I hardly know," she stammered, at last. "At least I suppose I meant to—to have it out with you: only—only, you see, I didn't know you were going to take it so quietly, so sensibly. I thought you were going to stand on your rights——"

"Rights!" echoed I, with irony.

"While I," she went on, "meant to stand on mine."

"And now," said I, "are you going to see him?"

"You would let me?" said she, looking at me with much astonishment.

"Oh, yes. Besides, you have the most right." The way was open to the folding doors, but still she hesitated. It was my turn to look surprised. "You don't care to see him while I'm here, I dare say?" I suggested. "Shall I leave him to you? I will only ask to see him just once more."

But my visitor had grown very white, and she stared at me in perplexity.

"You—you would be content to do that!" she said, in a trembling voice. "You don't love him, then?"

As she asked this question she came nearer to me, and, thrusting her face forward, examined mine attentively.

"Yes, yes, I do. But not as you do, I think."

"No. That's always the way!" exclaimed she, bitterly. "A man is ready to be trampled upon by a girl who doesn't care a straw about him; while for the woman who's worshipped him for years he hasn't a kind word." She looked at me with an angry frown.

"Why, what can I do more?" said I. "Why do you look at me like that?"

She turned her eyes quickly from my face, and looked rather ashamed.

"To tell you the truth," said she, "I feel I almost hate you for not caring for him."

And suddenly her composure gave way, and she went

quickly towards the outer door of the room, hiding her face in her handkerchief and sobbing bitterly.

"Why, won't you see him?" said I, following her, very much puzzled. She drew away from me as I approached.

"No, I dare not. He doesn't want me; he wants you; that's the cruel part of it. If I were to take your place, he would drive me away with hard words and cruel looks. I know him!"

And in spite of all that I could say to comfort her, to encourage her, she persisted in her resolution, and left the house without seeing him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THIS interview, painful as it was, relieved my mind of one of the anxieties which had preyed upon me lately. This poor woman, whom I had been taught to dread, was not in herself such a formidable person after all. It was in her relation to me and to the man whom I had supposed to be my husband that her terrors lay; and the discovery of my unfortunate position had been so much discounted by the fears which had tormented me of late that I could not realize properly my unhappy situation.

My visitor had scarcely gone before I heard my husband's feeble voice trying to call me. He asked if there had not been some one talking to me in the next room. I thought it better not to disturb him by telling him the truth, so I said it was some one in search of apartments, and he was satisfied. He seemed better after his sleep, and when I had made him take some nourishment, he asked me to prop him up and to give him a pencil and a sheet of note-paper. With some difficulty he then wrote a letter, and he was folding it up and putting it into its envelope, which he had not yet directed, when his friend Tom Hertz came back again to see him. No doubt he got his friend to direct and to post the letter, for I saw no more of it. When his friend had left him for the night, however, my husband took my hand in his as I sat beside his bed, and said, in a husky whisper, so that I had to bend my head to listen,—

“My poor little Perdita, I shall have to leave you very soon. So I am sending for another protector—and I hope a better one—for my poor little wife. My aunt’s a queer body, but I think she’ll be kind; I don’t think any one could help being kind to you, my poor child.”

But I, far from being reassured by these kind words, felt a sudden pang of alarm. I did not want to see a strange lady; I felt that I would rather, if I must, go back to the aunt of whom I knew the worst than to this stranger, upon whose kindness I had no real claim. I tried to protest, but he only smiled, and said that he must have his own way in this.

I heartily hoped that his letter would meet with no response; but the very next day a very quiet brougham drove up to the door, and Sarah, with considerably more respect than she had shown to my previous visitor, ushered into my sitting room a very tiny and remarkably thin lady, dressed with ostentatious simplicity and even shabbiness, with a little dried-up, expressionless face, who advanced straight into the room, and looking at me from head to foot with the careful and intelligent scrutiny one would bestow upon a rare animal at the zoological gardens, gave me a cold little nod, and said,—

“You are the Perdita my nephew writes about, I suppose?”

She spoke in a peculiarly hard and rasping voice, which I supposed to be assumed especially for my benefit, but which I afterwards found was her natural tone. Her tone and manner irritated me exceedingly, and I answered, very coldly,—

“Yes. Do you wish to see your nephew? He is in the next room.”

Still following me about with the same persistent and apparently vacant stare, my visitor answered, shortly,—

“I should like to talk to you first, since it was about you that he wrote to me. You carry matters with a high hand, I see, considering your position. I notice that my nephew writes of you as his wife; but this is not the case, I believe?”

Surely my own aunt’s unkindness was nothing to the absolute brutality of this new “friend.” I answered in a voice which I could scarcely control for the rage in my heart.

“So I learnt yesterday for the first time, *for the first time*, you understand. And so, being absolutely no relation to me whatever, you have no right to talk to me in this tone.”

She looked at me in exactly the same exasperating manner as before, and said.—

“You are wrong and foolish to give way to passion in this manner. I have come here to befriend you; but there is no good to be obtained by shutting our eyes to facts.”

“How can I shut my eyes to facts?” I cried, impatiently. “Is my position the sort of thing a woman can shut her eyes to?”

“Indeed, *I* think not. But you seem to rather ignore it.”

The slight increase of asperity in the lady's manner showed me the view she took of the matter.

“I don't think you understand, or else I'm afraid you don't believe what I told you, that I believed until yesterday morning that I was really his wife.”

But she was quite unimpressed by this asseveration.

“Oh, yes; I understood that he went through a form of marriage with you.”

“Then how could I know it was not a real marriage?” said I, boldly.

“Well, I don't say you could; but that makes no difference to the fact that you are not a wife. You seem to treat the matter with great levity.”

“And you seem to think that I ought to be as much ashamed of myself as if it had been my fault,” retorted I.

“Certainly I had expected a more modest manner, from the accounts my nephew gave of you,” said my visitor, drawing in her lips very tightly. “Indeed, I should have thought better of you, I must own, if, when you discovered your mistake, you had left him, and allowed the woman whom he deserted for you to take her place—what I consider her rightful place—by his side.”

“Well, I offered to. She came here yesterday, and I had a long talk with her, and said she could come, and I would go away. But she said that he would be unhappy if I did so, and so, of course, I stayed.”

But my hearer was scandalized.

"You had a long talk with her!" she exclaimed, with horror. "Really, I should have thought your sense of delicacy would have prevented such a meeting!"

"But how could I help myself? She came in, and I couldn't help seeing her, any more than I could help seeing you. And if you think me such an abandoned creature, how can a trifle like that matter?"

"I have not been brought up to regard womanly delicacy and modesty and honour as trifles," said my visitor, severely. "Perhaps you consider it a trifle that your child—you are going to have a child, I believe?—will be unable to bear his father's name."

Now this detestable woman had touched what was now my only real grief. My face changed, and I sank trembling and cold and on the verge of weeping on to a seat.

I can't help thinking that my visitor felt rather glad that she had reached a vulnerable spot at last. However, she said, or rather snapped, "Don't cry; there is no need to cry," an assurance which, of course, had little effect upon me. She became rather impatient, I think, when I did not answer, but, grasping the side of my chair, began to pant and to shiver, and to give all the symptoms of being on the verge of a fainting-fit. At any rate, I suddenly found a scent-bottle thrust under my nose with great abruptness.

"There is no necessity for all this. And I assure you I consider it partly affectation," said my visitor, while I struggled to recover myself.

During this interval I had heard the voice of Tom Hertz in the next room, talking and laughing very loudly to my husband, with the intention, I felt sure, of drowning our voices. I sat up, and gently pushed the smelling-bottle away. My visitor closed it with a sharp snap and sat down.

"To show you how silly you have been in treating me as if I were anything but your friend," she went on, in those hard, dry tones which precluded all idea that she could have any real sympathy for me, "I came here to-day with the express intention of telling you that I am going to adopt your child. By this I don't mean merely that I will look after it, but I will take it altogether, and educate and provide for it exactly as if it were a legitimate member of my family." She said all this very

deliberately, having evidently made up her mind upon every point, and being fully conscious of the great generosity of her offer. "The only condition I make is that you will go, as soon as my nephew is dead, if you are determined not to go before, into a 'Home' of which I am one of the patronesses, which has been founded by some benevolent persons expressly for young persons in your unfortunate situation."

I was aghast at the effrontery, the brutality of this speech. But in a few moments the ludicrous side of her proposal struck me, and I burst into half-hysterical laughter.

"Really, it is too ridiculous. I can't say any more than that," I said, trying to regain my gravity. "I suppose I ought to thank you, for I am sure your intentions are perfectly kind. But to begin with, the thought of having my child to care for is the only comfort I have; and, in the next place, the idea of treating me as what I suppose you call 'a penitent' shows so great a lack of good sense and good taste that you shock me quite as much as I shock you."

My visitor's tiny face was so dry and so colourless that the only change brought about by my astounding words was a series of little twitching movements about each of her features in turn, and a change in complexion to a livid greyness. As she turned and walked to the door, she threw at me one more little sharp speech,—

"I shall pray that your heart may be softened," said she. "In that case, in spite of your unseemly behaviour to me this morning, I shall still be willing to receive you in a Christian spirit, remembering who it was that commanded, Do good to them which hate you."

And, answering by a cold negative my question whether she would like to see her nephew, my visitor went downstairs, got into her brougham, and drove away.

My husband had heard his aunt's voice, and was very anxious to hear what had passed between us, and why she had not gone to see him. Of course, I could not distress him by letting him know what had really happened. I said that she had made me some very kind offers; and, fortunately, he was satisfied with this, and seemed rather glad than otherwise that she had not thought it necessary to interview him also.

In my natural endeavours to cut as short as possible our conversation about the lady, I forgot even to ask her name. We spoke of her respectively as "my aunt" and "your aunt." I brooded over this visit, which had opened my eyes to the difficulties and miseries of the life which lay before me. I perceived, from the view taken of my position by this lady, that my case was far worse, in many respects, than that of the *protégées* in whose ranks she had wished to include me. For the "fallen," as they are called, who are willing to be patronized and protected, there is abundant provision of comfort, consolation, and very substantial assistance. There are many more rich women ready to help the fallen among their own sex than there are women ready to help those who have not fallen. This is proved by the fact that any woman of bad character who comes into the police court can always have her choice of "Homes" where she will be comfortably cared for, not to say petted; while the hard-working and respectable girl, who has no interesting past to recommend her, gets no sympathizing friends to help her on her hard way. I could not help thinking to myself, after this experience of the professional philanthropy of this well-meaning, middle-aged lady, that there was very little of Christ in the Christianity which could not do good without condescension, and where it could not condescend declined to do good at all.

Two melancholy days passed after this visit, days during which my husband lay unconscious or asleep for long periods, and was too weak to talk much without an effort, which Tom Hertz and I would fain have spared him.

On the third day I noticed a change in him. He himself must have known that a crisis was approaching, for as the short afternoon waned he grew restless, and, contrary to his usual custom, asked me to light the candles instead of watching the daylight fade away, as was his custom. When I had obeyed, I found that he had struggled up on his elbow, and, alarmed by his exertions, I ran to him and put my arms round him for support. He was looking at me very earnestly, and as soon as he felt my touch, he asked me, in a stronger voice than I heard from him since his illness, to kiss him. Then, still searching my face with a very keen and eager look, he said,—

“My darling, I have brought some trouble upon you, but I don't leave you quite unprovided for, or quite without friends. I have treated no one else, Perdita, in my whole life, as well as I have treated you. I have loved you so! More than you can tell. Say you forgive me, darling, if I have brought fresh sorrow into your life. You forgive me, don't you?”

I burst into sobs which I could not repress. There was one sorrow, one wrong, which I had been brooding over all the time that I sat watching by his bedside.

“Yes, oh, yes,” I sobbed. “I forgive you, Harry. But oh! my poor baby,—my poor child who will have no name!”

The words had scarcely passed my trembling lips when my husband sprang from my shoulder into a sitting posture without any help from me. I looked up horror-struck at the effect of my words. With starting eyes and gasping, laboured breath, he was struggling to speak, but the stammering words tripped on his tongue, and I could not make out one word of his incoherent outburst.

While I was still, with one trembling arm thrown hastily around his shoulders, striving to understand something that he was striving still harder to make plain to me, a shiver seized him, he gasped, I heard a gurgling sound in his throat, and then a stream of blood issuing from his mouth told me that it was too late.

He made one last effort to articulate,—in vain. A look of unutterable agony passed over his face, and then his head fell on my shoulder.

I listened; I called to him. But he had left me: I was alone.

CHAPTER IX.

I HAD scarcely found out that my husband was dead when Tom Hertz, who had never been long absent from his friend's sick-room, arrived, and, seeing what had happened, led me away into the next room. I don't know what I should have done without him during the days that followed. He seemed to me to combine all the best qualities of a man and of a woman, so thoughtful, so

gentle, and withal so practically helpful was he. I soon confided all my troubles to him, but, to my great surprise and disappointment, I found that he knew if possible less about my husband's family than I did myself. He had been attracted by my husband's fascinating personality at their first meeting, and had attached himself to him, in true Bohemian fashion, without concerning himself in the least with his new friend's antecedents.

I sent him to make inquiries about the big house in Grosvenor Place which I had seen the first wife enter. Tom agreed with me in thinking my husband's behaviour in his last moments significant enough to warrant me in seeking out his aunt, and in coming to a fuller explanation with her, both as to what she knew of the first wife and as to my husband's family.

This, however, owing to my not having ascertained the lady's name, was no easy task. I was very much surprised to hear that the house in Grosvenor Place was in the occupation of no less important a person than the Duke of St. Ives; and Tom assured me that I must have indicated the wrong house. I was puzzled, but not convinced; even when my husband's first wife came to see me again, and in answer to my questions vehemently denied having ever called at any house in Grosvenor Place, I could not believe that my own eyes had deceived me.

Nellie, for that, the woman told me, was her name, was utterly overwhelmed with grief when she heard that my husband was dead. But she rebuked me sharply when I thus spoke of him.

"Why," said I, simply, "you cannot expect me to call him anything else. He married me, and I have only your word for it that he really married you before."

Apparently Nellie had been prepared for some such revulsion of feeling on my part. At any rate, she drew out of her pocket an evidently genuine document, a marriage certificate which showed that Henry Darent, bachelor, had married Nellie Styles, spinster, at St. Mary's Church, Paddington, seven years before. She showed it to me very quietly, and I read it through and returned it without a word. In spite of my occasional doubts I could not help feeling that the testimony of my husband's aunt was conclusive evidence of his marriage

with Nellie, who went away quite as heart-broken as if the dead man had been the best and most faithful of husbands.

On the evening of the day of the funeral, Tom insisted on taking me for a walk, "to cheer me up," he said.

"And now, my dear," he began, in his deep, gruff, but kindly voice, as we stood before a book-shop in New Oxford Street, he dipping into the second-hand volumes on the bench before him as he spoke, "what are you going to do?"

For answer a tear fell down on to the weather-beaten volumes, a tear which I thought he could not see. But he did.

"This will never do," he said, testily, as he slammed the book to and put it down with an air of fierce displeasure. "You've behaved beautifully all this time. For pity's sake don't give way now."

"I—I—I'm not going to," said I, feebly.

"But you are, you are going to. You're doing it," complained Tom. "As if it wasn't bad enough that I can't do anything in the world to help you, without your making it worse by crying!"

"You're very good, Tom, very good," I faltered. "But you needn't be afraid. I shall be all right. I can draw well enough to teach now, and I shall be able to earn my living that way, I think. If not, oh, there are plenty of ways. I can look about."

But Tom was not satisfied. After a few minutes' silence, he declared that he had an idea, but, as he refused to let me know what it was, I had to wait for my knowledge until the following evening, when he walked into my sitting-room with my aunt.

I started up with the air of a tragedy queen; but my aunt, whose heart had been touched by Tom's description of my lonely situation, and who had, I think, been visited by pangs of remorse on my account, burst into the room like a real ray of sunshine, would not hear a word that I had to say, and showed so much kindness and womanly feeling that Tom, who had only been prevented by main force from sneaking out of the room as soon as he had brought her in, was entirely charmed, and pronounced her "the most splendid woman in the world."

She wanted me to go back to the hotel with her, but

as I seemed to shrink at the idea, she did not insist upon it, but told me that, if I chose to stay where I was, she would come and see me every day.

And so she did, during the five weary weeks that followed before my baby was born, showing herself always at her best with me, until she had well-nigh effaced the impression made upon me during my stay at the hotel.

I cannot even now quite understand the change in her towards me. It may have been partly the result of self-reproach, or that she found the woman more interesting than the girl. At any rate, although she was still tyrannical, her tyranny was of a kinder sort than before and she showed me much practical benevolence. The one point on which she still showed all her old harshness was in her judgment of my husband, to whom she could never allude except as "that wretch," in spite of my prayers. I think Tom, although he would not own it, had made to her some indiscreet revelations.

There was one other subject of discord between us, but it was one so important that I avoided it as much as possible, doubting my own powers of self-control. When my child was born she looked upon the event as an unmixed misfortune, and my own extravagant joy excited her evident contempt as well as indignation. Indeed, she seemed to think that my delight was an affectation put on to annoy her. She constantly expressed her pity that I, "a mere child," as she said, should begin life with such a burden upon my shoulders, and she even hinted, in sufficiently open terms, her hope that the baby would not live.

"If—if—he—should—die, aunt," panted I, struggling up on my elbow to address her in tones as fiery as they were feeble, "I shall die too."

My aunt looked for a moment anxious as she glanced at me. It was for me, not for my poor baby; and on my account she refrained from saying more.

But the thought was always in her mind, and I saw it in her eyes. I heard it in her tones, too, when she remarked upon the improvement in my complexion since I was at the hotel, and said that really I should have some chance of doing well for myself now if only——

But with these gloomy views I did not sympathize.

I was crazy with happiness. I felt that I had never indeed known what happiness was before, nor what love was, nor peace, as I lay with my little, helpless baby in my arms, marvelling at its exquisite loveliness, and telling myself that never, surely, since babies were first born into this world, was there a baby born so beautiful as mine. Every movement of the tiny creature, every cry, seemed to me a revelation of incomparable sweetness, waking in me undreamt-of sensations of delight, so that the world seemed transfigured for me by the advent of this small fragment of humanity which to every one else seemed such an unmixed misfortune.

Although I tried to keep my raptures unseen by my aunt, it was impossible for them to remain a secret from her. The nurse told her about them, so did the landlady, both these women being touched by my happiness. My aunt grew impatient; and at last, when she had surprised me in the act of administering an adoring kiss to my little son's doll-like fingers, she "spoke her mind" with all her old tartness.

"Really, Perdita, I have no patience with you! One would think you didn't understand your own position, or the child's, to see the absurd fuss you make over it! I'm sure you couldn't make more if it had been born the heir to a duke's com!"

"Well, aunt, I couldn't feel more than I do if my boy were a prince. He is going to be my joy, my consolation."

"I'm afraid the joy will be all on your side, then. And perhaps he won't be so much of a consolation as you expect when he knows——"

"But he need never know. Why need he ever know? Besides, what you think may not be true. I don't believe it is true. I was properly married, in a church, and I shall have my child registered in his father's name, of course."

"Perhaps you are not aware that there is a penalty attached to registering ille——"

I interrupted her hotly.

"It has to be proved first that he is so. You don't know it, nor do I. And I'm not going to be the first to put such a stigma on my own child."

My aunt's thin lips closed in a straight line. She

would have said more in the same strain, but the nurse was giving her emphatic warnings not to carry on the conversation. It is to be observed that this woman's presence never put any check upon my aunt's discussion of my situation.

Whether it was in part owing to the constant irritation of my aunt's more or less concealed taunts I do not know, but on the day succeeding that on which this conversation took place I became very ill, so ill that they had to take my baby away from me. I had just strength to plead hard that he might remain near me, whimpering out, with tears rolling down my cheeks, that even his cries would not disturb me; but my entreaties were overruled by my aunt in the most peremptory fashion.

For days I hung between life and death, scarcely conscious for the most part, seeing all things around me through a mist, watching the slow-moving figures that approached my bed as they seemed to glide for a moment out of the darkness and then to melt away again, fancying I heard my husband's voice and that it was always behind me, so that I was unable to see him himself. And all the time I was haunted by a great sadness, a great void: it was my baby that I missed, though I did not know it. I only knew that my short dream of happiness had passed away, and that the little bit of sky that I could see through the window seemed to grow darker day by day.

At last things became clearer, and I knew where I was and who the figures were that came and went so softly. My aunt, with a kinder face than I remembered last; the old nurse, with a troubled look in her eyes; the doctor, looking, so it seemed to me, less grave; but this must have been fancy.

Then suddenly, one afternoon (I remember that it was afternoon, and that a little flicker of sunshine came in through the window and lit up the clock, so that I saw it was half-past two), I remembered everything: that is to say, I remembered my baby. My aunt had just come, and was standing in her bonnet and mantle by my bedside with a bunch of Parma violets in her hand, which she gave me, congratulating me upon the change for the better in my appearance.

"You will soon be all right again now," said she, kindly.

I tried to get up, a delicious sensation of joy springing suddenly into my heart.

"Yes, yes. And oh, now I may see my baby, may I not?"

For the moment, as I asked the question, and as all the joys in store for me which these words implied glowed within me, the whole world seemed full of life and gladness once more.

My aunt's face suddenly changed. The kindness went out of it; the lips closed tightly again; she put the violets down on the bed, with a strange air, constrained, ashamed, distant.

"I—I thought you had forgotten."

"Forgotten? Oh, aunt!"

"Well, well, I mean—— You have been very ill, you know, and—I didn't think you would remember so soon."

My aunt's eyes were averted from me; she spoke uneasily, irritably. For a few moments I stared at her, perplexed, full of dread, not yet believing that the horrible thought which had darted into my mind could be the truth. But then I saw the old nurse put her handkerchief furtively to her eyes and make a sign to my aunt. I stared from the one to the other.

"Not—dead—my boy, my baby! No, no!"

Neither woman answered. With a little wailing cry, so feeble that it seemed to die away almost before it was uttered, I sank back upon the pillow, broken-hearted. He was gone, then, my consolation, my comfort, the little creature for whom I was to have lived, who had brought hope, and sunshine, and happiness back into my heart. The world was over for me, then: I wanted to die.

I lay so still that my aunt was frightened, and I suddenly saw her face bending over the pillow, with the stamp of considerable anxiety upon it.

"She's all right," I heard her say to the nurse, somewhat testily. "You are all right, Perdita, aren't you?"

She was eager for my answer, I saw.

"Yes," said I.

But the tears were running fast down my cheeks.

"Of course you are," went on my aunt, in a voice

which was not free from emotion. "And in a day or two you will be well enough to be moved, and we'll take you away somewhere for a change. That will cheer you up, and in next to no time you'll be yourself again."

"Thank you, aunt."

My voice was choked. I could not look at her. For although, as I have said, there had been some trace of feeling in her tones, I could not free my mind from the belief that she was not really sorry, that she was glad—glad that I had lost my baby.

"There's a brave girl!" exclaimed she, relieved by my outward tranquillity. "I told you, nurse, that she'd bear it better than you thought."

"Dear heart, so she do!" cried the nurse, in a low voice, as she came and peeped at me in her turn.

And my heart seemed to quiver and to leap up within me as I looked at her; for in the wrinkled face of this tiresome old woman I seemed to perceive more real grief for my grief, and sympathy with my misery, than my aunt was capable of feeling.

"And very soon she'll be able to see for herself that all things are ordered for the best."

But this was the one touch more than I could bear.

"Yes, yes, it is for the best," I sobbed, in a passion of weeping. "For now I can bear anything, put up with anything; and I don't care what becomes of me!"

CHAPTER X.

MY aunt was wrong: I never did become the same self again after the loss of my child. She said herself that I had become more brisk, more alert, I did not "moon about" so much; in fact, according to her views, there was an improvement in me all round.

The truth was I was so desperately miserable that when I had recovered my health and at the same time got free from the heavy lethargy into which ill-health and my great sorrow had thrown me, I could not rest, I could not bear to be left alone with my bitter regrets. If I had only not fallen ill after my child's birth, I told

myself, he would have lived: my care, my love would have kept him alive. I would not allow my aunt to allude to my loss: I got used to the sneers she only affected to check at my late husband; but she soon understood that all allusion to my baby was forbidden, and she took the hint with promptitude.

I had gone back with her to the hotel, having, indeed, nowhere else to go to; but here I proved conclusively that I was a very different person from the unmanageable little girl of fifteen months before. I was so eager for occupation, no matter of what kind, to divert my thoughts, that my aunt's feelings towards me underwent a great change, and she soon began to set as high a value upon my services as she had before set a low one. Among these services one not to be despised was the attraction I had suddenly begun to exercise, certainly without any wish on my part, upon the gentlemen who frequented the hotel.

The time, little more than a twelvemonth, during which I had been away, had been sufficient to develop the overgrown, high-shouldered, gawky girl, with shy manners, abrupt, angular movements, and sallow complexion, into a young woman of considerable beauty, and, let me add, complete consciousness of it. I was glad I had falsified the disagreeable predictions of my childhood; I was proud of my good looks; I wished that I were better off, so that I could show them off to greater advantage by the help of dress. But this vanity sufficed for me: having assured myself that I was handsome, and knowing that other people thought so, I did not care to listen to compliments upon my appearance, and I rapidly gained as great a reputation for my coldness as for my good looks.

This attitude at first reassured, but afterwards troubled my aunt, who began to throw out at me sharply-worded hints about the folly of girls who thought too much of themselves, and who usually ended by outstanding their market. These observations were especially called forth by my treatment of a customer who had been attracted to the hotel solely by reports of the handsome girl to be seen there.

William Bagstocke Keen was a man who was known to be "something in the City," who was known to be

rich, and who was known to be "horsy" in his tastes, and fast in his mode of life. He was a rather short, stout man of a little over forty, with black side-whiskers and very good teeth, who came into the hotel in a swaggering manner, talked in a loud, authoritative voice, and looked about him as if he was not used to squalor of this sort. He made no secret of the reason of his coming, but said, as I looked out of the little office window and asked him what he wanted,—

"So you're the young lady I've heard so much about, I suppose?"

And he ran his eyes critically over those points of my face and figure which were discernible to him where he stood, much as he would have done over those of an animal who had been pointed out to him as a likely winner of the Derby.

"You want a bedroom and sitting-room, sir?" I asked, coolly, without apparently noticing his singular opening speech.

He still continued to regard me attentively, this time through a gold-rimmed double eyeglass.

"Eh! What? In this miserable hole? While there's the Metropole close by? Not exactly," said he, in a genial voice of contempt, still staring at me in the same persistent manner.

"I will send a waiter to you, then, for your orders," said I, as I closed the little window, and retired to a corner of the little room in which I was unseen by him.

But I heard him with considerable distinctness, as he stamped on the floor and swore at the waiter whom I had summoned by ringing the bell.

"D—, no, I don't want anything. At least, yes, I do, and I want to speak to that young lady about it. But she slammed the window down in my face, confound her!"

By this time his loud voice had reached the ears of my aunt, who came hurrying down the stairs, and, recognising a guest whom she considered distinguished, asked his pleasure in the humblest manner. But the great man was not to be soothed. He complained to her of my rudeness, told her that she should teach her dependents better manners, and, as I refused to obey my aunt's summons and to come out and apologize, he left the

house at the same white-heat, telling my aunt that she had lost a very good customer.

Of course in the old days the consequences to me of such a scene as this would have been too awful to contemplate. Even now I had to pass a very unpleasant evening. I had done her serious injury by my "airs and graces," my aunt said, and had sent away a man whose patronage would have been enough to make her fortune.

As it happened, however, the great man did not stay away long. On the third day after his first visit he returned. Having the good fortune to hear his voice, talking to a companion, before he had opened the door, I promptly ran out of the office to summon my aunt to take my place. But Mr. Keen was too quick for me. He caught sight of me as I turned into the passage leading to the coffee-room; and as I ran, he ran after me, and came up with me, a good deal more out of breath than I, just before I reached a door on the other side of the coffee-room, by which I had hoped to escape.

"Miss Farbrace, Miss Farbrace," panted he, "don't run away. I've found out who you are: I knew your father; and—and (confound it!" he muttered, in an undertone) "I've—I've come to apologize,—though what for damme if I know. There, will that content you?"

"Dear me, yes. I should think such an apology as that would content any one. It's so absolutely unique," said I.

Mr. Keen put on his eyeglasses.

"Upon my word!" said he. "The idea of a girl like you putting on these airs to me, to *me!*" he repeated, looking at me not so much with astonishment as with critical approval of the most disagreeable sort. "If I didn't take an interest in you through hearing that you were old Farbrace's daughter, I wouldn't put up with it. For, let me tell you, you go beyond the privilege of a pretty girl. For you are a pretty girl, a d—d pretty girl, as I suppose they've told you before. Why don't you go on the stage?"

The cool effrontery of the man was so astonishing that even I, with the reputation I already possessed for *aplomb*, was thrown a little off my balance. As I showed a momentary hesitation in replying, he hastened to take advantage of it.

"It is ridiculous for a girl as handsome as you are

to waste her time sending one old buffer up to No. 7 on the first floor, and another old buffer to the second-floor back, and serving out cigars to a third. Time enough for that sort of thing when you are too old for anything better. Now, if you like to go on the stage, I can get you into the chorus at the Palatine Theatre; and once there, with your face and figure, it will be your own fault if you don't get on as fast as you could wish. Now, don't twist that pretty little neck of yours so disdainfully, but think it over, and I'll drop in again and hear what you have to say."

"You can hear what I have to say on the subject now. I have no wish to go on the stage, but if I did, I should begin in a very different manner from the one you suggest. Do you wish to see Mrs. Morgan?"

"Not I! When I come to this hole, it is in search of metal more attractive than your revered aunt. The old lady is your aunt, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Well, give her my compliments, and tell her that whenever she *and* her niece—*and* her niece, mind—want a box at the theatre or a drive down to Richmond, I'm her man—and yours."

I chose to consider this as a farewell speech, and bowing, without further reply, I made my escape.

I did not give the message of the objectionable Mr. Keen to my aunt, but he found an opportunity to make up for my negligence and to deliver it in person. Then began a regular persecution of me on the part of both of them; my aunt contending that there would be no harm in my accepting his invitations, as she was always invited too; Mr. Keen becoming a constant visitor, and teasing me with his unwelcome admiration, his flowers, and his theatre-tickets, until I threatened to leave the hotel unless my aunt absolved me from the annoying duty of answering his questions.

I had in my own course of conduct one very strong advocate in the person of Tom Hertz, who was almost as regular a visitor as Mr. Keen, and who showed so much annoyance at that person's attentions that it was only natural for me to suppose that he was prompted by a feeling of jealousy. Indeed, Tom's affection for me was so manifest that I could not help expecting some

sort of avowal from him, and I own to a little feeling of something like disappointment when, after a prolonged visit during which he had grown more and more tender with every succeeding half-hour, he would suddenly spring up from his chair, thrust out his hand, say, "Well, good-night, dear," and hurry away. He began to show a great shyness with me, and very often he would come into the hotel, give me a smile and a nod as I sat in the office, and pass through into the coffee-room, where he would have his luncheon or dinner, and then sit writing for a long time, contenting himself as he went out with the same brief greeting as upon his entrance.

On one of these occasions I followed him into the coffee-room, to get rid of Mr. Keen, whom I left in the hall talking to my aunt.

Tom, who was sitting near one of the windows writing, rose, looking rather embarrassed, and offered me a chair.

"No, go on with your writing, Tom," said I. "I've only come in to escape from that horrid Mr. Keen."

Tom frowned.

"Is he still persecuting you, then?"

"Worse than ever. I can't put up with it any longer. I shall go away."

I saw Tom's hand begin to shake. Without looking up, he asked, gloomily,—

"Where are you going to, then?"

"Abroad, I think. I shall get a situation as governess. I saw an advertisement this morning. They want an English governess at a school in Germany."

"They'll starve you," said Tom, more gloomily than before. "Besides, you're not clever enough, and you're too good looking. So your pupils won't take any notice of you, and all the long-haired male students in the neighbourhood will take too much."

"Well, why not? Perhaps I shall find one to take pity on my loneliness and to protect me from attentions like those of Mr. Keen for the future."

"Oh, very likely."

But Tom looked deeply pained, and, bending over his writing-paper, he began scribbling away at a great rate, while I leaned against the window-frame and looked out at the baskets of daffodils which a flower-girl on the other side of the street was carrying.

I heard some one enter the room, and I guessed without looking round that it was Mr. Keen. I waited until he was well in the room, and then turned quickly, meaning to escape behind his back and to shut myself into the office out of sight of the little window. But he heard my steps, and intercepted me.

"Hallo, Miss Farbrace! Running away from me as usual, eh? Now, why can't we be friends? Upon my word, you don't know what you lose by not being friends with me. Here am I come to offer you—oh, and the aunt too, of course—a seat on my drag for the Derby. Ah, so you'd condescend to like that, would you?"

I knew that my face must have lighted up involuntarily at his suggestion. The love of horses, of racing, was, I suppose, mine by inheritance. I confess that I longed to accept his offer, and I think he read my longing in my face. He uttered a loud laugh of triumph and mocking amusement.

"Ah, ha! I've touched the weak point at last, have I? Well, I'll take you, and give you the box seat too. But as it's really more than you deserve, after treating me so badly, I must make one condition. You must give me a kiss."

"Indeed, I shall not!"

I gave him a look instead which showed enough repugnance, I should have thought, to extinguish his desire for the favour he sought. On the contrary, it seemed as if my unwillingness only made him more eager.

"Oh, come now, it's a very small price I'm asking, after all. I bet you never got better value for a kiss before."

I made no answer, but watched for an opportunity of escape. But he guessed my intention, and opposed it in a practical manner by interposing his person between me and the door. Putting his head on one side with an air of great shrewdness, he began to utter a low, chuckling sound, looking at me at the same time in a way which seemed to me particularly offensive.

"Perhaps you don't like being kissed? You're not going to tell me you've had no experience? Because, you see, I know better. Now, why do you treat my attentions with so much scorn, eh, Miss Farbrace?"

"The attentions of a married man are not flattering, Mr. Keen."

“Oh, that’s it, is it? You were not always so particular, by what I have heard,” he answered, frowning and speaking very angrily.

I grew very cold, and I dare say very white; for Mr. Keen, looking at me, had apparently a twinge of compunction.

“I had no wish to annoy you, Miss Farbrace, I assure you,” he said, apologetically, thrusting his red face, with its odious expression of bold admiration, insinuatingly near to mine, “but really it’s coming it a little too strong, you know, to put on these sanctimonious airs to me, when I heard you myself tell your aunt one day that you were going to visit a certain little grave.”

A little cry broke from me in spite of myself. There was the noise of a chair thrown down, and Tom Hertz strode up to where we were standing. I don’t know how much he had heard of my talk with Mr. Keen, which had been carried on for the most part in undertones. But he was white with anger.

“If this person is annoying you, Miss Farbrace, I will take upon myself the responsibility of relieving you of his presence,” said Tom.

“And pray, sir, who are you?” asked Mr. Keen, in a bawling, blustering tone.

“I was one of the most intimate friends of this lady’s first husband,” said Tom, thereby earning my deepest gratitude.

Mr. Keen gave an incredulous chuckle.

“Miss Farbrace’s late *husband*? Not, by any chance, part proprietor of the little grave?”

Mr. Keen, although not tall, was a robust and muscular man. The next moment, however, he was lying at full length upon the carpet.

“Go away, dear,” said Tom to me, gently. “I’ll get the brute to apologize.”

Just giving my hand for a moment to Tom, with my eyes too full of tears to see him, I ran out of the room.

Tom kept his promise to the letter. Within half an hour he brought to me a letter from Mr. Keen, apologizing in the humblest manner for having annoyed me, and explaining that the fact of my being still known as Miss Farbrace, coupled with some reports he had heard and some words I had used in his hearing, had led him

into a most regrettable misconception. He added that he humbly begged to suggest that it would be wiser in me, whatever might be my private reasons for wishing not to do so, to use my married name, as a person of my attractions could not hope that any incident in her life could remain entirely unknown.

When I read this letter, Tom Hertz standing by like a statue, I began to cry again. Tom was desperately moved by this, and began to shed tears too for sympathy.

"Oh, don't cry, don't cry. You wouldn't if you knew how it makes me feel," he exclaimed.

And taking in his the hand which lay nearest to him, he kissed it most tenderly.

"Tom," I cried, suddenly turning to him and drying my eyes, "you seem very fond of me. You are, aren't you?"

"Don't ask me, child," he answered, in a choking voice.

"Then why don't you marry me, Tom, and save me from all this?"

"My dear, my dear, do you think I wouldn't if I could? But I've got a wife already. I haven't seen her for five years, and I hope I shan't see her for another five: but she's alive, and so there's an end of it."

"Very well, then, Tom, that settles it. I'll go to Germany."

CHAPTER XI.

My interview with Tom Hertz made me rather unhappy. I had felt so sure for some time that he was very fond of me that I had begun to grow rather fond of him, and if he had asked me to marry him, as in truth I had expected that he would do as soon as a decent interval had elapsed after my husband's death, I should most certainly have said yes.

It was perhaps more the feminine longing for some one to take care of me, some one to belong to, than a more passionate and personal feeling that I felt for him. For I certainly was more concerned for him than for myself. His feeling was so much stronger than mine: I could

see this, and it made me ashamed and sorry. I felt that I was colder than I ought to have been, and that Tom had the wit to perceive it too.

Certainly my grief at parting with Tom, when all my arrangements were made for going to Germany, was not nearly so keen as my sorrow at parting from the little mound in Kensal Green cemetery, which my aunt, after much persuasion on my part, had at last with great reluctance shown me as that in which my little baby had been buried. I tried to persuade her to lend me enough money to pay for a stone cross to put over it; but this she flatly declined to do, giving as her reason that it would do me harm so to perpetuate the memory of a mistake in life which I was beginning to live down. I had to submit; but in my heart of hearts there still remained the resolution to raise that little monument some day.

So I went to Germany, and spent nearly five years there, five years which I think of now only to be glad that they are over. The first part of the time I passed in a school, where I was, as Tom had predicted, overworked and underpaid, but where I formed a friendship with one of my pupils, the daughter of an English horse-dealer, which had an important influence on my later life. From the school I passed into a private family of little wealth but much pretension, where I spent two years even more uncomfortably than at the school. My pupils were four clumsy and freckled little German baronesses, whose three clumsy little freckled brothers persecuted me with attentions which their mother was equally angry with me for exciting and resenting.

I was ill paid, unhappy, and far from kindly treated. The coldness with which I had already been reproached became more marked in me: I began to hate the people around me, to hate my own life. It was at this point that I accompanied my pupils and their mother on a visit to Paris. It was not many years after the Franco-Prussian war, and a German name and a German face were still regarded with abhorrence by the Parisians; the whole family wanted to go back almost as soon as they had arrived.

But I had met, while out with my pupils, the English girl to whom I have before referred as my great friend

at the German school. She had come from England to Paris with her father on a visit, and both he and she begged me to come and see them at their hotel. I was delighted at the thought of spending an hour with a girl of whom I had been so fond; and when the mother of my pupils refused me permission to pay this call, on the ground that it was not proper for so young a woman to go about Paris by herself, I thought myself justified in telling her civilly that I had a right to visit my friends, and that if she objected to my going I was ready to resign my situation. I left the baroness, who was very stout and very slow of speech and who received my announcement with apoplectic astonishment, and, as the hour had arrived at which I was off duty, I got into a *fiacre* and drove straight to my friend's hotel.

Mr. Babington, my friend's father, was furious at the treatment I had received, and urged me to return to England with himself and his daughter.

"But," objected I, "I shall be no better off over there. A governess's life must be just the same all over the world."

"Why not give it up, then?" said he.

"What am I to do instead? There are so few things that a woman can do."

"Well," said Mr. Babington, looking at me steadily, as if evolving some idea which had been for some time hovering indistinctly in his mind, "I could find you something to do, only I don't know whether you'd care to do it."

"Yes, yes, what is it?" said I, eagerly.

But still he hesitated to declare his project, and both his daughter and I were dying of curiosity and impatience before he at last disclosed it. Then I was surprised, and his daughter was shocked. Mr. Babington wanted a young woman with a good figure and a good seat on horseback, to ride horses to show them off.

"There, I said you wouldn't hear of it!" he exclaimed, in an apologetic tone, while his daughter gave vent to her feelings of indignation very strongly, and I sat looking at the table-cloth without saying anything. "But really I've said nothing you need be offended at. Some girls might like teaching better; on the other hand, some might not."

“And I’m one of the girls who might not, Mr. Babington,” said I, as I rose from my chair, almost trembling with excitement. “I thank you very much for making me the offer, and I accept it with delight. Lilly, don’t be shocked. You don’t know how much nicer companions English horses are than German baronesses!”

A fortnight later I had resigned my engagement with the baroness and was again in England.

My aunt professed to be much shocked at my change of profession, and predicted a downward career of the most dreadful kind. But, unutterably weary of the dull years I had passed, the drawbacks to my new mode of life seemed trifling, and I was happier than I had been since my father’s death eight years before. I had ridden well as a child, and I found no difficulty in recovering this accomplishment, which was indeed the only one in which I ever excelled. As I looked my very best on horseback, I attracted a great deal of admiration of a sort which, while it flattered my vanity, gave me little real pleasure; and Mr. Babington was delighted with my success.

I became the fashion. When I rode in the park, which was one of my pleasant duties, mounted on some beautiful animal which it was my business to show off, I was quite sensible of the attention I excited, and it was not displeasing to me to find myself surrounded by the best-dressed and most prominent men, of a certain set, of the day. Although I was only three-and twenty, it will be easily understood that the experiences through which I had already passed had increased the coldness with which I had in my earliest youth been reproached, and made me hard, self-contained, and almost cynically indifferent to homage, on which I set no more than its right value.

One of my most enthusiastic admirers was a young fellow a year or two younger than myself, whom I therefore chose to regard as a mere boy. His name was Burgess Falconer. My attraction for him was strong enough to make him go a step further than the rest, and implore me to marry him. I only ridiculed his proposal; but when I mentioned it to Minnie Babington, she repeated my words to her father, and he took me rather

severely to task, in his bluff manner, for neglecting "a good thing."

"Don't you know," said he, "that he's the step-son of old Keen, the owner of St. Martin, and that he's sure to have some money when the old man dies, as he's a great favourite with him?"

Now, St. Martin was the winner of that year's Derby, and his owner, I had discovered, was no other than my old acquaintance whom Tom Hertz, on my behalf, had so roughly handled. Hateful as the man had been to me, I must confess, absurdly perverse as it may seem, to a slight feeling of pride in having known a man who had attained what seemed to my friends and to me such a lofty eminence.

Instantly I felt a new interest in Burgess Falconer for being his step-son.

"I didn't know that," said I, "and the fact is not enough to make me care to marry a boy like that, younger than myself. But it is just enough," I added, with a laugh, "to make me a little more civil to him this afternoon."

I was to take part that day in a performance which was not quite to my taste; but I had undertaken my share in it at the request of Mr. Babington.

Some half-dozen thoroughbreds were to be exhibited at the Aquarium, and I was to show off the paces of those two in the sale of which Mr. Babington was interested. One of these was a beautiful bay mare, docile and easy to manage; the other a handsome but vicious grey, which Mr. Babington was fond of declaring no woman but myself could have ridden. I had tried him in the sale-yard and on Hempstead Heath; but I own to feeling rather nervous as to his behaviour when he should find himself surrounded at close quarters by a moving, murmuring, excited crowd.

I drove to the Aquarium in a hansom, and found, as I had expected, the devoted Burgess Falconer waiting for me on the pavement outside. He was a tall, sandy-haired, rather heavy-looking young man, with a low forehead and light eyes. There was nothing about his person to attract me, and the charms of his mind I had had no opportunity of gauging, as with me he was always in a state of extreme nervousness which rendered

him almost dumb. So that it was his fault, not mine, that I set him down as inoffensive but stupid.

He blushed with pleasure at the sight of me, and was so overjoyed when I gave him a smile out of consideration for the fact that he was step-son to the owner of the winner of the Derby, that he was rendered almost inarticulate, and helped me to alight with a hand which trembled violently.

“You—you—you always look so l-l-lovely in your habit!” he stammered. “I—I—I’ve had a little whip made for you, pretty enough even for you, at—at—at least I hope you’ll think so. I told the man to bring it here this afternoon, but it hasn’t come yet. You—you—you will accept it, won’t you?”

“You’re very kind, but——”

“Don’t say but. You wouldn’t if you knew how I feel about you!” he murmured, bending his head to look under my hat, and not scrupling to make love under the very eyes of the cabman, whose interest, however, was embarrassingly evident to me.

I laughed, told him I would see the whip and make up my mind then whether I would have it or not, and then I left him and entered the building.

I was rather nervous when I made my first appearance on the pretty bay mare, for I had never yet taken part in an exhibition so theatrical as this. The narrowness of the space railed off for showing the horses brought the crowd of spectators so near as to be almost confusing, and although I knew that the mare would behave properly, I grew still more anxious than I had been before as to the conduct of the grey.

My first part in the programme went beautifully. The mare trotted, cantered, galloped, took her hurdles in a style that brought tumultuous applause both for herself and her rider, and stood like a rock while I fired a pistol over her head and under her nose. This was the part of the performance to which, as savouring of the ring and the sawdust, I had the most strongly objected. Then I trotted her quietly back through the dense lines of that particularly smart-looking, well-dressed crowd which any exhibition of horses or horsemanship always attracts, through a running fire of highly flattering criticism. At the very end of the lane

I saw Mr. Babington, with his face set into that stolid gravity, only relieved by the shrewd twinkle in his eyes, which with him denoted high good humour. He gave me a nod as I drew rein for a moment.

"Good!" said he, in his gruff whisper. "Do as well with the grey, and we shall do."

I just shrugged my shoulders and drew in my lips as I passed out.

The uneasiness I felt on the subject of the grey was soon justified. He made his appearance, looking as handsome as a picture, and moving with a grace and spirit which took admiration by storm, but with a suspicious look about his eyes and ears which we who knew him understood to mean mischief. Mr. Babington felt, I knew, more apprehensive than he looked, as he leaned over the barrier, twirling a flower in his mouth, with appearance of entire unconcern. We got the trot and the canter over very well. It was a little difficult to pull him up after the gallop, and the applause which followed the taking of his first hurdle, a splendid performance, excited him almost to frenzy. He took all his jumps in magnificent style, although I had a feeling throughout that it was touch and go between us who should be master. Mr. Babington had advised me not to try the pistol-firing with him unless I had him well in hand.

But by this time I myself was as much excited as the grey; and spirit got the better of prudence. At the first shot the horse quivered under me; at the second he reared so high that there were cries among the spectators: "She'll be off!" "She'll be thrown!" "Ah!"

He reared again and again, and I knew that the danger of his falling back with me was a real one. But I am not a coward; or perhaps the excitement of such a moment as that, with a crowd, too, to look on, gives courage even to the timid. At any rate, I remember that I felt no fear, only an excitement which was keen, bracing, and pleasurable. I could feel running through my veins the intoxicating sense of the admiration felt for me by the men of that well-dressed crowd at the firmness of my seat, the skilfulness of my handling of the spirited animal.

"Leave him alone," said I, "I can manage him," as

one or two of the bystanders would have got over the barrier with the idea of coming to my assistance.

And I let them see that I could be as good as my word. Time after time I brought my whip down sharply upon his flanks, his shoulders. Time after time he plunged, he backed, he reared. The tussle was exciting, but it was short. He made several attempts to bolt with me, and to jump over the barrier into the crowd. Each time I frustrated his aimable intentions, and the struggle ended by my taking him down the narrow lane lined with excited faces, at an easy canter.

"Bravo, bravo, my girl!" was Mr. Babington's short comment.

I disappeared with the grey, but the applause of the crowd was not to be resisted, and once more I rode up the lane, receiving congratulations the whole way.

One voice, louder than the subdued tones of the rest, made me turn my head to the spot where my devoted admirer Burgess Falconer hung, in a worshipful, adoring attitude, over the barrier.

With a curious sensation, which I cannot well analyze, but in which there was something of triumph and something of disgust, I recognised in the man who stood beside him, stouter, more florid, better dressed than ever, my persecutor of more than five years ago, Mr. William Bagstocke Keen.

CHAPTER XII.

EVEN in the very brief glimpse I caught of his face, from which I instantly averted my eyes, I saw in Mr. Keen's countenance exactly the same expression of bold admiration which had caused me so much annoyance in the old days at the hotel. Now, however, I was older, more experienced, and I felt that if his persecution were to begin again, I should have no difficulty now in shaking off his unwelcome attentions. And yet, though it may be hard to believe, I felt all the time a secret admiration for him in his new character of owner of the winner of the Derby.

I expected to meet my faithful Burgess on leaving the

building, and I was not disappointed. Admiration of my recent feat with the grey had changed his complexion from pink to purple, and had rendered him, if possible, more inarticulate than usual. To add to his modest confusion, a group of other gentlemen, whose admiration for the heroine of the hour was more ephemeral, were waiting round the door to see me come out. Burgess fell upon me like a timid hawk as soon as I appeared, and, stammering and trembling with agitation, held out a very long, very thin parcel, which he begged me to accept.

“Th—th—the whip,” stuttered he. “You know you promised to look at it. You will take it, you will, won’t you? I’ve got a hansom for you. Let me put it inside.”

“But really, you know,” I objected, “I would much rather not. I know it is something very much too handsome for my use. This is the sort of workman-like weapon with which I do the trick.”

And I held up the little shabby black whip, with the plating wearing off the mount, with which I had punished the grey.

“If—if you would only let me have that in exchange!” cried Burgess. “In memory of your splendid riding this afternoon. I should prize it; I should indeed.”

This short colloquy had taken place, as I have said, in the presence of a knot of less-daring admirers, who found themselves quite out of the running with the persistent Burgess. I was standing close by the hansom, quite willing to give Mr. Falconer these few moments, being not insensible to the silent homage of which I was the object.

Suddenly a loud, peremptory voice, which made both of us start, broke upon our ears, and a burly form, without the least ceremony, placed itself between Burgess Falconer and me.

“Prize it! So I should think. But such favours are not given to hobbledehoys like Burgess, my boy.”

And Mr. Keen, putting his head on one side in the old way, and leering under my hat in the manner which had so often filled me with disgust, took his step-son’s place, and in the most confident manner tried to grasp my hand and the whip it contained. But I was too quick

for him. He was large, and heavy, and cumbrous in his movements. I was slight and agile as a cricket. In a moment I had stepped into the hansom, and leaning back in the seat, pushed up the little door in the roof, and told the cabman where to drive to. But Mr. Keen put his heavy foot upon the step, and the driver dared not move.

"Just the same spirit as ever?" he asked, with genial effrontery.

"Just the same old spirit, with more than the old *savoir faire*," I answered. "Take your foot off at once, or——"

I raised my whip ever so little, and I suppose the expression of my face did the rest. Mr. Keen retreated upon the curb-stone, with the casual remark that I was a d—l and no mistake. When I reached my lodging, however, my cumbrous admirer got out of another hansom which had closely followed mine, and by the time my driver had opened the doors from above, Mr. Keen's face, florid, bold, and smiling, obstructed my view of the house-door.

"Allow me," said he, as he stretched out his arm to save my habit from contact with the wheel. "See the beautiful example I set you, Miss Farbrace," said he, as he persisted in following me up the steps. "I can look over a grievance of only half an hour old, while you can't forget one that has been mouldering for the last five years. Won't you wipe out old scores now, and be friends with me? Your old objection, I may tell you, no longer exists. I've been a widower these three years."

I shrugged my shoulders, as if this did not interest me in the least. But Mr. Keen was not to be discouraged.

"In the mean time," he continued, with a little more acerbity in his tone, "take my advice, and don't have that fool of a boy, my step-son, hanging about you. He's as poor as a rat, I may tell you, and will never have a farthing but what he gets from me; and you may guess how much that will be if he does anything I disapprove off."

I looked meditatively down at my old whip.

"I like him," I said, simply. "I wish I'd taken the

whip he offered me; I'm sure it was much handsomer than mine. But you came between us, you know——”

“Yes, I did,” said Mr. Keen, doggedly. “And I don't apologize for it. I've saved you both from making fools of yourselves.”

“For the time, at any rate,” said I. “Good-evening.”

The maid had just opened the door, in answer to my knock. With a very cold inclination of the head, which checked effectually his evident impulse to follow me into the house, I left him standing on the door-step.

Early next morning Mr. Babington called to see me, in the best of spirits.

“Well, my dear,” was his greeting, “you've done me a good turn by your clever riding yesterday, and I think you've done one for yourself too. Mr. Keen came round to my place last night, praised the grey horse, the bay mare, and your riding, and seemed disposed for a deal. Then he asked which of the two animals you fancied most yourself,—for a lady's riding. I said the mare, decidedly, and I added, what I remembered to have heard you say, that if you had a horse of your own, the bay was the animal you would choose. I saw that he looked interested, but I didn't ‘tumble’ till the servant happened to come into the room with a parcel ‘for Miss Farbrace.’ It was a long, narrow parcel——”

“My whip!” cried I, with a laugh.

“Oho! You know something about it, then?” said Mr. Babington, with a shrewd look.

I laughed again.

“If it was from Mr. Falconer, I know all about it,” said I. “He offered it to me yesterday, but his papa came between us at that moment, and prevented my taking it, if I had wanted it.”

“Well, you've set them both by the ears, then. And you will never get that whip at all now. For Mr. Keen flew into a great rage, and broke it up into three or four pieces. A pretty little thing it was, too! He said he wouldn't have his step-son playing the fool; but I don't know——”

Mr. Babington hesitated, and looked at me out of the corners of his eyes as if not quite sure what he might venture to say. Then he laughed a little, and observed that there was no making out such demure young women

as I. And as I neither offered nor asked any explanation, he soon took leave of me.

Half an hour afterwards there was a groom's loud knock at the door, and I saw under the window a couple of horses, the one bearing a man's saddle and the other a lady's. The latter animal was the pretty bay mare I had ridden at the Aquarium the previous day. At that moment the servant came into the room with a note for me. It contained the following words :

“DEAR MISS FARBRACE,—I venture to send you the bay mare you rode yesterday, begging you to accept the animal as a little token of my great admiration and respect for you. I doubt whether she would ever be happy in the hands of any one else when she had once had the honour of being ridden by you. If you, in accepting this gift, would condescend to look with favour upon the donor, I should prove at least as docile and devoted a servant as she. I am sorry that, through my agency, a misfortune befell a whip which was on its way to you; but I will take care to replace it with one which I flatter myself will be more worthy of your acceptance.

“Believe me always, dear Miss Farbrace,

“Yours with all submission and devotion,

“WILLIAM BAGSTOCKE KEEN.”

Even at this distance of time from the old days at the hotel, I was glad to be able to take a little revenge upon my old persecutor. I sent him by the groom a very short, cold note, declaring myself unable to accept his offered gift, and adding that I did not wish for a new whip from him, but should be glad if he would send me the four pieces into which he had reduced the whip which he had intercepted on its way to me.

If I had some malicious pleasure in sending this note, the answer it drew forth gave me even more surprise. It contained not only a declaration from Mr. Keen of devoted love, but an offer of marriage. At first I was paralyzed with astonishment; then to astonishment succeeded doubt, and to doubt indecision. What if I were to accept him?

The very fact of my harbouring such an idea may seem shocking, for it is true that, so far from caring for

the man, I disliked him. Only those women who, from some cause or other scoured before their time, have had to earn their own living for years amid uncongenial people, can understand the temptation which such an offer as Mr. Keen's could have. I was poor, with no prospect of earning much by my own exertions; I was fond of dress and of luxurious surroundings; I believed myself too cold ever to care much for any man. If I had felt for Mr. Keen indifference only, and not dislike, I should have accepted him at once. As it was, I sent him no answer, and, instead of taking this as a refusal, he became doubly as persistent, doubly humble, and enlisted both Mr. Babington and Minnie on his side before venturing to address me again, except by letter. When at last I met him, I had had time to consider him in a new light; I was too old to think, as a girl does at seventeen, that there was in the world a peerless Prince Charming waiting for me somewhere. I understood by this time that you must take a man as you find him. And so the end of it was that I took Mr. Keen.

Not until I had given my word did I understand how deeply one other person was affected by my decision. Burgess Falconer, whom I had looked upon as a boy, took his disappointment to heart as only a boy can. I was touched by this, more touched than I thought it possible for me to be by anything. I had an interview with him, and was shocked at the change in the florid face and burly frame. He looked quite haggard, and he reproached me with a sullen bitterness which caused me some alarm. Nothing that I could say had any effect in softening him, or in causing him to take a reasonable view of my action. I pointed out to him that as he was entirely dependent upon his step-father, and as the latter would certainly have cut him off altogether if he had married me, he had absolutely no reason to be anything but grateful to me for what I had done. I promised that I would be a friend to him all my life, and that I should always be ready and anxious to take his part with Mr. Keen. But these remarks, instead of appeasing him, made him angrier than ever.

"You're very good, I'm sure," he said, in his usual stammering manner, and with a vicious look at me out of his light eyes. "But the governor and I are very

good friends, and I know him better than you do. Perhaps it will be you who will want my friendship with him some day. And it will be a bad day for you," he ended, between his set teeth, as he opened the door to let himself out, "if it does come to that. And so I tell you."

Of course I did not think much of this threat, but I was sincerely sorry to have made such a bad beginning in my new life. For Burgess's influence was soon used against me in a way which I deeply regretted. He had a little step-sister, a child of five years old, Mr. Keen's daughter by his late wife. Burgess contrived to set the child's mind against me as an intruder, and worked with so much effect as to produce an impression upon little Meg which not all my care during succeeding years was able to efface.

It was on the occasion of my first visit to my future home that I made the acquaintance of the little girl. Mr. Keen's town residence was a large house in Kerr Street, Berkeley Square, with nothing in its outward appearance to distinguish it from its monotonously and decorous neighbours. Mr. Keen, who for me had decidedly improved upon closer acquaintance, being the most generous and attentive of lovers, took me in and showed me over the house. When we had returned to the drawing-room, after an inspection of the whole house, I asked for his little daughter, whom I was very anxious to see, believing as I did that I should love the little girl as if she were my own child. Her father went out of the room for her, and, receiving no answer to his cry of "Meg, Meg," he went up-stairs again in search of the child.

In the mean time I, left by myself in the drawing-room, moved slowly from end to end, looking at the pictures on the walls, and at the old china and curiosities with which some enormous cabinets were filled. One picture, the portrait in oils of a lady, especially attracted my attention, as I supposed, from the period indicated by the dress, and also from the position which the picture occupied, that it must be the portrait of my predecessor. It represented, in spite of the benevolent flattery of the artist, a thin, plain woman, with a long nose, short upper lip, and retreating chin, of that particular type of ugly-

ness which has become associated with the English aristocracy.

While I was looking intently at the picture I thought I heard a slight sound from the conservatory at the end of the room. Turning, I saw the cretonne cover of a chair which stood just within the room fall, and on stooping to look underneath I found a pair of great brown child's eyes staring at me out of a very small face in elfish horror and astonishment.

"Why," cried I, "is this Meg? Little Meg hiding under a chair? Come out, my dear child. What are you afraid of?"

I had lifted the chair and disclosed the whole of the tiniest form for a child of five which I have ever seen. Out of a billowy mass of white muslin peeped a pair of great black eyes, regarding me with an unmistakably hostile expression. So striking were these dark eyes, so full of character, that at first I hardly noticed that the rest of the little brown face offered no corresponding beauties. Distressed to see the defiant look in the tiny countenance, I stooped and offered to kiss her, telling her to call me "mamma." But the child retreated with an ingenious serpentine movement, and shook her head.

"You're not my mamma," she replied, promptly, "Burgess says you're not. And he said I needn't call you so unless I liked to. And I don't like to."

Much troubled by this manifestation of ill-will on the part of Burgess, I did not attempt to approach Meg again, but, going back a few steps, I took down from the top of one of the tall cabinets a little porcelain group, and held it out towards her.

"Very well, dear, you shall call me what you like," said I. "Now will you come and tell me who these pretty little dolls are?"

But my tiny enemy was not to be cajoled.

"They're not dolls; they're mamma's china figures," she said, sullenly. "And mamma is watching you turning over her things as if they were your own!" And she glanced up, with a pitifully puckered little face, at the portrait which I had rightly guessed to be that of the first Mrs. Keen. "Burgess s-s-said you would!" she ended, with a sob.

I was utterly at a loss what to say to the child, whom

I pitied and sympathized with most heartily. For it was the very way in which I should have liked a child of my own to cherish my memory and resent the appearance of a successor to my place. I looked at the little creature with my eyes full of tears, not knowing in what way to try to break down the barrier which stood so formidably between us.

The difficulty was averted for that time by the entrance of Mr. Keen, which Meg took as the signal for running away; and I satisfied her father, who would have called her back, by assuring him that the child and I had just made each other's acquaintance without an introduction.

My wedding-day was already very near, Mr. Keen having insisted on the shortest of short engagements, to which I had no valid objection to offer. I had so much to do in the mean time that it was not until the day before my marriage that I was able to pay a long-deferred visit to the grave of my baby-boy, whose short existence had left an impression on my mind and heart which no joy, no sorrow, could ever efface. Mr. Keen had treated me very generously in settling upon me, penniless as I was, a handsome income: now, for the first time, I was on the point of being rich enough to fulfil my cherished wish to erect a cross to the memory of my lost child.

After spending an hour by the little green mound which my aunt had pointed out to me long before as the grave of my baby, I went to the office of the cemetery to make the necessary arrangements for the erection of the cross. I had to give particulars of the name, the date of the funeral, and of the person who arranged it. These details I gave as well as I could, mentioning Mrs. Morgan as the person who arranged the funeral, Harry Dare as the name of the infant (my aunt having told me that the child had been given his father's name at baptism), and the date of the funeral approximately.

The superintendent, having received this information, searched the register carefully, but without success. Then he told me that there must be some mistake; he could find no entry such as I described, and he suggested that the burial had taken place in some other cemetery.

"Oh, no," I exclaimed, impatient at what I took for

his stupidity. "My aunt, whose name and address I have given you, showed me the grave herself."

The superintendent closed his book, and very courteously asked me to show him the grave which had so been pointed out. I returned to the cemetery with him and led him straight to the little mound, the position of which nothing could have made me forget.

"You are entirely sure, madam, that this particular grave has been shown to you as that of your child?"

Of this I was absolutely certain.

We went back to the office. The superintendent took down the register again, and referred to the grave which I had pointed out by the number.

"Madam," said he, in an absolutely assured tone, "either intentionally or not, your friends have deceived you. The child buried in the grave you pointed out to me just now was a girl, in the first place, Maria Lansdell by name, who died at the age of eight months, and was buried a year before the date you have given me."

This announcement, made with such startling suddenness, made me dizzy.

What could have been Mrs. Morgan's motive in thus deliberately deceiving me? Quickly upon the heels of this followed another question: If he was not buried here, then where was he buried?

And then another thought flashed into my mind, one so intoxicating that I almost reeled under it:

Had he never been buried at all? Was he still alive, something to love, something to live for, something so precious that if it were only possible to clasp it once more in my arms, rich husband, handsome house, diamonds, horses, might go, for what I cared, to the bottom of the sea?

CHAPTER XIII.

I WENT back to Mr. Babington's house, from which I was to be married, in a state of excitement to which my feelings concerning my approaching marriage were absolutely tepid. If, even at this hour, I could have had

reasonable hope of finding my child alive, I should have thought little of throwing over Mr. Keen. But a reasonable hope of this was more than I dare indulge. There was no time to question my aunt, who was out of town; I had therefore to put off all inquiries until my honeymoon was over.

I can truly say that on the following day, even while the ceremony of my marriage was taking place, my thoughts were fixed upon the hope of finding my child.

We went abroad for our short wedding trip, but returned home, by my own suggestion, in time for the Doncaster September meeting. Mr. Keen, who was the most devoted of husbands, was terribly disappointed when I expressed a wish to remain in town while he went to Yorkshire. I would not have caused him so much annoyance if it had not been for the crazy impatience I felt on the subject which haunted me.

As it was, I had no sooner seen my husband off at King's Cross than I ordered the coachman to drive to Mrs. Morgan's hotel.

I had not seen my aunt since Mr. Keen's proposal to me. I was therefore unprepared for her new attitude towards me, which was one of adoring reverence. I cut short her admiring comments on my looks, my dress, and my brougham, and leading her into the sitting-room from which I had helped Harry Dare to escape seven years before, I said, abruptly,—

“Aunt, what did you do with my child, my baby?”

This was, indeed, a bolt from the blue. My aunt turned ghastly white, stammered, but was unable at first to speak.

“You told me he was buried at Kensal Green; you showed me the grave. I have been there; I have made inquiries; what you told me was not true.”

“But, my dear Perdita,” said my aunt, recovering herself a little, “I did what was for the best. Surely you must see it yourself. How could you have got on like this, made this splendid marriage, with that story against you, with a baby too? What could you do now but leave him where he is, even if you could find the child.”

These words contained a germ of hope for me, and I changed at once from reproach to entreaty.

"Where he is!" I echoed, with almost a scream of joy. "Tell me, only tell me. I would give everything I have in the world, position, everything, just to hold my boy in my arms again."

But at this my aunt was more alarmed than ever. She stared at me as if doubting my sanity.

"What!" she cried. "You would give up your carriage?—your horses?—your *rings*?" (My aunt, having seen through my gloves that I wore rings, had gently taken off one glove herself, and had gone into silent ecstasies over the diamonds my husband had given me.) "Just to see a child whom you wouldn't even recognise? whom you wouldn't be sure was your own?"

But my soul revolted at this last suggestion.

"I should know my boy if I were never to see him for twenty years!" cried I, with conviction.

"Well, I did my best for him and for you, and I'm sure I don't know where he is now," said my aunt, assuming a sharper tone as I became less arrogant and more tearful. "And what's the use of beginning to worry yourself about him after all this time? When you will very likely have half a dozen more, too!"

I shook my head. Strangely enough, I did not even hope to have another child; all the passion, all the affection of which I was capable had centred on the tiny creature which for a few short days had nestled at my breast.

"You must tell me just what you did with him," said I, with more menace in my tones than I had yet used, "and then I can trust to my own instincts to track him out. Now," I went on, with feverish impatience, "be quick, be quick. I have only these few days while my husband is away, and he may be home any evening, so every minute is precious."

My aunt looked more gloomy than ever.

"Mr. Keen would be very angry if he knew."

"He is not to know—at least at present—until I know more myself."

Bit by bit, working hard for each link in the chain of the story, I got from her at last all she knew. It was not much, but it was enough to set me on the track. She told me that when I was taken so ill that I could no longer nurse my child, the landlady of the house where

I was lodging suggested that a cousin of hers, a young woman who had just lost her own baby, should nurse mine. My aunt caught at the idea; telegrams were exchanged between her and the young woman; and all was arranged in a couple of hours, my baby being taken down to the woman, who was the wife of a railway guard, living near a station on the Great Northern line, a few miles out of London. My aunt went on to say, hurriedly and without meeting my eyes, that the young woman had, in the course of a few days, written to ask whether she might adopt the child as her own.

"She was a very respectable young woman," went on Mrs. Morgan, apologetically, "and I own I thought it would be much better for you not to start in life with such an encumbrance as a young child. So I arranged that she should have the baby."

I could not trust myself to speak. That my aunt should have witnessed my grief when I thought the baby was dead, without relenting and comforting me by the assurance that he was alive and well, seemed to me such an inconceivable piece of cruelty that I hated her as I had never hated her before, in the days when she had snubbed me and treated me unkindly. I began to draw on my gloves, unable to see what I was doing for the tears which had gathered in my eyes. My aunt was very much more discomposed by my silent resentment than she would have been by a torrent of reproaches from me when I was only poor Perdita Farbrace.

"You—you don't bear me any ill will for what I did?" she asked, almost diffidently. "You would never have been the wife of the rich Mr. Keen if you had had a child to drag about and keep you down in the world."

"No," sobbed I, as I stopped for one moment at the door before going out; "I should never have been Mr. Keen's wife. But—I might have been a happy woman!"

I rushed out of the hotel, got into the brougham and drove back to King's Cross station. In less than an hour I had got out of the train at the place indicated by my aunt. But I had little hope in my heart. Since my aunt had deceived me once, it was quite possible that she was deceiving me again; and when my inquiries for Mrs. Brownlow failed, I felt tempted to give up a search which I began to think fruitless, and to return to my

aunt, and threaten her with a lawyer's interference if she did not tell me the truth.

As a last resource, I was making my usual inquiry for "Mrs. Brownlow, wife of a railway guard," at a little nondescript shop on the very outskirts of the village, and had been met by a proprietress with the usual profession of ignorance, when an old woman who sat knitting in a corner looked up and said,—

"Eh, but I remember her! She lived in the cottage next to me and my old man. I mind her! I mind her! She died, poor thing. Ay, I mind her."

I was by the old woman's side in a moment.

"You remember her?" said I, very gently, afraid lest incautious eagerness should frighten the precious memories away from the old woman's brain. "She had a little child, a boy, not her own; she had adopted him."

She remembered this too clearly enough.

"Ay, so she had, a pretty little fellow, but sickly-looking, I thought. She was as fond of him as if he'd been her own, that she lost, poor dear! And when she lay a-dying—I mind it was Easter-time, and the primroses was still about the church at her buryin'—she said they was to care for it as if it had been her own. But they didn't, they didn't! 'Twasn't in nature perraps, and them poor folks themselves."

"And what," whispered I, softly, after a pause to get my voice under control,—“what became of—of the child?”

The old woman had by this time found me out. She had borne children into the world herself, and her feelings were not yet so numb, after nearly seventy years of a toilsome life, but that she could recognise the tones of a mother asking about her child. She turned her wrinkled face to mine, and said, simply,—

"So he was your child, was he? Why did you let him go?"

"I was ill," sobbed I. "They sent him away, and when I got well they told me he was dead. It's only to-day I've learnt where they sent him."

"Dear, dear, that's a bad job!"

"But you can tell me—something?"

"Not much, dearie, not much that's any good. The husband's mother had the managing of things after the poor thing died, and she found out the address of a

woman in some paper that wrote she'd be willing to adopt a child."

I gave a smothered cry. To think that while I was breaking my heart over the loss of my baby, he was being sent over the country, perhaps to be slowly starved, to some wretched woman who trafficked in the lives of unwanted children.

I could learn very little more. With some difficulty the old woman, who seemed nearly as much concerned as I, recalled to mind that the address in the paper to which they had written was in Upper Street, Islington; the number she had forgotten, or perhaps had never known.

"But," she went on, with a warning shake of the head, "don't set too much store by that, dearie. For these women, when they are the wrong sort, go to work in roundabout ways, so it's mighty hard to get at them."

The truth of this was already weighing heavily upon my soul. I kissed the old woman's withered face, gave a sovereign to her daughter, and left the cottage with hurrying feet.

My task was a hard one indeed; so hard that I was tempted to despair. On reaching town, I drove in a hansom to Islington, and in Upper Street, when I had begun to feel bewildered by the impossibility of making inquiries with such slender data to go upon, I had the happy thought of calling at a little stationer's where I thought it likely that letters would be received. On asking if this was the case, the woman shook her head, and told me that she and her husband had given it up for some years now.

"Ever since," she added, "we found we were being used for purposes we didn't approve of."

"What purposes?" asked I, my heart leaping up.

"Well, a woman used to have letters addressed here that we suspected to have something to do with baby-farming."

The shock of finding my worst suspicions confirmed, together with a sickly little gleam of hope afforded by finding myself really on the right track, was so great, that I sank on the chair by which I was standing. The woman looked at me curiously.

"Tell me all you know," I faltered. "I—I am trying to find my own child."

As before, I found that my woman listener grew sympathetic directly. She was not so motherly as the old woman had been, being more impressed, town-bred as she was, with my dress.

"I'm afraid you'll find it very difficult, ma'am. These women change their addresses so often, and there's a regular system of go-betweens. It's like the Chinese boxes that always have another inside when you open them; you're never sure when you've got to the last one."

"I know, I know," whispered I. "But help me, if you can, to find the first."

Rather reluctantly, and evidently fearing that I was only starting in quest of disappointment and distress, she told me that it was now between five and six years since a woman who gave the name of Mrs. Jackson had been suspected by them. She remembered her address, and gave it to me. Whether the suspicions she and her husband had entertained of Mrs. Jackson had been proved by them to have a strong foundation, she could not or would not tell me.

I went to the address given, but discovered, of course, that Mrs. Jackson no longer lived there. I was directed to an address in Camberwell, to which I immediately drove. Mrs. Jackson, I was told, did not see visitors except by appointment. With my suspicions strengthened by this information, I had to be content to return home, considering what my next step should be. On the way, however, I perceived that further researches on my part would be useless unless I set some one to watch Mrs. Jackson. Much against my will, I had, therefore, to have recourse to a private inquiry agent, who arranged to have a watch kept upon the house and the persons indicated by me.

For some days I heard nothing, and I lived in a state of acute excitement which it was hard not to betray to the eyes of my husband, who had returned from Doncaster, and who was jealous and suspicious to a degree which rendered complete happiness impossible either for him or for me. Unfortunately, his jealousy was retrospective, and he could not bear any reference either to

my first husband, or to my lost baby, or even to the period during which I had known them. I felt therefore that secrecy was forced upon me; and, innocent as my concealment was, it made me uneasy, and raised up a barrier between me and my husband which he was not slow in perceiving, although he had no definite suspicion of any kind as to the cause.

I dared not have the letters of the private inquiry agent addressed to the house, so I called every day at a shop where I was a constant customer, the proprietress of which had arranged to take in letters for me. On the fourth day I received a communication. The detective had found no less than three women, living in different parts of the country, who were in the habit of receiving children to nurse through the agency of Mrs. Jackson. The addresses of two of these women the detective had already procured, and he awaited my further instructions. I drove at once to the inquiry office and asked for the two addresses which were known. One was in Essex, the other near Birmingham. I don't know why I at once decided upon the latter as the scene of my first investigations; but I drove straight to St. Pancras, telegraphed home to my husband that I had had to go to Birmingham suddenly,—for the time for concealment was past, and I was reckless of anything but the success of my expedition,—and started for Birmingham by the next train.

CHAPTER XIV.

IF I live a hundred years, if I sink into second childhood and lose my memory of every other scene through which I have passed, of every feeling which has ever stirred within me at other times, I shall never forget the shocking sights, the awful experiences of that day.

I found the place easily enough. It was dusk when I reached it, a large, ill-kept modern cottage, standing by itself, but in the neighbourhood of several rows or terraces of equally unattractive dwellings. Now that the moment had come at last when I might indeed hope with some reason for definite tidings of my lost child, I

felt as if all the energy, all the strength which had supported me so far, had suddenly died out of me, leaving me a poor, helpless woman, without the power to take safely a single step towards the recovery of her fugitive and long-lost happiness. It seemed impossible, after all these dull, purposeless years, during which those few hours spent with my baby had come back to my mind again and again as the one oasis of happiness in a chequered existence, I could again be on the point of holding in my arms my own child. It seems strange to me now that, guessing as I did only too well what the character must be of the creatures who had taken charge of my baby for gain only, I did not believe that it was dead. I kept picturing him to myself as neglected, thin, pinched, half-starved, perhaps, but I never lost the feeling, since my aunt first owned the deception she had played upon me, that somewhere in the world my child was waiting for me to find him.

Very slowly, and trembling from head to foot, I went through the untidy little garden, or rather court which was railed off in front of the squalid little dwelling, and knocked at the door. I waited a long time, and, hearing no sound within, I began to think the house must be empty. I stepped back and examined it more carefully. It differed in no respect from hundreds of the ugly modern substitutes for the old-fashioned thatched cottages which spring up in rows round every extending town. To the right of the door was a bay-window with green Venetian blinds. These were drawn down. But the two little windows of the upper floor had each a dirty curtain behind it, so that I judged the house must be occupied. I went back to the door and knocked again. I rang the bell, but neither knock nor ring brought any answer. At last, looking round, I perceived that I was an object of silent interest to a group of people who had collected at a little distance outside the railings.

At once I turned back with the intention of making some inquiries among them. But, to my surprise, as soon as they saw me move in their direction they dispersed as if at a given signal, and I saw them go, some into the neighbouring cottages and some along the road.

This fact at once aroused my suspicions that I was on the right track, and that the house was not only occupied,

but occupied by miserable and half-starved children. Then the weakness which had seized me passed away, giving place to a frenzy of determination that I would get inside the house if I had to break my way in like a thief. Once more I rang and knocked. Then, passing out by the gate, I made my way round to the back up a little court which divided the house from its nearest neighbour on the right.

Behind the house was another yard, bigger than that in the front, partly paved, and shut in by the shed of a wheelwright on one side and by the backs of some out-buildings on the other two sides. I got in easily enough through a back gate in the side wall, but found my further progress barred, for the back-door of the house itself was locked.

Looking through the kitchen window, which was barred, I saw further evidence that the house was inhabited, in scraps of food, some dirty plates, and a can which stood on the table. But the fire was out, and there was no one in the room. Peering close against the glass to ascertain these things, my attention was attracted by a faint sound which seemed to come from one of the upper rooms. It was like a moan. I stepped back, cold and with an agony of fear at my heart. For it came into my mind that the weak voice I heard might be that of my child. I tried to burst the back-door open: it was bolted, as far as I could make out, at the top and at the bottom, and would not yield.

The noise I made attracted the attention of some of the shy neighbours; and a woman, one of those I had seen before, peeped through the door of the yard at me, but quickly withdrew her head when she saw that I was looking at her. Determined not to be baffled this time, I started in pursuit, and followed her down the court and into an adjacent yard.

"Do you know if a Mrs. Finney lives in that house?" I asked, before she could take refuge within the doors of her own house.

"Yes, I believe she does," said the woman, shortly. "But we're not partic'lar neighbourly, for they haven't been here long, an' I'm one as keeps myself to myself."

The woman, a respectable-looking person of about thirty, anticipated my questions.

“Do you know if there’s any one in the house,—any grown-up person, I mean?” said I, quickly.

“I don’t know, but I think it’s likely not,” said the woman, more shortly. “I see Mrs. Finney go out this afternoon pretty early. I don’t know her business, of course, but I haven’t seen her come back. When she goes away like that, she mostly comes back late.”

Struck by the dryness of the woman’s tone, I put a question suddenly:

“She takes in children, does she not?”

The woman answered, more dryly than ever,—

“May do, for all I know.”

“I’m trying to find a child,—my own,” I said, with my voice breaking.

The woman looked at me differently at once, but was still cautious.

“Well, you can’t make her hear if she’s not there,” she said, after a moment’s pause.

But I want to get in—to see for myself—to find—to find him,” said I, in a husky whisper.

The woman drew back again: she seemed anxious not to compromise herself.

“Well, you can’t break into a person’s house,” she said, hastily.

“I can. I will. I will do anything,” I returned, feverishly.

But at this point she evidently became anxious to get rid of me.

“Oh, well, you can’t expect me to help you to do that,” she said, as she made a pretext of picking up an old yard-broom to carry it in-doors.

“But,” said I, detaining her, “will you let me take these steps, if I promise to bring them back again?”

But she was very unwilling indeed.

“Oh, my goodness!” cried she, with much vexation, “I’d rather not. I wish you wouldn’t. I do dislike being mixed up in any rows with my neighbours. And my husband’s ten times as bad as me. I don’t know what he’d say if he was to come back and find I’d lent the steps for any one to go poking their nose into anybody else’s house when they was away.”

But I still thought, notwithstanding her reluctance, that she would not go so far as to refuse me out-

right. So I went towards the steps, and said, in a low voice,—

“Did you ever have a child?”

For a moment the woman still hesitated. Then, nodding towards the steps, she said, “Take ’em,” and disappeared abruptly into the house.

I did not lose a moment. Dragging the steps through the two door-ways into Mrs. Finney’s back yard, I placed them in front of the kitchen window, and getting up to the very top, looked in through the window above.

The first sight which met my eyes was so weird, so ghastly, that, prepared as I was for painful experiences, I uttered an exclamation of horror. At the moment my figure, rising above the steps, obscured the dim twilight that came into the room through the dirty window, a little, thin, white face rose slowly from within until it was close to the glass, and two great eyes, sunken in their sockets, stared at me, not in fear, not in childish wonder, but with a dull, elfish gaze that seemed to see without discerning.

“Open, open the window,” cried I, impatiently.

At first there was no response to this; then, after a long pause, during which I trembled too much to try to help the child on my side, two poor, thin little hands, dry, small, and withered, like bird’s claws, were lifted slowly upwards. Meanwhile, I perceived behind the child a second figure, smaller than the first, raising itself with apparent difficulty until it was able to support its feeble frame against the window-sill beside its companion.

Though the emotions which thrilled me were so strong that I could scarcely restrain myself from weeping aloud, I had recovered enough self-command to try to open the window from the outside, a task which was evidently far beyond the strength of the poor mite within, even if he had understood how to set about it, which was doubtful. Luckily, it was not fastened; for the catch was broken.

As I threw up the sash and peered into the room, the atmosphere of which was so heavy and close that I instinctively drew my head back to take a long draught of fresh, outside air before attempting to enter, I saw that the room had other occupants, as wan, pinched, and

sickly as the rest. Five miserable children, of whom only the boy I had first seen was able to walk, were cooped up together in the wretched room, the only furniture of which consisted of a filthy mattress in one corner, on which the three youngest children lay.

When I stood on the floor of the room, and realized the full extent of the vile conduct of the creatures who had penned up these poor mites in the den in which I found them, passionate indignation and pity filled my heart, and there was no room in it for any other feeling.

In that moment, for the first time since I began my search, I forgot my own child. I could think of nothing but the wrongs of the tiny creatures before me, unwashed, ill clothed, half starved, whose pitiful moaning never ceased, even in the disturbance caused by my entrance.

I knelt down by the eldest child, the boy I had first seen at the window. He was very small and weak and wasted, and so spiritless that, although his eyes remained fixed upon me with a sort of dumb, dull expression of expectancy which I can scarcely call hope, he never spoke to me. His face, although so small, was old for his years, even if, as seemed probable, his growth had been stunted by the want of proper food. A horrible pang shot through my heart as I asked myself whether this could be my own boy, this poor, little, unwashed starveling with the cavernous eyes.

“How old are you, my child? What is your name?” I asked, as well as I could for crying.

But he seemed not to understand. When I repeated my question, however, he put his poor, little, thin hand on my shoulder, and I thought he tried to smile at me; but my eyes were too full of tears for me to be sure.

“Are you all alone in the house? Where are the—the——?”

I stopped, not knowing how to describe fitly the custodians of these poor babes. I turned to the others. One of them lay in a corner of the horrible couch, with its eyes closed, moaning feebly. Another was sucking hard at the tube of an empty and evil-smelling feeding-bottle. Of the two remaining children, one, dressed solely in a ragged pinafore, was sitting on the floor, weakly

crying at intervals; while the second I had seen, apparently a new-comer, for it was less emaciated than the rest, crawled after me along the dirty floor.

I began to feel that if I stayed much longer in the presence of these unhappy babes I should lose the wits I had need of for their rescue. I had gently raised in my arms the little thing who was crying on the floor, but the sight of the haggard, elfish face struck me with so much horror that the lisping baby-talk died upon my lips, and I could only sob in sympathy as I pressed the poor head against my breast. When I tried to put it down, the creature clung to me with its claw-like fingers, and burst into fresh cries.

"Don't cry; don't cry," I whimpered out; "I am going to get you something to eat; going to fetch some one who will take you out of this dreadful place, and be kind to you, kind to you, poor, little babies!"

Gently I disengaged myself from the still weeping child, and was about to go away as I had come, when I felt the hands of the eldest child, the boy, detaining me. The pitiful expression of the poor, drawn, little face I shall never forget, as he sobbed out,—

"Take me; take me. Oh, do take me!"

I snatched the child up, though my arms trembled so much that I was afraid of dropping him; and telling him to hold on to me as tightly as he could, I shut the window and went down the steps.

A wail of fresh grief from one of the poor mites in the room brought the tears again to my eyes.

The woman from whom I had borrowed the steps was standing just inside her own yard when I got down.

"Well," she began. But at the sight of the poor child in my arms she cried aloud, "Dear, dear, but it's the boy Mrs. Finney brought home last March! My, how he's changed! Dear, dear, but I'm afraid they've not been using you well!"

I was glad to be able to vent some of my pent-up wrath on her.

"How could you let this go on? You couldn't live so near and not know, not guess something!" I cried, passionately. "There is a roomful of children there being slowly starved to death, and—and—and——"

The woman was impressed, interested, shocked.

"Dear, dear, I didn't know it was as bad as that!" she murmured. And, after a short pause, she went on apologetically, "You know there's not much thanks to be got by interfering for them sort o' children."

"Why not?" said I, angrily. "I won't believe that their poor mothers ever guessed where they were going to. No, no, no; it's not possible they did! A woman may lose her honour without losing her heart."

The woman shook her head dubiously. "Some do, no doubt; not all. There's many a lass thinks of nothing but how to get rid of the poor brat that's been born to her shame. Do you think they'd let them go out of their sight altogether as they do if they'd much of the right sort of feeling for the poor little creatures?" she said, dryly. "And so this one's yours?" she added, in a more sympathetic tone.

I was crying. I shook my head.

"I don't think so. I can scarcely hope so. It is seven years since they stole my boy from me. This poor child can't be more than four or five."

The woman shook her head.

"And you're sure they brought your boy here?" she asked, in a tone which made me think she knew something. "If so, you may be sure it's done for long ago," she went on, revealing in this speech that she had known or guessed more than she had owned to. "Mrs. Finney lived here then, and had to move away rather sudden, because of two or three children she had, which she said were her own, dying very mysterious-like. They all died, except one that was fetched away by a lady."

"There, you see, I told you their mothers wouldn't let them stay if they knew!"

"It wasn't the child's mother. It was a middle-aged lady, the smallest and the snappiest too you ever saw."

For a moment my heart seemed to stand still. For this description brought into my mind the would-be protectress whose help I had so indignantly refused,—Harry Dare's aunt.

Scarcely intelligible in my excitement, I put more questions concerning the lady, and received such answers as confirmed me in the belief that it was indeed Mr. Dare's aunt who had rescued my child—for how could I doubt that it was in search of my child that she had

come?—from the wretch in whose clutches it had been allowed to fall.

This intelligence gave me an altogether different track to follow.

In the mean time, mindful of the poor little ones I had just seen, I asked the way to the police-station. With a shrug of the shoulders the woman directed me, and in less than a quarter of an hour I had made my statement, the poor little urchin I had already saved proving a powerful witness in support. Without this eloquent advocate, indeed, I doubt whether I could have induced them to let me have the services of a policeman to accompany me back to the house.

On arriving at the baby-farm for the second time, we were lucky enough to catch the proprietor of the den, Mrs. Finney's husband, at the door. He was in an advanced stage of intoxication, and was easily frightened into giving up the children, whom I myself accompanied to the workhouse, where I left them in charge of a motherly-looking matron, who comforted me by telling me that, though they would require care, they were not beyond it. As for the boy whom I had held in my arms for so long, his grief when I went away was so touching that, if I had not dreaded that my husband's anger would fall upon the child as well as upon myself for such an action, I should have taken him home with me.

As I had expected, my husband was furiously angry with me for what he called my Quixotic expedition, and it was fortunate for me that my researches could now take a different direction. For it was now clear to me that my only chance was to find out Harry Dare's aunt. This was difficult indeed, since I knew neither her name nor her place of residence. However, there was one way open,—to state my case plainly to Mr. Wray, the solicitor who had known all about Harry Dare and his affairs, and to ask him to find out the whereabouts of the mysterious aunt.

So I set about discovering Mr. Wray, which I supposed would be an easy task.

And here, on the very threshold, as it seemed, of the door which was to lead me to my lost child, I received a blow which threw me back almost in despair: Mr. Wray had been dead two years.

CHAPTER XV.

THE death of Mr. Wray having left me absolutely without a clue to the mystery which enveloped the fate of my lost child, my hope of recovering him at last gave way; and, although I was still not without intermittent flashes of belief that some day I should find him, the chances of such a meeting seemed to grow more remote with every succeeding year.

There was only one step to take, and that I took: I consulted a solicitor of great experience and acuteness, told him the whole of the circumstances of the case, and asked him what he thought of my chances of success in my search. He did not encourage me. If I had known either the name or address of the aunt the outlook would have been very different. But as there were thousands of austere philanthropical middle-aged ladies in England, and as I had not even known the real name of the man whom I still spoke of as my first husband, he felt, and he said, that it would be absurd for me to indulge in any great hope of finding the boy unless his guardian should herself think fit to restore him to me, or unless chance should favour me in some singular manner.

One thing he did for me, but unavailingly. He inserted carefully worded and exceedingly touching advertisements in the principal papers, religious and otherwise, imploring the nameless lady to make known to me the existence of my son, if he still lived. He even went so far, in these advertisements and by my authority, as to promise that I should be content with the knowledge that my child was alive and well. He advertised also for the waiter Thomas, who had confessed to me that he had possession of Mr. Dare's luggage, and incidentally of his secrets also.

None of these advertisements, however, drew forth any answers from the persons to whom they were addressed.

Fifteen years of married life with Mr. Keen passed very quietly for me. I never had another child, and I am sorry to say that I never succeeded in wholly ob-

taining the confidence of my step-daughter Meg, in spite of my longing to do so. Her step-brother, Burgess Falconer, had poisoned her mind against me at the outset; and although, after a time, she consented to call me mamma, there was always a barrier between us, made stronger, as time went on, by her shrewdness in discovering that my affection for her father, whom she adored, was not very deep.

Not that my husband and I lived unhappily. Although he complained, as my first husband had done, of my coldness, he would certainly have complained still more if my affection had been strong enough to make me jealous and exacting. As it was, I was an easy-going and good-tempered wife to an affectionate, indulgent, but decidedly erratic husband. He alternately adored and neglected me, and I put up complacently with both these moods, although, as time went on, I rather preferred the latter.

We had one subject of interest in common, the running of his horses. Already well known and highly successful on the turf at the time of his marriage with me, Mr. Keen had continued to hold a foremost position in the racing world; and my face was almost as familiar to the *habitués* of the principal race-courses as that of my husband himself.

My other hobby, however, was one in which he took no interest, or, rather, perhaps I ought to say that the interest he took in it was entirely antagonistic. Since the terrible visit I had paid to the Birmingham baby-farm, the proprietress of which I had caused to be prosecuted and convicted, I had never lost my interest in the poor little children whom ignorant or heartless girl-mothers give into the care of strangers for a few pounds, the price of the children's misery or early death. My husband, who knew what memory it was which had bred this interest in me, never ceased to be jealous of it, and this feeling was so strong in him that, even after fifteen years of married life with him, any reference on my part to the possibility that my child might be still alive would fill him with anger which I did not care to rouse.

He still kept his house in Kerr Street; but he had also taken a very pretty place on the Thames between

Richmond and Teddington, where we now spent the greater part of the year. The house itself was large and rather heavy-looking, with massive stone pillars and frieze on the side which faced the river. It bore the strikingly inappropriate name of "The Limes," and stood in about six acres of beautifully-wooded grounds.

Here, during the London season, we entertained an almost constant succession of visitors, most of whom belonged to the "world" which races, bets, wants ready money and is willing and able to pay handsomely for it; in short, to that section of Society, with a capital S, which is most talked about, most written about, most abused, and most envied.

This particular class, while possessing the merit of taking life easily, is lax in so many points as to provide an atmosphere not conducive to the moral health of the very young who may be exposed to its influence. In my capacity of careful step-mother, therefore, I was in the habit of sending Meg to spend a few days with an old lady in town, a relation of her late mother's, whenever I was expecting a particularly "rackety" set of visitors. Meg resented these short periods of exile from her river-side home, but, as her father entirely concurred in my views on this subject, she had no appeal.

It was early in June, and Meg had not long returned from one of these forced excursions to town, when I received one morning, at breakfast, an intimation from my husband that we were to receive a visit from one of his clients who was supposed to be an especial danger to "the young person."

"How tiresome!" said I, glancing at Meg, who, having finished reading her own letters, was eating strawberries with a meditative air.

Judging from past experience, I foresaw that a battle with that self-willed and spoilt little person was imminent. There had been a difficulty about her going away on the last occasion, and what would she say now that she was wanted to go away again so soon? However, the news had to be broken to her, and I thought it better to take the field at once, while her father was present to support me. I would rather have begun the battle when Burgess was not present, because he had never forgiven my rejection of his addresses in favor of his father's, and

whenever he could thwart or oppose me he did so. But I resolved not to be daunted by his presence, and proceeded to the attack.

“Meg,” I began, gently, “I am afraid I have some news for you which you will consider very bad.”

The girl looked up. She had grown up just as she had promised to do, when I first made her acquaintance as a tiny brown child with glorious eyes which made the rest of her face seem of no account. Very little below the middle height, she was so slender, had such a small face and such tiny hands and feet, that she gave the impression of almost fairy-like proportions. A brunette by complexion, she rowed and paddled on the river, she played lawn-tennis in the heat of the sun, until her face and hands were the colour of a gipsy's. While the rest of her features were fairly good, her teeth were so white and regular and her eyes so large and bright that the rest of her face seemed insignificant by comparison. She was now dressed in a serge skirt and a pale blue cotton shirt, rather open at the throat, and was not looking her best. Meg was very extravagant in dress; for she bought hastily things which often failed to suit her, and then threw them aside without taking the trouble to discover whether a little alteration in them or in her way of wearing them would not set right what was wrong.

“Well, what is it?” she asked, rather gloomily.

I hesitated. If she did not seem in a very good humour before I broke the intelligence to her, what sort of scene might we not expect afterwards?

“Lord Percy is coming down. He says he shall be here the day after to-morrow. At least he asks if we can have him, and we don't want to have to refuse.”

Meg turned away her head quickly to look out of the window, and I thought the storm was coming. Burgess, who had grown very dissipated-looking and rather fat, was watching her mischievously from the other side of the table. Then, very quietly, she looked at me again.

“And you want me to go back to town to stay again with Aunt Di?”

I could hardly believe my ears. Was this only the calm before the storm?

“Well, yes, dear. You know we always think it——”

“Very well. When do you want me to go?”

Such unexpected submission made even her father look up from his paper. She had already begun again to eat strawberries, but she was not so deliberate over it as before. Burgess uttered an ironical laugh.

“Charming, charming!” he exclaimed. “What touching resignation! What beautiful self-abnegation! It brings tears to my eyes!”

Instead of turning sharply round upon him, as was Meg’s wont when teased by her step-brother, between whom and herself there was always some sort of warfare going on, Meg blushed, and contented herself by throwing one haughty glance at him.

“Burgess, don’t be a fool,” said his step-father, harshly. “Meg has sense enough to know that the arrangements her mother makes for her are entirely for her benefit, and then you try to make mischief, and in so doing only make an ass of yourself.”

And he rustled his paper angrily.

“Yes, sir,” returned Burgess, meekly. “But it’s because I am an ass.”

Meg remained silent while these words were exchanged, and offered no further remark during the course of the meal. I was debating what the cause of her change of front could be, and wondering whether I should get her to confess it. But Meg was shy with me, and I felt doubtful.

When breakfast was over, however, and we were leaving the room, a whisper of Burgess’s, which I caught, opened my eyes a little. He had run after Meg when she left the room, and had caught her as she was on her way to her own private study,—a big, disused school-room where she sometimes took fencing-lessons, and where she kept her tennis-racquet and a favourite pair of sculls.

“It must make haste, it must, a pretty one!” Burgess whispered, with exaggerated solicitude. “Or it won’t catch the post, it won’t; and then he won’t know it’s coming, bless it’s little heart!”

Meg, who was apt at retort, put her head saucily on one side, and cooed out,—

“And did it think itself so very clever then, a big hulking fellow that thought its own love-affairs the only ones in all the world!”

And she ran away along the corridor without giving him time for further parley.

A love-affair! Well, it was bound to come sooner or later; and if Prince Charming had made his appearance first in Aunt Di's sedate drawing-room, there was little to fear concerning him. But, then, I could not be sure of this. Meg was not kept in conventual seclusion on these visits to town, and she might have met, even when under Aunt Di's wing, some man who had taken her girlish fancy, who would turn out to be only another of the numerous suitors she had had, whose eyes had been more intently fixed on the father's money than on the daughter's charms.

Of course there had been many admirers of that sort about for two or three years now; and, although Meg was so shrewd that she saw through the motives of these gentlemen quite as quickly as her guardian did, still the charm of the impecunious might some day make itself felt by her; and this was a danger always present to the minds both of her father and myself.

I followed my husband to the study, and expressed my fears to him. But he had so much faith in his daughter's shrewdness that he was less perturbed than I.

"The girl's got her head screwed on the right way, Perdita," said he. "She's always spotted 'em before, and I'll back her to do it again. But I'll look in at Mrs. Sutherland's this afternoon" (Mrs. Sutherland was Aunt Di) "and ask if there's anything in the wind."

This seemed to me such a desirable course of action that I resolved to put no question to Meg until after my husband's visit to Mrs. Sutherland. It was arranged that she should go up to town with her father on the following morning, and that he should take her himself to Mrs. Sutherland's house in Eaton Square. We passed the day very quietly, therefore, having no visitors with us, and the weather being so warm that even energetic, lithe Meg was glad to lie in a hammock slung between two trees on the lawn instead of beguiling an unhappy neighbour into playing lawn-tennis with her or going for a cruise in her canoe.

Towards evening a gentle breeze sprang up, and between five and six o'clock it was pleasant to sit in our basket-chairs on the edge of the lawn, close by the river's

bank, and watch the boats go by. Meg was inclined to be cross, I thought.

"Nobody nice or decently dressed ever comes by here," she said, scornfully. "Only city clerks in badly-washed flannels, with a giggling shop-girl or two to steer them."

Quite suddenly she stopped and blushed. Turning my eyes rapidly from her face to the river, I saw a skiff smart-looking enough to satisfy even Meg's lofty ideals, manned by a decidedly attractive-looking crew, consisting of two well-dressed and well-bred-looking young men, who were at that moment in the act of raising their hats to us.

"Who are they, Meg?" said I.

She had risen impulsively from her chair, and had already taken a few steps towards the bank; encouraged by this condescension, the young men were resting on their oars. The girl turned towards me, and I perceived by the heightened colour of her cheeks, and by a certain air of repressed excitement which I knew her well enough to read, that one or other of these two smart-looking oarsmen must be the "reason" which was drawing her back to town.

"I met them at Aunt Di's," she answered, with affected carelessness; not, however, turning sufficiently to lose sight of the boat. "They are great friends. They call them Damon and Pythias. I forget their real names. Shall I introduce them?"

"If you can manage it, having forgotten their names," said I, smiling.

Something about the look of one of these young fellows attracted me; a twinkle of humour in the dark eyes, perhaps it was, or the intelligent expression of his small, bronze face. I glanced at the other man. He, too, was pleasant to look upon, and would no doubt have been considered by many the handsomer of the two. But he was tall and rather weedy-looking, I thought; moreover, like so many fair-complexioned young Englishmen, he was burnt by the summer sun a bright brick-red, which did not show to advantage beside the rich copper-brown of his companion's skin. Turning my eyes again upon his companion, who had by this time brought the skiff close to the bank and was conversing with Meg, I felt that I could understand her fancy for this slight, lithe, olive-

skinned lad, with the merry eyes and the nimble limbs, who was evidently urging some plea, and urging it in the most persuasive way, while his less eloquent companion sat silent behind him, and gave all his energies to keeping the skiff steady, a feat which the restless movements of his excitable friend rendered by no means easy.

"Let me introduce you to mamma," Meg said, as I came to the river-edge. "Mamma, this is Mr. Harry Carey," and she presented the young fellow with the bronzed face. "And this," she went on, indicating with rather less ceremony his quieter companion, "is his cousin, Mr. Deane Carey. I met them at Aunt Di's."

"Miss Keen throws that explanation in very apologetically, as if anxious to absolve Mrs. Sutherland from the guilt of having picked up such undesirable acquaintances," said Harry of the laughing eyes.

"Undesirable!" I exclaimed, smiling. "Is that how you wish to write yourselves down?"

As the lad (for he could not have been more than two- or three-and-twenty, and seemed, if anything, even younger) turned to me, I felt that the attraction both his face and his manner had for me increased. The deviltry in his answer pleased me also.

"Certainly I do. Start with a good character, and the chances are, to begin with, that people will look upon you as a humbug, and be always looking out for unsuspected weak points. Then, too, you have an awfully high standard to live up to, and at the slightest slip you are hurled down from your pedestal, never to be set up again. Start with a bad character, or with none, like me, and every intimation you give of ordinary human feeling scores you a point, while in the case of your man of good character it goes for nothing."

He had chattered on so volubly that his companion had not yet been introduced to me. I now turned, smiling, to the more sedate of the cousins.

"And does this alarming description apply to you also?"

Before he could answer the voluble Harry broke in:

"No, poor fellow. Unfortunately it does not. He has always had a good character, he has always suffered for it, and no efforts that he can now make will ever suffice to clear away the unfortunate impression once

made. I have to go about explaining to people that he isn't quite as good as he seems, or the poor fellow would never get anybody to speak to him."

"Of course," suggested Meg, demurely, "every one is so much occupied in running after you."

"Unfortunately, no," admitted Harry, modestly. "If I were the only bad character in the world I should have a high old time, I dare say. But there are so many more of them about that I don't get appreciated at my proper value."

"Which is, no doubt, a high one?" said Meg, mischievously.

Harry bowed in respectful acquiescence.

From this short colloquy I gathered that Meg had met the young men, or at any rate Harry, more than once. It was not so much out of consideration for Meg's feelings as for my own that I asked the cousins whether they would land and have tea with us under the trees. I wanted to see more of the bright-faced boy. As the years went by I had kept count of the age my son would have reached if he were still alive, and as he would now be two-and-twenty, that was the age which at this time had the greatest fascination for me. This may have had something to do with the interest I felt in Harry Carey, compared with my indifference towards his much graver and older-looking cousin.

My invitation was accepted with eagerness; and, as I was about to walk towards the house to give orders for the tea-table to be brought under the trees on the shady side of the lawn, Harry asked whether Meg might steer them as far as the lock and back during my absence. I saw that this had been the subject upon which he and Meg had been conversing when I came up. I consented, rather surprised that the wilful Meg had thought it necessary to consult me in a matter in which she evidently felt much interest. She took her place in the boat at once, and made a very pretty addition, in her pale pink frock and black sailor-hat with a pale pink band, to the boat-load she had herself admired so much.

When the young people came back I had the daintiest and most inviting of tea-tables spread for them in the prettiest nook in the garden. As they came up the lawn from the boat, I noticed that Meg and Harry came

first, each with so much to say, of a flippant and lively sort, that neither seemed able to wait with patience for the remarks of the other; while the tall and slow Deane was left to make fast the boat, and then follow in the wake of the others, with nobody to talk with him. When at last they came close to the table, however, Harry left his young companion and came up to my chair. I had not noticed the movement, for, with my hand on the little silver kettle in front of me, I was looking underneath it to see whether the wind was too strong for the little spirit-lamp which kept the water hot.

Suddenly a voice above me, and not far from my ear, startled me so much that the kettle rocked under my trembling hand.

“You are very good to us, Mrs. Keen. I wish all poor, weary travellers might find such hospitality.”

The words were nothing, only a young man’s playful speech, uttered in tones of mock-solemnity and tenderness. But something in the voice struck a sort of terror to my very soul: it was the voice of my first husband, Harry Dare.

“Harry!” I exclaimed, involuntarily, as I looked up, expecting to see I know not what.

But all that I did see was the young man’s look of surprise at my so very unexpectedly addressing him by his Christian name.

“How lucky,” I thought to myself, as I blushed like a girl at my fanciful foolishness, “that Harry is his Christian name!”

CHAPTER XVI.

“I WAS so much perturbed, middle-aged woman as I was, by the strange effect the young fellow’s voice had had upon me, and by my own lack of self-control, that I rushed into tea-making without giving myself time to make any reflections. I was not surprised to find, when I had recovered myself a little, that the volatile Harry had taken possession of Meg, leaving me to entertain his shy and rather ponderous cousin.

Now, I flattered myself upon my brilliant success with very young men. The haunting belief in my son's existence which formed such an important element in my life gave me a sympathy with their thoughts and feelings which made me exceedingly popular with them. But on this occasion my kind words, which had become a matter of habit, came from my lips only and not from my heart. It was surprising to me therefore, absorbed as I was in furtively watching Harry Carey, in whom I took a strong and almost tremulous interest, to find myself presently listening to such a frank outpouring of a young man's soul as I had never yet been honoured with. I looked wonderingly at the sunburnt face of the heavy young man who was making me his confidante. His blue eyes were full of feeling, his voice was soft, his manner gentle, almost tender.

"Why," said I, leaning back in my chair, and feeling, as I turned my eyes resolutely from the other face to his, like one waking from a dream,—“why do you tell these things to me, a stranger?” I asked the question quite gently, but the young man drew back a little, and his face, which had been the colour of a red brick before, became the colour of beet-root.

“I—I hardly know: perhaps I ought to apologize,” said he, relapsing into shyness for a moment and then quickly recovering himself. “At least, that is not quite true. The fact is, Mrs. Keen, you have only yourself to thank if I have bored you to death. I don't talk like this to everybody: I certainly never talked quite in the same way to any woman before. But you have a manner which does not so much invite confidence as compel it, and I have given way to the magnetism (really I must use that word!) you possess, without considering the awful consequences to the magnetizer.”

I was touched, and rather ashamed to think how little, if he had only known it, I deserved this young fellow's confidence. For indeed I had heard him, for the most part, without listening.

“You have not bored me,” I answered, gently, and truly enough, for I had not heard much. “It is only an idiot whom genuine confidences, from man, woman, or child, *can* bore. And so,” I went on, reverting to a point which I had not only grasped in his discourse, but had

been interested in, "your cousin Harry is your only friend?"

"Excepting the aunt who brought us both up," said Deane, in answer. "And she thinks so much more of him than she does of me that I may almost leave her out of the question."

"Ah!" said I, smiling, "that is the effect of the fatal good character he told us about! We women, you know, like to patronize, and to pity, and to forgive. And we feel comparatively cold towards the man who won't give us the opportunity to do any of these things."

"That is very bad morality to preach. And the sting lies in the truth of it. A year ago Harry and I fell in love with the same girl. She fell in love with him, of course, and I asked her, as a matter of information, to tell me on what grounds she made her choice so quickly. 'Well, Deane,' she said, 'Harry's so fickle, there'll be some fun in keeping him up to the mark. Now, with you, I should be afraid you really might love me forever: and think how awfully slow that would be!'"

"Go on," said I, smiling, seeing that he paused.

"Well, she was quite right. He *did* want keeping up to the mark. But by the time it dropped through she had grown awfully in earnest, and she said to me, crying, poor girl, 'Deane, why didn't I take you!' And so it will be always!" he ended, rather mournfully.

"But you needn't always fall in love with the same girl," I suggested.

"Sometimes one can't help it," he said, ruefully.

And, involuntarily, I am sure, he threw a glance at Harry and Meg which suddenly opened my eyes as to the need he had felt for confidence of some sort, even if he had to leave out the principal subject of his thoughts.

I uttered an exclamation of sympathy. Indeed, if he and the mercurial Harry were rivals I could give him little hope. He seemed to fear that he had betrayed himself, for he grew very red again, and, rising suddenly, suggested to his cousin that they were inflicting themselves upon us too long, and that they ought to be getting on if they were to catch the train by which they proposed to return to town.

I debated with myself whether I should ask them to remain and meet my husband; but I decided against this

course, for he often returned from town tired and not in the best of tempers, and I wanted him to meet Harry Carey when he was in a good humour. I let the two young men go, therefore, and Meg and I accompanied them as far as the river's bank, and waved a farewell to them as they rowed away. They had not gone out of sight, however, when my husband's voice, in its very surliest tones, was heard shouting to me from the house.

Meg started and turned rather pale, as she always did when her father was angry.

"Papa!" she exclaimed. And then she added, ingenuously, "Oh, I'm so glad the boys got away before he came!"

I echoed the thought, but not the words: before we had time to say any more, my husband came down the garden towards us at a rapid pace. Meg, with one glance at his face, fled precipitately. I went to meet him, feeling rather nervous.

"Well, dear," I began, with a propitiatory smile.

"Well, dear," said he, mimicking me angrily. "Who was that I saw you women nodding and smirking to? Come, come, don't pretend not to know. There were two of 'em—in a boat."

"Only two young fellows Meg met at her Aunt Di's," I answered at once.

"Her Aunt Di's! Pretty mess you've been making of it, then, sending her there to escape *my* friends! Why, one of those precious young fellows you were making such a fuss with is a young blackguard I wouldn't have inside my house! A fellow who's always borrowing money, and who's forged his old aunt's name to a bill of his I've got, I'm pretty sure."

A spasm of terror seized me. I would not for the world have disclosed my suspicions, my hopes, and my fears to my husband. As he paused a moment, still looking angrily down the river towards the bridge, I, exercising strong command over myself, said,—

"Are you sure it's the same man, dear? What was the young fellow's name?"

"His name is Carey, Harry Carey. You know that as well as I do," he added, brusquely, thinking he saw an attempt on my part to interfere, as I had sometimes ven-

tured to do, though never with success, on behalf of some luckless client.

"It is the name of one of the lads who were in the boat, certainly," I admitted, seeing that there was no help for it. "But you are not sure about the forgery?"

"I shall be to-morrow," replied he, briefly. "I was put up to my suspicions of the genuineness of the old woman's signature by another man who had been 'had' by the young rascal. So I wrote to her asking if I could call upon her on business. I had an answer from her to-day, saying she would rather call upon me, and would be at Kerr Street at half-past one to-morrow. I shall get my money, I ascertained that from my informant; but that doesn't affect my opinion of a man who will let in his poor old aunt again and again in that way."

"Of course not," said I, quietly.

I was miserable, excited, filled with fears and doubts, which I took pains to hide.

"What is the aunt's name?" I asked, with affected carelessness.

"Lady Stephana Darent," said my husband. "She's a relation of the Duke of St. Ives, and aunt to Lord Wallinghurst."

Lord Wallinghurst! The name sent a thrill through me, and set me on a fresh track of thought. My husband saw me start at the name, and asked if I had ever known him.

"No," said I. "But his father, the late earl, I knew very well indeed. My father trained his horses; he trained Fabricius, who was Derby favourite in sixty —, and who didn't win, you remember."

My husband had heard the story from me again and again, of what I knew of that eventful Derby and its consequences. So he only nodded. To my relief, for the confusion in my thoughts was increasing so fast that I was afraid my husband would grow curious, the dinner-bell rang at that moment, and we went in-doors.

That night I scarcely slept, so sure was I that I was on the brink of a great discovery.

Next morning I found I had some shopping to do, and went up to town with Meg and my husband. But when I reached the house in Kerr Street, I made some excuse

for remaining there, so that I might be present when Lady Stephana should arrive.

My husband's study, into which his clients were shown after a ceremonious period of probation in an adjoining room, was on the ground-floor. Reckoning, as a matter of course, that the lady would go through the usual course on her arrival, I seated myself in the anteroom to wait for her. Punctually at half past one the bell of the front door rang. With my heart beating very fast I listened to the opening and closing of the door, to the footsteps of the footman and of the lady in the hall. But they passed the door of the room in which I was sitting: my husband had given orders, so I afterwards heard, that the lady was to be shown at once into the study.

It seemed an age to me before the interview was over. I did not dare to enter the study while my husband was engaged with a client: no excuse would have availed, in my husband's eyes, to account for my taking such a liberty. But I was determined not to be balked a second time; so I waited near the door of the room to hear the first sound of the lady's departure.

When the study-door opened at last, my husband himself came out with his visitor, and they passed so rapidly along the hall that they had almost reached the front door before I came up to them. Following them as I did, I could not at first see the lady's face; but her diminutive stature arrested my attention and caused my heart to beat faster. My husband turned on hearing my footsteps, and said, at once,—

“Allow me to introduce my wife, Lady Stephana. Lady Stephana Darent—Mrs. Keen.”

I bowed, trembling like a leaf in the wind. But I uttered no word, no sound; for I did not want my husband to know that I recognised her.

Lady Stephana Darent was the aunt of my first husband, Harry Dare, and she knew me as soon as our eyes met.

CHAPTER XVII.

“MRS. KEEN—Lady Stephana Darent.”

A conventional smile on my side, a stiff, jerky nod on the part of Lady Stephana; and then the visitor, with the briefest of small speeches, disappeared quickly into the brougham which was waiting for her, and the meeting I had waited for so many years was over.

My husband looked at me in astonishment.

“Why, Perdita, what’s the matter with you?” he asked. “You’ve gone as white as a sheet. Did the old woman’s rudeness annoy you? Those little bundles of genealogy and nerves are always like that. But you can hold your own with ’em, old girl.”

“Yes, I suppose I can by this time,” said I, trying to laugh, but with rather a shaky voice.

My husband thrust his hand through my arm and led me into his study. This was a rarely-conferred honour, which, however, I was hardly in the mood to appreciate. I wanted to be alone, to think over what I had found out. My husband was too shrewd not to see that, in spite of my denial, there was something wrong with me. He poured me out a glass of wine, with a keen glance at my face, before he began to speak about the interview he had had with Lady Stephana. It was I who had to ask him for details of what had passed. I think he guessed that, for some reason, my interest was stronger than I pretended.

“It was just as I had thought,” he said, briefly, in answer to my question. “The old lady evidently adores the young scamp, and when I showed her the bill, she declared the signature to be hers. But I saw by the start she gave, and the sort of orange tint which came into her little dried-up face, that it wasn’t true. Well, she made me give up the bill,—for a consideration, of course. I didn’t come badly out of the business: these old women must expect to pay for their fancies, whether they run in the direction of curly poodles, or missionaries, or wild nephews. But the lad is a dirty little scoundrel, who ought to be kicked.”

These last words seemed to cut into my heart like the point of a sword. For how could I doubt that it was of my own son he was speaking? I remained silent for a short time, during which my husband, behind his big office writing-table, looked through the pages of a memorandum-book, and made two or three fresh entries.

“It seems curious, doesn’t it,” said I, at last, “that she should turn out to be the sister of the very Lord Wallinghurst I used to know so well when I was a child? I ought to have told her about that. It might have interested her, and made her thaw a little. Where does she live?” I asked, as indifferently as I could, after a little pause.

“Somewhere in Shropshire, I fancy, by what she said.”

“But where is she staying in town?”

I felt that my colour was rising under his close scrutiny. But he answered,—

“In Grosvenor Place, at the house of the Duke of St. Ives.”

I had now heard all I wanted to know, and as soon as I could I made my escape. There was the shopping for an excuse. My husband wanted me to have the brougham, but I thought a hansom would give me greater independence; for I knew that he was not above questioning the servants as to my movements when he was either jealous or curious, as was even now sometimes the case.

I did some shopping first, in Sloane Street and its neighbourhood; then I drove as far as St. George’s Hospital, and dismissed the hansom. I was thinking of that occasion on which I had followed the mysterious woman who proved to be Harry Dare’s wife down this very street, and, as I soon found, to the very door at which I was about to ask for Lady Stephana. I remembered how impossible it had seemed that such a woman as she was should be admitted into such a house; and I understood now that Lady Stephana must have been staying there on that occasion just as she was staying now.

But I was destined to be less fortunate. The footman who opened the door in answer to my ring informed me that Lady Stephana was not at home.

I wrote to her that evening, imploring her to let me know the truth about my son, whatever it might be. I

said I thanked her for the care and kindness she had bestowed upon him for so many years, but asked her what possible reason there could be now for keeping us apart any longer. I was now a middle-aged woman, a wife of long standing, and perhaps, I suggested, my influence, low as her opinion of me might be, might do more for my boy than hers had been able to do. I added that though, in consideration of what she had done for him, I condescended to use a tone of entreaty, being anxious to be on good terms with one who had been a kind friend to my son, yet that it was too late to deceive me; and that if she refused to be reconciled to me herself, and herself to introduce me to my boy, I should make myself known to him without her intervention.

I received a prompt answer, written in the third person, apparently by a female secretary, who informed me that Lady Stephana Darent had left town for the Continent, and that, in answer to Mrs. Keen's note, Lady Stephana desired to inform Mrs. Keen that she was at liberty to take what steps she pleased.

I was not long in taking them. I dared not ask my husband for Harry Carey's address, but it seemed to me probable that Meg would know it, and, as the girl had by this time returned from Aunt Di's to The Limes, I took the first opportunity of asking her.

We were sitting in the drawing-room one evening after dinner, before the gentlemen had joined us, when I put the question I wished to ask as neatly as I could.

"By the bye, what has become of those two young fellows whom we entertained at tea last week? They seemed to enjoy themselves so much here, particularly the younger of them," said I, with an arch smile and a glance at the girl's crimsoning face, "that I wonder we haven't heard from them again. But perhaps *you* have?" I suggested.

Meg looked quite frightened.

"Don't you know, mamma," she said, in a low voice, and rather suspiciously, "that papa wrote a very angry letter to Aunt Di, telling her she had no business to have such people in her house, and that if the Careys were allowed to visit her again I should never come to stay with her any more?"

I told her truly that I had not heard of it, and then,

warming to the girl as I had never done before on finding how much distressed she was by the prohibition, I told her, rather tremulously, that I knew Harry Carey had got himself into trouble through some youthful folly. And then, watching her face, and seeing sympathy there, I said I had learnt something about the young fellow's early history which made me sorry for him, and that I was by no means disposed to be so hard upon him as her father was.

"Do you know where he lives?" I then asked.

At first Meg, looking askance at me out of her soft, bright eyes, seemed inclined to suspect that I had been set to play the spy, and professed complete ignorance on the subject. But presently she relented, and confessed that she had heard one or other of the cousins say that they had chambers, "or a flat, or something," in Piccadilly. By degrees I got the whole address, and then that very night I wrote a note to Harry Carey, in the following words:

"DEAR MR. CAREY,—I have to go up to town to-morrow, and trust my matronly and not over-active person in the London streets—the terrible London streets—without an escort. Will you take pity upon a poor old woman who has no son to lend her his strong young arm, and see me on my way? If so, please meet me at Waterloo at one o'clock.

"Sincerely yours,

"PERDITA KEEN."

On the following morning, much to Meg's surprise, for it was a wet day, I got into the brougham as soon as it returned from taking my husband to the station, and started for town. I was in a state of keen excitement, divided between the delight of the thought that I had recovered my son and grief that he was not all that a mother's heart could wish. The sins of the father were being visited on the son; I could not find it in my heart to blame; I had nothing but pity for the child of Harry Dare, and the grandson, as I now felt sure that he must be, of my father's old friend and patron Lord Wallinghurst.

A great many things which had puzzled me in the old days were now becoming clear to me, one by one. The

attraction the face of Harry Dare had had for me when I first met him I understood to be his resemblance to his father, Lord Wallinghurst, which, looking back, I could now dimly recognize. I remembered how Lord Wallinghurst had spoken of a scapegrace son, and how I had said I should prefer him to his brothers, little thinking how far that liking would one day carry me. This Lady Stephana, then, was the saintly sister of whom Lord Wallinghurst used to speak. Gradually the whole story was getting a new meaning: I saw that my instinctive liking for Harry Dare had been no mere coincidence, but the natural consequence of my seeing in his face the features and expression of my father's old friend. And so, in a way which seemed strange, but which was really very natural, my fortunes had become bound up in those of Lord Wallinghurst's family.

It was still raining fast when the train drew up at the platform at Waterloo, and my heart leapt up as I recognised the bright, black-eyed face of Harry Carey, who was waiting to meet me. It gave me a thrill of the most exquisite happiness to note that his face lighted up at the sight of me.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come when it turned out such a beastly day," said he, as he helped me to alight.

My hand trembled as it touched his. It was difficult for me to keep up the light tone of an ordinary acquaintance.

"I have been hoping all the way that it would clear up," said I, "so that I might at least be able to potter about with some comfort after luncheon."

"Are you going anywhere to lunch by appointment?" asked he, quite eagerly. "Because, if not, there's nothing would give me greater pleasure than to give you luncheon at my own place,—mine and Deane's, that is. They're only bachelor diggings, you know, but if you would put up with them we should feel so much honoured, both of us."

With another thrill of pleasure, I accepted the invitation. To see my son's home, the objects which surrounded him every day, the place in which he lived,—this was a pleasure greater than I had ventured to expect. We got into a hansom, and drove first to Somerset House, where, so Harry told me, both he and

his cousin were engaged. He wanted to run in and tell Deane of the honour which awaited him, so that that young man, instead of lunching in the Strand as usual, should hurry back home as soon as he was at liberty.

"We both have an hour for luncheon, from one to two," Harry explained, as, with his usual radiant face, he got into the hansom again beside me. "I got off this morning to come and meet you, and I don't suppose they'll be hard upon Deane if he's ten minutes late after luncheon. I shall say," he added, laughing, "that you are a rich aunt, and that we daren't offend you."

This little jest pleased me, and I caught at it eagerly.

"Yes, you shall both call me aunt, and then you will gradually believe in the relationship, and be able to tell the tarradiddle without a betraying blush."

"Oh, if I blushed whenever I did tell one," said Harry, laughing, "I should hardly ever be a proper colour." This avowal caused me a sharp pang, even as he rattled on: "But I like to lie consistently, so we must not let you be seen, Mrs. Keen. For you don't look old enough, nearly old enough, to be my aunt, much less the aunt of a great, hulking fellow like Deane."

For a few moments I remained silent, and then I said, softly,—

"You boys need not make pretty speeches to me. I am old enough, quite old enough to be your aunt, or—or your mother."

I held my breath with interest and excitement as I saw that a gloomy expression passed for a moment into his face as I uttered the last word. Had he wondered, poor boy, what his unknown mother was like? Or had he been told that she was a person about whom it would be better for him not to ask?

I trembled as I went on, following up the opening I had made:

"I feel interested in all young lads, boys I should say if I dared, of about your age. For, if he had not been taken from me, I should have had a son who would have been twenty-two."

My voice must have betrayed to a pair of eyes so keen as Harry's the fact that I was under the influence of some extraordinary emotion. He glanced at me in his usual rapid manner, and remained silent; and I

fancied by the expression of his face that he was puzzling out some question in his mind. I was silent also, hoping that he would ask me something. But the problem which occupied his mind was apparently too intricate to be solved quickly or easily. At last, after throwing at me two or three lightning glances, full of inquiry, of intelligence, he said, in a tentative sort of way,—

“You lost your son, you say. Do you mean that he died?”

There was a pause, while I tried to get my voice entirely under control. Then I said,—

“No. I do not think he died. He was, as I told you, taken away. He was taken by people”—my voice shook, in spite of all my efforts—“who thought they were doing the best they could for him—and for me. But—but—they nearly broke my heart. And—and my boy—I think would have been the better for knowing that he had a mother who, whatever her faults and her misfortunes might be, had love in her heart for him, love which has never died in all these lonely years.”

I did not dare to look at him: for if at that moment, with my heart full of yearning, I had met his eyes, I should have cried aloud “My son! my son!” I should have flung my arms about him, and have sobbed on his breast. And, remembering that we were driving through the London streets, in a hansom with the glass down, where there was little room for violent demonstrations and considerable chance of attracting attention, I kept my head turned away from him and restrained myself.

Harry on his side was as reserved and as silent as I. I wanted to know what he was thinking, above all what he was feeling; whether nature was speaking to his heart as loudly as she was to mine. But I would not speak, I would not look; and so we drove on in complete silence, until the cabman reined in his horse, opened the trap above, and put his head down to inquire, in a thick voice,—

“Is this right, sir?”

It was right, and it was the side-door of a shop in Piccadilly. We got out, and hurried in.

“I must apologize for the stairs: it’s at the very top, a mere garret,” explained Harry, as I began the ascent.

It was a long way up, certainly, but it was a very snug little nest when you got there. The two young men had each a tiny bedroom, and they shared between them a sitting-room of fair size, furnished in the most luxurious manner.

“You extravagant boys!” I exclaimed, as I noted the dado of lin crusta Walton and the Japanese leather paper, the saddlebag furniture and the Persian rugs. “Why, you have a room fit for princes.”

“But only just decent enough to ask *you* into!” said Harry, in whose face, which I now saw for the first time since our entrance, there burned an excitement equal to my own. “Take this chair, and let me turn it a little,—so. Like that you have a fine view of our best etching, and besides, you miss the sight of this trayful of undarned socks, which that graceless beast Deane should have taken into his own room, instead of giving us away by leaving them about here!”

“Undarned socks! Where are they?” said I, eagerly.

And rising from the chair which I had obediently taken, I pounced upon a pile of ragged hose. Harry rushed at me, and with mock sternness commanded me to give them up. But I clung to them, and there ensued between us a struggle which set me laughing hysterically for joy that the hands touching mine were those of my recovered son. In the end I conquered, being indeed determined to carry my point.

“Now,” said I, “have you anything to mend them with? Some of these are silk, I see, and some cashmere. Who mended them last?”

“The memory of man goeth not far back enough for me to say,” answered Harry, cheerfully. “We do pay the old woman who does the washing—or we promise to pay her, I forget which—to look over our things. But I believe she keeps to the strict letter of the contract, and contents herself with the looking.”

“Then,” said I, “I will go out myself and get what I want to enable me to set about my work.”

“Not so, madam? We are not here upon a desert island: there are myrmidons within call.”

And he pulled the bell-handle.

“Now,” he went on, “you will give your orders to the slavey, who shall execute your commands or die. In

the mean time I will away in search of the wherewithal to make a meal. I dare say you will not miss me for a little while; and there is our art-collection to inspect."

So I commissioned the servant, who had by this time appeared, to get me the needles, wool, and silk I wanted, and, Harry having taken himself off in the highest possible spirits, I was left alone.

I was crazily happy. At last the hunger of my heart was appeased: I had found my boy. True, I had not yet made myself known to him; but already he had, I felt sure, an inkling of the truth, and when I took leave of him that afternoon we should part as mother and son. I moved about the room, unable to contain my happiness. These were the chairs my son sat in, the walls which sheltered him, the pictures on which his eyes rested every day. I peeped into the little bedroom adjoining. It was not in keeping with the sitting-room, being furnished with almost monastic simplicity. A small bed, an insignificant painted wash-hand-stand, a wardrobe, evidently bought second-hand, not matching anything else, a common little dressing-table, one chair: that was all. On the table was a book, which I opened lovingly: it was in Latin, so I could not understand it. But there was something in it which I did understand, and that was a dead and dry flower, an orchid, which I recognised as one which Meg had worn when she started in the skiff with the two young men, but which I now remembered that she had not worn on her return.

I placed tender fingers on the withered thing, and felt that I loved Meg for having given it to him. He should marry her; she was a good girl, and the gentle influence of a loving woman should make right what was wrong in him, correct the defects which heredity had brought upon him, and render him as happy as even I could wish him to be.

There were difficulties in the way of this pleasant settlement, I was obliged to admit. I felt a sudden qualm of uneasiness as I wondered what my husband would say or do if he could know where I was at that moment. A doubt crossed my mind whether he would ever consent, now that he had formed so strong a prejudice against Harry, to his marriage with Meg. But I was too happy to nurse such fears for long: surely such love as burned

in my breast for my boy would be strong enough to clear away all obstacles to his happiness.

Singing to myself I closed the Latin book gently on the withered flower; and, looking up, I caught the reflection of my own face in the little looking-glass which had so often, so I told myself, reflected that of my son. And I saw a face which was transfixed, radiant with keen delight. I felt a vivid pleasure in the fact that I had preserved my beauty, that my hair was still bright, my skin still smooth; for I told myself that my boy could still be proud to say of me, "That is my mother!"

And, flushed and excited with the thought of the momentous interview before me, I went back into the sitting-room just in time to meet Harry on his return from his marketing expedition.

"I have been trespassing. I have been exploring your room," I said, in a tone which seemed to take his knowledge of the relationship between us for granted.

But Harry looked, I thought, rather scornful.

"*That* isn't my room," he exclaimed, disdainfully, as he glanced at the open door through which I had just come. "That's Deane's." And, leading the way out on to the landing, he threw open the door of a second bedroom, larger than the first, and as handsomely furnished as the other had been the reverse.

Brass bedstead with silken hangings to match the window-curtains; wardrobe, wash-hand-stand, chairs, and dressing-table of rosewood; silver-backed brushes and cut crystal jug and basin.

It was ridiculous, childish of me, but I was sorry that the plain room was not my son's.

And then the withered orchid?

CHAPTER XVIII.

I soon got over my momentary disappointment in the pleasure of Harry's society. He was in the highest possible spirits; yet through his hilarity I thought I perceived a certain acute anxiety, which I attributed to the half-knowledge he must have of my relationship to him, and to his earnest wish to know more.

The servant had brought me the needles and wool, and I had sat down in the chair which Harry had chosen for me, and begun my work.

Harry took a modest footstool, and asked permission, which I accorded laughing but almost with tears, to sit at my feet. Embracing one knee meditatively, he remarked, as he watched my busy hands,—

“I believe it’s a shocking thing to say, and gives evidence of I don’t know how much natural depravity, but I appreciate your goodness in mending my socks ever so much more because you have such beautiful rings on.”

I laughed, but I shook my head.

“I remember, when I was a little child,” said I, “I had some remarkable ideas about my proper destiny. I was an only child, and a good deal spoilt in one way or another, I suppose, so that I began to think that nothing that was good enough for ordinary people was good enough for me. Among other ideas, I made up my mind that I would marry a prince.”

“So you ought to have done,” said Harry, promptly. “And you would have satisfied the imagination as a princess, which is more than we can say for most of them.”

“Don’t interrupt. There’s a moral to my story, and I was just coming to it. An old nurse I had used to shake her head at me, and say that there was trouble in store for me, because I had ‘notions.’ Now, you have ‘notions’ too.”

“I am content,” said Harry, with a courtly air, “to resemble you in your defects, since it is out of my power to resemble you in your virtues.”

There was a little pause, and then I asked, only half playfully, “If I didn’t feel sure that it is just a young man’s way of talking, and nothing more, your cynical assumption of so many bad qualities would shock me a little.”

Harry looked up quickly and curiously, I thought.

“It is very good of you,” said he, “to take any interest in me at all.” He began to play with the window-curtains, and after a short silence he asked, abruptly, “And so you once had a son. Tell me, why did you speak about him—to me?”

I could not immediately answer him. Such a rush of

incoherent words seemed to rise to my lips, of passionate feelings to my heart. I felt choked by thought and emotion. My hands trembled, and I dropped my work. Turning my head away, I said, in a voice which was scarcely articulate,—

“Tell me—about yourself, your life, anything, everything you can remember.”

Again, as I glanced at him, I caught the quick, bright glance of his eyes, and felt sure that he must know something. Then obediently he began,—

“What shall I tell you? Do you want an autobiography? If so, some of the details must be left to the imagination; at least I can't supply them.”

“Never mind. Tell me all you do know—from the beginning. Your father? Your mother?”

“Ah, I must break down on the very threshold. I never knew either of them.” But, as he spoke, I noticed a flush in his face, a conscious look in his eyes, which, in spite of his boasted accomplishment in falsehood, betrayed to me the fact that he knew or guessed more than he would own to. “I have been in my aunt's care, or rather my great-aunt's, ever since I could remember.”

The work lay in my lap and my hands were idle.

“And you can't remember anything earlier than that?” said I, trying to subdue the tremulous earnestness in my voice as I put the question. “You can't remember being in the care of any one—of any person—who—who didn't belong to you, who didn't treat you well? At least—Of course not—— You were only a baby!”

The words were out of my mouth, against my will, before I had time to consider what their effect would be. Having betrayed myself so far, I lost my self-command altogether; and rising, while needles and work fell in a heap on the floor, I walked to the window, and looked out through the rain at the traffic below, the umbrella-covered omnibuses, the broughams with their white-mackintoshed coachmen, the hansoms with their dripping drivers. In another moment I felt Harry's breath upon my neck.

“Won't you tell me what you mean? Why did you say that? Did you know my parents, or did you—have you—are you——”

He was earnest, anxious, excited. There was no put-

ting him off now. Turning, I put his hands in mine, and held them against my breast.

"I have lost my boy," said I, tremulously. "And I hope—I sometimes think—I may have found him!"

He seemed as much moved as I.

"You are my mother?" he exclaimed, with unmistakable satisfaction. "Oh, if I could only think so! It seems too good to be true. And yet—my aunt said my mother was beautiful,—said it in her way, that is, and not in so many words."

"You are twenty-two?" I asked, impulsively.

"Yes."

"And—and—your father's name—was it Carey?"

"No. It was really Henry Cunred Darent. But he called himself Harry Dare."

"And your mother's?" asked I, eagerly.

"I don't know what her maiden name was. But her Christian name was Perdita."

My arms shook; I felt as if I should fall to the ground. In a moment the boy's arms were around me, and he was whispering in my ear,—

"Mother! My mother! I'm so awfully glad you're my mother!"

Perhaps in every great crisis of feeling there is some shock, some jar. I was conscious, even in that supremely happy moment, when my boy's voice, calling me "mother," sounded in my ears, that I missed something of joy for which I had so long hungered, and which had seemed so close to my lips. And yet, even with the feeling, came the thought that I had expected too much. How could this young fellow, who, if he had even known that his mother was alive, had certainly scarcely expected to see her as long as he lived, be prepared as I was for this meeting? Was it not unreasonable in me to hope that his feelings would be on the same plane as mine?

I sat down again in my chair, and he resumed his seat on the footstool; but now I held his head on my lap, so that I could feast my eyes upon his face.

"And you know something of the story," I began, timidly, when we were seated, "of your father and me, and—and of the other woman who stood in the way?"

"Oh, don't talk of *her*!" he said, hastily and harshly.

"Ah, you do know it, then!" I cried, relieved to find

that I had not to go again over the pitiful old story. "But, Harry, you must not be too hard upon your father. He was fond of me, too fond of me, and he let his fondness carry him away. He would have made me his wife if he had been free. And I thought I was his wife. He married me in a church, you know,—St. Clement Danes."

Harry started.

"Did he, though? I—I didn't know that." For a few moments he looked thoughtful; then he said, "Then how did you hear it was not a legal marriage?"

"I didn't know it until the first wife told me."

"She told you that—that my father had married her first?"

"Yes. And your aunt confirmed it. But how was I to blame, Harry?"

"Why, of course, of course you were not," he answered, hastily. "And besides, what does it matter? You've made a splendid marriage since; you have everything you can wish for. Why trouble about it now? I'm sure I don't."

This speech jarred upon me. It was not that I regretted that he was reconciled to the fact that he could not bear his father's name. But I would have chosen that he should look upon the misfortune differently. "What does it matter?" It was a common-sense view, certainly, but yet——

"Your aunt is very angry with me for wanting to see you. Did you know that?" I said, changing the subject.

"Oh, is that why she has taken herself off to Switzerland in such a hurry?" asked he, quickly. "I thought it was my delinquencies which had frightened her away." Again his light tone, in speaking of such grave errors as he had committed, jarred upon me. But he left me no time for thought. "Tell me, mother," said he, and the word made me forget everything but my happiness, "how did you find me out?"

I told him the whole story of my two meetings with Lady Stephana, to which he listened attentively and without comment. I suppressed, in justice to the woman who had proved herself such a devoted guardian to him, the more unpleasant details of that lady's behaviour to me all those years ago. But he said little about her, and I could not fail to see that, generous as she had been to him, Lady Stephana had never succeeded in taking a

foremost place in his heart. When I had finished my story, all he said was,—

“You must not let her know that we have come together, mother, you and I. She is jealous of me, and it would break the old lady’s heart.”

“And I am afraid,” I said, sadly, “that for the present I must not let my own husband know that I have found you. For he is very, very angry at what you have done. And so, Harry, am I. It is sad to have to spoil this first meeting by scolding you, but oh, Harry, you will not do such a wicked thing again, will you?”

“My dear mother,” said he, kneeling up to caress me, “you don’t know what a corner I was in. I know I did wrong. But see, mother, how rough it is on a fellow to bring him up as if he would have any amount of money, and then suddenly to tell him he must manage to get along on what he’s been used to spend on his gloves alone. Mother, Aunt Stephana is a good soul, but these good souls are rather trying sometimes to the bad ones!”

I could see that it was very likely the ideas of a rigid old lady and those of a lively young man would clash on the subject of expenditure, and of course I was inclined to take my boy’s part. I would not own to this, however, and I said, gravely,—

“She is a very good woman, Harry, and generous and charitable. Think of her educating and providing for—why, not one, but two,”—I had suddenly remembered Deane,—“two lads as if they had been her own! Who is this Deane Carey? Is it his real name?”

“No. He’s only one of her numerous *protégés*, and no relation to me at all, I believe. She has given us the same name, and she calls us cousins; but we’re really nothing of the sort; only, as we’re great chums, we accept the position without any protest. By the bye, I feel jealous of Deane’s seeing you. He and luncheon will be here in a moment, but I am going to take you off before either of them appears. For you are my property, mine, mine.”

And he gently pressed a kiss upon my forehead. I submitted to his caprice, as I was ready to submit to anything at his hands.

“And you’ll come and see me here again, won’t you,

mother?" said he, coaxingly, as, in obedience to his imperious wish, I fastened my mantle and prepared to go out with him. "And if my impecuniosity, which is chronic and severe, should prevent my entertaining you properly, you will partake of the humble biscuit and the lowly glass of water, and we will season the frugal fare with our happiness."

"Indeed, indeed I will," said I, in a trembling voice. "But, my boy, you need not be impecunious now. Do you want money? How much will you have?"

I had pulled out my purse, and was fumbling in it for the money my emotion would not let me see. He laughed, and laughingly pushed away my hand.

"Oh," he cried, "some good fairy help me to resist the temptation! What a sight for a fellow who has had to worship a half-crown respectfully!"

With trembling fingers I took out a note, the only one I had with me, and some gold, and put them into the pocket nearest to me. He resisted, laughing, but finally yielded. And we went down-stairs together, and got into a passing hansom. Harry was treating me with quite open demonstrations of respect and affection, betraying our relationship, indeed, to any eyes with powers to see.

Just as we were about to drive off to a restaurant where he was going to take me to luncheon, we saw Deane Carey jumping in hot haste out of a hansom at the door.

"Deane in a hansom! What an extravagance for him!" cried Harry, good-humouredly, but somewhat disdainful.

As I looked out at the young fellow, my heart smote me for the disappointment we were evidently inflicting upon him. For his face fell as he looked wistfully from Harry to me.

"Ah, I'm too late! I always am," said he, gently.

"Yes, old chap. As usual. Ta ta!"

Again, as we drove off, my boy's tone jarred upon me. I felt quite sorry for poor Deane, left to eat a lonely luncheon while we drove away.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN spite of those transient feelings of disappointment which I have mentioned, the day that I spent with my recovered son was, I think, the happiest of my life. Certainly it was the happiest I had spent since that far-off day when my baby was first put into my arms. I did indulge a dream, on that happy morning, that life would be transfigured to me now; but my hopes were premature. When, after five delightful hours in Harry's society, during which I had luncheon without knowing what I ate, and went through the Academy without knowing what I saw, I parted from my boy at Waterloo Station, I remembered for the first time that the sky was clouded and that the rain was pouring down, and that I was not yet in heaven, after all. A thousand considerations seemed now to crowd into my mind to obscure my happiness. In spite of, or perhaps because of, Lady Stephana's austere goodness, my son's principles were evidently not such as a mother could contemplate with peace of mind. He had already been guilty of forgery, and the crime in his case was rendered more appalling by the fact that the victim of it was the guardian who had taken charge of him since his babyhood. I confess frankly to a shameful feeling of vindictiveness towards Lady Stephana for her treatment of myself, which inclined me to think that it must be partly her fault that my boy had started his early manhood so ill. I was full of hope that the mother he was so evidently ready to love might have a better influence over him; and I even stifled the wicked maternal jealousy in my heart so far as to hope that the girl he loved would have a better influence still. I had too long severely censured those mothers who assume an antagonistic attitude towards their sons' sweethearts and wives not to try to avoid falling into that pitfall myself.

On the whole, I rejoiced that his choice had fallen upon Meg, who, although a spoilt, audacious, and self-willed little mortal, was also a good and sweet girl, with

intelligence enough to understand a man and character enough to be an influence for good with him.

Meg had been exceedingly puzzled by my sudden journey to town. I had grown too luxurious in my habits to be fond of the rain, and she knew of no urgent business to take me up to town. Reticent herself, however, at least towards me, she respected my reticence, and said nothing to her father or her step-brother about my hurried journey.

When we were sitting together in the drawing-room that evening, I, from the fulness of my heart, found it impossible not to speak on the subject dearest to me.

"I met one of the young Careys in town to-day," I said, trying to speak in a casual tone.

Meg, who was not easily deceived, fixed her eyes upon me steadily.

"Indeed! Which one?" she asked, with as unsuccessful an affectation of indifference as my own.

"Oh, the nice one," returned I, to see what she would say.

"And which do you call the nice one? The one who talks your head off in five minutes, without saying a word worth listening to, or the one who is so glum that when you have talked at him for a quarter of an hour you feel as if you must lie back and fan yourself?"

"You are rather severe on both of them," said I, smiling.

"Now, are not both my descriptions perfectly just?" said Meg, who was evidently delighted to talk upon the subject at all.

"Well, neither the talkative one nor the taciturn one seemed to bore you as much as you declare that most young men do."

"That is true," said Meg, meditatively, with mischief and amusement in her eyes. "Neither of them does bore me. One has to work too hard with the one, in order to keep conversation going at all; and as for the other, why, his incessant chatter does not bore, it absolutely stuns one."

"But the process is not unpleasant?"

"Not altogether, perhaps."

"Ah!"

Presently Meg left off smiling.

"I sha'n't have much chance of being either stunned or overworked by them again," she said, as I thought, rather gloomily. "I never knew papa speak so harshly of any young fellow as he does of Harry Carey. He says he's a scoundrel, a thief, and a——"

"Oh, hush, hush!" I cried, unable to conceal my distress. "He ought not to use such words. It isn't right, it isn't fair. He is a very young man, and he has been spoilt, over-indulged, perhaps over-lectured. With a good woman at his side to love him, to correct his faults with tenderness, to give him her sympathy, to encourage what is best in him, he would be a good man, a noble man, I am sure."

I had been carried away by my own feelings. I was abruptly recalled to myself by finding Meg's pitiless black eyes fixed upon me more steadily than ever.

"Oho!" she said. "It is easy to see which is *your* favourite."

"Well," I said, in some confusion, "I think he is everybody's."

Meg looked suddenly away into the garden, where the shadows were growing blacker, while the lawn was outlined in the distance by the silver line of the moonlit water.

"Yes," she said, in a peculiar tone of voice which puzzled me, "Harry is everybody's favourite. Poor—Harry!"

In the pause which followed, we heard the dining-room door open, and a burst of talk and laughter announced the approach of the gentlemen and closed our conversation.

It was on the second morning after this conversation that an invitation came for us all to a launch party further up the river. I passed the note round without comment for general inspection. My husband glanced at it first, and, briefly observing, "Not me!" threw it across to Burgess.

"The Everetts! H'm!" said he, critically. "Champagne very good,—nobody who had a grandfather ever gives such champagne,—it's waste, wanton, wicked waste! That's one side of the question. But then those girls! They're so d—d plain, and there's such a d—d lot of them:

‘It’s daughters, daughters everywhere,
And not a girl to kiss!’ ”

“Burgess!” I cried, much shocked.

One was always being shocked at The Limes, either by Burgess or by his father, or by one of the rackets visitors. The occurrence was so frequent that my reproofs had grown to be quite conventional; while, as Burgess was about the only person I ventured to address them to, they were largely ineffectual in raising the standard of the daily conversation. Even Meg’s more pungent comments failed to keep her step-brother in order.

“I’m sure, Burgess, your absence will make no difference to the daughters, though it may to the champagne,” she said, dryly.

“While your absence won’t even affect that.”

“I’m not going to try the effect of absence,” said Meg, imperturbably. “I’m going.”

I looked up in surprise. I frowned a little too, for, if Meg chose to go, I should have to go too to chaperon her; and the prospect of spending some hours of a hot day broiling slowly in the confined area of an overcrowded steam-launch, with a number of people whom I scarcely knew and scarcely liked, had for my mature mind no attractions whatever. Meg glanced at me in a stealthy way, and, seeing that neither Burgess nor her father was looking at her, managed to convey by the silent movement of her lips the following information:

“The Careys will be there.”

So I made no objection to our accepting the invitation.

The day of the picnic, opening cloudily, developed into what Burgess, who had decided to accompany us, termed “a regular scorcher.” I was by no means grateful for his escort, and Meg was so angry when she heard of his intention that she was at one time on the point of sacrificing her own chances of pleasure by not going herself. The fact was that both she and I, knowing Burgess’s malignant love of mischief and his peculiar keenness in scenting out and worrying any little feminine secret of ours, feared that he had ferreted out something of our motives, and meant to wriggle himself into the very heart of the little mystery.

This idea was strengthened when he uttered a partic-

ularly offensive laugh on perceiving that both of us had taken especial pains to look our best.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, ironically, as he examined us with a critical eye, "how awfully smart we are to-day! Just for an up-river crush, too, which I've heard Meg say a dozen times anything was good enough for. Everetts are at a premium evidently."

Uneasily, Meg affected superb disdain, while I pretended not to hear him. We knew that he had heard Mr. Keen's diatribes against the Careys, and we felt that the events of the day would be sure to put us more or less in his power. So the railway journey to Maidenhead was an uncomfortable one, during which we women both abased ourselves by treating the monster with unusual deference.

I had not asked Meg how she had learnt that the Careys were to be of the party; but her information, however obtained, proved to be correct. Harry was the first person to meet us, and his shy cousin was only a little way behind him. We all got on board the launch and steamed gently up the river to a spot which had been already selected as the place for our picnic. Here we disembarked, and proceeded, not in the rough-and-ready fashion of genuine picnickers, but with all the state of the parvenu who brings liveried servants to spread a cloth on the grass for him, to eat a late but gorgeous luncheon.

There comes a season of life, even to the most frivolous, when one prefers one's cold lamb without earwigs; and I, who had reached that season, should have been much bored but for the presence of my son. The younger members of the party, however, seemed to enjoy themselves greatly, especially Harry and Meg, whose battles of repartee gave life to the entertainment.

In order to afford some variety of amusement, a flotilla of skiffs and canoes had been brought to this point, and, when the luncheon was eaten, the party broke up into small sections, the older members of it remaining faithful to the solid merits of the launch, while the younger ladies trusted themselves to the powers of the amateur oarsmen who were eager to prove their skill.

To my great pleasure, Harry, instead of inviting one of the young girls to embark with him, offered his

services to me. I was very anxious for an opportunity of a talk with him, as the extravagant young man's appeals for money had become so frequent that I was afraid my sudden and unusual requests for money would excite my husband's suspicions. But when I found that the craft of his choice was a double canoe, I drew back and declined to venture, on the ground that I valued my life.

Harry, standing upright in the canoe, and confirming me in my decision by his reckless movements, proceeded to argue with me on my answer.

"I am ashamed, Mrs. Keen," he began, gravely, "to hear you base your refusal on so paltry a plea! There is no more fatal sign of the degeneracy of the present age than the absurdly high value now set upon human life. The hardy Saxons and Norsemen, who were our ancestors, were troubled by no such sickly sentimental feeling. If we could preserve our lives indefinitely, there might be something in it. But we cannot. And I consider that this miserable clinging to life for a few more weary years, instead of a spirited readiness to die at once under pleasant and romantic circumstances and with an amiable and accomplished companion, is both weak and foolish. Once more I ask you, will you come?"

"I will come with pleasure, but not in a double canoe."

"I wish I could write music-hall songs," said Harry, pensively. Think of this:

'Over the seas with you, dear boy,
Sailing the wide world through;
Over the seas with a nice little breeze,
But not in a double canoe!

It would make the fortune of a serio-comic. For the last time, will you come?"

"And be drowned?"

"Well, and take your chance?"

"No, thank you."

"Well, Miss Keen, will you?"

"Take my chance? H'm!"

"Don't, children, don't talk like that!" said I, nervously. "You never know what may happen."

Now this was a speech worthy of a washerwoman, and I got deservedly laughed at and made ashamed of it. And the young people went off in their boats, the double canoe, with Harry and Meg in it, taking the lead.

"It was too bad to laugh at you, Mrs. Keen," said a shy voice, close to my ear. "As a matter of fact, Harry is so reckless and so careless that in such a light craft as a canoe to go through a lock with him is not without danger."

It was Deane who said this, and I was so much alarmed by his words that I sat on thorns until the launch came up with the little boats, and we all went into the lock together. Deane, who, if not a very lively companion, was a pleasant and considerate one, sat by me, it being the first opportunity Harry had allowed him of doing so.

"Where are they? Where is the canoe?" I asked, anxiously, as we passed through the gates.

"It's all right. They went in in front of us, and they are on the other side of the launch. I'll go and see if they're all right, if you like, and keep an eye on our erratic friend."

He had scarcely risen from his seat when there was a cry, and a rush was made to the other side of the launch. I recognised Meg's voice, and was for a moment paralyzed by what I felt to be a realization of my fears. Then I heard Deane's voice, calling out peremptorily, "Make way, please, make way!" He had something in his hand which I could only see to be a long pole, and the next moment he was leaning over the side of the launch.

"Harry, Harry!" I cried, faintly, as I tried to push my way through the group to see what was taking place.

A voice, I don't know whose, cried out, rather contemptuously,—

"Oh, *he's* all right! That young man can look after himself!"

A film seemed to pass over my eyes.

"And she, she?"

I did not hear the answer. But in a few seconds I saw what I at first took for the lifeless body of Meg,

lying on the bank beside the lock. The cry of distress which I uttered brought Deane Carey to my side. He looked very white and much agitated.

"She is all right; at least I think so, I hope so," said he.

It was Burgess's voice which answered him.

"Yes, she's all right.—that is to say, she's alive,—thanks to your presence of mind, Mr. Carey. As for that confounded fool your cousin, whose d—d carelessness caused the spill, she might have drowned, for all he cared. The cur thought of nothing but saving himself."

"Nonsense," said Deane, peremptorily. "A man isn't to be judged by what he does when he finds himself thrown suddenly into the water. If his position and mine had been reversed, so would our actions have been."

"I'm d—d if they would," replied Burgess, bluntly.

I trembled as I listened. In a few moments Burgess and I had been landed and had accompanied Meg, who had been rendered almost unconscious by striking her head against the side of another boat when she was thrown into the water by the capsizing of the canoe, into the lock-keeper's cottage. Here she soon recovered; and, having borrowed some clothes from the lock-keeper's wife, while her own were left to dry, we got into a fly, which Burgess had been lucky enough to get, to drive to Maidenhead Station.

When we had got into the train and were on the point of starting, Deane, with a shy, crimson face, ran up to the window.

"Is she—I mean Miss Keen—all right?" he asked, anxiously. "I've been waiting here to ask."

Meg herself was sitting by the window. To my astonishment, she answered his solicitous question with great stiffness.

"There is nothing the matter with me, thank you."

And poor Deane, smarting from the snub, raised his hat and retreated hastily. I turned to her, much scandalized by her behaviour.

"Don't you know, Meg, that it was Mr. Deane Carey who in all probability saved your life? You were being dragged down under the boats when he caught you."

"Yes, I know,—with a boat-hook!" cried the girl, ironically. "It hurt my back!"

"Really," said Burgess, impatiently, "you seem more grateful to that wretched Harry for half drowning you than to his cousin for saving your life."

Again I shook my head reprovingly; but in my heart I felt glad that she did not bear Harry any malice for the carelessness which had allowed the stern of the canoe to get fixed on the stone coping of the lock when the water was going down.

CHAPTER XX.

I GOT home that evening unhappy and irritable. Everybody seemed to accuse Harry, either openly or tacitly, of selfishness as well as carelessness in the matter of the accident. They said he had not even turned his head to see what became of his companion, even when he himself had been assisted into a friendly boat. Nobody except Deane had taken his part openly, although Meg had refrained from joining in the outcry against him.

I think both Meg and I were troubled by thoughts of what Mr. Keen would say. It was impossible to hope to keep the story of the accident from him. As it turned out, he was waiting for us at the gates of The Limes, and her borrowed costume betrayed her at once.

He heard all the details from Burgess, but, to my great relief, he gave no other sign of displeasure that night than was indicated by an especial abruptness of manner. On the following morning, however, when he distributed the letters to us at breakfast, according to his custom, he frowned as he read the direction on one for his daughter.

"I know that fist, Meg," said he. "And it's from a person who has no business to write to you. Open it and see what the rascal has the impudence to say."

I hid myself as well as I could behind my letters and my silver kettle, for I guessed from whom the letter came. Meg opened and read it very quietly.

"It is from Mr. Carey, papa, Mr. Harry Carey."

"I know, I know. Well, is it a love-letter?"

"Oh, no. It is an apology for what happened yesterday."

And, to my surprise, she handed the letter up for inspection. With an air of intense disgust, my husband ran his eyes over the note, nodded, and tossed it back again to her.

"You're sure," he then asked, with sudden suspicion, "that he has never written to you before?"

"Only once, when I was at Aunt Di's, he sent a note with a book he was returning."

My husband was satisfied and I was surprised. Meg, although rather reticent, was decidedly truthful. But I had certainly imagined the two to be in correspondence. My husband went on, impressively:

"Very well. I'm glad to hear it. I might have done you the justice to believe that you wouldn't be taken in by such a shallow rascal. But as older women than you have been deceived into thinking him the open-hearted, generous fellow he emphatically is not,"—he uttered these words with so much emphasis that I trembled lest they should be directed at me,—“I think it best to warn you that he is a selfish young scoundrel, not only fast, but vicious. And I should be very sorry for any lady of my family to give him a second thought.”

"Indeed, papa, the Careys are nothing to me," said Meg, who, in spite of her haughty tone, had tears in her eyes.

"Oh, as to the cousin I make a distinction," returned her father, in a different tone. "I have never heard any ill of that lad, and I owe him a good turn for his behaviour yesterday. I shall bring him down to dinner this evening if I can."

Meg expressed no gratitude, and I was incensed at this wrong to my own boy. That silent prig, Deane, to be made much of, while poor Harry was left out in the cold! Suddenly my husband got up from the table, and, coming round to me, thrust a letter before my eyes. I started. It was a letter from Harry to me.

"What's he got to say to *you*?" asked my husband, shortly. "I know that young man's fist a little too well, you see!"

"I can't think, I'm sure," I answered, in a trembling voice. For I was by no means prepared to go through the ordeal Meg had done, and hand the letter up to be read. It would certainly begin, "My darling mother," and would almost as certainly contain an appeal for more money. Therefore I put it down beside my plate as if it had been of no consequence, and went on pouring out tea. After waiting a few seconds, my husband returned to his seat, and, allowing a decent interval, I mastered the contents of my letter at a glance, and, saying carelessly that it was a repetition to me of Mr. Carey's apology to Meg, I thrust the note into my pocket.

Now, I had only told part of the truth in saying the letter was an apology. It did indeed begin with that, but it went on to beg me to meet him at Waterloo in his luncheon-hour that day, and "not to forget my poor boy's necessities." I was almost at my wits' end as to how those perpetually recurring necessities were to be met. My husband's allowance to me for my private expenses was a liberal one, but since my discovery of my extravagant boy I had already had to beg for a supplementary cheque. This had been given without a murmur; but, even if I could have reconciled it to my conscience to obtain from him more money to devote to a purpose of which he would most strongly have disapproved, it was most unlikely that a second application within so short a period would be received with the same liberality.

So, having escaped further questioning for that time, I kept my boy's appointment at Waterloo with an uneasy mind. Harry received me with his usual demonstrative affection, and, taking me into the waiting-room, overwhelmed me with inquiries about myself and about Meg, so that for a time the business of this meeting was thrust out of my mind. At a pause in our talk, however, my trouble returned to me.

"My dear Harry," I began, in a grave, judicial tone, "I have something very serious to say to you."

"Oh, marmie, must we spoil this delightful time by talking of anything unpleasant?" he asked, as if no inkling of the meaning of my words occurred to him.

"I am afraid so, Harry. It is about money."

"Oh, that's an unpleasant subject indeed, especially for me, who never have any!"

"But, my dear boy, I gave you fifty pounds only the other day!"

"Yes, so you did, mother, and Heaven bless you for it. If you had not, I should now most certainly have been in Holloway gaol. It's the debts, the debts, mother, that worry me so! You see, Aunt Stephana has always kept me so short that I simply couldn't live, careful as I might be, without running into debt. And now that, thanks to you, I have been able to settle the most pressing of them, my other creditors have got wind of it, and now all the rest of the brutes have come down on me together!"

"All the rest! Why, how much do you owe still? You have had altogether two hundred and seventy-five from me, and I understood——"

"Oh, my darling mother, if you have understood anything of the whole confounded business, it's more than I have. I'm certain they have a system of adding an item here, and a little bit there, until a modest little debt of ten pounds becomes, without your being able to note the stages of the transformation, a big, bloated bill for twenty-five!"

"And how much do you owe still? And, Harry, I must ask you, what sort of debts are they? Whom do you owe them to? I can't help thinking you must have been very extravagant to run up such heavy bills when you are earning a salary!"

"Oh, well, mother, don't trouble about it any more. I have been sold up before; I can bear being sold up again."

"Sold up!" echoed I, anxiously.

"Yes. An old rascal that I had a lot of books from, law books that I had to read up, and mathematical instruments, says he'll sell me up if I don't pay him the whole amount I owe him to-morrow morning."

"Oh, Harry, this is dreadful! How much is it?"

"Thirty-five or six pounds, I believe."

"So much? For books?"

"Mother, I told you not to trouble your head about it. I had to have the books, as it happened. But I don't say that I don't owe for a lot of other things I could have

done without. You see, I have had nobody to look after me, in the way *you* would have done, nobody to feel unhappy when I did things that were foolish or wrong."

"You had your aunt, my boy," I suggested, gently.

"She's a very good woman, and a dear old thing; but she's not like you—or Meg. By the bye, how is Meg,—Miss Keen, I ought to say? Do you think she will ever care for me, mother?"

I sighed.

"I don't know. And I don't know what would happen if she were to care for you. You see, Mr. Keen was very much shocked by—by what you did; and when he once makes up his mind, his prejudices are very strong indeed."

Harry looked grave and thoughtful.

"Then you don't think he would ever consent to her marrying me?"

I hesitated.

"For a girl like her, whom I could respect as well as love," Harry went on, "I could do so much! I could become a better fellow for a girl like that. Of course," and he began to speak more slowly, "it would be a terrible responsibility if I were to marry her without her father's consent, because in that case he wouldn't leave her any of his money, and she is hardly fitted, pretty little butterfly as she is, for a poor man's wife."

"Well, she will have her mother's money, in any case."

He looked at me quickly, and I thought he was going to say something. But if so, he checked himself, and there was silence between us for some moments. At last he jumped up, saying, "Well, mother, I shall have to be getting back. It was very good of you to come all this way to see me."

"But what—what are you going to do?" asked I, hesitatingly.

I was miserable, full of anxiety about him.

"What, about the execution? Oh, he must do what he likes," returned Harry, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Don't look so miserable, mother; it's no more than your naughty boy deserves."

As he spoke, he took my right hand in his. He had himself drawn off my glove, in order that, with his pretty demonstration of affection, he could caress my fingers. He now held the hand, and putting his fore-

finger and thumb one on each side of a beautiful ring I wore, twisted it about while he held his head on one side to look at it admiringly. The movement put an idea into my head: I had no money with me, but I could give him this ring. Without an instant's hesitation, I drew off the ring, and placed it in his hand.

"Take this," said I, impulsively. "I don't want you to sell it. My husband gave it to me, and he would be sure to miss it. But you can raise some money on it. I believe it cost a hundred and twenty guineas. If you can't get it back for me yourself, let me know, and I'll manage it."

Harry thanked me with tears in his eyes; and with a flush in his face, which showed that he was ashamed of obliging me to make such a sacrifice, he looked alternately at my face and at the ring. I was rather alarmed the moment I had done this thing, for the ring was a unique one, and I was seized by a fear that it might be seen and recognised. It contained twin diamonds of great beauty, surmounted by a tiny crown of much smaller stones.

"You are too good, much too good to me. I am not worthy of your goodness to me."

He was very much moved, and I took advantage of the feeling to deliver the following little lecture, leaning upon his arm as he took me towards my train.

"It is a sacrifice, my dear boy, and it may put me into great difficulties if my husband should have his suspicions aroused as to what I have done with it. For, on somebody's account, you know, I have been extravagant lately."

"I know, I know," he whispered, brokenly.

"But the sacrifice is nothing because it is made for you, made for my son. Nothing seems to me of any value compared with his happiness and his well-being. Remember that, my son, when you feel inclined to be too rash or too reckless again."

He was hardly able to speak; but he pressed my hand against his side, and cleared his throat two or three times. And when he had put me into my train, he whispered,—

"Mother, I shall never forget your goodness, never."

And so, though indeed I had not exaggerated my fears concerning the difficulty I should have in concealing the loss of my ring from my husband, I returned home in

the full belief that I had given the too thoughtless Harry, together with a proof of my affection, a lesson he would not easily forget.

That afternoon my husband came back early from town, and I congratulated myself that I had returned so speedily. He was in great good humor, and I gathered that he had got with profit out of some business by which he had begun to fear that he should lose money. He ordered the mail-phaeton round, and took me for a drive, finishing up by a call at the Star and Garter at Richmond, where one of his clients was staying.

He left me sitting in the phaeton while he went into the hotel. The weather was very hot, and, although I was in the shade, I was holding my sunshade up and feeling languid and listless. The conversation of two well-dressed young men who were standing, the one on the steps and the other just below him, reached my ears like the humming of bees. They were in ecstasies of admiration over a very smartly turned-out drag which was coming up the hill.

"That's one of the best-looking teams I've seen for a long time," said one.

"Yes. Saw 'em in the park yesterday. Know the chap driving 'em?"

"Rather. Quite a young fellow. Don't know where he gets his money from; but, as he's the present possessor of the affections of Kitty Dynevor, I suppose he's got some."

"What's his name?"

"Carey; Harry Carey. He's some relation to Lord Wallinghurst's family; at least it's supposed so. Calls Lady Stephana Darent his aunt."

"Oh, that's the chap, is it?" said his friend, with fresh interest. "I've heard of him, then. The old lady dotes upon him, and has had to shell out pretty freely to support the young man's extravagance. Those sort of chaps often do get a bigger share of the family ready cash than the legitimate members."

I had heard this colloquy, from the first mention of Harry's name, in a fever of amazement and despair. For, looking out from under my sunshade, I had seen the coach with its four bright bays, seen Kitty Dynevor, the dancer, with her cream-coloured face, scarlet lips,

and copper hair, sitting on the box-seat beside my son. Then I don't know what happened, until my husband's voice roused me.

"Perdita, my dear, my dear, you are ill!"

And when I entirely recovered my senses, I was sitting in a large room, beside an open window looking on to the renowned terrace.

I believe it was the sound of my son's voice, laughing and talking gaily with his companions on the terrace below me, which brought me to myself.

"Let us go. I shall be better at home," I cried, rising quickly to my feet.

But as I rose, giving an instinctive glance at the group outside, I witnessed a sight which almost deprived me for the second time of the use of my limbs.

Kitty Dynevor had taken off her gloves, and was showing one of the young men, not Harry, the ring which I had given him that morning.

CHAPTER XXI.

Now, although I was so far from the group on the terrace when Kitty Dynevor showed the ring on her finger to her companion, that it was more by intuition than by actual sight that I knew that the ring was mine, I was instantly seized by a fear that my husband would see and recognise it also. Instantly turning to him, therefore, and renewing my entreaties that he would take me home, I raised my voice sufficiently for Harry himself, on the terrace outside, to turn at the sound. He recognised me at the same moment that my husband recognised him.

Harry turned quite white, while I instantly averted my eyes from his face. This incident, however, had the desired effect of making my husband quite as anxious to get away as I was.

"There's that d—d rascal who nearly drowned Meg!" he cried, in no very subdued tones. For one moment I thought that he meant to "go for" Harry there and then. But Harry, evidently thinking discretion the better part of valour, turned at once, and disappeared in the grounds.

Whereupon Mr. Keen turned, and vented some of his anger upon me.

"It was seeing that little cur again so soon that upset you, I expect," he said, angrily. "If, after what I told you about him, you had had the sense to forbid Meg to go in the same boat with him, the accident wouldn't have happened. I consider you partly to blame for what took place. Now come along. Let's get out of the place. If I see that little scoundrel again, I shall have to wring his neck."

He had no need to complain of my dilatoriness; I hurried out as fast as my trembling limbs would let me, and we drove home almost in silence.

On reaching The Limes, we were told that Mr. Deane Carey was in the drawing-room. Although he had come by my husband's express invitation, the very sound of his name, being that of his cousin, sufficed to increase my husband's ill humour, and he greeted the poor lad so shortly that Deane's shyness was increased. Meg had been entertaining him, as well as two more friends who had come down by the same train as the young man. I was myself inclined to resent Deane's presence, partly because it reminded me of his cousin, with whom I felt I had quarrelled forever, my son that was; and partly because, in spite of this feeling, I was inconsistent enough to be angry that Deane could come to the house while Harry could not.

I had just fairness enough to see that this attitude was cruelly hard upon shy Deane, who, to judge by his unhappy expression, had had something to put up with at the hands of Meg also. So I whispered to my husband that he had not yet thanked Deane for his timely help to the girl on the previous day.

"Oh, yes, yes, to be sure," grumbled he, rather ungraciously. And, turning abruptly to his other friends, two old racing men who were great chums of his and who were frequent visitors at The Limes, he said, raising his hand and bringing it down heavily on Deane's shoulder,—

"This chap isn't such a fool as he looks, boys. My little girl took it into her head yesterday to trust herself on the river with a hare-brained ass who knows more about bills than he does about boats, and behaves about as well with the one as with the other."

The ancient boys began to laugh ; and as poor Deane looked exceedingly uncomfortable at Mr. Keen's comments on himself and on his cousin, my husband shook his arm with rough good humour, and went on, with another slap on the young fellow's back :

" Well, this chap kept his head."

" And his boat-hook !" cried Meg, ironically. " Papa, we've been trying to avoid this subject for the last hour. There's nothing heroic about saving a person's life with a boat-hook, and, besides, it hurt me."

" Why, you ungrateful girl," began her father, with a laugh, in which everybody joined.

" Miss Keen's quite right, sir," said Deane, who had grown purple with shyness, but who was encouraged by the laughter to speak out his mind. " It's really an awful thing to have done, and all I can plead in extenuation is that it's better to be hooked up like a fish than drowned like a cat."

" Thank you very much for the simile," said Meg. " It is just what I should have expected from a man who would pull me out with a boat-hook instead of plunging into the water himself in the orthodox fashion."

" But then," objected Deane, mildly, " as I am not a very good swimmer and there was no room to swim, I should certainly have been drowned, and in all probably so would you."

" I'm really not quite sure that I shouldn't have preferred that to being saved with a boat-hook," said Meg, with asperity.

" Then I apologize for saving you," said Deane, in whom Meg's rude as well as cruel taunts were rousing a spirit which began to get the better even of his shyness.

The other gentlemen were rather amused by the war of words, but I confess that to a middle-aged matron like myself this very unconventional conduct of Meg's towards the man who had saved her life seemed to me rather shocking.

" My dear Meg," said I, nervously, " you're really very unkind. I assure you, Mr. Carey, that her father and I are very grateful to you, whatever she may be."

" Why, so am I," said Meg, lightly.

And, springing up from her chair, she turned to Deane and said, " In token of my gratitude I will show you

over the hot-houses in the few minutes we have left before dinner."

Taking it for granted that he would follow her, she flitted off through the French window, looking, in her dress of plain gold-coloured silk, with frills of apricot chiffon at the neck and sleeves, like some gorgeous winged insect.

The details of the scene which followed I heard long afterwards. She went straight towards the hot-houses, without so much as looking to see if her companion was following. Now Meg was a wicked little creature, by turns prude and coquette, who would sometimes treat the men of her acquaintance with haughty indifference which prevented them from becoming her admirers, and sometimes, on the other hand, took it into her head to be so charming that even to an unwilling slave she became irresistible. At the door of the first hot-house she came to she suddenly stopped, and, looking up at Deane with an expression of the most piquant devilry, said, suddenly,—

"Do you want to be thanked for the boat-hook business? By me, I mean? I can make the most beautiful set-speech to you, if you like. I was making it up last night instead of going to sleep, and I got it right, down to the very last column. But you know I couldn't say it before all those people, like a school-girl on prize-day; now, could I?"

"Well, it would have been rather rough upon me, certainly, because, you see, I couldn't have been prepared with a set answer, including semicolons."

"Talking about semicolons," said Meg, staring intently at an aloe in flower a little way behind her companion, "how can you tell when to use a colon and when only a semi? It seems to me it is a matter requiring great judgment,—more than I possess, at any rate."

"Was there any difficulty of that kind in—in the speech, then?" inquired Deane, gravely.

"Yes, there was. By the bye, wouldn't you like to hear the speech? Just for the sake of settling the colon difficulty, it might be worth while."

And she put her head on one side to look up at him, with one of her little brisk, bird-like gestures.

"Certainly I should."

“Will you hear it inside or outside the hot-house?”

“That depends. If the sentiment expressed in it be very warm, I should prefer to remain outside, or if the grammar is as loose as a lady’s is sometimes apt to be, I think I might bear it better out here in the open. But if the whole is of academic frigidity and correctness, why, then let’s go inside.”

“It’s extremely difficult to criticise one’s own compositions. What about the cool orchid-house, as a sort of happy medium? Then, if you should feel as it goes on that my expressions are not up to the necessary fervour, you could dash into the next house, which is, oh, warm enough for anything.”

“That’s an excellent idea.”

“I shall have to take you a little farther, and, oh, I’ve brought no sunshade, so my hands will get brown.”

“Are you so careful as all that? When there’s no sun left, to speak of!”

“Well, sometimes I am. Mamma is more particular than I. She says it looks very bad to see a brown hand at the end of a white arm. Like mine, do you see?”

And she raised for his inspection two pretty, slender, white arms, bare from elbow to wrist, and two equally pretty little hands, which were certainly, however, some shades browner.

“I see,” said he.

“And do you think it looks bad?”

“I shouldn’t like to say that.”

“But you may, if you like. The affair of the boat-hook, you know, makes you a privileged person.”

“Really, from what you said, I shouldn’t have thought so.”

“Well, go on. I want your opinion—about the hands.”

“I—I’m really afraid I haven’t any.”

“Really! Your cousin Harry would have had.”

“Harry? Oh, yes, I’ve no doubt he would.”

“Shall I tell you what he would have done? He would have taken one of my hands, or perhaps both of them, affected to examine them judicially, and then, if I’d let him, he would certainly—would certainly——”

She broke off, laughing, daring a good deal, yet not quite daring to say the words which were on the tip of her tongue.

"Yes, I know," said Deane, nodding, becoming purple in the face, which was the only form of blushing his sun-red complexion allowed, and looking at the little piquant face with an expression from which the shyness was rapidly disappearing. "Harry can do a thousand things for which I, if I were to attempt them, should get turned out of people's houses."

"Why, yes, that's true. Doesn't that ever seem hard?"

"Sometimes. For instance——"

He checked himself abruptly, and asked what about the speech of the orchid-house.

"All in good time," said Meg, taking two little steps forward in a leisurely manner. "You were saying, 'For instance——'?"

Deane hesitated.

"Ye-es?" said she, insisting.

"Well, then, you were much kinder to him yesterday, after the accident, than you were to me," said Deane, hastily. "Of course," the poor fellow hurried on, in confusion, "I don't mean to say that there was any need for you to be specially kind; but, well, you were specially unkind; now, weren't you?"

Meg locked the little brown hands, upon which she could get no judgment passed, behind her, and stood in a judicial attitude.

"I consider I was perfectly justified. Your cousin, poor boy, had just committed a blunder; everybody was blaming him, and he was to be commiserated. You, on the other hand, had just been lauded up to the skies for an exploit, and consequently required——required——"

She hesitated again, laughing, and not looking up. Deane found the missing word.

"Taking down a peg," he suggested, gently.

He bent his head to try to see her face, encouraged by the fact that she held it down, laughing all the time softly to herself.

"Something like that, perhaps. I didn't want your character to suffer, you see, from gross doses of flattery injudiciously administered."

"I suppose I must consider that thoughtfulness as due to regard for the human character in the abstract, rather than for the creature under consideration in particular."

At this Meg looked up, with large, grey-brown eyes, in which there was a gleam of something that was not grey.

"Would you oblige me by putting that into words of one syllable?" she asked, solemnly.

His head was still bent, so that her face, upturned suddenly, was very near to his.

"One syllable only?" said he, his voice shaking in an odd manner over the simple question.

"Yes, please."

Suddenly her eyes went down again, and the corners of her mouth curled up.

"I could if I liked," said he, in a whisper.

"Go on, then."

"You—are—a—sad—flirt!"

"Oh?" with a little interrogative inflection. "I hadn't an idea you meant that by all those long words. That's the worst of the frivolous education they give us women, you see. We have to guess at what a man means so!"

Deane said nothing to this, but drew back a little. They had stopped, on the way to the orchid-house, in front of a stone fountain, and Meg, who had been watching the goldfish, suddenly went down on her knees and began to dabble in the water, pretending to try to catch the little creatures as they darted about under her fingers.

"I suppose, then," she said, after a silence, "that you disapprove of me?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, I am sure you are the sort of person who would disapprove of flirts. You are so extremely—sedate—and—and——"

"Solemnly stupid?"

"Oh, no, no, of course not. But—well, sedate and—well-conducted."

"And you like ill-conducted people better?"

"I don't say that. Though that is what you would expect of a flirt, isn't it?"

"You are trying to make me say something rude."

"Well, I should look upon it as a sort of triumph if I did."

"A poor sort of triumph, surely."

"Well, what sort of triumphs do you expect an ill-conducted flirt to delight in?"

"Now you are putting into my mouth words which I never used, never thought of using."

"You used them by implication. Now, pray define what you mean by a flirt."

"I would rather not. You would twist my words into something I did not mean."

"I see. Having once written me down a flirt, you will not even give me credit for ordinary honesty. I am condemned unheard for a crime I don't even understand."

"Well, then, the 'crime,' as you call it, is that of making yourself too attractive to sedate and well-conducted persons."

Meg glanced up at him with the delightfully roguish look of a mischievous child.

"Now, I should have thought," said she, demurely, "that was something to be grateful to me for."

Deane shook his head very decidedly.

"Nothing of the sort," said he, looking down at her with judicial gravity. "Don't you know that one of the faults of us 'sedate and well-conducted persons' is that our slow brains take an impression so slowly that, when once taken, there is great danger of its being permanent?"

Meg looked down into the water again. Then she shook her head slowly.

"I don't think," she said, in a rather plaintive little voice, "that there is much danger of any impression I make being permanent with anybody! Your cousin, for instance——"

Over Deane's face, which had been wearing a quite unwonted expression of vivid interest and animation, there came suddenly a great change. He threw at the girl one rapid glance of reproach, which made her lower her eyes, before answering, in a very constrained tone, "He will take his permanent impression some day, I suppose, like the rest of us."

Meg looked up again rather wickedly.

"Has nothing led you to believe, then," she asked, demurely, "that he has taken it already?"

"If so, Miss Keen, no doubt you will hear of it sooner than I," answered Deane, in a tone which betrayed the fact that he was suffering acutely.

Meg rose quickly to her feet, almost in dismay. For a moment she hesitated to speak, and in that moment she lost the opportunity of doing so, for I came up, having heard the last few words, and put my own construction upon them.

"Didn't you hear the dinner-gong?" asked I, rather sharply, for I was angry with Meg for her unkindness to a man who had certainly saved her life, and whom I suspected of being as much in love with her as his more fortunate cousin was.

"No," said the girl, very soberly. "I didn't hear it, mamma."

"I thought you were perhaps in the houses on the other side of the shrubbery," said I, "so I offered to come and find you myself."

"Thank you," said she.

And she added not a word more to the conversation until we all three reached the house.

CHAPTER XXII.

Now, although Deane's attractions seemed so immeasurably inferior in my eyes to Harry's that I almost despised him as much as I pitied him for daring to cast his eyes on any girl whom my son honoured with his liking, yet I felt bound to do my best to make up for Meg's unkindness. So I talked chiefly to him at dinner-time, which was by no means an easy task, as his *tête-à-tête* with Meg had made him shyer and more diffident than ever.

Afterwards, in the drawing-room, I took the girl to task for her conduct.

I told her that my particular reason for annoyance at her treatment of Deane was that her father had found a fresh cause of dislike to Harry Carey, and that his resentment would probably extend from the one cousin to the other, so that she would not have an opportunity of making amends to Deane for the unkind manner in which he was treated. As I expected, she was very much interested, and was not satisfied until she had

drawn from me some details of the scene at the Star and Garter that afternoon. She heard all I had to say with very little comment, and I must own that I thanked her in my heart for showing very little indignation against Harry.

She was just asking me whether I was really sure that the cousins would be banished forever from The Limes, when the gentlemen came into the drawing-room.

As Meg turned her attention at once, with her usual perversity, to one of her father's old friends, I myself entered into conversation with Deane, who looked by no means happy. I felt sure that he was a good fellow, and fond of his more spirited cousin; and I thought I could not do better than take him into my confidence a little. But how far that tentative little step was to take me I did not know.

We were on the broad walk which stretched between the house and the lawn, when I, after leading the talk to the subject of Harry, began to deplore that young man's reprehensible extravagance and his choice of companions. Deane looked at me quickly, as if wondering how I knew. I told him what I had seen that afternoon. Then, thinking that I had betrayed an astonishingly keen interest in the young fellow, and that Deane would wonder why my feelings were so strong on the subject, I added, in a tone of affected carelessness,—

“I take an extraordinary interest in the fact that you two lads, brought up together, amid the same influences, in the same atmosphere, should have turned out so widely different in tastes, habits,—everything.”

“It's not quite so strange as it seems,” said Deane. “You see there was a difference of temperament to begin with; and then, as a matter of fact, the atmosphere has not been the same for both. He, being more attractive than I, was spoilt, and I was not. He always had more pocket-money than I, more indulgence, more of my aunt's affection. She has paid his debts over and over again, while I was always expected to keep rigidly within my allowance. It is poor Harry, however, who has suffered by the distinction, in the long run.”

I was touched by the generosity of this view, taken of the spoilt one by the one who was not spoilt. My feeling was so strong, indeed, that it caused the tears to

rush suddenly to my eyes. This evidently moved him very strongly.

"Don't be so unhappy about it, Mrs. Keen," he said, earnestly. "Remember he is very young. And he has not had about him, always, the influence which would have done him the most good."

Although he said this hurriedly, I looked up, rather startled by the words. Deane had grown crimson, as he so easily did, and was in some confusion.

"Your secret is quite safe with me, Mrs. Keen," said he, in a low voice. "But it may be convenient for you to know that I know it."

"Harry told you!" cried I, in a whisper.

"No, he doesn't know that I do know it."

"Then who did tell you? You cannot have guessed!"

Deane smiled, rather sadly, I thought.

"I did guess, though," he said. "Or, rather, you 'gave yourself away,' on the day of the picnic, by the way you looked at him. There was an expression in your eyes which made me wonder that everybody there didn't guess that you were looking at your own son."

I was so much agitated by Deane's words that I was unable to answer him, unable even to stop the tears which would flow. He was miserable at having caused me so much distress.

"Why, you treat me so prettily, said I, as I at length dried my eyes, "that you make me wish that I had had two sons, and that you were one of them."

"I wish to Heaven I were," said Deane, with unexpected warmth.

"You never knew your own mother?"

"She died at the time of my birth."

This was almost all the conversation we had together, but our *tête à tête* ended with a pleasant feeling of confidence established between us. Here, thought I, is a good friend to my boy. Seeing that Meg took no further notice of Deane, I even whispered to her, when I got an opportunity, that she could be civil to him if only for the reason that he was such a devoted friend of Harry's. But this argument was of no more avail than the rest; and he got from the young girl no further word but a cold "Good-night," when the time came for the guests to leave for the last train.

I was relieved, but rather puzzled, by the fact that my husband said nothing further to me that evening about either of the Careys. But the next morning I received sufficient proof that this reticence was not the result of forgetfulness.

Breakfast was scarcely over when a telegram was brought to me. The message it contained was this:

“Harry very ill indeed. Come if you can.

DEANE.”

The shock, coming as it did when I had been harbouring angry feelings against my boy, was too great for my self-command. I uttered a low cry, which attracted the attention of my husband. He turned back as he was leaving the room.

“What’s the matter?” asked he, shortly, and, as I thought, with suspicion.

“Nothing, at least nothing that you would think much of,” I answered, trying to speak cheerfully. And, searching in my mind for an excuse, I added, “A friend of mine, at least a relation, is ill; my aunt wants me to go up.”

He turned back into the room without looking up, still apparently intent on his letters. But when he got near me he made a sudden snatch at my hand, seized the telegram, and mastered its contents in silence. I made no protest: it was too late.

“So,” said he, very quietly, when he had read the message and returned me the bit of pinky-brown paper, “you have a friend, at least a relation, who is ill and who wants to see you, and whom your aunt wants you to see. It’s very unfortunate; but you can’t go.”

“I—I must!”

I sank into a chair. My husband looked at me sternly and yet not altogether unkindly. He made a sign to Burgess with his head that he might take himself off, and, turning to Meg, he said,—

“Go and get your mother a glass of water.”

Meg ran to the sideboard.

“I’ll do that,” he said, abruptly, taking the tumbler from her hands; “go and get her smelling-bottle. And you needn’t hurry,” he added, significantly.

Meg, looking rather frightened, glanced at me, and

disappeared. Mr. Keen came over to me with a glass of water.

"Drink this," said he.

I put my lips to it obediently, but I could not drink. I tried to hold the tumbler, but my hand shook so much that it was impossible for me to do so. I pushed it away, and stood up.

"William," I exclaimed, in a half-stifled voice, "you must let me go. I must and will go. It is a relation of mine who is ill. It is my son."

To my surprise, my husband received this intelligence in silence. Then I, looking at him askance and with fear, perceived that he must have been shrewd enough to suspect this before.

"And pray, how long have you known of the existence of your son? And who told you of it?" he presently asked, in an exceedingly dry tone.

There was nothing to do now but to make a clean breast of it.

"Lady Stephana took away my son: Lady Stephana has brought up this young fellow," I answered, tremulously.

"Well, for the matter of that, she's brought up a dozen waifs and strays," answered my husband, in a rather contemptuous tone. "Your son, if he's alive at all, might just as well be one of the young fellows she has brought up and trained as footmen."

"No, William, no," I answered, earnestly. "I have two proofs that Harry Carey is my son. His age is the one; but the other is much, much stronger,—he is exactly like his father."

"Morally or physically?"

I did not answer, and Mr. Keen laughed.

"And do you really think it worth while, considering what you know of this young man, to lay claim to the relationship?"

"I have done so. He knows," I faltered.

"I'll be sworn he does," said Mr. Keen, grimly. "I'll be bound he'd have left his ma in blissful ignorance of the relationship if she hadn't been well enough off to be worth plundering. Where's your ring?" he asked, abruptly, with a sudden change of tone which threw me off my guard.

"My ring! Which ring?" I asked, weakly.

He stamped his foot impatiently; and I saw that, if he had kept his temper so far, the outbreak was now getting near.

"Yes, yes, you know which one. The one I gave you on your last birthday but one. The one you used to wear on this finger."

And he seized, with some roughness, the third finger of my right hand, on which, since the previous day, I had been wearing a comparatively insignificant diamond half-hoop in place of the ring I had given my son.

For answer I burst into tears. My husband, usually not insensible to such a demonstration, seemed only excited to fresh anger by my grief.

"Yes, yes, I know, I know what's become of it. And of all the money you've been spending lately!" cried he, savagely. "Not content with thieving himself, he must needs turn you into a thief also."

"William, William!"

"William, William! It's true; you know it's true. You're welcome to anything I have for yourself, as you know. But to get money from me for a rascal who ought to be in gaol is theft, and, what's more, it's the most arrant folly. Do you suppose, if I hadn't found this out, that he'd have stopped until he'd drained you dry? Do you imagine that, having got from you one piece of jewelry, he'd have been content till he'd got the lot? By the bye, is that all you've been fool enough to give him?"

"Yes, yes, it is indeed."

"Unluckily, I can't take your word for it. I'm going to stay at home to-day,"—I started involuntarily,—“and we'll just amuse ourselves, you and I, by going over the contents of your jewel-cases.”

I was stung to the quick, as well as racked with anxiety on my son's account, and my misery and despair gave me courage enough to oppose my will to my husband's, a thing which I had never before had the temerity to attempt. Starting up, I ran across the room to the door.

"Where are you going?" asked he, in an ominous voice.

"I am going up to town. I must."

My husband, who had been standing by my side, came rapidly, but without my own hysterical haste, to within a few feet of me. He looked hard and angry, but, instead of pouring upon me, as I had expected, a torrent of words, he only laughed shortly.

"You think you can prevent me, of course," said I, with an assumption of boldness which the tremor in my voice belied.

Even at a crisis of despair such as I had now reached, the habits of fifteen years are not lightly broken; and in all the fifteen years of our married life I had never defied him, never done anything but yield submissively to him before.

"Oh, no, I don't," he answered, quietly, with a repetition of the ugly little hard laugh. "Oh, no, I don't. I am not such a fool as to think I can make a foolish woman give up any folly she has set her heart upon."

"Then—then," said I, nervously faltering, "then you—you will let me go?"

"I will not move a finger to prevent your going," replied my husband, with an appearance which did not avail to hide from me the fact that he was much moved. "But—and now mind this—I don't say one thing and mean another, as you have good reason to know, my girl; and if you make up your mind to go up to town to see this d—d young rascal of a son, as you call him, and as he may be, for anything I know, I won't have you back in this house again, and I won't have anything more to do with you."

In any man but my husband I should have looked upon these as mere words, a threat never intended to be acted upon. But I knew him well enough, as he said, to be instantly sure that, if I did not yield, he would not. I leaned against the door, trembling.

"William, William, you don't mean that; you can't! Think what it is for a mother to know that her boy is ill, and asking for her!"

"I have thought, and I have decided that it's all d—d nonsense," said he, sharply. "If he were a decent chap, like his cousin even, I should forgive the feeling, understand it; or if, being what he is, you had seen him grow up, had had him with you since he was a baby. But to make all this bother over a man whom you only suppose

to be your son, while, on the other hand, you know him to be an arrant scoundrel, is the most unmitigated idiotcy, and I shouldn't be doing my duty as your husband and protector if I didn't do my best to restrain you in your folly."

"William, I have never resisted your wishes before ——" I began, entreatingly.

He interrupted me.

"And you're not going to begin now, unless you think the partnership has lasted long enough. So, now, which is it to be?" And he crossed the room and put his hand upon the bell. "Do you want the carriage, to take you to the station, or not?"

For answer I shook my head, as I threw myself, broken-hearted, upon the sofa.

He had conquered. But I saw in the expression of his face, as he glanced at me with returning kindness, that he knew there was more trouble in store for us both on this unhappy subject.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WITH a kiss of forgiveness, to which I was too heart-broken to respond, my husband left me. I think he was sorry for me; I think he would have been glad if this son, for whom I had searched the world all these years, had turned out a comfort to me when I at last found him. For, although he was jealous, he was sincerely fond of me; and I do not believe that he took any small-minded pleasure in the fact that the hope of my life had turned to its despair.

Perhaps despair is too strong a word, for I still hugged the thought that, even if a mother's influence were of no avail with him, marriage might accomplish the needed reform. And surely Meg, self-willed, determined little Meg, if she had made up her mind to marry him, would carry her point, whatever her father might say. On the other hand, I could not help owning to myself that marriage with Harry would be a dangerous experiment. I even felt that it would be my duty to warn the girl

against the peril of the very step which in my heart I hoped she would take.

Marriage with a man known as a ne'er-do-weel had not brought me so much happiness that I could conscientiously advise another woman to incur the same risks. If only I could go and see my boy, I might, now that he was lying ill, be able to do more with him than when he was in the full enjoyment of his health and high spirits.

I got up from the sofa, and, running up-stairs, shut myself into my own boudoir. From the windows of this room I could see my husband playing tennis with Burgess. He had kept his word, then, and meant to spend the day at home, keeping a watch upon me. As I stood at the window, I perceived that his quick eyes had caught sight of me, though he appeared to take no notice. It made me feel that I was a prisoner in the house where I was supposed to be mistress. I withdrew from the window, and walked up and down the room, torn between resentment, longing to see my son, and dread of the consequences of disobeying my husband.

In spite of this dread, my desire to be by Harry's bedside grew so strong, as I paced up and down like a caged animal, that I almost think I should have risked everything and left the house, if I had not suddenly been startled by a soft tap at the door.

"Come in," said I. And Meg entered, dressed for going out.

"I've come to say good-bye, mamma," she said, very softly, as she drew on her gloves. "I'm going up to town to see Aunt Di. I've just asked papa if I might."

"But," said I, wonderingly, "what is taking you up in such a hurry? Don't you know that Sir Roger Bernard is coming over this afternoon with his daughters?"

"Yes, mamma," answered Meg, as demurely as ever, still intent upon her gloves, "but I thought that you could entertain them without me for once. I thought," she went on, with a curious little curve about her mouth, "that—that perhaps I could get Aunt Di to call with me in Piccadilly and find out how Mr. Carey is."

My relief and delight were so great that I could hardly restrain myself from throwing my arms round the girl's neck. I forgot my anxiety lest she should be

in love with a ne'er-do-weel; I even forgot to inquire how it was that she had learnt that my friend who was ill was no other than Harry Carey. I only remembered that my boy had found another friend, another advocate, and that, thanks to her, my worst anxieties as to his condition would soon be relieved by my learning the exact truth as to how he was.

When she had gone, I remembered one thing that I must do; and I went meekly down into the grounds and asked my husband if I might go into the town and send off a telegram. He frowned, and, after weighing his tennis racquet thoughtfully in his hands for a minute or two, said, shortly,—

“Oh, yes, I suppose so; but don't go beyond the sixpence; he isn't worth it.”

I was furious, especially as Burgess, who was throwing his racquet up in the air and catching it again to fill up the time, looked very much amused at the answer I got. I retreated without a word; but my husband, who was, I think, rather touched by the abject condition to which his spoilt wife was reduced, sauntered after me to say that I must cheer up, for the chances were ten to one there was very little the matter with my friend.

I felt that this would-be consolation was a fresh outrage, and I hurried to the telegraph-office and despatched the following message:

“Cannot come. Am miserable with anxiety till I know how you are. Get Deane to wire again.”

Then I went back to The Limes, and waited with what patience I could for Meg's return.

She did not come back until late in the afternoon; and, as in the mean time I had received no other telegram, I was almost ill with my fears and forebodings before I saw her again.

It must have been nearly six o'clock when I was startled by hearing a burst of laughter from the garden, in which I distinguished Meg's voice as well as my husband's. The Bernards had only been gone about ten minutes, and I had taken the opportunity to go up-stairs to bathe my aching head with eau de Cologne and water. I looked out of the window, and saw my hus-

band still in the midst of a fit of uncontrollable laughter; while Meg, with her eyes full of mischief, was running away from him towards the house. The sight filled me with suspicion. Surely, considering what the real reason of her journey to town had been, it would have been only natural for Meg to seek me out at once on her return. For although she had no suspicion of the relationship between Harry and myself, yet I had made no secret of my liking for the lad, nor of the fact that I was entirely in sympathy with hers. Had the girl entered into a conspiracy with her father against me? Yet how could I reconcile such a supposition with her open liking for Harry?

I was debating these questions with myself when Meg's voice called out, "May I come in, mamma?"

Her face, when she entered, had not yet recovered its gravity. I looked at her rather resentfully.

"What is the great joke you were enjoying with your father on the lawn just now?"

Meg broke again into laughter.

"Oh, mamma, it is a joke, really! Though I'm not quite sure how you'll take it."

And she looked at me again with eyes full of mischief.

"Well, never mind the joke now. Tell me about your journey. You got your Aunt Di to go with you to Piccadilly?"

"Yes, oh, yes."

And Meg's mouth began to expand again.

"And you made inquiries about poor Harry Carey?"

"Yes."

"And you saw his cousin?"

"No, he had left Harry and gone out."

"He might have stayed with him while he was ill!"

"Well, mamma, so he did. But—but we made our dutiful inquiries, and the housekeeper told us that Mr. Harry Carey had been taken ill very suddenly, so that his cousin didn't like to leave him this morning. And that Mr. Deane wanted to send for a doctor, but that the patient wouldn't let him, but asked him to send off a telegram instead. Well, the telegram was sent; and in the mean time Harry Carey got so much worse that his cousin did send for the doctor without telling him

about it. And then a telegram came for the invalid; and the housekeeper said that when he read it he used the most shocking language, turned her out of the room, and got up. And when the doctor arrived, Harry Carey slipped past him in the passage, and got into a hansom just as the doctor reached his 'sick-room.' That's the joke, mamma, that I was laughing at in the garden."

And Meg burst into another peal of amusement.

I certainly did not share her enjoyment. Saying, rather curtly, that she had much better not have mentioned the matter to her father at all, and that Harry Carey's illness might turn out to be no laughing matter to him, I told her she had better go and dress for dinner.

On the following morning I knew, by the frown on my husband's face as he brought in the letters, that there was one from Harry to me among them. I was not disappointed; but even my devotion to my boy was somewhat shocked on finding that he wrote saying he had been ill in bed ever since the preceding morning, and that he had grown worse on hearing that I could not or would not come to see him. He went on to say that he had been longing for an opportunity to put himself right in my eyes after the unlucky meeting at the Star and Garter; and he proceeded to explain that he had been invited down on a friend's drag, and that, although the company was not much to his taste, he had accepted the invitation because it would take him into my neighbourhood, in the hope that he might be able to slip away from the rest and give himself the poor pleasure of going to look at the outside of the house that contained his darling mother, since he was not permitted to see the inside.

Now, there are limits even to a loving mother's patience and credulity, and Harry had reached them. I was bitterly grieved, bitterly wounded; but, instead of writing him a reproachful letter, upbraiding him for his duplicity and giving him an opening for another eloquent epistle, I just left unanswered his long tissue of falsehoods, and almost brought myself to the point of taking my husband's advice and resolving not to have anything more to do with him.

I think my husband kept a strict watch upon my

actions for the next week or two; but, if so, he must have been perfectly satisfied with my behaviour. Not only did I refrain from making any attempt to go up to town by myself, but I even abstained, during that space of time, from answering a single one of the letters with which Harry continued to deluge me. I suffered, however, very severely all the time. No one can live as I had done for years upon a hope, and then, when that hope is fulfilled, lose all interest in the object of it. For years I had longed to see my son, and had never troubled myself to ask what sort of man I should find him. I had even not considered the probability that he would inherit some of the least desirable characteristics of his father. Now it seemed to me very natural that he should do so, and I felt that I could only pity him for the disposition that was born in him. It may be easily imagined, therefore, that, when I at last got a letter saying that my hardness towards him had broken his heart, and that he had made up his mind to emigrate to Florida, and so rid his mother of the burden of a child who was a disgrace to her, my resolution broke down, and I told myself that I was a hard and wicked woman.

The distress I suffered was so acute that, even before I had made up my mind as to whether I should consult my husband about this letter or not, he had perceived that there was something the matter with me, and guessed that it was in consequence of the letter I had received that morning. He said nothing to me, however, but called Meg to him, and walked up and down the shadiest of the garden walks in earnest conversation with her. Presently I heard him tell her she was a splendid girl, and enjoin her to "Keep a sharp lookout." Then he gave her a kiss, and went round to the front, where the phaeton was waiting to take him to the station. What these words referred to, and the events which followed, I did not learn until long afterwards.

Without my knowledge, the servants and the lodge-keepers had been warned that Mr. Harry Carey, who was carefully described to them, was on no account to be admitted within the grounds; while one of the gardeners had been deputed to keep watch on the river front, so that no descent might be made from that quarter. My husband hoped by these means to prevent a

meeting between myself and Harry, who put the servants' vigilance to the test on three or four occasions before the day on which I received the above letter.

On the afternoon of that day Meg, instead of going for a drive with me, as I wished her to do, chose to remain in the garden. She wandered about the grounds, keeping a strict watch upon the boundaries, for some time, until at last her patience was rewarded by the sight of a young man getting over the high wall into the shrubbery.

Skimming rapidly over the ground in the direction of the intruder, Meg was in time to intercept Harry Carey as he made his way stealthily through the trees in the direction of the house.

"Oho, Mr. Carey, this is very like a burglarious entrance, isn't it?" she called out, as she ran up.

Without showing any signs of confusion, Harry rushed up to her and seized her hand.

"Miss Keen, Meg," he cried at once, with great fervour, "all's fair in love or war. I love you; your father knows it, and won't let me see you. There was nothing for it but to recall my old feats at orchard-breaking and get in to see you somehow."

"What, you've come to see me?" asked Meg, incredulously.

"Who else in the world should I wish to see?"

"Why," said Meg, stolidly, "by what I've heard, it might be any other of a dozen ladies."

"I don't know where you've heard any such thing of me!" cried Harry, with indignation. "Or, rather, it is easy to see that this is your father's work."

"He hasn't the highest opinion in the world of you, certainly," said she. "And mamma, who used always to take your part, now seems to think just as badly of you as he does. Pray, what have you been doing to bring this about?"

"It's nothing in the world but because I love you, and because they think I am not rich enough or not good enough for you," said Harry, fervently.

Meg, apparently unmoved by his ardour, looked at him imperturbably.

"Well, and are you?" she said.

"Well," said Harry, for the moment taken aback, "I

had hoped—you have been very kind—you called to ask after me when I was ill——”

“And found you had got well very suddenly,” said Meg, laughing.

Harry blushed at last.

“I went out at the risk of my life,” said he. “But of course you’re welcome to think what you like. I see I am intruding. They have been at work destroying the kindly feeling I believe you once had for me——”

“You destroyed it yourself,” retorted Meg, hotly. “I liked you very much, I thought you awfully nice, and amusing, and bright, until that day when you let me fall into the water, and didn’t trouble yourself any further about me, any more than if I’d been a water-rat. I don’t say that my life is a very valuable one, but it’s the conventional thing to treat a young woman of my age as if she was a very precious object, and—well, I prefer the conventional treatment. And papa agrees with me, and—*so does mamma!*”

Harry listened to this very quietly. When she had finished he said, in the same unruffled manner,—

“Your own opinion I am bound to take as you give it me, Miss Keen; your father’s I am willing to take on trust. But *Mrs. Keen’s* I should prefer to hear from her own lips; and, if you’ll allow me, I will go to the house and hear it now.”

“Mamma is out,” cried Meg. “And, in any case, I am sorry to have to inform you, Mr. Carey, she would not be at home to you.”

“That, also, I should prefer to hear from her own lips,” answered Harry, speaking as coolly as ever, although his face had grown a little paler. “Mrs. Keen has been kind enough to show me the greatest friendship and good feeling possible, for she’s not one of those women who value a man for what he has rather than for what he is.”

“I’m one of those women!” retorted Meg, with her head in the air. “I like a man who has good sense, and good taste, and modesty.”

“Modesty! You ought to prefer my cousin to me, then!” answered Harry, lightly, with a sneer.

“So I do!” replied Meg, promptly, with crimson cheeks.

Harry looked thoroughly astonished. Then, raising his eyebrows, he said, "Surely, then, for his sake, since you think so highly of him, and since he has the bad taste to think highly of you, you might treat *me* better!"

Meg suddenly became very serious.

"Mr. Carey," she said, "you don't know how well I am treating you. I will tell you frankly that my father, rightly or wrongly, has got it into his head that you are taking advantage of mamma's good nature and generosity. He heard that you came down here several times to try to see her, whether she liked it or not, and he made up his mind to lie in wait for your coming, and give you a very warm reception. When I heard that, I begged him not to do so, but said that I would look out for you myself, and that I was sure I could make you listen to reason."

"Awfully good of you, I'm sure!" said Harry, whose self-possession it was difficult to disturb. "Perhaps you don't know that the relationship between Mrs. Keen and me is that of mother and son."

But apparently this claim was not new to Meg, who answered, quietly,—

"I've heard that you *say* so, Mr. Carey; but papa says the proofs of it seem to him very slender. And he says that in any case she has done enough for you, and that he must prevent the possibility of her being imposed upon."

At this Harry remained silent for some minutes, and, when he spoke again, it was with the voice of a person who is deeply hurt and mortified.

"I'm much obliged to you, Miss Keen," he said, at last, "for the care you have taken to consider my feelings. I am sure my cousin will feel quite as grateful as I do. You can assure Mr. Keen that I shall not trouble him again, as I'm not in the habit of intruding where I'm not wanted. And as for my mother, I love her too much to allow dissensions to arise in her family on my account."

They had by this time, walking together openly along one of the paths, reached the lodge gates. Harry raised his hat formally to Meg, and she returned a salutation equally stiff. As he passed out into the road, he met me returning from my drive. On my way back I had called

at the station and waited for my husband, who was now sitting by my side. Harry, however, who was on my side of the carriage, did not see that I was not alone, and rushed up to me.

My husband gave me one look, one warning touch. With the tears welling up to my eyes, I turned my head away, though I felt that my heart was breaking.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DURING the two weeks which followed this inauspicious visit of Harry's, we heard nothing more of him. There were no more piteous and appealing letters for me, no more surreptitious visits on the part of my unhappy son. I was utterly miserable, reproaching myself for my hardness, and telling myself that Harry had been too deeply offended and hurt by the treatment he had received ever to let me hear from him again. My husband, on the other hand, openly expressed his joyful conviction that "the young scamp was choked off at last;" while Meg, although reticent as to her opinions, was evidently no longer on my side.

It was our habit—as, indeed, it had to be the habit of most of our neighbours, the houses being so far apart and standing for the most part in such well-wooded grounds—to exercise some vigilance against intruders. Robberies, either of a grave or trifling sort, were not uncommon; as it was an easy thing for a man to hide among the trees, watch his opportunity, and enter the house by one of the inviting French windows; after clearing the room he happened to enter of anything portable he liked the look of, he could sneak out again and await an opportunity of getting clear away. In this way we, as well as our neighbours, had been made the victims of several small thefts since we had lived at The Limes.

When, therefore, the footman told us at dinner one evening that a suspicious-looking man had been seen about the grounds, that he had been followed, but had escaped, we were not very much surprised, and only

gave orders that the drawing-room windows should be fastened at once and the back entrances kept locked.

My husband, indeed, took the trouble to interview the gardener who had seen the man; and, when I heard him ask whether the supposed thief was respectably dressed and whether he was young or old, my heart beat high, for I knew what the suspicion was in his mind.

The man's answers, however, went far to dispel my fears. As far as the gardener could judge, the intruder was just a common tramp.

By the time we went to bed, we had all forgotten the momentary scare.

My husband and I occupied a large room which looked upon the lawn and the river. He had a bed in one corner, far from the light and hung with curtains; while mine was at the other end of the apartment, in a light corner between two windows.

As usual with me now, I was too unhappy to fall asleep immediately. While I was lying thinking of my son and wondering what was to become of him, I became aware of certain sounds which were not like the ordinary night-noises one always hears during a wakeful night. At first, of course, I thought they must be the result of fancy only; but presently, as they continued and grew more suspicious in character, the mysterious tramp who had been seen about came into my mind, and I sat up in bed to listen. The noises were continuous, though always slight, and they proceeded, as far as I could judge, from the room underneath, which was the dining-room.

My husband was asleep. I crossed the room and woke him.

"William," said I, "there's a burglar in the house. He's in the dining-room. Listen. I'm sure of it!"

The sounds I had heard went on again. My husband got up, put on his dressing-gown, and put out his hands for the revolver he always kept loaded in a little cupboard against the wall over the bed.

"Oh, no!" cried I, and, strangely enough, the fear which now possessed me came into my mind for the first time at this moment, "don't take that."

"Nonsense," said he, sharply. "One must do it in self-defence nowadays. The rascals all carry arms."

He was proceeding to light a candle; but I, haunted

by the same unacknowledged fear as before, tried to dissuade him, saying that if there really was a burglar in the house the candle would be more useful to him than to my husband.

"Go and call the servants," said I, "and I will make all the noise I can, and try to frighten them away."

"You will do nothing of the sort," said Mr. Keen, sharply. And then it flashed into my mind that he shared my own suspicions. "If there's a thief in the house, I want to catch him, and give him in charge. You stay here and keep as quiet as you can."

He thrust me back into the room, shut the door softly, and went along the corridor in the direction of the butler's room.

I dared not yet open the bedroom door again. So I lit my candles, and put my head down on the floor to listen. It seemed to me that the sounds down-stairs had ceased; and I was rejoicing to think that the intruder had taken the alarm and escaped, when I was startled by finding myself suddenly seized and a hand placed tightly over my mouth.

While I uttered a stifled cry, I managed to turn so as to get a view of my assailant. It was Harry. He wore workman's boots and a shabby suit of clothes, and I had no doubt that he was the supposed tramp who had been seen by the gardener.

As soon as he saw that I knew him, he released me, and, going back softly to the door, turned the key in the lock.

"All's fair in love and war, mother," said he, with his usual airiness of manner, as he put his arm round my neck and kissed me heartily. "This escapade may be considered as partaking of the nature of both love *and* war, since there is love for you on my side, while you make the most shameless war upon me, and I am forced into reprisals. Fancy cutting your own son, as you did the other day! Why, mammie, I'm ashamed of you!"

Even while he talked, his eyes roamed about the room, and ran over the objects on my dressing-table. When he had finished speaking, he darted to my dressing-case, of which he had just caught sight, and tried the lock.

"Where's the key of this?" demanded he, in a clear whisper.

"Harry, Harry!" I expostulated, in agony, "you are surely not going to rob me before my eyes!"

"Don't put it in that coarse way, dear mother," returned he, coolly, and yet not without an odd note of playful affection in his voice. "I am only going to do what all sons, and daughters too, have to do,—get their parents to help them when they can't get help from any one else."

"But, Harry, Mr. Keen will be back here in a minute. He has gone down to look for the burglar! And—and, Harry, he has a revolver, a loaded revolver!"

To my horror, Harry, with a light laugh, produced from his pocket a similar weapon.

"So have I," said he, simply.

I could scarcely repress a cry.

"But you would not use it; oh, you would not use it!"

"I would, though, if he did. There's nobody in the world I hate like Mr. Keen. He has abused me to my aunt, if not succeeded in turning her against me. And now he's doing a much worse thing,—shutting me out of my own mother's heart."

Again there was a sound as of real feeling in his tones, although he was occupied all the time in transferring to his own pockets the loose articles of jewelry which lay in the silver and tortoise-shell trays on the dressing-table.

"No, Harry, it is your own acts that are doing that!" I cried, with spirit. "Do you think it possible I should go on caring for a son who comes by night like a thief to rob his own mother?"

"Oh, come, I know you don't care so much for a few trinkets that you would let them weigh against your boy's real necessities; for it has come to that indeed, mother. I had to get help somewhere, and, knowing that your heart was still ready to help me, though your hands could not, I thought I would use my own hands, and trust to your heart to forgive me. Where's the key of this dressing-case?"

I pointed mechanically to the place where the key was lying.

"What I would or would not do doesn't matter," I faltered. "When Mr. Keen finds out what you have

done, he will have you arrested; and you will be tried and convicted, whatever I may say."

"Not a bit of it. You will never tell him who the burglar was. Sb-sh!"

He looked at the door and listened. I heard the handle being softly turned. Then the door was shaken roughly; but the lock held fast.

"Perdita!" cried my husband's voice, "open the door!"

I uttered a little cry, as Harry, holding me tightly by my wrist, which he had seized, opened the nearest window and looked out.

"Too far!" he muttered. But he left the window open.

"Open the door!" roared my husband from outside.

"Yes, yes, William," I cried, in tones of great distress.

Harry, who was still holding me, smiled at my distress, whispered, "Poor mother!" and kissed me on both cheeks. He seemed perfectly cool and collected, and was arranging the different articles he had taken, distributing them in different pockets, so that none might look suspiciously bulky.

At that moment there was a tremendous blow against the door from the outside. But it did not give way. Harry instantly blew out the candles. Then two sharp reports followed, and the key rattled in the lock of the door.

"They are trying to blow away the lock. They will never do that," he whispered. "I must say good-bye, mammie."

Once more he kissed me, as affectionately as ever, and in a moment was gone.

I was so much bewildered that I groped about in the darkness for him, wondering where he had hidden himself. But before I had taken many steps there came a second and a third heavy lunge at the door: at the third, it cracked; at the fourth, a panel came out. There was a light outside, by which I saw that a hand was put through the broken panel. The key was turned, the door burst open, and my husband rushed in.

"Where is he? Where is he?" he asked, between his set teeth.

But his face was livid, and his eyes were glaring. I would not have told the truth then if my life had depended upon it.

"Come, come, I know who was in here. I know, I tell you, and you *shall* confess it. I'll have him taken up, as sure as my name's Keen."

"It was a thief, a man!" I stammered. "He's got away. He's——"

"I know he's got away, and you've helped him, you doating fool!" roared my husband, who was beside himself with rage. "What's this, and this?"

He was inspecting my dressing-case, which bore conclusive signs of the overhauling it had been subjected to.

"Has he—has he—taken anything?" faltered I. "I—I—I was frightened; I didn't see."

"Nonsense. You saw well enough. You're no coward. You would have shrieked out if it had been any one but the person who did it. And you shall admit it, you shall give evidence against the rascal; for I mean to put a stop to this, once for all. He shall cool his heels at his country's expense a little while, and when he comes out he will have had a useful lesson. Now," and he stood over me in a threatening attitude, "admit at once that you recognised him. Do you hear?"

I was not so brave as he thought. I shuddered to see the look on my husband's face, a look I had seen there before, but never before for me. Still, I could not bear witness against my own boy, my poor son, with his heritage of his father's sins. I turned my head away, that I might not see my husband's face as I answered, in a whisper,—

"I—I will admit nothing—even to you."

Violent as his temper was, my husband had never before, even in the height of passion, suffered it to get the better of him in his treatment of me. When, therefore, I suddenly felt his hand on my shoulder, not in a caress, but with a sharp blow, I cried out, not in pain, for indeed the injury inflicted was not great, but in sorrow and surprise.

We were still almost in the dark, the only light which came into the room being that of a candle held by the butler in the corridor outside. But I was able to see a figure, which I knew to be my son's, spring from behind the bed-curtains and across the room to where we were standing. Without a word he flung himself with all his force upon my husband, and, stripling as he was com-

pared to the thick-set middle-aged man, he flung him heavily to the floor.

Then, snatching my hand and pressing it one moment against him as he passed, Harry went rapidly and noiselessly out of the room, passed the astonished butler like a flash of lightning, and made his escape without the slightest difficulty.

For my husband was lying, stunned, upon the floor.

CHAPTER XXV.

As soon as I had recovered my breath and my wits, which had been momentarily paralyzed by the suddenness of Harry's onslaught and abrupt flight, I fell on my knees beside my husband, and called for a light.

The butler with his candle, and my maid, who had been waiting in a distant corner of the corridor, afraid to come in, both hurried into the room.

"He's stunned, ma'am, only stunned," said Sanders, the maid, who was a sedate person, not easily moved to hysterical excess of emotion.

It was, however, some minutes before Mr. Keen recovered consciousness, and in the mean time I was sufficiently alarmed by his appearance to send for a doctor. Before the arrival of the medical man, however, my husband had sat up, looked about him, and, remembering quite suddenly the events which had preceded his loss of consciousness, had pushed me away from him, with a frown, and said, shortly, that I had better go to bed.

Even the presence of the stately Sanders did not suffice to put a check on my tears. But Mr. Keen, instead of being moved by the sight of my grief, said, irritably,—

"This snivelling is absurd. If it is on my account, you yourself brought it on me. If it is for that scoundrel, it is thrown away, for I can tell you I won't leave a stone unturned till I've had him laid by the heels."

I signed to the maid to leave the room, and I judged by her intelligent promptitude in obeying, as well as by a look which she threw at me in passing, that she also had a decided opinion of her own as to the identity of

the burglar. As soon as we were alone, I threw myself on my knees beside my husband, who was lying back in an arm-chair, with his eyes closed.

"Are you in pain, William?" I asked, timidly.

"What's that to you?" he returned, roughly.

"It is everything, it is everything; you know that!"

"Indeed I know nothing of the sort. It might have troubled you three months ago, before this young black-guard turned up. But things are altered between us now. You don't care how you treat me, because you have this precious son's affection to fall back upon. And I needn't mind how I treat you," he went on, with a sneer which was almost ferocious, "now you've got such a champion."

I felt so miserable, so humiliated, that I could only cry my eyes out quietly without offering any more intelligible apology than a dozen broken words. I tried to put my hand in his, but he pushed it away.

"Don't be a humbug," he said, shortly. "You know my feeling about a wife: her husband is everything to her or he's less than nobody. While I was everybody to you, or while you acted as if I was, you could do what you liked with me. But since you choose to let a scamp whom you must despise come between you and me, you are no more to me, I tell you, than the woman who brings home the washing. And you may take yourself off to bed as soon as you like. I'm going to wait for the doctor down-stairs; and to-morrow I'm going up to Kerr Street, where I can spend my nights quietly without fear of being knocked on the head by your self-styled son."

I tried to speak, tried to expostulate, but I had not yet recovered enough self-command to do so coherently. So I had to let him go down-stairs; and it was not until the doctor had arrived, a few minutes later, that I was calm enough to present myself again before him. As soon as I had checked my tears and washed away the traces of them as well as I could, I went down-stairs, and tapped at the door of the library, where I had been told that my husband was sitting with the doctor. Mr. Keen frowned when I entered.

"The doctor says I am to keep quiet," he said, abruptly.

The doctor, who was a stranger to me, had risen, and was looking at me with interest and curiosity. I knew that my husband, who liked to talk about anything which weighed on his mind, had been complaining, whether specifically or not I could not tell, of his wife's conduct. I came to the point at once, having made up my mind as to the course I should pursue.

"And I am going to do my best to help you to carry out his instructions," said I, turning to the medical man with a smile.

My husband broke in quickly:

"There's only one way of doing that, as far as you're concerned."

"I know that," said I, submissively.

"What!" cried my husband, jumping up from his chair, "you'll give up that scoundrel to justice?"

The doctor looked puzzled and a trifle scandalized, and rubbed his gold-rimmed spectacles discreetly.

"I will do that, or anything else, rather than that you should complain of me," I said, my voice growing a little unsteady on the last words.

"I think, Mr. Keen," broke in the doctor's measured voice, "that Mrs. Keen will prove a valuable coadjutor, and that I cannot do better than leave you in her care. I will write you out a prescription, and I will see you again in the morning. Keep as quiet as you can, and if the headache continues in the morning I think it will be better to stay away from town and the worry of business for a day or two."

He took his leave, and my husband turned to me, with an assumption of coolness which did not deceive me as to the relief he felt at the course I had taken.

"Did you mean what you said when that chap was here, or was it only a pretty little scene,—wifely devotion, exquisite feminine submission, and all that?"

"I meant it," I answered, in a low voice.

"And you'll speak up in the witness-box when this fellow's had up?"

I hesitated; and my husband, who had laid his hand upon my arm, withdrew it, with a mocking laugh.

"Yes, I will, I will do even that—if I must!" whimpered I.

And, having broken down altogether, I put my hands

over my eyes and sobbed. My husband began walking up and down the room impatiently. He spoke, however, more persuasively and less harshly than before.

"Come, come," said he, "isn't it folly to make a fuss about giving such a rascal the punishment he deserves? Allowing that he's your son, which he may be for all I know, does that give him the right to break into your house and rob you?"

After a few moments' pause, I answered,—

"It doesn't give him the right to break into *your* house, at any rate, nor to take property which you gave me; I see that. And so, if you insist, I—I—I——"

"Well, all right; we won't talk about it any more now," said my husband, hastily.

He had discernment enough to be sorry for me, and he did not wish to have his resolution to punish the offender broken down by my now submissive tears. So the subject was closed between us for that night, and on the following day, as he was still suffering from the effects of the blow and fall of the night, I took care to avoid that and every other subject which could irritate or excite him.

Taking the doctor's advice, he stayed away from town on that day, and spent the morning with Meg and me, roaming about the grounds and inspecting the stables. In the afternoon we persuaded him to lie down for a little while on the library sofa.

Meg and I had not exchanged more than a dozen words on the subject of the burglary, and we were both shy of discussing it. This very reticence on her side confirmed me in my belief that she cared more for Harry than she chose to acknowledge; and I hardly knew whether I was altogether sorry that she should have placed her affection so unworthily, or secretly glad that there was one more creature in the world ready to take his part and to find excuses for him.

We were both busy with fancy-work in the drawing-room, and both rather silent, when the sound of the front-door bell made us look up. There was an expression of excitement and expectancy in Meg's face which made me curious. It was not my "day," and I was not expecting any visitors.

"Who can it be?" I asked. "Do you expect anybody?"

"I? Of course not," she answered, quickly. "I was only wondering—after last night——"

Even as she paused, the door opened, and the footman asked whether I would see Mr. Carey. I almost cried out; but Meg said, hastily, "Certainly, certainly. Show him in at once."

The servant hesitated for a moment, looking at me. As, however, I said nothing, he retired, and as soon as he was gone I sprang up in great agitation and put my hand on Meg's shoulder.

"What—what will your father say?" I stammered.

"Mr. Deane Carey," announced the footman.

Deane! I had not remembered his existence, and the name fell upon my ears with startling effect. Whether I felt relieved or disappointed I hardly knew. Sinking back in my chair, I held out my hand nervously. Deane did not appear to see it. I looked up in his face, and saw that he looked more shamefaced, more absolutely abject and miserable, than I had ever seen a human being look before. He had a bag in his hand, upon which he kept his eyes fixed as he stood, with bent head and stooping shoulders, in the middle of the room.

"How do you do, Mr. Carey?" said Meg, very kindly, as she came quite close to him and held out her hand so that it was impossible for him not to see it.

For a moment he hesitated. Then, looking at her, and speaking in a constrained, husky voice, he said,—

"Miss Keen, I cannot let you shake hands with me. I am here on a disgraceful errand, and I only want to get it over and get out of the house as quickly as I can; and I hope neither you nor Mrs. Keen will think me ungrateful when I say that I don't wish anything so heartily as that I may never see either of your kind faces again."

By this time I knew, of course, that the poor fellow's errand was an apology for his cousin.

"Meg, my dear, you had better leave us for a little while. See," I added, in a lower voice, "that your father doesn't come in." Turning again to Deane, I said, "Mr. Keen is not very well. He might be angry, rude, impatient——"

"Indeed he has every right to be so," said poor Deane. "But, if you please, I should like to see him too. I

suppose he knows all about last night, and who was the cause of the—disturbance?"

Meg, who had moved slowly towards the door, now ran back again.

"Yes, yes, he does know; we all know. What's the use of sending me away, mamma? There is nothing to be hidden from any of us now."

I think she was sorry for Deane, and anxious to see how I meant to treat him, and I felt sure she must be anxious also on Harry's account. So I did not again urge her to go away, but, turning to Deane, asked him what had brought him. For answer he opened the bag he carried, and, with an air of the most guilty shame imaginable, took out of it the jewelry which Harry had robbed me of the night before. He put the things down, one by one, on a little table near him, and brought it over to me.

"Look at them," he said. "See whether they are all there."

"Did he send them back?" I asked, eagerly.

But the answer was a bitter disappointment.

"No. He did not return until early this morning. He had been drinking, and he fell asleep in an arm-chair in the sitting-room, after putting some of the things out on the table before him. I went into the room a little later to persuade him to go to bed, and I saw these things, and I knew where they came from."

He paused a moment, and I broke in, quickly,—

"Why did you bring them back? How did you know, or think, that I had not given them to him?"

"It seemed unlikely," said Deane, gently. "But, as you say, I didn't *know*—until later."

I shivered, and blushed. Deane presently went on:

"I shook him and woke him up, and he took me for a policeman come to arrest him. I turned out his pockets, sent him to bed, put all the things in a place of safety, and—and—here they are."

"He let you bring them? He was sorry this morning. As you say yourself, last night he had been drinking: he hardly knew what he was doing," I pleaded, scarcely able to make myself audible for the shame and grief I felt.

"I didn't give him a chance of objecting," said Deane,

dryly. "That is all I have to do here. As for apologizing, I can't do it."

He began to retreat towards the door as he spoke; but, before he reached it, I heard my husband's voice, in loud and angry tones, outside. He was evidently speaking to the footman who had admitted the unfortunate Deane.

"You shouldn't have let him in, you shouldn't have let him in!" he thundered, loudly.

The next moment he had burst open the door with much violence and entered the drawing-room. Meg flew across the room and put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Papa, papa, he's brought back the things that were taken last night. He made him give them up," she cried, eagerly. My husband, still frowning, glanced from the young man to the jewels on the table, which I, as well as Meg, was pointing out to him. Somewhat mollified, but by no means thoroughly restored to good humour, Mr. Keen said, shortly,—

"Why not have sent them? I don't suppose you're an accomplice of your cousin's, Mr. Carey; but, frankly, he has given your name such an evil odour that I can't make you welcome, however much I may appreciate your motive in coming."

The tone in which he spoke made these words almost insulting, and Deane writhed under them.

"I quite understand that," he said, in a constrained voice. "And I will never obtrude myself upon you again. I would not have come myself, to give back the things, but that they were too valuable to send except by hand, and I knew no one to send them by."

He bowed stiffly to me, still more stiffly to Meg, and left the room abruptly. He had scarcely gone when Meg, who had retreated to the window, rushed up again to her father.

"Papa, you are cruelly harsh and hard!" she cried, fiercely. "You ought to be sorry for him. It is not so pleasant to have to do as he has done, to come here and be treated like that."

And, to my astonishment, her voice suddenly broke; she turned away, threw herself into the nearest chair, and burst into an agony of tears. But my husband frowned again. He was too much incensed against Harry to do justice to the cousin who was also his friend.

“Among the blind the one-eyed is king,” said he, dryly. “The companion of a thief seems a hero because he keeps his hands out of other people’s pockets. Keep your tears, my dear, for worthier objects.”

And he left the room abruptly.

CHAPTER XXVI.

I WAS very much touched by the gentle kindness which Meg showed me during the few weeks that followed. Indeed, without the help of her quiet sympathy I don’t know how I should have got through that unhappy time. For, although my husband never mentioned Harry, and, to my great relief, took no steps to punish him, he was never quite the same in his manner towards me after the night of the robbery. He seemed, too, to be permanently affected in health by the consequences of Harry’s violence, and to become suddenly older in face, voice, and carriage. He was at this time about sixty years of age, but until this occurrence he had always passed for a much younger man.

It must have been nearly a month before we heard anything more of either of the Careys. At last, one morning, I found on my dressing-table another letter from Harry to me.

After some hesitation I furtively opened it. I could not even now look upon my son’s writing unmoved, but I had been schooling myself well, recognising that my first duty was to my husband and not to him.

This was the letter:

“MY DARLING MOTHER,—I must make this letter reach you; though, if it did not, I don’t know whether I should have any right to complain. For I am a good-for-nothing fellow, not worthy to be your child, and it would have been better for you, if not for me, if you had never found me out. You would then have carried about with you always the remembrance of me as I was when they took me from you, and you would have been quite sure, in your dear good motherly heart, that I had

always remained as innocent as I was and as lovable as I have no doubt you thought me then.

“I know your husband is enraged against me, and I don't like to try and see you, for fear of making things unpleasant for you. You see, being dependent upon him as you are, it wouldn't do to offend him, and I can't say he is not justified in his view of me. Only, my darling mother, I hope you don't think I am altogether a heartless fellow; for that is not so. Perhaps I am not burdened with too much Sunday-school morality, but I have the keen feelings all we ne'er-do-weels are cursed with, and I never fall asleep at night without the tormenting thought that I shall perhaps never be able to see you again.

“But remember, mother, I could have seen you freely, and should have been able to escape without exciting old Keen's suspicions, if I had not been carried away by my feelings when I saw him strike you. Remember that. It was the virtuous and adored husband that struck you; it was the despised and outcast son that took your part! However, I don't want to sing my own praises: I should come to the end too soon. I only want to assure you that, although through the machinations of this Keen my aunt has thrown me over and I am in worse difficulties than I have ever been in before, I am still able to bless the moment when I recovered my mother, and that I live in hopes, through all my troubles, of being able some day to feel on my face once more her forgiving kiss.

“Your loving, heart-broken son,

“HARRY.”

I could not help it. I did try hard to tell myself that this was only a cleverly concocted letter designed to work upon my feelings. In spite of my troubles, I was deeply moved, and unable for a time to do more than hang over my dressing-table and sob. Sanders had left me alone, and it suddenly occurred to me to connect this long absence of hers with the presence of the letter on my dressing-table. I touched the bell sharply, and in the glance I gave at her face as she re-entered I understood that my guess had been a shrewd one.

“Who gave you this letter for me?” I asked, rather sharply.

The woman, who was a tender-hearted creature, looked at me askance.

"Oh, ma'am," she said, in a frightened voice, "it was sent to me by post, with a note to me myself begging me to give it to you. And oh, ma'am, he's such a nice young gentleman, and he did beg so hard and so pretty, that I hadn't the heart not to do it. Though I know," she added, mysteriously, "how mad the master'd be if he knew!"

So poor Harry had been able to make the charm that he exercised over most women work even upon prim, angular, sedate-looking Sanders! I said nothing, but just moved my head in assent, as I put the letter down upon the dressing-table. I did not wish to encourage her to help his correspondence with me, although I had not the heart to forbid it.

The receipt of the letter had delayed me so much that my husband came presently to the dressing-room door to see why I was not ready. I opened it myself, with a smile; but his sharp eyes detected the trace of tears on my face.

"You've been crying!" he said, abruptly. And, after a moment's pause, he came into the room, and, shutting the door sharply, continued, with a frown of suspicion upon his face, "What's it all about this time? You've heard from that rascal again!"

I had put Harry's letter in my pocket safely; but my husband's unexpected suspicions set me guiltily blushing, and I felt that my best resource was candour.

"Yes," said I, "I have heard from him. But I'm not going to answer the letter."

"Will you let me see it?" he asked, authoritatively, after a pause.

With much reluctance, I produced the letter, and handed it to him. He read it through, with a face I scarcely dared to look at, and, when he had finished, he laid it open on the dressing-table in front of me and brought his hand down upon the page with a tremendous thump. "Look there! Look there! Read that. Doesn't that show you? Can't you see that the young rascal shows his hand? There, there!" cried he, in great excitement, as he made me read aloud one particular line in the letter.

It was this: "being dependent upon him as you are, it wouldn't do to offend him."

"The scoundrel is afraid of my keeping you short, so that you won't be able to help him. And, by Jove, I thank him for an idea he's given me!" he cried, starting up from the chair on which he had been kneeling with one knee. "I've left you a good deal too much liberty as to what you shall do with your money when I'm dead. I must tie it up a bit, and I will."

"William, William!" cried I, in great distress.

"Yes, William—William knows what he's about, and he's not going to have his money squandered either when he's alive or when he's dead." He suddenly stopped short on his way to the door, and, coming back to me, said, very kindly, "My dear, it's all for your own good, your own protection. You must see that. And, my dear, I shall send you away for a little while. This young rascal can get at you here, and with the continuation of his d—d existence life is becoming not worth living to either of us. I shall trust to your honour not to let him know where you've gone, and I shall give a word of warning to Sanders. I hate that woman, and I know it was she who brought you this letter. Preserve us from sentimental old maids!"

He kissed me kindly, and went out. By the time I saw him again he had already made up his mind where I was to go to, told Sanders to pack my trunks, and ordered the carriage round to catch a particular train. I was to go to Brighton, and he had already wired to engage rooms at the Metropole.

"I shall be very lonely!" protested I, with a tremor in my voice.

"Not a bit of it. Meg's going with you. She chose to go herself."

I looked at the girl in surprise. She generally grumbled very much at being asked to go anywhere with me without her father. But I was not yet satisfied.

"Well, well, what more have you got to grumble about?" inquired Mr. Keen.

I hesitated, and walked to the breakfast-room window. He followed, and was surprised to find, as well he might be, that I was in tears.

"I—I can't help it," I murmured, as I dried my eyes.

"I know you will only laugh at me and say I'm very silly. But, William," and I lowered my voice, "I don't like leaving *you*. You will think I'm growing into a nervous old woman, full of silly fancies. But I don't want this change; I would rather not have it. Let me wait till you can come down with us; then I should enjoy it very much. Don't, don't let me go without you!"

"Why, what are you afraid of? Even if this young rascal should find you out, he can't do you any harm!"

"Not me, but *you!*" cried I, tremulously. "Oh, I'm afraid——"

But my husband laughed at my fears, and told me that it was not at all likely that Harry would try any of his games when he had a man to deal with.

Nevertheless, it was with a heart full of misgivings that I took leave of my husband at Charing Cross station, when he had put us in the Pullman.

"Will you wire to me every morning and every evening, just to let me know you're all right?" I asked, anxiously, as he stood on the platform beside the train before it started. "I shall be anxious unless you do. Wire on your way to town in the morning and on your way back at night."

"Oh," said he, "I shall stay at Kerr Street till you come back. But I will certainly wire, as you desire, if it will give you any satisfaction."

The last thing I saw of him was an expression of good-humoured amusement on his face, as he waved his hand to me from the platform.

I sat back and pretended to read, in order to avoid talking. But Meg had something to say to me. Presently I felt a light touch on my arm.

"Do you know, mamma," she said, in a low voice, "that Sanders went away to send off a telegram before we started?"

I began to tremble. Truly my son's restless machinations were beginning, as my husband had said, to make life unbearable! Shrewd little Meg had guessed, or her father had told her, that there was a conspiracy between Harry and the lady's maid. I wondered whether it was the hope of seeing him that had brought Meg down with me to Brighton. If so, I felt that I must warn her without delay.

“Meg,” said I, gravely, “I hope, my dear child, that you don’t care for Harry Carey!”

She burst into a merry laugh, but she looked away from me as she answered,—

“Set your dear heart at rest, mamma. If there were no man left in the world but Harry Carey, and if he were to spend his whole life in imploring me to care for him, I could only inform him politely that he was wasting his time.”

Somewhat reassured by her decided tone, though I remained puzzled by her conduct, I sat back again. I had matter enough for reflection in debating how I should receive Harry, on the inevitable occasion of his reappearance on the scene. I was beginning to be genuinely anxious to shake him off, feeling that the maternal influence, from which I had hoped so much, was only a temptation to him to fresh extravagance.

I was still undecided when we reached our destination; and Meg, who saw that I was disturbed and anxious, carried me off, after dinner, for a walk along the sea-front. We had got as far as the Kemp Town end, and were resting on the seat there, when I was startled by hearing the voice of Harry Carey close to my ear.

Although I had known that it would not be very long before I should see him, I was so much startled that I uttered a little scream. Meg, who was sitting beside me, turned to the young fellow with a frown. Although I knew nothing, at that time, of the meeting that had taken place between them in the grounds of The Limes, I saw at once a look of open antagonism pass between them, as she said, sharply,—

“Is not this a fresh intrusion, Mr. Carey?”

He drew himself up with an injured air.

“Knowing what you do about us, Miss Keen,” he began, warmly, “surely you can’t expect that I should pass Mrs. Keen like a stranger when I am so fortunate as to meet her by accident.”

“Accident!” echoed Meg, sardonically.

But Harry took no further notice of her. Seating himself beside me on the bench, after having persuaded me by a gesture to make way for him, he was overwhelming me with whispered assurances of his delight at meeting me. Meg, disgusted, got up and walked

away. I summoned all my strength, and spoke to him, not indeed coldly, but with an air of determination.

"Harry," I began, "she is quite right: this is an intrusion. You have thoroughly repelled and estranged me by your conduct, and I don't pretend that I can regard you with the same feelings that I had for you before. That a man should get money and jewelry from his mother, not for his necessities, but for his vicious pleasures, is bad enough; but when it comes to breaking into houses and stealing, he puts himself outside the pale of decent people's sympathy. Besides, you hurt my husband, seriously I am afraid: nothing can make me forgive that."

"Why did I hurt him?" asked Harry, passionately. "Because he was hurting you. Because it was impossible for me to keep my hands off a man who dared to strike my mother."

I trembled a little, but I would not let him see that I was in the least touched. I went on calmly with my harangue.

"Now, I have not lost all feeling for you, as you choose or pretend to suppose. But I see that I have only been doing you harm, instead of helping you, by supplying you with the means to indulge in dissipation beyond your means. I have been helping you towards your own ruin. Well, I am glad of an opportunity of telling you that I am going to do so no longer. When you have given up your wicked, wasteful habits, and have settled down steadily to work like your cousin, nobody shall prevent me from seeing my boy again as often as I like. But so long as you use me only as a means of providing yourself with money to waste, I shall certainly take my husband's advice and refuse even to speak to you again."

It was not easy to say this, especially as I noticed in my unhappy son's dress and bearing signs that he was, as he himself would have put it, "down on his luck." There was something which I felt to be humiliating even to myself in the hang-dog way in which he listened. But I knew I was right, and so I went doggedly on with my lecture.

When I had finished, Harry raised his head suddenly.

"Your husband's advice! Yes, that's it! That's the

influence working against me, hardening you against your only child! D—n him!" he cried, with so much sudden ferocity that I was frightened. "I wish I had killed him that night when I only stunned the brute!"

I was so much appalled by the depths of malignity which I so unexpectedly perceived in my own son that for the moment I could not speak. Harry went on, in the same savage tone,—

"If he were dead you wouldn't turn a deaf ear to your boy in his necessities!"

This speech revived all the terrors which had assailed me that morning, and which had made me so anxious not to leave my husband.

"Pray dismiss that thought at once from your mind," I said, hastily. "For he told me only this morning that he meant to make such arrangements that, if he were to die, I should find my hands absolutely tied, and be more unable to help you than I am now."

Harry started to his feet with an oath. For a few moments he stood before me, clenching his fists, while his eyes glared wildly before him without appearing to see me. Then he burst into a harsh laugh.

"He said that, did he? Then—then," he stammered for a second, "of course there's no more to be said. I—I am afraid I am intruding, as Miss Keen said. Good-evening, Mrs. Keen!"

He raised his hat, turned, and hailed a passing cab.

"Station!" he called, briefly, to the driver.

I started to my feet, and called to Meg, who was a little way off, looking at the sea.

"Meg, Meg," I cried, "we must go back to town at once, at once."

"Hush, mamma!" she said, soothingly. "What are you afraid of?"

"I—I—don't know, my dear child," said I, tremulously, "but I pray that—that we may be in time!"

For we had to call at the hotel first, and the cab Harry had taken was the only one in sight.

CHAPTER XXVII.

I HURRIED Meg along the parade so fast that I gave her no opportunity to expostulate. It was not until we met a cab and got into it that she tried to remonstrate with me. But as soon as we were seated, she put her little hand coaxingly into mine, and said,—

“Now, mamma, I want to persuade you to see that you are very silly. Don't you think, if you go back to town to-night, that papa will say the same?”

Undoubtedly there was only one answer to be given to this question. Mr. Keen liked his arrangements to be carried out, and he was more likely to scold me for my folly than to laugh at it. Meg pursued her advantage :

“What can you say to him to explain it? You can't even say you've had a dream, since you haven't passed the night away from home! Really, mamma, I think you have a very poor case!”

I began to think so too.

“My dear,” said I, with less firmness, “it is difficult for a girl like you to realize the state of mind of a desperate man. Harry Carey is desperate. He thinks himself injured by your father, and—and I don't know what he will do. You see he is so very daring, so very rash!”

“He will hardly dare to break into The Limes again,” said Meg, reassuringly. “And, if he does, he won't find much there that it would be worth his while to take away, for papa has taken your jewelry up to town.”

“But I am afraid—you know he is so impetuous—that he will try to see your father, and—and——”

“He can't see papa if he goes to The Limes, because papa won't be there. You know he's going to sleep at Kerr Street, and Harry Carey can't know that. Sanders didn't know it herself when she wired to him.”

This fact, which I had forgotten, comforted me. My husband was safe, for that night at any rate, from any manifestation of Harry's malignant feeling towards him. I gave a sigh of relief, as I leaned back in the cab. Meg's voice, speaking with some scorn, soon roused me.

“What an absolutely selfish, heartless, and altogether

worthless sort of person he is!" she exclaimed, energetically. "Mamma, how can you like him?"

Of course this sweeping condemnation sent me flying to arms.

"Indeed, Meg, you were not always so severe upon him yourself. Remember it was you yourself who introduced Mr. Carey to me; you were most anxious for me to show him hospitality. Your very face betrayed, on that afternoon when he rowed up to The Limes, that you took a particular interest in him."

Meg hesitated a little before she answered. When she did, it was in a demure and gentle tone.

"It is quite true, mamma, that I did take an interest in—in Mr. Carey."

"Well, and if that interest were altogether dead, what made you come down here? For I suppose you had your suspicions, as I had, that we should see something of him as soon as he found out that I was alone."

"Why," said Meg, laughing softly, "I will go so far as to confess that it *was* the hope of seeing or hearing something of—Mr. Carey that brought me down here."

I looked at her in astonishment.

"Then how, knowing too the relationship between him and me, can you be surprised at *my* affection, *my* forgiveness?"

For a few moments Meg did not answer. Then she said,—

"Oh, mamma, oh, dear mamma, how can you be so blind? How can you suppose it possible that I should love Mr. Carey, selfish, heartless, unprincipled, when there is Mr. Carey, unselfish, true-hearted, and honourable always by his side to show him up?"

At first I did not take in the meaning of her words. As for me there could be but one Mr. Carey, my mind began to work on the assumption that she was speaking only of Harry, and I was comforted by the thought that she found in my son a dual nature, of which the one part was as estimable as the other was hateful.

"You mean, then," said I, gently, "that you would not speak to him to-night because to-night his worse nature was uppermost?"

Then Meg destroyed at one blow my pretty little hypothesis:

"Why, mamma, what other sort of nature is ever uppermost in *Harry Carey*? The one I mean is Deane."

Deane! I had forgotten all about him!

The girl's words gave me a tremendous shock, not wholly of surprise; for even now I felt something like disgust at the idea that any girl could prefer the silent and heavy Deane to the lively and fascinating Harry.

"Oh," I exclaimed, coldly, when I had recovered from the first shock of astonishment, "then I suppose you are in correspondence with him?"

"Mamma!" exclaimed Meg, indignantly, "you don't understand Deane any better than you do his cousin. I don't know even whether he cares for me. Sometimes I have thought so, but he is far too honourable to make love to a girl whom he feels he is not in a position to marry. And now I know that shame at his cousin's behaviour will keep him away from me as long as he lives!"

I was silent. I was irritated by the discovery of Meg's liking for Deane. I had never in my heart given up the hope that her supposed love for him was to be his salvation. However, of course I could not reproach her, while at the same time there was nothing in the prospects of her love for me to congratulate her upon. I was somewhat impressed by the girl's manner. This was, as far as I knew, the first affection she had ever felt for any man which went beyond the bounds of the most transient liking; and the effect upon her manner as she spoke of it was very striking. It made her rather sad, very gentle, and infinitely more lovable.

No further word was exchanged between us until we reached the hotel. As we went up-stairs to our sitting-room, a waiter ran after us to say that a gentleman had called to see me, and that he had left his card and said that, as his business was important, he would call again that evening. The card bore the name "Mr. J. G. Boyle, Solicitor," and an address in Lincoln's Inn.

The name was unknown to me, and I was much puzzled as to what his business with me might be. But my suspense did not last long, for I had scarcely reached our sitting-room when "Mr. Boyle" was announced.

My visitor was a tall, portly, middle-aged man, upon whom years of confidential business with clients of high

rank had left their impression in a certain mixture of lofty deference and dignified urbanity which had now become his habitual manner.

“I have the honour of addressing Mrs. Keen, I believe, Mrs. Perdita Keen?” he began, suavely, as soon as he entered.

“Yes, my name is Perdita Keen,” I answered, rather apprehensively, for I thought at once that he must have come concerning some escapade of my son’s.

Mr. Boyle glanced at Meg, who, being too quick-witted to require any words, made an excuse to leave us alone together.

“You have come to see me on business?” I asked, nervously, as, after asking him to be seated, I placed myself in a chair in such a position that the electric light did not fall upon my face. “I wish you had written instead of coming, for I know little of business, and I would have referred you to my own solicitor.”

“That would have been of little use to me, madam,” said Mr. Boyle, in the tone of one who is used to ride over difficulties easily and pompously. “My business is with yourself. I am the family solicitor of Lord Wallinghurst.”

I started up in great agitation. Then, controlling myself with a great effort, I asked, “And what is your business with me?”

“I have come direct from his lordship, to ask you whether you will come and see him.”

“See Lord Wallinghurst! I!”

A hundred strange ideas were chasing each other in my head. How had he heard of me? What did he want with me? Ought I to go? After a long pause, I said,—

“I do not refuse, but I should like to consult some one first.”

“I am afraid, madam, that I must have ‘yes or no at once from you. Lord Wallinghurst is dying. He wanted me to bring you back to town to-night. There is a doubt whether he will live until the morning.”

I had no longer any thought of refusing to go. It was stupefaction, consequent upon the great issues which I felt to be at stake, which kept me silent. But Mr. Boyle, not understanding this, evidently thought that I suspected some trap, some proposal to my disadvantage.

"I am violating no confidence in telling you," he said, in his solemn, smooth tones, "that the object his lordship has in view is your advantage. His lordship wishes to do an act of reparation."

I began to tremble violently.

"Reparation!" I echoed, in a quavering voice.

"Yes. You were married, I believe, madam, when very young, to a younger brother of Lord Wallinghurst's?"

"I *thought* I was married to him."

Mr. Boyle, with a large white hand, courteously waved the doubt away.

"We are aware, madam, that circumstances tended to cast a doubt upon the validity of the marriage. But we incline to the opinion that the marriage was valid, all the same."

Valid! My first marriage valid! Then, if not to me, what a difference it would make to my son!

"I think," pursued Mr. Boyle, "I have told you enough to make it clear that you can lose nothing, and may gain a great deal, by complying with the wish of my client. I may add that I have seen Mr. Keen to-day, and that he offered no obstacle, as you may see from his having at once told me where to find you. There is time to catch the last train to town. I shall think myself very happy if I may escort you."

"I will come," said I, briefly.

To inform Meg that I had to return to town that night, to get her consent to be left at Kerr Street, to settle our bill at the hotel, and to leave my maid to do the packing, was the work of a few minutes only. We caught the ten-nineteen train to town.

Lord Wallinghurst's house was in Eaton Square. There was some anxiety, in the minds of the solicitor and myself, as to whether we might not, after all, be too late. But the servant who opened the door reassured us. His lordship was a little better, and had given word that Mr. Boyle and the lady were to be shown up to his room the moment they arrived.

I entered the sick-room, prepared to see in the dying earl a resemblance either to my first husband or to his father so strong as to be startling. But I found nothing of the kind. The Lord Wallinghurst whom I now saw

for the first time was a man of different build altogether, tall, thin, spare, precise, altogether without the touch of humorous geniality which had formed the charm of his father and brother. It was only in certain tones of his weak voice that I could detect any likeness to Harry Dare.

Although he was too weak even to sit up supported by pillows, his mind was perfectly clear, and he raised his hand feebly to take mine as I approached the bedside.

"I can't talk much, Mrs. Keen," said he, in a voice which was hardly more than a whisper, "so you must forgive me if I seem startlingly abrupt. I am discharging now a duty which ought to have been discharged two-and-twenty years ago, when my brother Harry died. He wrote me a letter asking me to look after his wife, and her child who was not yet born. Well, you know perhaps what poor Harry's reputation was, and that he had quarrelled with all the family and been sent abroad. So I did not pay to his appeal the attention which, I suppose, I ought to have done. At any rate, I did not answer him. However, when I heard he was dead, through my aunt Stephana, I did make inquiries of her. She told me that there were two ladies who claimed to be Harry's wife, and that neither of them had any claim to the title."

I started at these words. I had always understood that Lady Stephana knew the woman Nellie to be Harry Dare's real wife. I seemed to remember that she had told me so. If this was not the case how could I doubt that I, whom Harry Dare had married in a church with all the necessary formalities, had been his legitimate wife? Why had I not been more explicit with Lady Stephana? Certainly she had treated me with so much evident antagonism, had so openly espoused the cause of the woman Nellie against me, that I had had from her little encouragement to confidence.

These thoughts passed through my mind while Lord Wallinghurst, momentarily exhausted by the effort of continued speaking, lay back silently resting. Presently he made me a faint sign that he was ready to go on with his discourse.

"I had no reason to doubt the truth of what she told

me, he said, "especially as she always took Harry's part when she could. So when she said she had taken the matter up herself and done all she could for both women, I did not trouble myself further about the matter. Until —until—"

He began to breathe heavily, as if exhausted by the prolonged effort of this narration. Then he made a sign to Mr. Boyle to continue the story for him. The lawyer therefore took up the tale in the following words:

"Six months ago, Mrs. Keen, his lordship had the misfortune to lose his only son, who fell ill of influenza about the same time as his lordship. Lord Wallinghurst's brother, the Honourable George Darent, having died nearly sixteen years ago, Lord Wallinghurst began to make inquiries, with a view to finding out who was the next heir to the title. The question whether the late Harry Darent had or had not been legally married now became an important one, since if he had left a legitimate son, that son would undoubtedly be the next heir. Lady Stephana could give us no assistance; she believed that no marriage at all had taken place. Quite recently, however, we discovered the woman Nellie Styles, and found conclusively that, though she had lived with Harry Darent and borne him children, she had never gone through any ceremony of marriage with him. At the same time she showed so frantic a jealousy of the second claimant of the position of wife to Harry Darent that we were convinced her claim was a better one. So we traced you out, Mrs. Keen, and, in the interests of your son, who has, I understand, been brought up by Lady Stephana, we beg you to afford us all the information in your power."

I was so much shaken by this narration that at first I could not control my voice to speak. If only my son had been more deserving of his good fortune, what a glorious moment this would have been! How deeply I should have rejoiced that, having found my child, I could now remove the supposed stigma from him, and be able to restore him to a brilliant position! As it was, I was tormented by the fear that his succession to the title would not only be the means of bringing more discredit upon an ancient and honourable name, but also, by giving him greater facilities for his vices, hasten the ruin in

which his course of life must sooner or later involve him.

Both Lord Wallinghurst and the solicitor saw that my agitation was great, and they waited patiently while I endeavoured to recover some calmness. At last Mr. Boyle said,—

“We shall be glad, in the first place, Mrs. Keen, if you will let us know where you were married and the date.”

I gave the required information at once, fully and without the least hesitation. I saw the two gentlemen exchange glances.

“And I understand, from what Mr. Keen told me to-day,” went on the lawyer, “that you have discovered your son, and made yourself known to him?”

“Yes,” said I.

Again Mr. Boyle looked at the sick man; but he no longer got a glance in response to his. Lord Wallinghurst was drawing breath with difficulty, and the watchful nurse, whom the earl had dismissed into the adjoining dressing-room, now came up to the bedside, and signed to us imperiously that our business with the patient was at an end for the present. Indeed this was clear to our eyes, for Lord Wallinghurst was no longer conscious of our presence.

Mr. Boyle led me down-stairs to a cold, formal drawing-room, whence I could look, through primly-draped archways, through a vista of more cold, formal rooms. Here I waited while he returned up-stairs.

But I was not left long. Twenty-two minutes I had watched the hands of the great gilt Empire clock on the mantle-piece, when the door opened again to admit him. He wore an air of pompous gravity which prepared me for the announcement he had to make:

“I am sorry to tell you, Mrs. Keen, that his lordship has passed away. Peacefully, I am happy to be able to add, very peacefully. He was just able to signify to me that his mind was at ease. This matter of the succession has been troubling him a long time, a very long time. Through your kindness in coming to-night, it has been cleared up.”

“But—but,” stammered I, “you are not yet sure! You can’t be sure!”

"We shall have to go through a great deal of work before your son's claim is perfectly established," answered Mr. Boyle, discreetly. "But I have no doubt that in a few weeks the necessary formalities will have been got through, and you will add to the social distinctions you already enjoy that of being the mother of the Earl of Wallinghurst."

The words rang in my ears as I went down the steps of the big, silent house, in the chilly light of the early morning. My son was now Lord Wallinghurst: my son! my own son!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

It was nearly four o'clock in the morning. I had been in the late earl's house more than three hours. A cab had been sent for, and I drove to Kerr Street, where I was let in by one of the servants, who had been sitting up for me by Meg's orders. I went quietly up to one of the spare rooms which was kept always ready, and fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow.

I was so much prostrated by the emotions as well as the physical fatigue I had gone through that I slept late. When I woke up, I found Meg sitting at the foot of the bed, with her eyes fixed on me with what seemed to me an unusual expression. I started up in vague alarm.

"What's the matter, Meg?" I asked, quickly.

She withdrew her eyes at once from my face, and laughed. But this did not reassure me.

"I only wanted to know how you felt after the fatigues of yesterday, and whether you slept comfortably," said the girl.

"But you had something to tell me, I feel sure," I persisted. Meg looked down, and smoothed the counterpane.

"Well, yes, mamma, I had. I thought you would be interested to hear that you were right about something you said yesterday." She bent forward to whisper into my intently-listening ears. "Harry Carey did go down to The Limes last night. Richards has been up this

morning, and he told me so. Now, don't look like that, and don't tremble so. He didn't do any harm; he didn't even get into the house. Richards saw him out of his window; so he went down and lit the hall gas, and I suppose that frightened him away."

"Where is your father now? Have you seen him this morning? Ring the bell for Sanders, dear. I must get up. I want to see your father before he goes out."

"You're too late, mamma. He went out half an hour ago. He would not disturb you, he said."

I felt unaccountably anxious and worried on learning that I had missed him. Meg, observing this, tried to divert my thoughts.

"I suppose, mamma, it is of no use to ask you where you went so mysteriously last night? I asked papa, but he only frowned and said that you had gone on business of your own. Now, your business always means Harry!"

"Well," said I, rather snappishly, I'm afraid, "but, as you don't take any interest in Harry, my business would not concern you very deeply."

Meg received the snub quite imperturbably.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I do take an interest in Harry, a very strong interest."

"Yes. But only because whatever affects him affects his cousin Deane!"

Meg sighed.

"I wish I hadn't said anything to you about Deane, mamma," she said, rather sadly. "Of course it can never come to anything; I don't even know whether it would if all things were going right with him. But I did just want you to know that—that I was not just idly flirting that day you found us outside the orchid-house; or, rather, if I was flirting, it was in the way one flirts with only one!"

I sighed.

"There! Why do you sigh? It's too bad of you to sigh! You pretend to be so anxious, you and papa, that I should not care for some worthless man. Well, even papa admits that Deane Carey is not worthless."

"Oh, dear, no! Not worthless, by any means," said I, hastily. "On the contrary, his worthiness is a little oppressive."

"This is only the force of contrast, I'm afraid, mamma."

"Oh, of course I know poor Harry exposes himself to sneers of that sort!" cried I, almost tearfully. "And, as there's no one to lend him a helping hand, I'm afraid he will never reach his cousin's height of perfection!"

"I'm afraid not, mamma," said Meg, dryly, as she went out of the room and Sanders came in.

I had a cup of tea, and then dressed quickly; for it was late, and I wanted to see my husband before the time when he would be too busily occupied in receiving his clients for me to dare to disturb him. I wanted to tell him the startling tidings I had heard the night before, feeling sure that, with the instinctive reverence of the rich man for money and position, he would condone a good many of Harry's faults when he knew that they were the faults of an earl. But I was too late. When I got down-stairs I was told that Mr. Keen had gone to his study, and that he had already had a client with him. "A young gentleman," the footman said.

On hearing this I, after a moment's pause, put another question.

"A young gentleman whom you know? whom you have seen before?" I asked.

"I don't think so, ma'am. But he wore blue spectacles, and was so muffled up about the throat that I should find it hard to recognise him."

"Yet you said he was young?" asked I, with some anxiety.

"I told that by the voice and the walk, ma'am."

Blue spectacles and a muffler always suggest disguise, and the young clients, of whom my husband had many, were a careless race, not given to disguises. I seated myself in the dining-room, near enough to the window for it to be impossible for any one to go down the steps into the street without my seeing him.

It was twelve o'clock when I took up this position, and at one nothing had happened to disturb me or to arouse my attention. Meg flitted in, tried to persuade me to come for a walk with her, and, failing in the attempt, went out alone. A gentleman called, driving up in a neat brougham with a coronet on the panel. Evidently a client. But he was told that, as he had not made an appointment, he could not be seen that morning;

and he got into the brougham and drove away, with an angry and mortified expression, and with maledictions on his lips.

When one o'clock struck, I began to be uneasy. My husband's methods were of the short and sharp kind: his clients did not usually have long to wait for their answer, whatever that answer might be. At last I summoned the footman, and asked whether the young gentleman with the blue spectacles and the muffler had gone yet. As I had expected, the answer was "No." Although Mr. Keen sometimes escorted an important client to the door himself, the footman was always near enough to see or hear when this happened.

"This gentleman's a very long time with Mr. Keen!" I exclaimed, anxious to be reassured by the man's remarking that there was nothing very extraordinary about it. But the footman said, at once,—

"Yes, ma'am, he is a long time. I never remember any one being so long with my master before. It's generally in and out again in no time."

Without further comment, I went back into the dining-room, feeling restless and sick at heart. Half-past one struck on the dining-room clock. I rang the bell sharply.

"Do you think Mr. Keen has gone out again, John?" I asked, trying to hide the anxiety which consumed me.

"No, ma'am, I don't see how he could without my seeing or hearing him," answered the young man.

I dismissed him, and, after a few irresolute turns up and down the room, left the dining-room and walked along the passage which led from the hall to the study-door.

The door was on the left hand, and it opened into a kind of anteroom, the purpose of which I conceive to have been to increase the solemnity of entrance into the sacred sanctum beyond. At this outer door I knocked, after listening and hearing no sound. Indeed I did not expect to hear anything; for the inner door was, as I knew, covered with baize, for the attainment of extra privacy. I knocked again, and then I softly turned the handle of the door.

It was locked.

My first impulse was to scream for assistance to open

the door; my next, to go down softly on my knees, and try to pick the lock with a hairpin. In this difficult feat I was at last successful. Then I went very quietly into the anteroom, closed the outer door after me, and approached the baize-covered door of the inner room.

At first, as I listened, I could hear nothing but my own heart beating. Then I became conscious that some one was moving about with great caution inside the room. The next thing that attracted my notice was the rustling of papers, and after that a grating sound as of a file at work.

“William! William!” I cried, as I tapped sharply at the door.

All was instantly quiet.

“William! William!” I cried again, with another rap at the door. “Let me in, let me in! I will come in; I must. Open the door, or I will call the men to burst it open!”

Some one came close to the door, and said, “Hush!”

But I knocked again and again, raining blows upon the door until it shook and creaked on its hinges.

“Open it, open it! I will come in!” I almost shrieked.

My loud cries did what my entreaties could not do. The door was opened a very little way, and the voice of my son Harry spoke behind it.

“Harry!” I cried, but in a more subdued tone. “What are you doing here?”

“We are busy. Go away for the present, mother dearest. We will come directly.”

But my misgivings were so strong that I could not be satisfied with half a dozen words.

“Is Mr. Keen there?” I asked, rapidly. Then I called out, in a louder voice, “William, are you there?”

There was no answer from my husband, but Harry said, hastily,—

“What do you want? What is it you want?”

“I want to come in,” I cried, resolutely.

And, before my son realized my intention, I gave a vigorous push to the door, forced him backward into the room, and made my way in.

The room was in great disorder, papers, account-books, note-books, bills, being scattered about in every direction, while open drawers and cupboards testified to the fact

that I had caught my son in the very act of ransacking the place. I uttered a cry of horror.

"You are robbing him, robbing my husband!" cried, aghast.

"Hush, hush, mother!" said Harry, in a voice as tremulous as my own. "Don't be foolish. I was doing no harm."

"No harm! No harm! Then what is the meaning of all this?"

My eyes fell, following the direction of his, on the fireplace, where a small fire smouldered rather than burned. Fragments of charred paper lay in the grate and lingered between the bars.

I ran forward and picked up a small piece of the destroyed paper. It was a legal document of some kind.

"Harry, what was this? What have you done?" said I.

Turning, I saw that he was ghastly white, and that his usual callous levity of manner had given place to nervous trembling. The suspicion came at once into my mind that my husband was returning, and that Harry had heard his step outside.

I ran to him instinctively, fearing the scene which must ensue if the two men met.

"Is he coming? Did you hear him?" whispered I.

Harry started convulsively, and put out his hand to thrust me away from him. Then, recovering himself with an effort, he said,—

"Good-bye, mother, good-bye. I'm off. You run away, run away. You—you don't want to be caught here."

With a wave of the hand which was only a feeble imitation of his every-day manner, he went towards the door. I noticed that he staggered as he went out, and that he paused a moment in the outer room. Then he passed quickly and silently along the passage and hall, and I heard the front door close with a slight slam behind him.

For I was holding the baize-covered door open, afraid lest he should meet my husband on his way out. Then, when he had got safely away, a thought struck me: how had Harry managed to get in, in the absence of Mr. Keen? It was my husband himself who always gave permission for any one to be admitted, and the footman

never ushered any client in without this formality. John knew his duties too well to let anybody in while his master was away. On the other hand, my husband would certainly never have left Harry alone in his room, on any pretence whatever.

As these thoughts came into my mind, my first idea was to call John. But then I stopped, seized by I scarcely know what paralyzing fear. I stood listening; I looked furtively round the room. At my feet, in the middle of the floor, lay a sofa-cushion, an antimacassar, and a grey woollen muffler. I stooped down, and picked them up. The next moment, with a stifled scream, I let them fall from my hands on to the floor. On that part of the carpet which they had covered was a pool of blood.

Giddy and sick with an awful fear, I staggered against the writing-table. As I did so, I noticed that the tall fourfold screen, which usually stood between the table and the door, had been moved into the corner. On the floor in front of it I saw again traces of the terrible red stain.

For one moment, petrified with my forebodings, I stood staring fixedly at the screen. Then, springing forward, I tore it down.

Lying on its back in the corner, between the screen and the wall, with the blood still flowing from a wound in the forehead, was the dead body of my husband.

CHAPTER XXIX.

STRONG as my foreboding of evil had been, the discovery of my husband, silent, unresponsive, motionless forever, gave me a shock so overwhelming that I think for a few moments I, kneeling on the floor by his side, grasping the hand which would never more feel the touch of mine, must have lost my consciousness of everything.

For I remember that I seemed to wake suddenly with a start, and that I called to him by name, forgetting that

I knew he was dead, and that I held his wounded and disfigured face against my breast, and, putting my handkerchief to his temple, tried to stop the flow of blood. Then I shouted for help, in a voice which was almost a scream. I would not let myself believe that he was past help, that the man I had known so full of life and energy, so fiery, so autocratic, would never be obeyed, never be feared again. The longer I knelt by him the more certain did I feel that in a few moments I should see him open his eyes, hear an impatient ejaculation in the loud, imperious voice I knew so well.

Some one heard me, after a little while,—I think it was Meg,—and then the room was in a few seconds full of people; and I, still holding my husband's head, still hoping against hope, said, "Hush!" and watched to see whether the noise would rouse him.

But he was never to be roused again, as everybody saw but myself.

Out of the subdued tumult of sounds and cries and exclamations of horror and despair, I heard Meg's clear voice, crying,—

"Who has done this? John, who came in to see him last?"

I looked up, and saw the girl's white face, and the servant's, in a dreamlike haze in which nothing else was distinguishable to me. And then I found myself hanging on the lad's answer with a terrible fear in my heart.

"A gentleman, ma'am, in a long, shabby overcoat, with a muffler round his neck. That's the muffler, ma'am," added he, pointing to the one I had picked up from the floor and thrown down again.

"What name did he give?" continued she, with an appearance of firmness and coolness which astonished me.

"He didn't give no name, ma'am. He said, 'Say—a client.' And my master turned round and caught sight of him in the anteroom, and he said, 'Oh, it's you, is it? Come in.'"

"And did you show him out?"

"No, ma'am."

"Did you know the gentleman?"

"No, ma'am."

"You had never seen him before?"

"Not as I know, ma'am. But I couldn't see his face well, because of his muffler. I saw he wore glasses."

"He was a gentleman, you say?"

"I think so, ma'am. He spoke like one, and he walked like one," said John, whose experience had taught him discrimination.

Then Meg's interrogatories came to an end, and I breathed more freely. And there was a movement in the group, and I heard a cry.

I looked up, and saw in some one's hand a revolver.

"He's shot himself!"

"Hush!"

I listened, trembling. If they would believe this, all would be well: so I said to myself, shuddering with fear for my son.

Then some one discovered that the safe was open, with the key hanging in the lock. Among bundles of papers, deeds, and old letters, there was the cash-box. I saw Meg draw it forward, and unlock it with a key which was in the lock. She held up a bundle of bank-notes. I felt a thrill of relief, at the same time that I must confess to some astonishment. Had there, then, been no robbery? What, then, had been the motive of the intruder?

In the mean time, while these investigations were going on, I was left in the corner undisturbed, with my husband's body against my knees. They all knew that there was no hope, and they watched my ineffectual efforts to bring life back to the dead man with pity only.

It was left to the doctor to tell me the truth against which I had struggled. As soon as he came he had me led away to another room, telling me gently, at once, in answer to my despairing questions, that my husband had been dead some time.

I dragged myself up-stairs to my room, and threw myself on to the sofa. I could not think; I could scarcely grieve: I was stunned by the double misfortune which had overwhelmed me.

My husband dead; my son his murderer! The blow was too heavy: it was scarcely conceivable.

I don't know how long I remained prostrate from the shock, when there was a tap at the door, and Mr. Boyle, the late Lord Wallinghurst's solicitor, was announced.

Of course I could not see him; but the remembrance of his existence, and all that it implied to my son and to me, added the sting of irony to my misery. For had not my unlucky boy brought himself within the utmost penalty of the law at the very moment when his claim to a title and a handsome income was on the point of being proved?

Again and again I asked myself if there was any way of escaping the conclusion that it was Harry who had shot Mr. Keen. But I saw none. If it had been an accident, he would have told me so. And what advantage had he hoped to gain by the crime? For the whole of that day I pondered these things, finding, I think, in the very anxiety, the very worry my perplexity caused me, some relief from the pain of my loss.

On the following day an inquest was opened, only to be adjourned for ten days. In the course of those ten days many things happened.

In the first place, I received a sanguine letter from Mr. Boyle, saying that he had searched the register of marriages at St. Clement Danes, and found the entry of my marriage, corresponding in every detail with the information I had given him. He also said he had written to Lady Stephana, asking for the fullest information concerning my son. As she was in America, he could not hope to receive an answer from her for at least a month, but in the mean time he begged that I would see him again.

I was living with a sword hanging over my head. Although John, the footman, who would be the principal witness, had neither recognised my son when he came in nor seen him as he went out, I was in terror lest some evidence should be forthcoming which would fasten the crime on Harry. This was the more to be feared since both Meg and Burgess, the former by her silence on the subject and the latter by innuendoes, left me in no doubt as to the person whom they believed to be guilty of the murder.

With these anxieties on my mind, my consternation may be imagined when, two days after the death of my husband, "Mr. Harry Carey" was announced. I could scarcely restrain myself from springing off the sofa on which I had been lying.

"Tell him," I said to the servant, in as steady a voice as I could command, "that I am not well enough to see anybody."

"I told him so, ma'am. But he said he should like to come in to write a few words on a card for you. And I showed him into the drawing-room. And just at that moment there was another ring, ma'am, and Mr. Boyle came. You wished to know, ma'am, when he came, so I showed him into the drawing-room too."

This intelligence disturbed me. Knowing how unprincipled my son was, and how keen he was to take advantage of anything which tended to his own interest, I was sure he would not be many minutes in finding out something from the lawyer, and in making some unjustifiable use of the information so acquired. I went into the next room, the window of which commanded a view of the street; and in a short time I saw Harry and Mr. Boyle go out of the house together, and walk down the street engaged in earnest conversation.

The following day was that appointed for the funerals of both Lord Wallinghurst and my husband, and on the morning after, this paragraph in one of the daily papers caught my eye:

"At the obsequies of the late Lord Wallinghurst, which took place yesterday at the historical family seat in Kent, where, in a vault in the little church at Heronden, so many generations of the earl's ancestors have found their last resting-place, great interest was created by the report that the late earl's nephew and successor was among the mourners. This young gentleman, whose history is a romance of the most thrilling kind, and who has been brought up in ignorance of his near connection with the late earl, is now only waiting the arrival of certain documents from America, where they are in the possession of his great-aunt, the Lady Stephana Darent, in order to establish his claim. In the mean time he is, on account of the recent decease of his relative and of another bereavement the tragic details of which have been made known to the public, living in complete retirement, from which he only emerged yesterday to pay his mournful tribute of respect to the memory of his lamented kinsman."

I laid the paper down in stupefaction. This was audacity indeed. For I could have little doubt that the above paragraph was inspired if not supplied by my enterprising son himself.

On that very day I received another and still more startling proof of what my son was capable of in the pursuit of his own interests. Having recovered sufficiently from the first shock of my husband's death to be able to see his lawyer, I learned from him in a few minutes the reason of my son's crime.

"I am afraid that this interview cannot be otherwise than very distressing to you, Mrs. Keen," he began, kindly, "but at any rate it will assure you, if indeed you needed assurance, of the high regard your husband had for you."

I bowed my head. Knowing that it was my own innocent act in searching out and discovering my son which had brought about my husband's death, these words seemed a reproach to me.

The lawyer looked carefully at a document he held in his hand, and then at me, before he said,—

"The will the contents of which I am about to make known to you—a will, I must tell you, by which you benefit almost to the exclusion of any one else—is not the last your husband made."

He said this in so emphatic a manner that I looked up inquiringly, and he went on:

"It is dated half a dozen years ago. It is a singular circumstance that on the very day before his death he sent for me to make a fresh will."

The room swam round me: I began to understand.

"Mr. Keen then showed exactly the same consideration and affection for you as before; but he seemed to fancy that, if you were to be left in uncontrolled possession of much property, you would be imposed upon by some person or persons who did not requite your interest and your kindness as they ought to have been requited. The will, therefore, which he made last week, left you in the hands of trustees, for your own protection."

I listened without daring to look up. My husband must have gone further than this,—must have told him whose influence it was that he feared for me. Did the lawyer suspect anything? It was impossible to tell, from his even, business-like tones.

“That last will cannot be found, or rather enough of it has been found to prove that the document, as a whole, is no longer in existence. For I was in the study in which your husband’s body was found, by permission of the police, before anything was meddled with; and I found, by some charred scraps of paper in the fireplace, that the will just made had been burnt.”

He paused here, and I, knowing very well who had done this, moved my head in assent without daring to speak. He took up his discourse again in the same dry tone :

“The question is, of course, whether he destroyed the will himself—and it is a strange thing, mind, for a man to alter his intentions from one day to another in this manner—or whether the will was destroyed by some one whose prospects would be injured by it.” He paused impressively. “In fact, the question is whether the destruction of the will does or does not give the clue to your husband’s violent death.”

I wondered then what he knew, what he guessed; I wonder now.

So terrible were my fears that he did know, and that he would use his knowledge to bring to account my guilty son, that I did, without intention, the very best thing that I could have done both for myself and Harry: I slipped off my chair and fainted, for, I think, the only time in my life.

When I came to myself, Meg was with me, and so was Sanders; while the lawyer peeped in from the outer room, from time to time, asking how I was. The sight of him brought back my terrors. He must have noticed this, for he came in, when I had entirely recovered, and, taking my hand very kindly in his, said,—

“You are not strong yet; you are not yourself, Mrs. Keen. The anxieties you have been suffering have been too much for you. But take heart, keep up your courage. We will take care that you shall have no more worry, if we can help it; won’t we, Miss Keen?”

Meg assented doubtfully. The fact was that the girl was continually hearing from Burgess that the suspicion resting on Harry was growing strong, and she knew that while this was the case there would be no peace of mind for his unhappy mother.

The day following this was that of the inquest.

It was a terrible ordeal, though not quite so terrible as I had feared. The distress under which I was labouring had left unmistakable traces in my appearance; and my haggard face, which looked whiter than ever against the sombre mourning garments I wore, created sympathy for me which was more necessary than I supposed. For it had not occurred to me, as it had occurred, either with or against their will, to others, that I myself, benefiting as I did by the destruction of the new will, might myself be suspected of having had a hand in my husband's death.

This view, however, did not perhaps occur to the jury, who were probably not in possession of the facts concerning the new will and the old. I was treated leniently, therefore; and, as there was no suspicion in the minds of the coroner and the jury that I had actually met the murderer face to face, my statement as to the position in which I found the body was taken just as I gave it, and, luckily, no one thought of questioning me as to the presence of another person in the room.

Fortunately, too, although John, the footman, could give full details as to the arrival of the gentleman in the shabby overcoat and the grey muffler, he could neither swear to his identity nor give the time of his departure.

The third witness of any importance was the doctor, who proved the finding of a bullet in the skull of the dead man. He had fitted it into the revolver found on the floor of the room, and was of opinion that it had been fired from that weapon. Death had, he deposed, necessarily been instantaneous, but whether self-inflicted or not he could not say.

Evidence was then called to prove that, although the safe in the room had been opened and the contents had shown some disorder, a large bundle of bank-notes had been found in the cash-box. Although one jurymen was astute enough to suggest that some gold might have been taken and the bank-notes left as being more difficult to get rid of without exciting suspicion, this theory did not receive the attention I thought it deserved.

The inquiry did not last long, and there was only a brief interval of suspense before the jury returned the following verdict :

“That deceased died from the effects of a bullet-wound in the head, inflicted by a revolver; but how or by whom the revolver was fired there was not sufficient evidence to show.”

“Not sufficient!” I heard Burgess Falconer mutter, behind me, as soon as the verdict had been given. “No, but, by Heaven, there shall be before we hear the last of the case!”

“Sh-sh!” said Meg’s voice, gently. “She’ll hear you!”

CHAPTER XXX.

I WAS taking a little lonely walk by myself in the square at the end of the street about two days after the inquest, when my attention was attracted, I don’t know how, by a shabbily-dressed man, blear-eyed and unprepossessing of countenance, on the opposite side of the street. As soon as my eyes fell upon him, he turned his head away and looked into the square. I hardly noticed this at the time, knowing of no reason for taking a special interest in him. But presently it dawned upon me that his footsteps on the one side of the road always kept pace with mine on the other, and that, moreover, my looking at him was always the signal for his looking away from me.

I came to the conclusion that he was a professional beggar who had me in his eye as a possible victim, but that for some reason, such as the near neighbourhood of a policeman, he was waiting for a favourable opportunity for attacking me with his importunities.

And yet I was not altogether satisfied with this conclusion. The man did not look exactly like a beggar: he wore a tall silk hat of ancient fashion, and a particularly threadbare, not to say slimy, frock-coat, for one thing; and, for another, it seemed to me that his face was familiar to me; and, in the third place, a beggar would surely have seized the opportunity of my looking at him to sneak across the road and ask for alms. Instead of

doing so, he suffered me to return home unmolested ; but I saw through the window, when I had gone into the dining-room, that he was standing on the pavement and looking up at the house with a particularly sinister expression.

It was in the afternoon, and the day was foggy and dark. I went up-stairs and opened the drawing-room door. I had left Meg sitting by the fire, answering letters of condolence on a blotting-pad on her knee. As soon as I opened the door, I heard her voice, speaking very gently. Some caller was with her then ; and John, whose wits had been sent to flight by the events of the last few days, had forgotten to tell me so.

“No one—except, indeed, poor mamma—will be more pleased than I if you really carry out your good intentions,” she was saying, gently.

I wondered to whom she was speaking, as the words were not at all like ordinary drawing-room small talk. I did not, however, dare to look into the room, lest I should be seen by the visitor, and be forced to enter and join the conversation. I was retreating, closing the door very softly, when I was petrified to hear Harry’s voice in answer to hers.

“You are too good to me, and so is she,—much too good,” he said, so fervently that one could imagine that there were tears in his eyes. “I am not worth so much kindness, so much sympathy. But indeed, Miss Keen, if you could know what a strange life I have lived for the last few days, what entirely new experiences I have passed through, you would not wonder at the change you see in me.”

After hesitating for a few moments, in doubt whether my ears heard aright, I slowly opened the door and entered the room.

Meg was still sitting by the fire, the light of which glowed on her black dress and sad little white face. She was on a very low fancy chair, and was leaning on her knees, so much interested in the talk she was engaged in that the blotting-pad had slipped on to the floor unheeded.

Opposite to her, with his back to the murky and fading daylight, sat Harry on a sofa, with his face hidden in his hands, the picture of melancholy, even of despair.

I was startled beyond measure. What had he been confessing?

I had entered so quietly and the light was so far gone that even now neither man nor maid perceived me. I stood in the middle of the room, looking at them, and not daring to speak until I had some clue to what had passed.

Suddenly Meg lifted her head, and, leaning forward to try to look into his face, she said, vehemently,—

“You know, I can’t tell even now what to think, or whether I am to believe you!”

Harry gave a deep sigh.

“The prodigal son doesn’t get so well treated in these days as he was once!” said he.

“That’s because he’s contracted a habit of lapsing from his repentance,” retorted Meg, who, even when she was sympathetic, could not forego an opportunity for an apt answer.

“But you can’t tell that of me, because I’ve never repented before,” objected Harry, gently. “And—and listen, Meg,—I must call you Meg this once, because I always think of you as Meg,” he went on, with a note of humility in his voice which to me sounded irresistibly touching, and which even Meg, I think, found it impossible altogether to resist,—“listen. If I had never known you, I don’t think I should ever have repented——”

“Don’t use that horrid word: it’s like a tract!” objected Meg.

“Well, I mean it would never have occurred to me to be sorry I had wasted my money and my time, and disappointed every one who has ever taken any interest in me,” pursued Harry, rapidly. “But when the news came that I was really now Earl of Wallinghurst, it pulled me up, you know,—make me think. It was so entirely unexpected, you see. I had always been led to believe that I was less than nobody, a sort of outcast of society, to be excused because of my unfortunate position. I had known that to make a nice girl my wife, especially a rich girl, was as much out of the question as if I had been a crossing-sweeper. So I amused myself, and did my best not to think. But of course you can’t understand this; perhaps you don’t believe it. But I give you my word, the strongest feeling I had

when I found out that I was Lord Wallinghurst's successor was that if only I had been a better fellow I should have been able to come to you and beg you to be my wife."

At these words I uttered a low cry. Meg scrambled to her feet, and even Harry started violently. It was a long room, and the darkness outside had increased rapidly: even if Harry had looked up before this, or if Meg had turned her head, they would very likely not have seen me, as I stood in my black gown against the dark curtains which divided the outer from the inner drawing-room.

"Mamma!" cried Meg, and "My mother!" exclaimed Harry, at the same moment.

I came forward hastily.

"What are you doing here? What have you been saying to Meg?" I asked, in a bitter tone.

"He has been trying to persuade me, mamma," said the girl, as she put her hand affectionately about me, "that I should make a countess. It's absurd, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, of course it's absurd, unheard of!" I cried, tremulously. "So—so soon after your father's death, too! Oh, Harry, Harry!"

My horror at the outrage upon decency which he was committing was so great that words expressive of the emotions I felt refused to come. Stammering incoherent words, I sat down and clasped my hands in despair.

"Meg, Meg, why do you listen to him?" I suddenly asked, with energy.

"Mother, it is only the unjust and unfair that won't listen," said he, quickly. "Meg has been listening to me because she is honest and fair-minded, and likes to hear what a man has to say for himself before she condemns him."

I looked, straining my eyes to see in the firelight, from him to her. She was still hanging about me, almost as if I could protect her from Harry and his wiles.

"Go, dear, go," I whispered to her.

Before Harry had time to realize her intention, she had given me a rapid little kiss on the chin, and run out of the room. I sat down on the sofa from which he had risen, and addressed him at once, not with the tenderness he was accustomed to in me, but coldly and austere-ly.

"You have no right to come here," I began, repelling sharply his attempted caress. "You have no right to speak to Meg or to me again. I have been weak and foolish in my treatment of you, as my husband often told me. But I have learned one lesson by his cruel death, and I mean never to see you or to speak to you again after this meeting."

"Spoken like a dear, impulsive old mammy!" cried Harry, seizing my hand and covering it with most unwelcome kisses. "If you meant it, even for the moment, perhaps I might manage to hate you—also for the moment. But you don't mean it, and so I have nothing to do but to sit here as quiet as a mouse, and wait till you are 'good.' It isn't in you to be unkind for more than a few minutes to your poor boy,—your poor, bad boy, if you like, but still your boy!"

These words set me trembling. Infamous as his conduct had been, deep as the sorrows were which he had caused me, I was even now not wholly insensible to his voice, to his pleading eyes. I kept my head turned away from him as I answered,—

"You need not fear that I shall forget the fact which is the greatest sorrow of my life. I am your mother, your unhappy mother. And you, my son, have murdered my husband."

Harry started up in as much apparent indignation as if my words had been the first intimation he had received of the charge which hung over him.

"Good heavens, mother, what are you saying?" he burst out, passionately; "have you any idea what it is you are accusing me of?"

For one moment, one blessed moment, I was fond enough to entertain a ray of hope that the awful thing I believed might be a delusion. But, in spite of his words and tones, I saw something in his face which belied them. I shook my head and put my handkerchief to my eyes.

"Do you think," he went on, in the same manner, "that, if this fearful thing were true, I should dare to look you in the face, or to show my face in this house? Ah!" he suddenly exclaimed, as if a new thought had flashed into his mind, "this accounts for the coldness with which Meg treated me at first. You have told her,

perhaps told everybody, your own shocking suspicions, and turned them all against me! Well, never mind. I haven't been used to much kindness at the world's hands; I don't know that I have deserved much. I haven't anything to suffer that I haven't suffered already,—unless, indeed, you contrive to hang me!"

His injustice was so flagrant that I was not much moved by this speech. Seeing this, he changed his tone, and, seating himself again beside me, he took one of my hands in his, and went on, in a coaxing voice,—

"After all, mother, I don't know why I should be indignant at your thinking such a thing! If I had always behaved well you would never have thought of such a thing, no matter how much appearances had been against me. And of course they are against me," he admitted, with a sigh. "Will you let me tell you what really happened?" I bowed my head in assent, and he went on: "When I went into the study, your husband scowled at me, and asked me very insultingly what I wanted. I told him I only wanted to be allowed to see my mother freely and without restraint, and that I had a right to do so. But he flew into a passion, swore he would send you out of the country and have me arrested, and at last, when I refused to go until he had given me a calmer hearing, he pulled open a drawer in his writing-table, and took out a revolver and levelled it at me."

I listened, but incredulously. Rising to illustrate his words by his gestures, Harry, with every appearance of intense excitement, went on:

"I saw his intention, or what I supposed to be his intention, sprang forward, and we struggled for the revolver. While we were doing so, I heard a sharp crack, and, to my horror, old Keen fell on the floor. My first impulse was to call for help; but the next moment I saw he was dead, and remembered that if I brought any one in I should draw suspicion on myself."

"Not so much suspicion as you have drawn by running away! And—and what were you doing in the room—afterwards?"

"Well, mother, he was dead, and I couldn't bring him to life again," answered Harry, in his usual easy tones. "So I confess that I had a look round, and, coming upon a most unjust will, evidently drawn up when he was in

the heat of passion, by which you were to be deprived of all control over your own money, I did you a good turn by destroying it."

I was aghast at this cynical confession, and shocked by the cool rascality the meaning of which I well knew.

"If you had any idea of profiting yourself by this act," I said, coldly, as I rose and walked towards the door, "I assure you you made a mistake. I don't mean to let my husband's money benefit you!"

Harry was taken aback. Then he murmured,—

"What d—d ingratitude!"

I had heard a ring at the bell, and, looking at my watch in the firelight, I saw that it was about the time that Burgess was now in the habit of coming home. Turning to Harry, I was going to warn him that he had better not meet my step-son, when I heard hurried footsteps coming up the stairs, and I knew that I was too late. A moment later Burgess burst into the room.

It was now so dark that for half a minute he did not see the man of whom he was in search. When at last, muttering below his breath, "Where is he? Where is the rascal?" he caught sight of Harry, who had coolly kept his place on a chair between the fireplace and the window-curtains, he made a spring towards him.

"Ah! You d—d scoundrel, you dare to show your face here! You dare, you——"

He broke off as the other slowly rose, and, seizing him by the collar of his coat, tried to drag him towards the door. But Harry, although the shorter and slighter of the two, had the advantage of being entirely master of himself, while Burgess was in a frenzy of rage. As soon, therefore, as he felt the touch of Burgess's hand, Harry hit out, dealing on his assailant such a swinging blow that the latter was thrown off, staggering, and fell to the floor. Harry, walking coolly to the door, said, simply,—

"Never meddle with a man unless you are sure you're a match for him. Good-bye, mother, I shall see you again soon."

And, giving me a kiss on the cheek before I knew what he was going to do, he left the room, ran down the stairs, and walked out of the house as quietly as an ordinary morning caller.

I would not stay to hear Burgess's indignant comments upon my conduct in receiving Harry; so I left the drawing-room, when I had made sure that he was not hurt, and remained in my own room until dinner-time.

But I was not to escape like this from the troubles of the day.

Dinner was just over, and Meg and I were on our way up-stairs, when the footman announced that a man wished to see me.

Always on the alert now for bad news, I felt as if my heart ceased beating as I asked what it was the man wanted with me and what his name was.

"He wouldn't give no name, ma'am," said John; "but he said he had something to tell you that he was sure you would wish to hear yourself."

"Tell the man," I said, with sudden haughtiness, thinking boldness was certainly the best policy, "that it is impossible for me to see unknown people about unknown business."

I was at the top of the staircase. From the hall below, a common, hoarse voice startled me.

"Tell the lidy," the voice said, in what seemed to me to be an ironical tone, "if she can't see me, Mr. Falconer will do as well."

I shivered from head to foot.

"Tell the man, John," said I, in the meekest of quiet voices, "that I will see him. Show him into the outer library."

When I entered the room into which he had been shown, I recognised the man at once. It was the shabbily dressed individual whom I had seen following me in the square.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, for disturbing of you," he began, with a swaggering assumption of extreme courtesy, "but I have some information to give which I thought it might be worth your while for to hear."

"Go on," said I; "what is it?"

My affected indifference had some effect upon him. It made him more emphatic.

"It is concerning the way your respected husband, the late Mr. Keen, come by his death, ma'am," he went on, pompously. "Maybe, ma'am, I know more about it than anybody."

"Indeed?" said I, still controlling my voice better than I could my feelings. "And why did you not give your information at the proper time and place,—at the inquest?"

For a moment the man hesitated, and glanced at me askance.

"Well, ma'am," he said, at last, "I thought as how—I'm a poor man, lidy, and times are hard—I thought perhaps, if I kept what I know to myself a little, as it might be worth somebody's while to buy it, lidy."

"Indeed!" I raised my eyebrows incredulously, though I felt sick with suspense. "I should think that very unlikely."

"Well, ma'am, before I leave this house, I should like to take Mr. Falconer's opinion about that!" said the man.

And in his voice I noticed for the first time a menace.

"But," and again his tone became insinuating, "perhaps I'd better tell you, lidy, that I'm the care-taker at No. 25 in this street, and that I was cleaning the winders at the back of No. 86 Warre Street on the morning of last Thursday, lidy. Now, the back winders of No. 86 Warre Street look right into your late respected husband's study, lidy."

This was true. I felt giddy and powerless. After a moment I said,—

"And you saw something, I suppose? What was it?"

He paused, as if to give weight to his hideous information:

"I saw a man shoot your husband through the head, lidy."

"And you—you know the man?"

"Well, lidy, I will not deceive you. I do not know him in the way of knowing his name," said he, with an assumption of excessive frankness. "But I could point him out anywheres. He's been here, lidy, since your respected husband's death. That's what give me the idea as how it might be useful to you to know this before any one else, lidy."

What should I do? What should I do? I looked at the man's low, cunning face and greedy, shifty eyes. He knew more than he pretended,—knew that if he could not levy black-mail upon me, there was still a chance of getting something out of Burgess. While I

hesitated, the door opened, and Meg's bright little face looked in. She cast at my unlovely visitor a look full of intelligence.

"May I speak to you a moment, mamma?" she asked. "We won't keep this gentleman long waiting."

CHAPTER XXXI.

So abject a coward had the events of the past few weeks made me that I hailed the young girl as a protectress and deliverer; and, turning hastily to the would-be blackmailer, I asked him to wait a few minutes, and left the room with Meg.

"Mamma," said she, in a decided tone, as soon as we were in the drawing-room together, "will you tell me what that man has come about?"

I hesitated to tell her.

"Well, I can guess," she went on, when I paused. "He has found out something, and he wants you to buy his knowledge. I have seen him hanging about this house, watching everybody who went out, ever since—ever since papa died, and I guessed that he wouldn't leave us alone long. Will you let *me* speak to him?"

I felt half inclined to consent to this; her abrupt little ways when she had made up her mind to anything would, I thought, have more effect upon the man than my own more nervous manner.

"Or, better still, will you let Burgess get rid of him for you?"

I started with a cry.

"Burgess! Not for the world!"

Meg went on, in a matter-of-fact voice:

"Why not, mamma? He knows as much as I do,"—I started again,— "perhaps even as much as you do. We have talked it over together——"

"You have!"

"Yes, this man's appearance, and all. There's no reason why you shouldn't trust him, because you know how he hates a scandal, and he wishes above all things to

avoid one about poor papa's death. He says the more talk there is about it the more we shall all suffer. And he advises——”

“I shouldn't take his advice on the matter!”

“You are wrong, mamma. Listen. Burgess's advice is that you tell this man you will have nothing to do with him or his information. Above all, don't let him think you're interested in keeping things quiet.”

“But,” whispered I, “he knows something,—*saw!*”

“Well, all the more reason why you should appear not to care. Look here, mamma.” She planted herself down on her knees in front of me, and looked up with bright, coaxing eyes. “If a certain person has really been seen in a compromising position, you will not be able to hush the matter up for long. If you buy off this man, he will only hold his tongue for a little while, and then will come to you to be bought over again; and so on, and so on forever. You will be at his mercy as long as he lives. Be bold: take the bull by the horns: tell him his information doesn't concern you, and that he can give it where he likes——”

“But suppose he takes me at my word?”

“Well, you will write to-night to—a certain person, and warn him that everything is known, and that he must get out of the country at once. It is the smallest punishment he deserves, and then you will be free from all further anxiety about him.”

“But,” objected I, in astonishment, “you were talking to-day as if you liked him, liked him very much! You let him almost propose to you——”

Meg sprang to her feet, with a shudder.

“Not quite that, mamma,” she said, hastily, in a low voice. “Some day you will understand, some day I will tell you—why I was so kind to him. But, indeed,” she added, with a sigh, “I don't quite understand myself.”

I also had by this time risen to my feet, and was half inclined to take her advice. Seeing this, Meg added one more argument.

“You know, mamma, if you don't do what Burgess wishes, he will think nothing, when you have bribed the man to be silent, of bribing him still higher to speak.”

This last shot had the desired effect. I had recognised that I was in some degree at Burgess's mercy; and I

could not but acknowledge that the price he demanded for clemency—namely, Harry's exile—was not extravagantly high. My shabby visitor, therefore, found a change for the worse in me when I again joined him in the study: I was firmer, colder, and more decided in manner.

"I am sorry to have kept you so long waiting," said I, keeping my eyes fixed upon the man's face, in which anxiety and avarice were plainly to be seen, "but I thought it best to consult the other members of my family before giving you an answer."

The man kept his eyes upon me with hungry eagerness.

"Certainly, certainly, lidy," he said, as he played nervously with the greasy brim of his hat. "In a matter of importance like this 'ere, it was only natural you should."

"And we have decided," I went on, in a manner which seemed to him indifferent, "not to interfere in the matter. As for your information——"

"Yus, my information! The truth, that is,—what I saw myself, with my own eyes, on Thursday mornin' last, in this 'ere study wot opens out of this." And he pointed to the inner door with a shaking forefinger. "My information ain't worth nothin', ain't it? Not a five-pound note to a poor, hard-working man!"

He had raised his voice almost to a shout, and was gesticulating violently under the influence of bitter disappointment. "Well, we'll see about that!"

I had the sense to see, frightened as I was, that it was necessary to take a high hand with the man now that he had begun to bully and to threaten. I put my hand upon the bell.

"The footman will show you out," I said, frigidly. "And if you give us any more trouble we shall call the police, and you will then be able to give your 'information,' as you call it, into the best possible hands. Only we shall be obliged to tell them of your attempt at blackmailing."

For a moment at least the man was cowed. He went out, muttering to himself, but he was no longer violent either in speech or in manner.

He was scarcely out of the house when I sat down to

write to Harry. I told him that he had been seen on the Thursday morning, and that his only chance now was to leave the country as quickly as he could. I told him, moreover, that it was of no use for him to come to me for money, but that, if he would wire to me at once by what route he should leave the country, I would myself pay his passage-money into the office of the line of steamers he would choose to travel by.

By the time the answer came to this letter, at four o'clock on the following day, I was ill in bed, absolutely prostrated at last by the anxiety and grief I had suffered. The letter was a passionate appeal to me to come and see him just once before he started for South America, which he said he had chosen as his place of exile because the climate was unhealthy and he would be more likely there than anywhere else to die soon and relieve me of the burden of a child I no longer loved. The letter was dated from an address in Wandsworth, to which he wished me to come. He had been obliged, he said, to leave his expensive rooms in Piccadilly, where he now only called to get his letters.

The tone of misery in which he wrote was so abject that I cried while reading his letter, and did not sufficiently consider the improbability of his contenting himself with lodgings at Wandsworth now that he could get credit on the strength of his pretensions to the earldom of Wallinghurst.

He asked me to telegraph the time I would come and see him. So I wired instead to say that I was ill in bed, and unable to come at all.

It was about six o'clock on the evening of that day, and I, feeling a little better, was lying down in my tiny boudoir, when a servant came in to tell us that a person wished to see Miss Margaret on particular business. Meg, who was reading aloud to me, looked up suspiciously.

"What sort of person, John?"

"A woman, ma'am, very respectably dressed. She wouldn't give her name; she said you wouldn't know it."

Meg glanced at me; we both guessed whose machinations were at the bottom of this visit. She rose slowly.

"Don't go, Meg," said I.

But she insisted, and left the room, while I waited in some anxiety for her return.

When, in five minutes, she came back, she was on the brink of tears.

“Well, who was it?” I asked, glancing at a sheet of note-paper, written upon in a large, sprawling hand, which she was holding.

She answered, tremulously,—

“It is Deane Carey’s mother. He is ill, dangerously ill—of brain-fever.”

The girl was more agitated than I had ever before seen her. She was looking at the paper in her hands, tracing the words on it with tearful anxiety.

“Deane’s *mother!*” I repeated, more suspicious than ever. “Why, we have never even heard of her! It is some trick, Meg! I hope you have sent her away?”

The girl shook her head.

“I’m afraid it’s true,” she whispered. “As for our never having heard of his mother, that is nothing. We knew he must have had one!”

“But what has she come for?”

“She wants me to go back with her to see her son. She says he is—is dying, and that he calls out for me in his delirium. And—and he wrote this, not knowing what he was doing.”

She handed me the paper in her hand, and I saw that it was a letter, a wild, mad letter, scrawled on a sheet of note-paper in a shaky hand, large as a child’s, but yet not a child’s. These were the words of it:

“DARLING MEG, darling Meg,—I love you, I love you, and I can never see you again. The days are long, and the nights, and I see you, and then you fade away—and I hear your voice mocking me. Never to see you again—Meg, Meg. Nothing but disgrace and shame. I think of it always—I shall die thinking of it. Good-bye—good-bye.”

While I read it Meg openly sobbed.

“Why, child,” said I, in surprise, “did you care for him so much?”

“Oh, yes, yes, I did and I do. Oh, mamma, he is ill, dying, and I want to see him; I didn’t treat him well, and I must ask him to forgive me; I must, oh, I must!”

The girl was getting quite hysterical, and I was scandalized.

"Why," I cried, "only this afternoon you seemed to think of no one but Harry!"

"Ah, mamma, that was because he talked of no one but Deane."

I was silent, impressed afresh by this proof of my son's almost diabolical cleverness. It made me still more suspicious of the visit of the mysterious woman, and of the letter in my hands.

"Mamma, mamma," sobbed Meg, getting behind me to put her arms round my neck, "can't I go? Won't you take me?"

I shook my head.

"I think it's a trick," said I, "a trick of Harry's. As for this letter, I don't believe in it."

I made a movement as if to throw the scrawl away, but Meg snatched it out of my hands.

"Mamma, how can you?" she cried, indignantly. "Whatever you think, I am quite sure there is no trick about this. I can see it is his handwriting, scrawl as it is. And you can't suspect *him* of deception!"

But I was not in love with Deane, and I clung to the idea that he and Harry had joined in some plot, and that this letter was a bait laid for Meg or for me.

"In any case, even if I knew it were genuine, I could not allow you to go, Meg. You must see yourself how improper it would be. There is no engagement, no tie of any kind between you and Deane Carey; and there never can be any. I will see the woman myself, and tell her so. I don't believe she is Deane's mother at all. She is more likely to be some woman whom they have persuaded to help them."

I thought, from the way in which Meg received this expression of opinion, that she herself was not unwilling to agree with me to the extent of believing that there was no connection between Deane and the woman.

"She is not a lady, I suppose?" I asked, as I rose to prepare to go down-stairs.

"No, mamma," she answered, promptly. Then she added, as if a fresh thought had struck her, "I will go and tell her you are coming."

I was not very long in following her down-stairs; but

before I reached the hall I saw the dining-room door open quickly, and a woman come out, closely followed by Meg, who was persuading her to stay.

"My mother won't be a minute, I assure you. Here she is!" she cried, as she caught sight of me.

"Oh, never mind now. I can't wait. I must get back to my poor boy," answered the woman, as she almost ran along the hall towards the front door.

I stopped short on the staircase, seized by a certain vague belief that the voice was one I knew. Then I hurried down into the hall, and tried to overtake the woman before she left the house. She, however, seemed to know that she was being pursued, and, without turning her head, or uttering another word in answer to Meg's entreaties that she would stay, she rushed out of the house, and slammed the door behind her before the scandalized John could come up with her. Meg pulled me into the dining-room, looking much puzzled.

"When I told her you had got up, and were coming down to see her, she said she couldn't wait," said Meg.

"And doesn't that show you there was something wrong about it all?" said I, triumphantly.

"Of course I know there is something wrong,—that Deane is ill, for one thing," almost sobbed Meg. "Mamma, nothing you can say will persuade me that that part of the woman's story is not true. This letter tells me. I am sure it was written by him, and I am just as sure that it was written when he was very ill." She put her face into her hands, in an attitude of despair, for a few moments, and then suddenly stood erect with an air of determination.

"Mamma, if you won't take me I shall go by myself," she said, almost fiercely. "I have got the address, and I can't rest without knowing more."

"Sh-sh, child," said I, hastily. "You can't go; I can't allow it. What is the address?"

She told me, and I found that it was the same that Harry had given me on the letter I received from him that day. This confirmed me in my belief that we were being made the victims of another of Harry's stratagems. Meg, however, was not to be convinced. So there was no other way of making her give up her project of going to Wandsworth than by going there myself. Burgess

was expected home every minute, to dinner; so I hastened to get out of the house before his return, to avoid the necessity of explanations with him.

I took a cab to Waterloo, the train to Wandsworth, and another cab to the address on Harry's letter. It was a small, shabby house, standing by itself by the water-side, a dreary enough contrast to the house where I had visited Harry before. It was too dark for me to see much, but I discerned the face of a woman looking out from one of the upper windows as I drove up.

I got the cabman to knock at the door, and I told him to wait, as I thought it just possible I might be glad of the presence of a witness to the proceedings.

A woman opened the door; but, by the time I had got out of the cab and ascended the two steps up to the threshold, she had disappeared, and I was left to usher myself in.

No sooner had I stepped through the door-way into a gloomy, unlighted passage, than I heard some one shut the door behind me, and found myself unceremoniously pushed into a little back room, in which, as it was unlighted by lamp or gas or candle, I could at first distinguish nothing but the fact that it was very ill ventilated.

The next moment I heard a voice from the door way behind me:

"Meg! My darling!"

Then I felt myself seized in a close embrace.

"No, not Meg, it is not Meg," I cried, as I struggled to free myself.

Harry, for the voice had already told me that it was he, drew back, horror-struck.

"The d—l!" exclaimed he, as he instantly let me go.

"Light the gas at once," said I, peremptorily.

And, meekly as a lamb, he obeyed.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE back parlor of the shabby little lodging-house, looking out on a timber-yard which lay between the dwelling and the river,—this was what I saw; and Harry himself, more disappointed and worried than ashamed, sitting on the horse-hair couch, staring before him, and biting his finger-ends in mortification and rage at his mistake.

“So this was a trap of yours,” I began, in tones to which my disgust lent an unaccustomed firmness, “to get Meg, an innocent young girl, into your power! Harry, I am utterly disgusted with you, ashamed of you, and I will never have anything more to do with you. You are thoroughly heartless and wicked, and it is my shame, not my joy, that I have a son at all.”

“That’s all very well,” returned he, coolly, still looking in front of him, as if puzzling out some intricate problem in his mind. “But all’s fair in love and war.”

“Love!” echoed I, disdainfully. “You don’t know what love means.”

“Well,” said he, cynically, “we won’t argue about that. I know what want of money means, and the danger of being taken up by the police. Why didn’t you buy off the old scoundrel who said he saw me in Keen’s study? Money is no object to you. But perhaps your son’s life is no object either?”

I was silent. Indeed, I was beginning to lose all feeling for this heartless, selfish creature, except one of unutterable horror at the thought that I had brought such a monster into the world.

He looked at me at last, frowning. I rose to go.

“There is no such thing as buying the silence of a man of that kind,” I said, coldly. “You have put yourself in such a position that no one can pity you; and there is only one thing left for you to do, and that is to get out of the country as fast as you can. I will help you to do that, as I told you. But you cannot expect more from me.”

"But do you consider," asked Harry, who still wore the same ugly and menacing frown, "that when I have 'got out of the country,' as you call it, I shall still have to live? I can see how much remembrance of me and my necessities you would cherish when once I was out of the way, and I must make the best terms I can now." He rose from the sofa, and came towards me in a determined manner. "You want to get rid of me altogether. Well, what's the figure?"

"What do you mean, Harry?" I faltered.

He answered slowly and deliberately, emphasizing his words so that I could not fail to understand.

"What sum of money down will you give me, in addition to my passage-money, which you have already promised to pay, to enable me to keep my head above water in the new country wherever you are going to pack me off to, until I have had time to look round?"

"Harry, I can't give you anything more than I have promised. I am by no means as rich as you think, and——"

"Oh, rubbish!" cried he, impatiently. "You are rich by comparison with a poor devil like me. Now, look here, mother: I don't want to frighten you, but I don't mean to let you leave this house till you have stumped up. I simply can't afford to. So you know how things stand."

"Do you mean to threaten me?" asked I, my spirit rising in a manner he did not expect. "Because, if so, you will find that I am not quite the simple old woman you think me. I have helped you again and again for love, but I will never give you a shilling for your threats, I promise you!"

Harry gazed at me reflectively. He was surprised by this peep at another side of the character of his indulgent mother; it upset all his calculations. Presently he spoke again, in quite a different tone:

"I'm not the wretch you think, mother. I have some one else to care for besides myself,—my poor cousin Deane, who is lying ill up-stairs at this moment."

I felt a sensation of relief on finding that there had been, after all, one item of truth in the message sent to Meg.

"Let me go and see him," said I.

“Well, mother, I should like this business of the money settled first.”

“Do you suppose that I carry large sums of money about with me, or that it is merely a matter of writing out a cheque? I assure you that I have had no money at all since my husband's death, and I shall have none until his affairs are settled by the lawyers. At present every penny I want I have to get through them; and you may judge whether they would let me have any for you. The very passage-money I have promised you I shall have to borrow through them, and I shall have a difficulty in getting that.”

Harry looked thoughtful. Suddenly seizing one of my hands, he felt through the glove that I was wearing no rings. It was the result of accident, not design on my part; but Harry thought otherwise, and laughed sardonically.

“I see you came prepared for my extortions,” said he. “For you have jewelry, at least, if you have no ready money. Give me that, and we will cry quits. What have you to fear further from me? In a few days I shall be out of England, and it will be too dangerous, with so many kind friends ready to do me a good turn, for me ever to come back to trouble you!”

If I had had any jewelry with me, I should have complied with his request perhaps, but I had none, and I pointed this out to him.

“I see that,” said he. “But write a note to Meg, telling her to give you the jewels, and I will send it off at once by a messenger I can trust.”

“The woman you sent before?” I asked. “Who says she is Deane's mother?”

“Who is Deane's mother,” responded Harry, quickly. “Yes.”

“Who is she? Deane told me his mother died when he was born,” said I, full of suspicion of my son's veracity. “I did not see her face, but her voice seemed to me one I had heard before.”

“Perhaps,” said Harry, indifferently. “Anyhow, she's here to nurse her son. And, out of gratitude to me for taking care of him, she's ready to do anything I ask her to do. So now the note, please, and after to-night, beyond paying my passage-money, you will have nothing more to do with me, as you wish.”

He had already produced writing-paper and a lodging-house pen and ink. At first I hesitated to comply with his very peremptory demands. At last, however, I began to write, with Harry looking over my shoulder. When the note was finished, I handed it to him, and said, quietly,—

“You suppose, of course, that I have been frightened into writing this. But you are mistaken. I am not a coward. I have sent for a brooch that cost a hundred and fifty pounds. It will be my last gift to you. Even now I cannot forget that you are my son, and, since you must go away, I must feel that you will be safe from starvation, at least, until, as you say, you have time to look round in the new country you are going to. I shall not forget you, as you suggest. I shall pray for you night and morning; and still hope that a Power higher than mine, a Love stronger than mine, may one day move you to turn from your evil ways, and make you lead an honest life.”

I was much moved; and even Harry's face softened a little as, after folding up the note and putting the pen again into my hand for the direction on the envelope, he gave me a kiss on the forehead and told me that I was a good soul.

“And now,” said I, rising, “let me see Deane.”

Harry's face clouded a little, but he shrugged his shoulders, and led me out of the room and up the narrow stairs. I noticed that in the still dark passage some one was standing, listening. On the first floor Harry ushered me into the front bedroom. It was a sick-room evidently. On a poor little bed lay Deane, staring at us, but without consciousness of our identity. He seemed to be listening, and from time to time he turned his head towards the windows, the blinds of which were not yet drawn down. Instinctively, as I stood near one of them, I glanced out into the street, and I was struck by the circumstance that my cab was no longer there: the driver must have been paid and sent away. Harry, with my note in his hand, was impatient to be gone.

“Do you wish to stay with him a little while?” he asked. “The poor fellow won't know you, and you can do nothing for him. His mother nurses him.”

Nevertheless, I said that I would stay, suggesting that

I should take his mother's place during her absence. Rather reluctantly, as it seemed to me, Harry left me in the room, and I heard him go down-stairs.

I seated myself beside the sick man, who presently turned his eyes towards me. I seemed to see in them a look as if he almost knew who I was, and I put my hand out and took one of his in mine. Coming straight from the contemplation of Harry's handsome features spoiled by malignant and evil expression, I could not help seeing in Deane's countenance the traces of kindly feelings, of honesty of purpose, and of a dozen other qualities which I would have had in my own son, but which were in him so conspicuously absent. I was touched by the wistful look in the poor fellow's blue eyes.

"Don't you know me, Deane?" I asked, making my voice as gentle and soft as I could. "Don't you remember Mrs. Keen?"

He looked at me, and, after a pause, said, shaking his head sadly,—

"Keen! Yes, that is her name. But they call her Meg. She won't come; no, she won't come!"

I began to cry, and to wish almost that I had let Meg accompany me. There was something very touching in the simply expressed despair of this poor fellow, who, without any fault of his own except that of an unwavering attachment to his brilliant but unprincipled cousin, seemed always destined to share the burdens of Harry's bad actions.

"Do you want to see her so badly, then?" I asked.

He seemed to understand me, but for answer the poor fellow only sighed. I was sorry for him, from the bottom of my heart.

"You have your mother with you now," I suggested, wondering whether he would understand.

He frowned, and shook his head.

"No, no," he said, slowly, "my mother is dead, dead."

I had left my hand in his, and presently he raised it to his face, and lay with his cheek against it, closing his eyes. A peaceful expression, strongly in contrast with the wistful watchfulness I had noticed in his countenance when I came in, now came gradually over his features; and, before I had sat beside him many minutes, he fell asleep.

I glanced round the room. It was small, shabby, and meagrely furnished, just an unattractive lodging in an unattractive suburb. How had he got there? Why had this particularly uninviting house been chosen by the cousins? Where was the landlady? Where were the other inmates?

As I asked myself these questions, I became aware of sounds coming up from the passage below, and growing every moment louder. An altercation of some sort was going on, to which at first, absorbed in my own thoughts, I paid little heed. But presently the sounds grew louder, until I thought I distinguished the voice of the woman who had called at Kerr Street that afternoon to see Meg. For a long time it was only her voice that I could hear; but presently, as the dispute in which she was engaged grew louder, I discerned that the second disputant was a man.

Was it Harry? Was the woman, trusty messenger as he had declared her to be, refusing to do his bidding and to return to Kerr Street with the note I had written?

As I asked myself this question, something more than her voice reached me: I heard her very words:

"No, I'll not go. I've done your bidding time and again, and little thanks I've got for it. Why should I go trapesing over the town with this fine lady's notes, and leave her to steal away the heart of my own son, my own child? Why should I, I say!"

"Hush! Sh-sh!" said, peremptorily, a voice which I now knew to be Harry's. And he added something in tones too low for me to hear.

The woman resumed: indeed, her share of the conversation sounded almost like a monologue, so greatly did her voice overpower that of her companion:

"She's always stood in my way, the hussy, and I'm not going to give way to her now. Find somebody else to take your notes: I stop here as long as she stops, and so that's flat."

There was a pause, and then I heard footsteps on the stairs. A door was burst open, that of the room adjoining the sick-room, and then came the sound of violent sobbing.

The woman was really Deane's mother, then, and she was jealous of me, having evidently heard of the liking

he had always expressed for me. I felt sorry for the poor creature. It was evident from her voice that she was a woman of no refinement, and I could understand that if, as seemed evident, he had been kept all these years in ignorance of her very existence, the discovery that his own mother was not a lady, but a coarse, loud-voiced woman, of low birth and rough manners, must have jarred on the poor lad and rendered it difficult for him to return the love she evidently felt for him. I had experienced too much of the grievous disappointment a mother may feel in her own child not to sympathize with her heartily. So, gently withdrawing my hand from the pillow of the sick man, I rose, left the room, and knocked softly at the door of the next.

"Who is it?" asked the woman's voice, sharply.

"It is I, Mrs. Keen. May I come in? May I speak to you a moment?" I asked, gently.

I heard her bounce across the room to the door.

"Yes, you may see me, you may speak to me, for all he says!" she cried, defiantly.

And, bursting open the door, she appeared, and stood face to face with me, holding a candle above her head to facilitate my recognition of her.

I uttered a cry.

For, in the coarse features, which had now lost every trace of their old beauty, in the defiant expression, in the gesture, in the attitude, I recognised my old rival, the woman whom I had always believed to be Harry Dare's real wife.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

As I stood looking at this woman, whom for so many years I had believed to be Harry Dare's wife, all the events of my youth and of my first marriage passed in review before my mind. And I felt sorry for her. There seemed to be the stamp of failure, of disappointment on her worn features, on her figure, once so imposing, bent and aged before her time.

And then a spasm of terror seized me. What had I

not still to learn concerning the relations between this woman and me? I had known that she had a daughter; but I had heard never a word of the existence of a son. Was she really Deane's mother? I had overheard her using words to Harry which certainly implied that she was; but, then, was she altogether worthy of belief?

She had not uttered a word when she appeared at the door, and I, on my side, found it equally difficult to make conversation for her. Rivals we were, as we had always been. Indeed, if it were true that Deane was her son, the rivalry would be more acute than ever; for the question of an earldom for her son or for mine hung upon Harry Dare's marriage with the one or the other of us.

I held out my hand.

"You don't bear me any ill-will, I hope?" said I. "I came here to see my son, not to be a rival to you with yours."

She looked at me with tightened lips, and would not touch my offered hand.

"Oh, you were always soft-spoken, trust you for that!" she cried, in a bitter tone. "That's what first helped you to take Harry Dare away from me."

I despaired of getting anything like the truth out of her on any point; still I ventured to say, "I never knew that you had a son, but they told me you had a little girl. Was it true?"

"Yes," answered Nellie, sullenly, "I had a girl, but she died. When Harry Dare left me for you I had two children, a boy and a girl. But the boy was not with me; Lady Stephana had taken him."

"And she called him Deane Carey? And it is he who is lying ill in the next room?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. Then I asked, "Where is Harry?"

"Gone to your house, with a note. He wanted me to take it, but I wouldn't."

I was much relieved, since I could now get away without interference. I should have liked to see poor Deane for a few minutes more, but I was afraid of arousing his mother's jealousy afresh; so I resisted the temptation, and, taking a formal leave of Nellie, I left the house and returned home.

Being anxious to reach Kerr Street before Harry, I went by a hansom the whole way. Nevertheless, it was nearly midnight when I arrived. Late as it was, however, I saw, as I drove up to the door, the shambling, shabby figure of Michael Fish, the care-taker, holding on to the area railings of the opposite house. My heart leapt up. Scoundrel that he was, whenever danger came near to Harry I felt the mother's longing to protect her child as keenly as ever. I jumped quickly out of the hansom, and rang the bell.

The door was opened, not by one of the servants, but by Burgess Falconer.

I was frightened. Burgess had developed into a tyrant since his step-father's death. He had been not unnaturally irritated by the discovery that Mr. Keen had used the power given him under his first wife's marriage settlement, of leaving the interest of her fortune to Meg for her life; and, as he blamed me more than Meg for this, we were by no means on the best of terms.

"Really, Mrs. Keen, I think it would be better if you were to pay your calls at more reasonable hours," he began, in a surly tone.

"I really couldn't help it, Burgess," said I, humbly. "I was sent for in a hurry, to see a person who was ill—and I——"

"Ill! Is it true, then? Is Deane really very ill?" cried a heart-broken voice.

And Meg, who had slipped down the stairs in her dressing-gown, came up to us, her little mobile face distorted and quivering with feeling.

"Shut up, Meg," said Burgess, shortly. "We have enough snivelling over one of those miserable Careys, without your going crazy over the other."

But Meg stood up valiantly in Deane's cause, as was to be expected of her.

"There's nothing in common between the two of them except the name," she said, with spirit, "and it's a shame to speak of them in the same breath."

"I'm sure I don't want to speak of them at all," said he; "but one seems to hear of nothing else. But mind, mamma, I won't have that fellow Harry Carey about the place again. I've no proofs, certainly, that he had a hand in the poor governor's death. But I have sus-

picious as strong as they make 'em; and, if I once get hold of a little bit of evidence to bear them out, I'll put a rope round that young man's neck, as sure as I'm a living man."

Knowing that Harry himself might at any moment knock at the door, and that Michael Fish was on the watch outside, I could scarcely summon voice enough to answer him.

He seemed to have an idea that the night's events were not over, for he would not go up-stairs to bed, as he usually did at an early hour when he spent an evening at home. Although I was afraid that by staying downstairs myself I should excite his suspicions, I went into the dining-room with Meg, telling her I wished to speak to her. Burgess watched us into the room, and retired, not up-stairs to his own room, but to the study at the end of the passage.

I peeped behind the blinds into the street. Michael Fish had left his post on the other side of the road, and had taken up a position close to our door-steps.

"What's the matter, mamma?" asked Meg. "Are you expecting any one?"

Glancing apprehensively at the door, I whispered, "Harry."

Meg started.

"Mamma, why don't you forbid him to come? He is running great risks, and so are you. You ought to get rid of him, you must, for his sake as well as your own."

I laughed, with a shiver.

"It's not so easy," said I.

"Perhaps it would be easier, mamma, if you were in earnest about wishing it," said she.

"Heaven knows I am!"

And, giving way for the first time that evening, I burst into tears.

For a long time it was in vain that Meg tried to soothe me, to quiet me. And at last it was only the fear that I should miss the person I was watching for that caused me to dry my tears.

It was by a change in the attitude of the hitherto motionless figure by the railings outside that we first had an intimation that Harry was approaching. The old man raised his stooping head, and peered into the

darkness of the street like some ravenous night-bird on the look-out for its prey. Making a gesture to Meg to keep silence, I crossed the room very softly, opened the dining-room door, and stole along the hall towards the front entrance. Listening intently for some sound from the study, I could hear none, and I flattered myself with the hope that Burgess would not hear me. With careful fingers I pulled back the bolts of the front door, which Burgess himself had somewhat ostentatiously fastened, and waited, with my hand on the latch, for Harry's footsteps.

There was no hope, I knew, that he would escape the vigilance of Michael Fish. But I thought it unlikely that the care-taker would do more that night than note this fresh visit on the part of Harry. It was not long before I heard the footsteps I was waiting for. There was a jauntiness, a lightness of foot about Harry by which I always knew his step from any other. My heart leapt up when I heard his voice outside, cheery and careless as usual. He was evidently addressing Michael Fish.

"Hallo, old chap," cried he, "find the pavements uneven about here? No friend to lean on but the railings?" he asked, as he ran lightly up the steps.

By the time he reached the top I was holding the door open. With an emphatic gesture to him to be very quiet, I let him in, and softly closed the door behind him. With the same elaborate gestures of warning, I led him towards the dining-room. But at the door I whispered in his ear these words:

"My step-daughter is in there. I absolutely forbid you to speak to her. Your conduct to-night has proved that you are not fit to do so."

Harry, who had profited by my warning to make no noise, shrugged his shoulders with an easy smile. No sooner had we got inside than, without the slightest regard to my injunction, he held out his hand to Meg with the most charming appearance of delight at the meeting. But this was more than I, after my visit to Wandsworth, was in the humour to put up with. I came between them, and swept their hands apart before they could touch.

"No, Harry; no, Meg. This is the last time you will

ever meet, the last time that you, Harry, will come into this house."

"All right, mother," said Harry, with an air of great nonchalance, as he threw himself into a chair. "You are prepared, I suppose, now that I'm here, to redeem your promise and give me the brooch you spoke of."

As he spoke, he took out of his pocket, and waved lightly in the air, the note I had written to Meg. Then he handed it to her, with a bow and an affectation of carefully avoiding her fingers as he did so.

"Am I to open it, mamma?" said Meg.

I made a sign of the head of assent. But when she had read it, her little face flushed with anger.

"No," she said, decidedly, "I shall not do it. You tell me in this note to give up a valuable brooch, one that my father gave to you, to Mr. Carey. This note was meant to arrive, I suppose, before your return," she continued, turning to me. "Well, if it had come into my hands during your absence, I should have taken it to Burgess."

Both Harry and I looked at her in astonishment and some dismay. We were not prepared for this outburst of spirit, in which, however, I found something to admire. She went on:

"Of course, now you are here, you must do as you please. But I tell you frankly, mamma, that, for your own protection, Burgess will hear about it in the morning."

I started, and I felt that I turned cold with alarm, not at the girl's words, but at certain sounds which reached my ears from the hall outside. Some one was moving about there. With one of my quick revulsions of feeling where Harry was concerned, I sprang across the room to the door, and listened.

At that moment there was a single knock, scarcely more than a tap, at the front door. My heart sank within me. With a rapid gesture to Meg and to Harry to imply that they were to be quiet, I slipped out of the room into the hall. I saw no one; and with quick steps I went on tiptoe to the front door, and opened it.

As I expected, I found myself face to face with Michael Fish. He no longer wore the cringing air which had distinguished him on his last visit, nor the appear-

ance of humble expectancy which I had noticed in him that very evening. He had cocked his hat in a jaunty manner, and he had a cunning leer of triumphant malice in his face.

“Beg pardon, lidy,” he began, in his thick voice, “for troubling you so late. But I saw a gentleman go in here just now, a gentleman I take a particular interest in. So do you, I should judge, ma’am, by your letting him in yourself at this time o’ night.”

I was debating rapidly with myself whether I should shut the door in the man’s face, whether I should parley with him, or whether I should put him off until the morning, when the sound of a closing door at the other end of the hall caused me to make up my mind rapidly. Attempting to close the door upon him, I said, quickly,—

“I can’t speak to you now: you had better call and see me in the morning if you have anything to say.”

I was too late. With a movement more rapid than I should have thought the old rascal capable of, he thrust his foot inside the door so that I could not shut it, and, raising his voice suddenly to a much higher pitch, he cried out,—

“Very sorry, ma’am, but I have something to say which I should like to say to-night. And p’raps the gentleman behind there,” and he nodded in a direction beyond me, “would like to hear it, too.”

I made one more ineffectual effort to force him to withdraw his foot. In the mean time Burgess, with a little laugh, had come up to us.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, sharply.

I tried to speak, but Fish was too quick for me.

“The matter is, sir,” said he, lowering his tones a little, “that there’s a gent gone in here to-night that I saw, in very queer circumstances, on the day Mr. Keen died.”

As the man uttered the fatal word, I leaned back against the wall, so overpowered by my fears and my feelings that I was powerless to utter a word or to make a movement.

Burgess listened very quietly.

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” he drawled out, as if the news had no interest for him. “And pray why didn’t you mention this before?”

“I did mention it, sir, to the lidy ’ere. But she didn’t

think it worth listenin' to, seemingly, the way her husband came by his death!"

And the man looked at me malignantly. I took heart and spoke.

"It is merely an attempt to black-mail," I said, coolly; "otherwise you may be sure we should have heard something of this at the inquest. This man came to me and asked me to bribe him for his information. I preferred to have nothing to do with him, and so I should think would you."

"That depends," said Burgess, shortly.

"At any rate," said I, hastily, beginning to fear above all things that this man should see Harry, in the presence of Burgess, "this matter, if it is worth discussing, had better be discussed in the morning. Don't you think so?"

"Wait a minute," said Burgess, in a still quieter, more drawling tone than before. "We have at hand a very good method of testing the value of this gentleman's evidence. Come this way, please."

And he led the man, who followed close at his heels, along the hall and into the dining-room. I was not far behind. So near was I, indeed, when they entered the room, that I was in time to see Harry turn quickly from Meg, to whom he was evidently pleading with all the eloquence in his power, and stare in astonishment at Burgess and his shabby companion.

Without another word from Burgess, Fish made a few rapid steps forward, and, leaning against the table, stared full into Harry's face.

There was a pause, terrible to me, at least. Then Harry, absolutely in the dark as to the meaning of this sudden intrusion, put his hand up to his head and passed it through his curly hair with a favourite gesture of his.

At this, Michael Fish brought his fist down sharply upon the table, with a cry which was almost a yell.

"There, there!" he cried, "that's just what I saw you do, with the pistol still in your hand, *when you had just shot Mr. Keen!*"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THERE was a moment's dead silence. Then I, looking intently at Harry, saw his cheeks become livid and his jaw drop.

It was an awful experience for each one of us, even for Burgess, who was evidently taken aback by the success of his own experiment. Meg uttered a little cry, and put her hands before her eyes. Fish, however, continued to stare at his victim, pointing at him a grimy finger.

"Yes, you're the man that did it. I saw it all. You talked to him angry-like; you were white and he was red; and he bounced up from his chair, and walked up and down the room, while you stood still by the door there, almost behind the screen, so I couldn't see you well; and you watched him. And presently I saw something in your hand, and all of a sudden Mr. Keen started-like, and staggered against a chair, and fell down. And you waited a minute, and then you came forward, and you bent down to look at him. And I saw the thing in your hand, a pistol it was, or a revolver, I couldn't rightly say which. And then you stood up, and you run your hand through your hair, just like you did just now, and you stood so for a few minutes. Then you stooped down again over him; and, when you got up again, I saw there was a bunch of keys in your hand. And you unlocked the drawers of the writing-table, and you looked through the papers, throwing them about. And then you went to the side of the room where I couldn't see you, and you were there what seemed a long time, and when I saw you again you had a cash-box in your hands, and you opened it, an' you took out some notes and some gold. And you put the notes back in the cash-box, and the gold into your pockets."

At this point in the man's narrative, there was a movement among his hearers. We all knew that Mr. Keen's cash-box usually did contain notes and gold, and that after the murder only notes had been found in it. As

for Harry, he had recovered his ease of manner, and was sitting on the arm of a chair, with his knees crossed, and his face wearing an expression of amiable stupefaction, as if the absurdity of the tale he was listening to were too great for belief. Michael Fish, however, apparently paying little attention to anybody in the room but Harry, upon whom he kept his eyes fixed, went cumbrously on:

"Then I saw you bring out a paper, a large paper; an you read it, an' then you tore it up, an' you went again out of my sight for a bit; and presently you came back in a hurry, looking at the door, and I saw you move the body along the floor, an' draw the screen in front of it; an' then you threw some things on the floor, and then you went to the door, and presently I saw this lady," and the man turned to me, "come in with you."

I had not dared to interrupt the man, while Harry had behaved as if he had no wish to do so. At this point, however, he suddenly broke in with a laugh. It was such an inappropriate manifestation, in the midst of the horror we were all feeling, that it sent a shock through us.

"And pray, where were you, to see all this?" asked Harry, finding it prudent to interfere before the man came to that part of his narrative which the memories of all present could confirm.

"I was cleaning the windows of the first floor back, No. 86 Warre Street, so I could see right down into the study of this house," replied Fish, promptly.

"Well, you seem to have seen a good deal that did not take place, as far as I am concerned," retorted Harry, coolly. "I don't dispute that all you say you saw actually happened. You certainly seem to be speaking from memory, and not inventing. I don't suppose you are capable of that, indeed. All I dispute is that you saw me. That you could not have done, because I was not there. And I warn you that, if you go about saying that it was I you saw, I shall take proceedings against you, for, though it isn't very likely that you will find any decent people to believe your story, I don't choose to have such tales told about me, even by the scum of the slums."

And, rising without any haste from his seat, Harry came to me, kissed me affectionately on both cheeks, and, without taking any notice of Burgess, or of Meg, who had carefully turned her head away to avoid his farewell, he left the room.

He thought it prudent, however, to quicken his steps as soon as he was out of our sight, for the dining-room door had scarcely closed behind him when we heard the front door slam.

I saw, by the look on Burgess's face, that he let Harry go, as a cat lets a mouse run a little way, sure that he could pounce upon him with ease in a very short time. He got up from his chair, and beckoned Fish out of the room. Meg and I, who crept softly up-stairs to bed a few minutes later, heard Burgess let the man out of the house about half an hour afterwards.

It struck me as almost a tragic circumstance that by the first post on the following morning I received a letter from Mr. Boyle, the solicitor of the late Lord Wallinghurst and now Harry's own adviser, stating that in answer to his letter to Lady Stephana he had received a cablegram from her saying that she was starting for England and would see him at once upon her arrival in London. Mr. Boyle went on to say that my son had already applied to him for monetary advances, but that he had not complied with his requests, except to a very small extent, thinking it better to wait until matters were in a more forward state. But, the cautious lawyer added, if I cared to become security for my son (a course which I supposed had been suggested by Harry himself), of course there would be no difficulty in letting the young gentleman have what money in reason he wanted for his immediate needs.

This letter, which acknowledged my son's pretensions to a magnificent position at the very time when a warrant at any moment might be issued for his arrest, seemed to me full of the irony of fate. I did not answer it, as it was impossible to do so without informing him of the dreadful situation to which Harry had brought himself.

I thought that Harry would, after the warning he had received of his danger on the previous night, have discretion enough to keep out of the way until he left the

country, a necessity which became every day more apparent. Meg agreed with me in thinking this was the only thing he could do. She told me that, when left alone with her the night before while I went to the front door, Harry had made the fullest use of his brief opportunity to inform her that his love for her was making him desperate, and to implore her not to believe all the ill that was said of him, but to marry him off hand, in which case he said she would have the satisfaction of seeing him reform completely under her gentle influence. Meg, however, had declined to undertake the herculean task.

I was almost beyond being amazed by any fresh proof of my son's audacity, but I was truly thankful that Meg's heart was in no danger of being deeply touched by him. The girl thought that she had seen the last of her erratic suitor, but that very day she was brought again into most unexpected contact with him.

Since the day of the eventful launch party up the river, an intimacy had sprung up between Meg on the one side and the Everett girls on the other. They were, indeed, almost the only people she saw during these first days of our mourning. The eldest of the girls, Ethel, her particular friend, had conceived for Harry an affection of which she was rather proud than otherwise. She was a very tall, plain, angular girl, who would almost certainly have been left severely alone by her masculine acquaintances if it had not been well known that she would be amply dowered.

On this particular day Meg, who had always laughed at her friend's infatuation, thought she would call upon her and perhaps cure her by an account of Harry's obviously mercenary proposal to herself.

Arriving about tea-time, Meg was told that Miss Ethel was engaged at the moment; and she was shown into the drawing-room, where the two other unmarried sisters were sitting.

"What is Ethel doing?" asked Meg. "I have something most important to tell her."

The girls laughed.

"I think," said Daisy, "that she will have something important to tell you. At least she has been for the last hour and a half in the conservatory, with an exceedingly

interesting companion; and the latest news of the young couple is that they have sent for mamma."

"A proposal! Ethel!" exclaimed Meg, in astonishment. "Why, she has kept the matter very quiet. I haven't the least notion who the happy man can be."

"Don't tell, Daisy," cried Amy, running between them; "make her guess. Or, better still, let her wait till the betrothed couple make their triumphant entry."

But Meg, too impatient to wait, begged that they would at least acknowledge it if she made a correct guess at the lover's name. But, though they all agreed to this, she was unsuccessful in naming the right man, and it was not until the entrance of Ethel and her *fiancé* that her curiosity was satisfied.

Ethel herself came in first, blushing and radiant. Meg went up to her, laughing archly, and whispered,—

"I congratulate you, my dear. And I'm dying with curiosity. The girls won't tell me who it is. What have you done with him?"

"He's behind—in the hall—with mamma."

At that moment a well-known voice caused Meg to start. Ethel laughed.

"Do you begin to know now?" asked she, triumphantly.

But Meg had grown quite white. Claspings her hands, she said, in a frightened whisper, "Oh, no; oh, no! Impossible, it is impossible!"

Ethel conceived that she was jealous, and was sorry for her disappointed friend. She threw her arms round Meg, and kissed her consolingly.

"You have so many admirers," she whispered; "don't grudge me my solitary one! And when I love him so! Oh, you don't know how I love him!"

But poor Meg was struck with terror. She wanted to escape out of the house, to consult me as to what she should do, before Harry should see her. This, however, was impossible: in another moment he was in the room.

He was very little disconcerted by the sight of her, shook hands in his usual airy manner, and found an opportunity to whisper to her an entreaty not to "spoil sport." Meg felt paralyzed. She sat silently sipping tea, attracting every one's attention by her pallor and her

unusual taciturnity. When at last she rose to go, she saw that Ethel was offended, and that her behaviour had naturally enough been misinterpreted. Still, Ethel said, in a confidential whisper, as Meg went out,—

“So sorry, dear, about your mourning! I should have liked you to be one of my bridesmaids. But Harry wants it to be so soon, so dreadfully soon!”

“Yes, dear, yes,” answered Meg, hurriedly. And she went down the steps with the uncomfortable feeling that she had hurt the feelings of her friend, for whom, however, she knew that there was a much worse disappointment in store.

Meg came straight to me on her return home, and told me the whole story. I was stupefied by this fresh piece of audacity. That very evening I went round to Mrs. Everett, whom I found in a state of great pride and delight over her daughter's engagement to an earl. For I need scarcely say that Harry had had the wit to make the most of his pretensions. It was a terrible moment for a mother, to have to bring an indictment against her son. But I was bound in honour not to let the girl be hurried into marriage with a man who might at any moment be arrested for murder. I did not tell Mrs. Everett this; I told her only that Harry had got into a scrape, from which he must clear himself before he could honourably propose to any girl. It was not easy to convince the disappointed mother without giving further details; but my persistency at last carried the day, so that before I left the house she had promised not to sanction any engagement between the young people until she heard from me further.

But both Meg and I had reason to fear that our precautions would be no match for Harry's strategy. On the following day Meg received a passionate letter from Ethel, evidently inspired by Harry, reproaching her for the infamous means she had taken to try to separate her from her *fiancé*, and assuring her that her malicious efforts would be useless in the end.

Two days later, I was distressed but not surprised to hear from Mrs. Everett to the effect that Ethel had disappeared. The note containing this intelligence had hardly reached me when the poor mother herself followed. Could I, she implored, tell her where to find my

son? I at once put on my bonnet and went with her to the house at Wandsworth, although, as I told her, I had not much hope that he would have remained where he could be so easily found.

As I expected, we were told by the landlady, a deaf old woman whom I had not previously seen, that all three of her lodgers had left, and that she did not know where they had gone to. We then went to the old place off Piccadilly where I had first visited my son. Here again we could get no tidings of him. Mrs. Everett then proposed to set a detective on the track of her daughter; but I, for obvious reasons, was against this extreme course.

I accompanied her, however, to her husband's office in the City, where she got little consolation; for Mr. Everett had opposed the match from the first, and professed to be in no wise astonished at the turn the affair had taken.

"Of course he'll marry her. You may make your mind easy about that. And he'll find he's got a poor wife where he thought he'd got a rich one," he added, with a chuckle. "And equally of course he'll treat her badly. But that's no more than the fool of a girl deserves."

And the old merchant, with an apology to me for his bluntness, escorted us out in extreme unconcern.

It was late when Mrs. Everett, still without any news of her runaway daughter, reached her home, I, by her entreaty, still accompanying her. We found Meg with Daisy and Amy, awaiting my return. As it was near dinner-time, and Mr. Everett had told his wife not to expect him home till late, Meg and I were persuaded to stay and dine with the disconsolate ladies of the family. We had scarcely sat down when we heard a ring and a loud knock at the door. Mrs. Everett sprang up in excitement, hoping for tidings of her daughter. We tried to calm her, but, even while we were speaking, the dining-room door burst open, and Ethel rushed in, pale, haggard, and breathless.

"Oh, mamma, mamma," she cried, as she threw herself into her mother's arms; "oh, I'm so glad to be home again, and safe with you!"

Her mother burst into tears and sobs.

"How did you get away? Where is the wretch who persuaded you to go?" cried she.

"I don't know where he is now," answered Ethel, with a shudder. "They came for him, mamma, with a warrant for his arrest—for—for murder!"

Mrs. Everett almost shrieked. I, who heard this, felt as if turned to stone. Ethel went on:

"I don't know what I should have done, mamma, if it hadn't been for the kindness of Mr. Carey——"

"Mr. Carey!" echoed her mother, in astonishment.

"Yes. Not Harry Carey, but his cousin. Where is he? He brought me home, when I was too much ashamed to want to come."

Some of us went out into the hall, where we found poor Deane, white and emaciated from recent illness, waiting for an opportunity of offering some explanation to Mrs. Everett. He turned first red and then white again on seeing me. As for Meg, peeping out from behind my shoulder, she uttered a cry when she saw how ill he still looked.

"Harry?" I whispered, faintly; "is he safe?"

"For the present he is," whispered Deane back, "but—the police are looking for him, and they have a warrant."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE tidings that there was really a warrant out at last for my son's arrest were as terrible to me, at the moment of hearing them, as if he had been the most tender and dutiful of children. I stood in the hall, with the tears raining down my cheeks, listening to the short account Deane had to give me of Harry's narrow escape.

Mrs. Everett, herself a loving mother, came gently behind me, put her hands about me, and led me to the drawing-room, beckoning to Deane to follow me in.

"You have a lot to talk about," she whispered. "No one will disturb you in there." She paused a moment; and then, as Deane was going to pass her, she took his hand in hers, and said, "Why are you and your cousin

so different? And why isn't it you, and not he, who want to marry one of my girls?"

"I'm too poor to marry any one," said Deane. "As for offering myself to one of your daughters, Mrs. Everett, I should as soon think of kneeling at the feet of a princess."

"Ah," she said, there is another reason than your modesty, I think!"

And she intimated, by a backward glance towards the spot where Meg had stood a moment before, her suspicions as to the real bent of his affections. But Deane, although he blushed deeply, became on the instant very stiff.

"I have always," said he, quickly, "made up my mind that a bachelor's life is the only one for a sensible man."

"And you have never seen any woman attractive enough to induce you to alter your opinion?"

"No!" answered Deane, with unnecessary vehemence.

Mrs. Everett smiled and shook her head.

"Well, it is a pity," she said. "For some girl would have got a very good husband."

And she went out of the drawing-room, leaving Deane and me together.

I was still in tears: indeed, the reason Mrs. Everett had detained Deane for this short conversation was chiefly, as I felt sure, to give me an opportunity of recovering some of my composure. I made a strong effort to be calmer when I found myself alone with the young fellow.

"Well," I began, tremulously, "have you anything else to tell me?"

"Not much, Mrs. Keen," he replied, in a tone full of respectful and tender sympathy which almost destroyed my hard-won equanimity. "Harry had engaged fresh lodgings, thinking those we were in at Wandsworth were perhaps no longer safe."

"We—we?" I interrupted, rather sharply. "But where was the necessity for your going too? Why must you go wherever he did?"

I was irritated rather than touched to find so much devotion, so much steadfastness—in the wrong man! Deane hesitated, and looked for a moment rather foolish.

"Indeed, I find it hard to answer that," he said at last,

quite apologetically. "I can only say this: when you have been brought up with another fellow, when you become used to him and to his ways, especially when he is a lively, bright, good-humoured fellow like Harry, it is the natural thing to stick to him as long as he wants you; and it would be a very unnatural thing to throw him over when he's down on his luck."

"But it's his own fault!" said I, tartly.

"Partly, of course, it is. But, then, he's always been spoilt."

I was struck by his straightforward and amazing loyalty.

"Do you know," said I, in a whisper, "what the warrant is out against him for?"

Deane assented by a sign with the head.

"And do you believe—he—he——"

The young fellow did not force me to finish.

"I hope not," he said, in a voice little louder than my own. "But at any rate——"

I leaned forward towards him, trembling.

"You would stick to him still?"

"Of course I would; of course I will."

I burst into tears again. Presently his voice sounded close to my ear; and, glancing at him from behind my handkerchief, I saw that he had gone down on his knees to be near me, and that his kind face wore an expression almost of yearning.

"My dear boy," I said, gently, "you are a good fellow. I wish I were your mother too!"

Deane sighed.

"I wish you were," he echoed, with such touching heartiness that I looked at him in surprise.

"Well, but," I insinuated, softly, "it isn't as if you had no mother yourself, is it?"

A strange expression of pain, regret, and annoyance came into his face. He jumped up suddenly from the floor, and spoke with some constraint.

"Mrs. Keen," said he, in a rather bitter tone, "there are mothers *and* mothers!"

I looked at him in surprise. Was this young fellow ashamed of his mother, I wondered. He noticed the expression of my face, I suppose, for his next words were apologetic and explanatory.

"You know, I suppose, Mrs. Keen, that it is only lately I have known my—my mother. Lady Stephana always let me understand—if she has not actually told me so, as I am pretty sure she has—that my parents were both dead. It is only since Lady Stephana has been out of the country that—that—my mother"—he seemed to have an insurmountable objection to using the word in connection with his newly discovered maternal parent—"has turned up."

"Perhaps," I suggested, wondering whether this idea had occurred to him, "perhaps she is not your mother at all."

An involuntary sigh betrayed the fact that he would have been glad to believe what I suggested, if it had been possible.

"Why on earth should she say so, if it were not true?" he said, with some irritation. "To do her justice, she hasn't tried to use her relationship to me in any way whatever. Why she thought it worth her while to lay claim to me I can't think, for it is clear she doesn't care a rap about me."

"Didn't she take care of you while you were ill?" I asked, in astonishment.

"After a fashion, yes. But the old landlady did more for me than she did."

"Why," said I, puzzled, "when I came to the house, while you were ill, at Wandsworth, she seemed to be jealous of me."

"Yes, that's true; so she is, very jealous of you. I found it out in connection with your visit. But the feeling seems stronger than her affection for me, I assure you."

He took up his hat from the table on which he had placed it when he knelt down beside me.

"I must get back," said he, "and see how things are going."

"Stop," said I, "you haven't explained everything to me yet. Tell me exactly what happened. This girl—Ethel—where did you find her?"

"I was going home by rail, from town. This is my first day back at work," explained he. "And I happened to overhear a few words between two men, police officers, who were going to arrest a man, and something put it

into my head that it might be *our* man. It was only an idea, but I was not far out. I took a hansom to our lodgings, and found Harry there with this girl, who had just arrived, and whom he had persuaded to elope with him. I took Harry aside, and told him my suspicions, and gave him the straight tip to be off. He didn't want any persuasion, but got out of the house by the back way, not five minutes before the very men I had seen came in by the front. They made no secret of their visit; and the poor girl went into hysterics, and it was as much as I could do to calm her and persuade her to let me take her home. That's all the story."

And he again took up his hat. I went with him into the hall, where, as we appeared by the one door, Mrs. Everett was seen at another. Meg was not far behind her.

"Are you going, Mr. Carey?" asked Mrs. Everett, holding out her hand with much warmth.

"Unless I can be of any use to you or to Mrs. Keen," answered he.

"Thank you," said I. "If you will walk with me as far as the cab-stand I shall be glad, as I have to pay another call to-night."

"Won't you stay and dine with us first?" asked Mrs. Everett.

But I signified by a glance and a gesture that my business was too important to admit of delay, and, yielding to an appealing glance from Meg, I made her excuses also. In a few minutes, therefore, she and Deane and I were outside the door together.

As my visit was to Mr. Boyle, the lawyer, I wanted no escort. Deane, however, wished to put Meg into a hansom with me.

"Mamma doesn't want me, Mr. Carey," she said, very coolly. "But if you are determined to get rid of me, you may put me into another hansom, and tell the driver to take me to Kerr Street."

"I'm sure I don't wish to get rid of you at all, Miss Keen," answered Deane, with the same stiffness that had characterized his manner to her ever since we started. "I thought you would wish to return with Mrs. Keen. That was all."

"And, having found out that I did not wish to return

with Mrs. Keen, you found it convenient to suppose that I should prefer to return by myself?"

Deane said nothing. But he looked so cold and kept his eyes so persistently away from her face that, if we had not had reason to know the contrary, we might have supposed that her very presence bored him unspeakably.

"Now, I should like," Meg went on, with some mischief in her tone, to go home by—omnibus." Both her hearers looked a little startled.

"Meg!" exclaimed I.

While Deane appeared quite shocked.

"Yes," she persisted, "by omnibus. I have never been on the top of an omnibus, and I know I should like it, of all things. But I suppose," she added, pensively, "one cannot very well travel—by one's self—if one is a woman—on the top of an omnibus!"

There was a pause. Miserable as I was, I could scarcely help smiling at the girl's little coquetries and at poor Deane's valiant attempts to be unconscious of them.

"Not very well," he admitted, at last, in a solemn and sepulchral tone.

"Then," she said, with an outrageous sigh, "I suppose I must give it up. And," she went on, wistfully, "I should have liked it so much!"

The struggle, the long struggle was over. Deane looked down at her, frowning most forbiddingly.

"Of course I will see you home that way, if you like, Miss Keen," he said, in a hurt tone. "But I warn you there is no line of omnibuses which will take you anywhere near your home, from here, without your going a long way round!"

"And you can't spare the time, I suppose?" said she, quickly. "Or perhaps it offends your susceptibilities to travel by such a popular form of conveyance?"

"That's it exactly, of course!"

"Still, you will put up with the top of an omnibus—and with me—for once?"

Really the girl's coquetry was growing outrageous. I felt that involuntarily I was drawing myself up. Deane's face suddenly changed, as if he were throwing off a great weight and becoming reckless.

"I really think," I said, in icy chaperon's tones, "that

you had better come with me, Meg. You can wait in the cab."

"Oh, but, mamma, I shall find it so slow in a cab by myself,—even worse than on the top of an omnibus with a person who doesn't want to take me!"

"But who will nevertheless do his humble best to take proper care of you now that he is in for the infliction of your society," added Deane, solemnly.

By this time we had reached the cab-stand, and the young people got rid of me very promptly, without indecent haste, but with perfect resignation to the fate which for a short time was to keep us apart. Deane, however, did not forget to tell me not to worry about Harry.

"He has the most wonderful knack of falling on his feet, you know," he whispered, consolingly, as he closed the doors of the hansom for me.

And I smiled into his kind face, and shook his hand in warm gratitude for his steady friendship to my son.

I can't help thinking that by the time my hansom turned out of the square, and I got a last peep at the two figures, the tall man and the little girl, standing on the pavement together, they had both forgotten my very existence.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MEG, who liked talking about Deane, told me all that happened after I had left them together. He, poor fellow, was at a disadvantage; for he knew nothing of that scrawl which he had written in his illness, in which he had made so complete a confession of his love for her.

She, on the other hand, was mistress of the situation; for, while she knew he loved her, he had not the remotest idea that she felt for him anything stronger than a coquette's transient liking for her victim.

"What do you think," she began, as they started in the direction which he said would lead them to the nearest omnibus route, "will become of your cousin Harry?"

Deane looked more gloomy than ever at the question.

"I'm sure I don't know," said he. "I'm hoping that he will get out of the country, which is his only chance of safety. But he will keep on delaying it. He has always been lucky, and so he has become reckless."

"Well, I wish he'd make up his mind to go," said Meg, "if only for poor mamma's sake. She will keep on worrying about him, trying to harden herself against him at one moment and ready to yield to him in everything in the next, until he's out of the way."

There was a short pause. Then Deane said,—

"And you? Do you really wish him—out of the way?"

"Indeed I do, with all my heart," she replied, promptly.

There was another short silence, and then Deane said, emphatically,—

"I can't understand you women. I always thought, and he always thought—there's no harm in my telling you this, now that he has given himself away as he has done—that you were very fond of him."

"No! Not really? Why?"

"Well, you were always fond of talking to him, and laughing with him; in fact, you never seemed to take any notice of anybody else while he was there."

"Is that all the reason you have to give?" said Meg, disdainfully. "You thought I was very fond of him because I talked and laughed with him!"

"There!" said Deane, desperately, "that is how you women are so exasperating. You act as you please, in a haphazard fashion, and don't understand what a natural inference means."

"I don't understand that it must be taken for granted that I'm in love with everybody I like to talk to!"

"Then what is a man to go upon?—if you are at liberty to take open and evident pleasure and then to turn round with a stare of surprise when the poor fellow thinks he has made you like him?"

Meg stopped short. They were only sauntering, very slowly, waiting for the omnibus to catch them up.

"Mr. Carey," she asked, deliberately, "do you really mean to imply that I have treated your cousin badly?"

"Harry! Oh, no!" he said, quickly, with involuntary emphasis.

"Whom, then, have I treated badly?"

"No one, of course," answered he, hastily, in much confusion. Then, recovering himself a little, he said, more coolly, "We were arguing an abstract question, were we not?"

"Dear me, I had no idea we were doing anything so interesting! I thought you were accusing me, and that I was defending myself. Tell me, are we going to discuss abstract questions all the way to Kerr Street? Because, if so, I shall be bored, and I am more of an infliction than ever when I am bored."

"I am afraid there are not many subjects I could discuss with you without boring you," said he, rather ruefully.

"Really? I think there must be. Tell me, for instance,"—and she became a little less self-controlled, a little more diffident, a little shyer in manner,—“tell me what you thought about when you were lying ill.”

Deane, who was stooping to be nearer her level, drew himself up with a sudden jerk.

"Oh, well, I—I don't know that I thought of anything particular, or, at least, of anything that would interest you," he answered, much disconcerted.

"Tell me, and let me judge."

Deane remained silent.

"Well," said Meg, with a little catch in her voice, "let me help you. Did you think of any people?"

"Oh, yes; yes, I did, I dare say."

"Many people? Or—or few people?"

"Not so very many," said Deane, as if the words were being wrung out of him.

"Did you, for instance, ever think of—mamma?"

"Yes, certainly I did," said Deane, heartily, as if he had received a reprieve.

"And did you ever think of—me?"

"There's the omnibus!" almost shouted Deane, in the tone in which Robinson Crusoe must have cried, "A sail!"

It was a long way off still, that longed-for vehicle; but Deane affected to be anxious not to lose it a moment from sight; he kept his eyes fixed on it, and would suffer no word to be uttered about anything else until the big lumbering thing drove up, and stopped, and allowed

them to scramble up on to one of the front garden-seats, which had just been vacated.

Here, however, he was absolutely at her mercy. Meg showed him no quarter.

"Let me see, where were we?" she said, meditatively, as if she were really trying to recover the lost thread of an interesting discourse. "Oh, I remember. I was asking you if, when you were ill, you ever thought of me?"

There was a pause again. Then Deane snapped out, shortly,—

"Yes."

Meg was unmollified by this concession.

"Well, what sort of things did you think about me? Nice things? Or—or things that were not nice? Did you think, the thing you said about me once, that I was a flirt, and that I ought to be held in abhorrence accordingly?"

"I never said that—I never thought that."

Meg went on, suavely,—

"I can't undertake to tell whether you *thought* it or not. You certainly did say it."

"That you were to be held in abhorrence? Never!"

"I don't remember the words, only the sense. That was the sense. Nothing was too bad for a flirt, and I was the worst flirt you'd ever met."

Here Meg looked up at him, with a look which was a challenge. Deane glanced at her, and then looked steadily at the driver's hat.

"On second thoughts, perhaps you're right; perhaps I did say it," said he, quietly.

Meg, not quite expecting this sudden change of front, could only say, "Ah!"

She presently added, "You do remember it now?"

"Well, no; frankly, I don't. But I am arguing what I might have said then by what I might say now."

"You abhor me now? Is that what you mean?"

"No. It is what I should like to mean, though."

"That is very unkind. What harm have I done you?"

"None. Flirts never do any real harm. They hurt one a little, sometimes; but they help one to a better understanding of their sex, and to a truer appreciation of it."

"Then, on the whole, you will retain a grateful remembrance of me?"

Deane remained silent until, by another little glance up into his face, the empress implied that she was impatient for an answer.

"I shall retain a remembrance of you," he replied, in a very low voice. "Will you take that for an answer, please?"

"No, I won't," said she. "That would be very unsatisfactory. I would rather hear point-blank that your remembrance of me would be a disagreeable one than have things left in the vague like that!"

"It will not be altogether a disagreeable one."

"Nor altogether an agreeable one, I suppose?"

"Nor altogether an agreeable one."

"That is a pleasant thing to hear to one's face!"

"You should not have begun this catechism, then. I am quite blameless, for I should certainly never have thought of troubling you with these unimportant details of my experiences if you had not insisted on my doing so. Now let us talk about—omnibuses. How do you like this, your first experience of the people's conveyance?"

"No more than I like anything else belonging to the people. It is a great lumbering, horrid thing, and it frightens me not to be able to see the wheels."

"Would you like to get down, and go back in a hansom, after all?"

"I don't particularly wish to, but, if I am too unbearable, I will let you send me home so."

She was putting him through a terrible ordeal. In his face, in his self-repressed attitude, she saw that he was suffering from acute agitation; but all her efforts were powerless to make him betray himself more thoroughly.

"I am sorry," he said at last, as stiffly as in the first shy days of their acquaintance, "that I haven't been able to entertain you better. But at least you knew what you were in for when you let me see you home. I am not a duller companion at one time than at another. There is just that one advantage in stupid people, that you know what to expect; while a brilliant person has his good days and his bad days."

For some time after this they remained silent. At last the omnibus turned into Piccadilly. Then Deane

spoke again, in an altered voice, with a great and touching gentleness in his tone :

"This is your nearest point to Kerr Street, Miss Keen."

The words were commonplace enough, but poor little Meg, who had been sitting like a frightened bird on its perch since his last speech, recognised in his tones both melancholy and something like self-reproach.

"Thank you," she said, gently, "I will get down here."

So Deane helped her down, and they walked along in silence towards Kerr Street. Deane was suffering untold tortures in the knowledge that his treatment had quenched the bright little coquette's vivacity, and at last he tried to tell her so.

"I wish, Miss Keen," he began, in a gruff, strangled voice, "that I had made you come back in the hansom."

"No doubt. You feel, I suppose, that you have been wasting your time with such a frivolous person as I."

"No. I feel like a great, clumsy elephant who has put its hoof down on a beautiful little bird and crushed all the brightness out of it."

"The bird is not so easily crushed as you imagine, Mr. Carey!" cried Meg, with forced sprightliness. "When you thought it was under your hoof, it was really perched on the tip of your trunk, laughing at you. The little dicky has a spirit of its own, I assure you, and sets a higher value on its own plumage than the elephant might think."

By this time they had reached the portico of the house in Kerr Street. Meg held out her hand in a half-shy, half-dignified manner.

"Good-bye," she said.

Deane hesitated. The muscles of his face were twitching. She saw this, and made one last attempt to drag from him some little admission, some confession, no matter how half-hearted.

"I suppose," she said, "that, as our acquaintance began with Harry, so it is to end with him. This, therefore, is in all human probability our last meeting?"

"In all probability, yes," answered he.

His voice was shaking: if that was an admission, a confession, it was all she had to content herself with.

"I shall write to Mrs. Keen if I hear anything about Harry," said he.

"Oh, yes," said she.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

And as the door was opened by the footman, Deane raised his hat and walked away.

Meg went into the drawing-room, where Burgess was dozing, or pretending to doze, in an arm-chair. As she came in, he awoke, or pretended to awake.

"Who's that you came home with?" he asked, shortly.

"Deane Carey."

"Ah, well, we don't want any of that crew about any more," he said, in some excitement.

For a wonder, Meg had no answer ready, or, at any rate, she did not utter it.

"You have dined, I suppose?" he asked, as she walked towards the door.

"I don't want any dinner, thank you."

Then Burgess noticed something and laughed.

"Ah, you have heard the news, then, I suppose, that there's a warrant out for the scoundrel who murdered your father."

"Yes, I've heard it. Burgess," and the girl came back to lean coaxingly over his chair, "don't talk about it to mamma."

He would not promise, but Meg, although she knew that Burgess was not without malice, thought she saw a gleam of kindness, of regret, in his face. She left the room, thinking not of Harry, but of Deane.

"And he does care for me, he does all the time!" she said to herself, with a sigh.

It was late when I returned home that night, after having had a most unsatisfactory interview with Mr. Boyle. I thought it best to make no secret of the scrape Harry had got into. Tone the story down as I would, its effect was strong upon the solicitor, who had probably begun to have difficulties with Harry which made him inclined to put the worst construction upon my unlucky son's misfortunes. He advised me emphatically to send him out of the country as quickly as possible; and, when I asked if that would not be considered as an acknowledgment that he was guilty, Mr. Boyle shrugged his shoulders with a suggestive silence which made me shiver.

I returned home miserable and terribly anxious. Wishing to slip quietly up to my room without encountering Burgess, I was annoyed when my step-son, who had evidently been on the watch for my return, came out of the study to meet me. I was cold and distant, but he persisted in speaking kindly and with feeling.

"You have no right to be angry with me over this business," he whispered in my ear as I went up-stairs. "Remember, if this fellow is your son, of which by the way you can hardly be sure, my step-father, whom he murdered, was your husband. Remember, too, that this young man is a scoundrel who would think nothing of murdering you also, if he thought he could gain anything by it. You have no right to be angry with me for furthering the ends of justice."

In my heart I knew this; and, although I would not unbend at that time, yet on the following day, when I was broken in spirit after a sleepless night, I was more conciliatory towards my step-son. He seized upon this new mood to urge upon me a course which I was reluctant to take, although I admitted the soundness of his reasons. He wanted me to go to Paris to join some friends of ours who were on their way to the Riviera.

"You can do no good to Harry Carey before he is arrested," said he, in his matter-of-fact, sledge-hammer fashion, which he had in part borrowed from his late step-father. "And mind," he went on, emphatically, looking me straight in the eyes, "if he is arrested you can hardly fail to do him a great deal of harm, unless you perjure yourself horribly. *For you would certainly be called as a witness at the trial.*"

I started, and shuddered with horror. This possibility had never occurred to me.

I knew afterwards that this speech of Burgess's was a bow drawn at a venture, for he did not know how much I had seen. It served its purpose, however; and I allowed him to telegraph to the people I was to join in Paris, saying that I should start that evening.

At eight-fifteen that evening, therefore, Burgess and Meg, who was to stay with Aunt Di during my absence, saw me off by the night mail from Charing Cross. They insisted on my having Sanders, whom I would much rather have been without, in the carriage with me, being,

both of them, rather anxious about me, as the trouble I had been through was beginning to affect me in the form of fainting-fits. They got the guard to lock us in, and I was quite touched by the solicitude even Burgess showed as he wished me good-bye.

Sanders, however, glared at him with indescribable and surprising malice as the train moved off.

"The cruel hypocrite," she murmured, as she looked at him through the window, "to come between a mother and her son!"

I glanced at the woman apprehensively, hoping that she was not going to treat me to a discourse on this text to beguile the time. But she relapsed into silence, which lasted, uninterrupted by me, until we reached Cannon Street.

I was leaning back on my seat with my eyes closed when I was roused by hearing the guard unlock our door.

"This carriage is engaged," said I, quickly.

A well-known voice struck upon my ear.

"All right, it's all right, guard: this is my mother."

And, as soon as the guard had opened the door, Harry, in travelling costume, and with his rug on his arm, jumped in and gave me a kiss as he threw himself on the seat beside me.

In another moment the train was steaming towards Dover.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

I WAS overwhelmed by this fresh piece of brilliant audacity on the part of my son. I leaned back in my seat, and for a few moments his words sounded in my ears as if they came from a long way off.

Then I heard Sanders' voice whisper, "Sh-sh!" and the next moment she came quickly to me with my smelling-salts. I opened my eyes, and caught a look exchanged between the maid and Harry which showed me that it was to her good offices that he owed the intelligence which had enabled him to meet me.

No one would have imagined, while listening to his

lively chatter, how serious his need was to escape from his native country. The watchfulness, the anxiety, were mine. Indeed, a great deal of his talk fell upon deaf ears, as far as I was concerned. The situation was so strange, so unexpected, so puzzling, that I needed all my wits to devise some way out of it. At last I said, not lowering my voice much, for there was very little that Sanders did not know about the family affairs,—

“Harry, what are you going to do? Where are you going to leave me?”

He answered, in the easiest, airiest manner,—

“I don’t propose, for the present at least, to leave you at all, mother.”

“But surely you understand that you cannot remain with me, that it would not be safe? I am to be met to-morrow morning, on arriving in Paris, by some friends who are going on with me to the Riviera. The son is a great friend of Burgess’s; he does not know who you are; he would certainly write about my travelling companion to Burgess, if he were to see you.”

“He shall not see me,” replied Harry, promptly. “Give me the name of your hotel; I will drop out of the carriage as soon as the train arrives, and by the time you reach your halting-place for the night you will find me duly installed.”

“Yes, yes, that may do for to-night. But afterwards? We start, all together, in two days’ time.”

“You must give them the slip, that’s all.”

I was taken aback once more by this effervescent selfishness and buoyant disregard of every one’s convenience but his own.

“That is impossible,” said I, with sudden coldness. “I cannot alter my plans. And as for you, France is not far enough away——”

“I know that, mother,” said he, calmly. “I propose,” he went on, as he unfolded his rug and wrapped it carefully round his knees, “that we go first to Switzerland. You have some money with you, of course, which will last a long time at this time of year, when there is nobody in the place. We shall be as safe as if we were buried; dull, perhaps, but that we must put up with. I don’t mind a little dulness for a change, especially with you.”

And he threw his arm round me affectionately, with all the *aplomb* of an assured position.

As soon as I had recovered from the stupefaction into which this audacious programme had thrown me, I repelled his caress with some warmth, and said, sharply,—

“You misunderstand me altogether, Harry. I am not going away with you; I am not going to alter my plans for you; I am going to help you forward on your way to America, and that is all.”

“But supposing I don't want to go to America, what then? Supposing I prefer to go back to London and take my chance of arrest, to wandering over the face of the earth without money and without friends?”

I was trembling, I was agitated; still, I saw clearly enough that he was in the wrong.

“And are you willing, then, to subject me to the hourly anxiety of fearing to see you arrested before my eyes, when you might relieve my mind and make yourself perfectly safe by going to America?”

Harry, perhaps at a loss for an answer to this, tossed the question airily aside.

“Ah, well, we'll discuss that in the morning,” said he. “In the mean time it is enough for me, after the harassing life I have led lately, to be with you, just to sit by my mother's side again, and to look at her beautiful face, and to listen to her charming voice, even if she's unkind enough to do nothing but scold me!”

A subdued sigh from the other end of the carriage showed that sentimental Sanders, at least, was touched to the quick by this speech, which Harry uttered in his most persuasive and insinuating tones.

During the whole of the journey he proved the most perfect of travelling companions, ready with all the little attentions which a woman likes to receive, and which too many a worthy Englishman considers it beneath him to bestow,—on the ladies of his own family, at any rate. He never seemed to get tired, or irritable, or cold, or hungry; and when, in the murky light of an early November morning, we roused ourselves, when nearing Paris, and looked at each other, he seemed to be, not a haggard and worn-out traveller after a night journey, but exactly the same lively and smiling creature who had been so full of high spirits the night before.

“And now to prepare to make a rush for it!” said he, as he strapped up his rug and then proceeded to help Sanders with mine. “Your friends, if they really do meet you at the station, will be hardly wide-awake enough to notice whether it is a man or a ghost who flies past them. I shall be at the hotel as soon as you are.”

It was useless to argue with him. He carried out the arrangement he had made to the letter. As soon as the compartment was unlocked, he sprang out, and, having left the little luggage he had brought with him, for us to pass, with ours, through the Custom House, he promptly disappeared, long before my friend's son, who was at the station to meet me, had caught sight of us in the crowd.

At the hotel we were met by Harry, who had already succeeded in charming the proprietress, who was up to receive her early guests. He had explained to her that he was my son, and that an extra room would be wanted, he having made up his mind to come with his mother at the very last moment, when the telegram for rooms had already been sent off. As soon as I appeared, he escorted me up-stairs with the same tender attention he had shown me during the journey, and retired to the room he had engaged, it having been settled that we were to meet at the hotel *déjeûner* at eleven o'clock.

Left alone with Sanders, I turned upon her, reproaching her for her duplicity. She wept copiously, but was not penitent.

“Well, ma'am,” said she, “I knew you too well to think you would be able to bear the thought of having thrown your own son over just when he wanted a mother's kindness,” she said, between her sobs. “And with Mr. Burgess so hard on him too, and all the world against him. And such a good-tempered, good-humoured, affectionate young gentleman, who, I'm sure, for all they say, would never hurt a fly!”

Remonstrance was indeed too late to be of any use, so I dismissed her as quickly as possible, and tried to get some rest. But every sound startled me from the uneasy sleep into which I fell: half a dozen times I sprang up, cold and damp with terror, thinking I heard the voices of the gendarmes come to arrest Harry. I was quite

glad when Sanders came back, soon after ten o'clock, to help me to dress.

I had engaged a sitting-room, but it was Harry himself who had suggested that we should dine in the public *salle-à-manger*, as it would be lively; for he seemed to have no thought of concealing himself, or of anything but enjoyment of each small pleasure that presented itself. I was shocked, confused, desperate, when the young fellow who had met me at the station that morning came in during luncheon, accompanied by two of his sisters. Harry, on the contrary, was delighted, and introduced himself as my son, during the awkward pause of constraint made by myself; and in a moment every one at our small table was at ease except myself.

"I didn't know you had a son, Mrs. Keen," said the elder girl, who was evidently charmed with Harry. "I had never even heard you had been married twice."

Before the meal was over, I was amazed to hear an appointment made between the young people to meet on the boulevards that afternoon, when they were to settle something for the evening.

When they had gone, and Harry and I had returned to my sitting-room, I asked him how he could be so madly imprudent as to show himself in the way he was doing.

"Why, mother, it's the best possible policy," he answered, with a touch of shrewdness in his light manner. "If you appear to have nothing to fear, it is much easier to make a sudden bolt of it if necessary than if you went sneaking about, with your eyes round the corner, asking people to suspect you. At any rate, now, whatever happens, I shall spend the evening with two awfully nice girls and their very decent brother. And an evening's pleasure to the good is always something, *n'est-ce pas, maman?*"

He was leaning over the balcony railing, watching, with the greatest interest and amusement, the crowd below. He took a tobacco-pouch out of his pocket, and, after asking my permission to smoke, began to roll himself a cigarette.

"Can you make cigarettes, mother?" he asked, in his usual affectionate manner, looking up insinuatingly into my face.

I shook my head, and he looked quite disappointed.

"I should have enjoyed it so much better if it had been rolled by your pretty white hands," he complained, in a hurt tone. "Mother, I am going to persuade you to expatriate yourself altogether, and to go to live with your scapegrace son in France or Italy or Spain, and wean him from his evil ways by living in the sun with him, and making cigarettes and listening to his 'jaw' all day long! Easy enough, isn't it? Who would refuse to reclaim a fellow-creature on such terms?"

I did not answer. He was outside the window, on the balcony, while I, older and more susceptible to the keen air of November, was watching him from inside. I was trying to understand this volatile being, whom I had brought into the world to be my torment. Not put out by my silence, he went on,—

"Exile would have no horrors for me—for *you!* These Continental peoples I feel I have more in common with than with our dear old stodgy Britons. Look how they enjoy life, even its commonest incidents. Look at——"

He stopped suddenly, and drew back. Glancing at him quickly, full of the nervous apprehension I had suffered constantly since he joined me the night before, I saw that he had grown deadly white. I made way for him to enter the room, and, when he had passed me, I whispered, "What did you see? Are they coming—for you?"

He threw back his head, and affected to laugh heartily.

"Mother, mother, what a coward you are! No, 'they' are not coming; nobody is coming; nobody will come while you are near me. I believe you are my guardian angel!"

Although he threw his arm around me and kissed my cheek with his usual demonstrative affection, he did not deceive me: I knew he had seen some one or something, and that the sight had given him a great shock.

He presently suggested that I should go and lie down for a little while, and I assented readily enough; for I found the nervous tension at which I was kept while in Harry's presence very fatiguing. I left him, therefore, and retired to my bedroom, where I fell into a deep, heavy sleep.

I awoke suddenly, when it was quite dark, to find

Sanders standing like a sentinel by my bedside. With an instinct that something was wrong, I sat up and cried,—

“What is it? What has happened?”

“Oh, ma’am, Master Harry!”

“They have not—*taken* him!” I whispered, hoarsely.

“No, ma’am, oh, no. Not so bad as that. But—there’s been a woman after him.”

“Ah!”

“She came right up to his room after him, ma’am. I don’t know how they let her come up, or how she got up, or what. But you know my bedroom is next to his, ma’am; and all of a sudden I heard a tap on his door, and I looked out, thinking it was at my door; and I saw a woman go in. And I heard Master Harry cry, ‘Good heavens! what do you want?’ And the woman was very angry, and she said he didn’t care for her, and had given her the slip, after all she’d done for him; but that she was not going to be put off like that, and he must make up his mind to stick to her, or it would be the worse for him.”

“Why do you tell me these things?” I asked, irritably. “I don’t want to hear them; I will not hear them. I have enough to bear on his account without troubling myself about his intrigues.”

“Well, ma’am, I wouldn’t have told you, and I wouldn’t have listened, only the woman was threatening him, ma’am. That’s what made me think I’d better tell you. She said she wouldn’t go away until he’d promised to take her with him wherever he was going.”

I made no answer. I foresaw that there would be a constant succession of small troubles to bear, as well as the great one, as long as my son chose to honour me with his society. And that would be, as it seemed, an indefinite period.

It was near the hour of the *table-d’hôte*, for which Harry had promised to be back. I began to wonder whether he would keep his appointment, or whether the charms of his new friends of the morning would cause him to forget it, when I heard his voice outside my door asking if I was ready. He seemed as cheerful as ever, as we went down-stairs together, and it was not until dinner was half over that he disclosed the fact that he had a burden on his mind.

“Mother,” he said, affectionately, as he picked up my serviette, which had fallen on the floor, “what will you say to me if I ask you to go on from here to-night?”

“To-night! But where to?”

“Oh, I don’t much care where, so long as I am with you. Why not try Rome, or Florence? The fact is I’ve discovered I have a spy at my heels, a fiend in the shape of a woman, and I want to get away from *her*, and to get away with *you*.”

“But, Harry, I have told you it is impossible that I should go with you. There are a thousand reasons why I should not, and the chief of them is that it would be the readiest possible way of letting Burgess Falconer know where you were.”

“Burgess be hanged!” said Harry, lightly. “He will think twice about having me interfered with as long as I am actually with you.”

This astute remark opened my eyes: I could not help a suspicion that my son’s filial devotion was founded on a basis of shrewd calculation. I warned him, rather coldly, that my step-son was not troubled with an overflow of tender sentiment for me, and that he would certainly console himself for any outrage which Harry’s arrest in my presence would inflict upon my feelings, by saying that I ought to thank him for ridding me of him.

“And would you thank him?” asked Harry, in a low voice, looking into my eyes with a gaze full of reproach. I shuddered.

“Yet you are not willing to take the smallest step out of your way to help me to safety?”

“What are you afraid of that you are so anxious to go away to-night?”

“Oh,” answered Harry, with a frown of annoyance, “I’m afraid of this woman turning nasty.”

“Does she know—everything, then?”

“Rather!”

I reflected for a few moments. Then I told him that I would give him my answer when we went up-stairs. Dinner being by this time over, Harry sprang up, and in a few moments we were again in the sitting-room. Harry turned up the lamp, and looked at my face with anxiety. He saw that I had made up my mind.

“Well, mother?”

"Well, if you will go to Havre and take ship to America, I will go and see you on board. That is my only alternative to remaining in Paris."

He did not take long for reflection. He was balancing an unlighted cigarette on his forefinger; suddenly he tossed it into the air and caught it again.

"All right, mother. I'll go. What time will the next train start?"

He ran down to the bureau to inquire, and in another half-hour we were in a *fiacre* on the way to the station.

We were in plenty of time. We had taken our tickets, and were going slowly along the platform to choose a compartment with two vacant corners, when I caught sight, among the people on the platform, of two men whose appearance filled me with suspicion. The one was in gendarme uniform; the other, who looked like an Englishman, wore an ordinary tourist's suit. Both were looking for some one, and the fear crossed my mind that they were following me.

"This carriage, this one will do," said I, in a low voice to Harry.

"All right, mother. Let me help you in."

I had my foot on the step, when the two men I had noticed came quietly up, and the gendarme put his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Au nom de la loi, monsieur," said he.

Harry sprang back, evidently not wholly unprepared for the necessity of making a bolt of it at short notice. But the man in the tourist's suit caught him by the arm.

"No good, sir. You'd better come quietly," said he. "I've brought a warrant for your arrest from London."

Harry, either overcome by emotion or pretending to be so, exclaimed, in a loud voice, "My mother! My mother! It will break her heart!"

At the same moment he pointed at me. The tone and the gesture were sufficiently marked to attract attention; and, as the group instantly collected round us, Harry made another dashing attempt at escape. But the two men were reinforced by two others, who suddenly darted upon him from the outskirts of the crowd, and made any further effort to free himself out of the question.

I was standing all this time in the door-way of the

railway carriage, helpless, paralyzed with terror. The scene passed so quickly that I had done no more than cry out once, feebly, before the crowd closed round Harry and cut him off from my view.

Then the whole scene faded, and I saw nothing more.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

WHEN I came to myself I was in the ladies' waiting-room, the centre of a sympathetic crowd.

Some inkling of the truth had come to these bystanders, and they expressed their sympathy in a kindly chorus of would-be consolation. The fact that the man whom they knew to be my son had not even been allowed to return for a last kiss was commented upon with great severity.

"Ah, they have no hearts, these officers of police!" cried one excitable *bourgeoise*.

While a second, shrugging her shoulders, expressed her opinion that the young man would have been allowed that privilege if he had not irritated the officers by trying to escape.

I got free from their well-meant and voluble sympathy as quickly as I could, and returned to the hotel, where I found two telegrams awaiting me.

The first I opened was from Burgess, and it contained the following words:

"You had better come home at once."

The second despatch was from Mr. Boyle. It was more peremptory than the other, and was worded as follows:

"Come and see me at once. Most important news to communicate."

I had lost the last train that night, and there was nothing for it but to wait for the early morning train that left the Gare du Nord at eight-twenty-two.

After a sleepless night, therefore, I started for London on the following morning, accompanied by Sanders, whom, however, I relegated to another compartment, as her tearfulness over Harry's misfortunes had become unbearable.

I myself was almost stupefied by my grief. It was only natural that now, when he was threatened by an appalling danger, all the feelings of maternal tenderness which I had felt for him both before and since I discovered my lost son should come back to me with renewed force. My journey to London was like a hideous nightmare. It was marked by only one incident of any significance.

On the boat, crouching in a corner of the portion used by the second-class passengers, was a woman, whose head was buried in her hands, and whose whole attitude betrayed the fact that she was almost beside herself with grief. She was attracting general attention, of which it was evident that she was quite unconscious. As I looked at the poor thing, feeling deep pity, I heard the voice of Sanders close to my ear.

"Look, ma'am, look," she whispered. "That's the woman that came to see poor Master Harry at the hotel. I know her by the dress; I am sure of it."

These words made me curious to see the woman's face, and, as she was absolutely unconscious of anything but her own grief, I watched her from time to time during the passage. Not once, however, did she look up, or give me or indeed any one among her fellow-passengers an opportunity of seeing her face. She wore a loose ulster with capes, and was shabbily dressed altogether; that was all I could make out. On landing I lost sight of her; and, although I looked out for her when the train reached Charing Cross, I didn't see her again. I wondered whether it was she who had betrayed Harry's whereabouts to the police, and whether the grief she so openly showed was the result of remorse.

Burgess himself met me at Charing Cross. He was unusually gentle and kind, and seemed anxious to atone, by his consideration and care, for the sorrow he had brought upon me.

"I'm glad to see that you're bearing up very well," said he to me as soon as we were in the brougham

together. "Really, the fellow's audacity must have struck you yourself as stupendous."

"Don't talk about it," whispered I, shivering. "Why did you send for me?"

"I thought it would be best for you to be back home among us all when the crash had really come, for one thing. But my chief reason was that Lord Wallinghurst's lawyer said he must see you particularly. He has sent several times to Kerr Street already to-day to know if you had arrived. I promised him that I would take you straight to him as soon as you did come. Do you think you could manage the ordeal of an interview with him now?"

"No, I'm sure I could not," I answered, shortly. "I must have a night's rest before I have any more worry."

Burgess did not insist, and we drove on to Kerr Street in silence.

Little Meg was waiting at the dining-room window, to rush out and comfort me with an affectionate greeting. I thought I noticed in her manner an underlying excitement which had nothing to do either with my return or with Harry's arrest.

"Let me look you full in the face, child," I said, when we had gone up-stairs together to my room.

"Why, mamma? What do you want with me?" she asked, with a sudden lapse into a pretty, rosy shyness.

"You're excited this evening, Meg. What is the reason? Have you seen—somebody again?"

Her first answer was a deeper blush than before.

"Who is somebody?" asked she, with an affectation of extreme innocence.

"Somebody whose conversation on an omnibus, proved so very disappointing."

Meg raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, do you mean Deane Carey?" she said.

"You have seen him since I went away?"

"Yes." A pause.

"Ah, I thought so!"

"But it was to see you, mamma, and not me, that he came."

"But, as I was not here, he put up with you for a little while?"

"Ye-es, mamma. But 'put up' is the exact expres-

sion, for I assure you he talked about you the whole time. It was this morning he came, before luncheon; he had heard about Harry's arrest, and he was feverishly anxious to know whether it had taken place in your presence, and how you had borne it. And when I told him that both Burgess and Mr. Boyle had telegraphed for you, he got into such a state of excitement that I thought he was going to have a fit of some kind; I really did, mamma. He almost cried, and then he walked up and down the room as if he had been a wild animal in a cage; and at last he said that he must come here this evening and see if you had come back, and that if you had not come back he thought he should go over to Paris to see you."

"Very solicitous, I'm sure!" I exclaimed, dryly. "And his anxiety to see me had nothing at all, I suppose, to do with any previous conversation he had had with you?"

Meg sprang to my side and looked up earnestly into my face.

"Indeed it had not, mamma," she said, emphatically. "That is how it began. Presently, indeed," and the girl looked down and plucked at my gown, "he did begin to—to, well to atone a little for his conduct on the omnibus. He took back some of the things he had said about flirts, for instance, and said one or two really pretty things; nothing much, I should have thought them from anybody else, but you know, mamma, the value of words depends so much upon the person who says them, doesn't it?"

And the girl looked up archly into my face. I smoothed her pretty dark hair with my hands, and laughed at her. But I wished, with a heavy heart, that it had not been Deane Carey, whose presence must always remind me of my son, to whom Meg had given her first serious affection.

We dined early that evening, and afterwards I, unable to rest, as one always is after a tiring journey, put on a mantle and bonnet and went quietly out of the house for a walk in the adjoining square by myself. I had not gone many steps along the street before I heard some one following me. At first I took no notice, but, as the footsteps echoing after mine began to grow irritating, I at last turned round impatiently, and found, to my sur-

prise, that it was Deane Carey who was persistently dogging my steps. I had turned within the light of a gas-lamp, in order to see who my pursuer was; and its yellow rays fell upon a face so different from Deane's usually placid countenance that my first impression was that he had been drinking.

This idea was confirmed by the manner in which he received the shock of my turning upon him. His already flushed face became a deeper red, his eyes fell, and he staggered.

"Mr. Carey!" I exclaimed, coldly, "is it you?"

"Ye-es, Mrs. Keen," he answered, in a voice which was at once shy, hoarse, and humble. "I—I—I wanted to see you, to hear how you were, and to know how you had borne your journey."

Although he stammered a little as he spoke, I began to perceive that I had ascribed his excitement to the wrong cause. Still, his behaviour in silently following me down the street, instead of coming to the house or speaking to me at once, was so strange that I answered him doubtfully.

"I bore it quite well, thank you. You called this morning?"

Deane began to tremble like a leaf. More and more astonished by his behaviour, I said, with a change to a more sympathetic manner,—

"You feel this misfortune to poor Harry very acutely?"

Deane did not answer in quite the tone I expected.

"Yes," he answered, simply, "we, who cared for him, must feel it. But I have—through fearing it so long—the edge of the blow was taken off for me."

Then what is the matter with you? I felt inclined to ask, but didn't. Deane, however, read my thoughts.

"Mrs. Keen," said he, with husky earnestness, "you have heard, haven't you, that the lawyer, Mr. Boyle,—Harry's lawyer,—wants to see you? Are you going to see him now? Forgive me, it is no business of mine, but—but won't you go and see him to-night? He said it was important, did he not?"

The young man's excitement, his desperate pleading, astonished me beyond measure. What could he know about Mr. Boyle's tidings for me? And how could they interest him?

"I had not thought of seeing him to-night, certainly," said I. "I am very tired, and legal business is not, as a rule, inspiriting."

"But this—you don't know what it is," pursued Deane, eagerly. "It may not be as bad as you fear."

I was so much struck by the young man's manner that I began to think he must know something about the affair, something, however, which he did not think he could properly communicate himself.

I hesitated. Observing that he had had some effect on me, he renewed his persuasions, his entreaties, until the end of it was that I allowed him to hail a passing hansom, to get into it with me, and to drive with me to Mr. Boyle's private house in one of the big central squares.

I gave him permission to wait for me, to his unbounded gratitude.

I was ushered at once, on my entrance, into Mr. Boyle's study.

"My master's been expecting you, ma'am, ever since six o'clock. And the lady's been getting very impatient," added the man, who was Mr. Boyle's confidential servant.

The lady! Who was the lady? Visions of an unpleasant interview with Nellie Styles filled my mind as I entered the study, which was for the moment untenanted.

Not two minutes later I heard the voices of Mr. Boyle and of a woman outside. It was not Nellie, however; it was Lady Stephana.

I sprang up, trembling. Now, at last, I should hear the truth about my son.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

My heart sank as Lady Stephana Darent came in.

My thoughts flew back to the time when, three-and-twenty years ago, she had come to me at the time of my great trouble, and had, by her stony philanthropy and by what seemed to me her puritanical injustice, succeeded in quenching what little hope and spirit my griefs had left in me.

If anything, she was now colder than ever. In truth, Lady Stephana, whose saintliness grew more unattractive with years, very strongly resented my gradual transformation from a lonely and helpless woman, whom she believed to be neither wife nor maid, into a matron of assured position. She seemed to me to have grown smaller than ever. She must by this time have been not far short of seventy years of age; but her little body was so spare that she needed no stick to help her along, and her face was so small that there was scarcely room to show the number of wrinkles one would have expected. She now wore on her head a little scrap of lace by way of a cap, but this was the only change in her shabby and dowdy attire. As far as I could see, the gown she wore might have been the very one in which I had seen her three-and-twenty years ago.

I had, indeed, met her since then, on the memorable occasion when she visited my husband in Kerr Street, when we had exchanged a formal bow. But on that occasion the glimpse I had obtained of her had been a fleeting one.

As she advanced into the study, followed by Mr. Boyle, I held out my hand. She put a little shrivelled claw into mine, and said, with the steely, expressionless face I remembered so well,—

“You are late, Mrs. Keen. I expected you to come straight here as soon as you arrived in London, and I have been waiting since six o’clock.”

But the times were past for Lady Stephana to take the high hand with me.

“Indeed! I made no appointment,” said I.

Lady Stephana had, like most reputed saints, been allowed to grow autocratic in consideration of her good deeds.

“When people come begging for valuable information,” she said, tartly, “they usually consult the convenience of those from whom they hope to receive it.”

“I have begged for nothing, Lady Stephana,” I answered. “And it was certainly not to afford me any information that you returned to England sooner than you intended.—Mr. Boyle,” I went on, turning to the lawyer, “I don’t know why you sent for me at all to-day. Whatever you may think it necessary for me to know,

you will, I am sure, communicate to me yourself at your convenience. Good-evening."

I think the lawyer was secretly amused by this passage of arms between us women-folk. But it was with a very grave professional face that he set about restoring peace.

"It is I who am the beggar," he said, suavely. "It was I who begged for Lady Stephana's information on behalf of my client, and I am deeply obliged to her ladyship for having thought the matter of sufficient importance to come to England herself about it. And I am equally obliged to you, Mrs. Keen, for coming here to-night to hear what it is absolutely necessary for you to know.—And now, Lady Stephana," he went on, as he offered the tiny autocrat a large leather arm-chair, seated in which she looked like a doll, "will you oblige me by relating the circumstances of your adoption of the two young men who have passed by the name of Carey?"

The little lady affected to turn her back to me completely, and addressed the lawyer only. But her little thread of a voice was so clear that I heard every word of her discourse as well as if it had been poured into my own ear.

"I believe you are aware, Mr. Boyle," she began, "that I was interested in the reclamation of my nephew Harry Darent, the youngest son of my brother, the last Lord Wallinghurst but two. He was the scapegrace of the family, and in the end I was the only member of the family who would have anything to do with him. But I thought it my duty not to lose sight of the prodigal, and I helped him again and again when everybody else had given him up. He had at one time to leave England to escape prosecution for forgery, and during the time he was away in Australia, where he was sent, he contracted an irregular alliance with a woman of the name of Nellie Styles. When he came back to England he brought her with him, and when he appealed to me for help he represented that this woman was his legal wife. I saw no reason to doubt this, especially as the woman, although a person of no refinement, was a hard-working, devoted creature, who would certainly have been an ideal wife for a working-man. And it was as an ordinary working-man that she first met Harry Darent in Aus-

tralia. When I first met the woman, she already had one child,—a boy.”

Lady Stephana paused; the lawyer looked attentive; I sat holding my breath.

“In order both to help the parents and to have the child brought up as I conceived that a member of our family ought to be brought up, I offered to take entire charge of the boy. The offer was accepted, not without reluctance on the part of the mother; who was, however,” and Lady Stephana turned her head slightly, to impress upon me the beauty of Nellie Styles’s conduct compared to my own, “deeply grateful to me for what she called my goodness.”

There was another little pause, which Mr. Boyle utilized for the purpose of taking a few notes in a memorandum-book. Then she went on:

“I had the boy put in the care of trustworthy people, visited him constantly,—he was only a baby,—and kept the mother informed as to his health. At the time I believed this boy to be my nephew’s legitimate son.

“Soon after my nephew’s return to England, where he was obliged to live under an assumed name to avoid being arrested by the man whose name he had forged, who was implacable in his wish to prosecute Harry, another child was born, a girl. By this time dissensions had arisen between my nephew and the woman, and, in a fit of disgust with the poor thing, he acknowledged to me that she was not his wife. Nevertheless,” went on Lady Stephana, raising her tone a little to denote the height of her magnanimity, “I took the part of the woman, and thought it my duty to make no difference in my treatment of her. She had followed him, loved him, clung to him as a wife; and in my opinion the difference in rank between them made it all the more necessary for him to treat her well. However,” and into the lady’s tone there came all the acidity of which a balked professional philanthropist is capable, “my nephew had the usual morality of a man, and thought nothing of throwing over the woman who had followed him through the world for a girl of whom he knew nothing except that she had a pretty face.”

The lady’s acerbity grew so marked on these last

words that Mr. Boyle glanced at me as if appealing to me not to mind.

"I think you know, Mr. Boyle," went on Lady Stephana, with the manner of a person who is strictly *en tête-à-tête*, "that the girl has since become Mrs. Keen."

Mr. Boyle assented hastily.

"No persuasions, no threats availed to persuade my nephew to go back to what I considered his duty, and by marriage with the first woman to repair the wrong he had done her. At last the end came: he crowned his wickedness by abandoning Nellie for a fresh face. I heard this from Nellie herself; but she either did not know or would not tell me that Harry had actually married the girl. I was led to believe, and I always did believe until lately, that my nephew, when he died, was still, legally, a bachelor."

"I told you that he married me; I remember the very words I used to you!" I broke out, passionately, with a bitter feeling in my mind, which I really believe to have been justified, that Lady Stephana had wilfully shut her ears to the truth on that occasion, and had *chosen* to believe that I was not legally Harry's wife, rather than be convinced of the fact.

The old lady took no notice of the interruption.

"You understand perfectly, I am sure, Mr. Boyle," she went on, loftily, to him, "how natural my mistake was, and how it arose."

The lawyer was between two fires. On the one hand, he had to affect entire confidence in the lady whose information was so important; on the other hand, he did not wish to offend me. So he bowed his head hastily, with a deprecatory, sidelong glance in my direction, and became instantly absorbed in the study of his memoranda. Lady Stephana sailed blandly on:

"Of course I still continued my help to the unfortunate Nellie, and I allowed myself, against my better judgment, occasionally to assist my nephew also. After the lapse of some months," she went on, very stiffly, "he wrote to me that he was dying, and commended to my care, not the poor woman who was the mother of his two children, but the girl for whom he had deserted her."

"His wife! His wife!" I cried, with repressed ex-

citement. "I'm sure the words he used were, 'My wife and my unborn child.'"

Again Lady Stephana paid no attention to my interruption:

"I did what I considered my duty: I called upon the girl and I offered to befriend her and her child."

Again this was too much for me, and I burst out with,—

"But on what condition, Lady Stephana? On what condition? You wanted me to place myself, a wife, as I had always believed myself to be, in the position of a fallen woman. You wanted——"

"I wanted to do the best I could for you, in the only way in which it seemed possible for me to do it," interrupted the old lady, calmly. "But you rejected my overtures, with rudeness, or with what you called 'spirit,' I suppose. I had no right, as I can see, to force myself upon you, and I withdrew. I still, however, from a sense of duty, kept a watchful eye, without obtruding myself, upon you and upon your child when it was born; and when I learnt that it had been abandoned by you——"

I started up from my chair, breathless with indignation. The lawyer, taking advantage of the breathlessness, jumped up too, came over to me, and, laying his hand upon my arm, entreated me to listen quietly to what she had to say. With great difficulty I obtained sufficient command of myself to comply with his request. Lady Stephana, who had waited with the utmost calmness the upshot of the little scene between the lawyer and myself, went on calmly with her story.

"I found, as I said, that the child had been abandoned, and I traced it to the house of a woman in Birmingham, who kept a baby-farm. I rescued the poor little thing, and put it with its half-brother to be brought up with him. From that time," continued Lady Stephana, with some triumph, "I have been father and mother also to those two boys. I have fed them, clothed them, educated them, and started them in life. It is not my fault," and for the first time the old lady's voice faltered, "that, while one of them has never given me any trouble, but has always behaved as a dutiful son to me, the other—my favourite too, I must acknowledge—has inherited qualities which all my care has been unable to eradicate."

At that moment, when the old lady showed a momentary sense of humiliation at her failure, I was sorry for her. After all, she had behaved generously and well to both her nephews, and she had not visited my sins, real or supposed, on my son. I rose impulsively, and held out my hand to her.

"Lady Stephana," I said, in a humble tone, "forgive me if I have not shown you any gratitude for your goodness to my boy. Nobody, and least of all I, would ever blame you for the misfortune that he has turned out badly."

The little old lady looked steadfastly at me, and at last I saw in her face a glimpse of real, warm, human feeling. She put her limp little hand in mine, and smiled sadly, as she slowly shook her head.

"You have made a great mistake," she said, not unkindly. "I have only just found it out. *Your son* has not turned out badly, Mrs. Keen. The one who has turned out badly is my favourite, Harry, the son of Harry Darent and Nellie Styles, born five-and-twenty years ago. There is not a better boy in England than your son, whom I had baptized in the name of *Deane*."

Deane! *Deane* my son! I staggered back, overwhelmed by a thousand conflicting sensations.

"You are sure, sure?" I gasped. "Deane looks so much the elder of the two!"

"That is only because Deane is so much taller than Harry, and so much more sedate and grave; and because Harry wears no hair on his face."

For a little while I sat stupefied, recalling the steps by which I had gradually sunk down into my delusion. Then a suspicion crossed my mind.

"Harry!" I cried, "did he know?"

"Yes. His own mother broke her compact with me, some years ago, by revealing herself to him. But Harry was ashamed of her, and insisted on her keeping the relationship a secret, on pain of never seeing him again."

"And did he know," I gasped out, overcome with the discoveries I was making at every word—"did Harry know that—that Deane was my son?"

"Probably. He ferreted among my papers, I know; and he was probably the first to discover that your marriage with my nephew Harry Dare was a legal one, and

that consequently Deane, whom I had always brought up as his cousin, was the heir of Lord Wallinghurst."

This fact had escaped my notice until that moment. Deane, quiet, unassuming Deane, *my son Deane*, was now the holder of the title with which some of my earliest memories were associated. All this knowledge was coming upon me with bewildering effect. I sighed for silence, for seclusion, for air.

Mr. Boyle saw that I looked worn-out, excited, and ill, and he took compassion on me.

"We are keeping you a long time, when you must be tired with your journey, Mrs. Keen," said he. "If I may come round to your house to-morrow morning, to get some little technical matters settled with you, to enable your son to come by his own with the more ease, we can let you go home now."

Indeed it was evident that my presence, if I remained, would soon become rather an embarrassment than an aid to anything.

So I took leave of Lady Stephana, who was looking at me rather more kindly than at the opening of the interview, and allowed Mr. Boyle to escort me to the front door. Here, however, another shock awaited me. I had forgotten who was waiting for me, and, when I saw Deane's tall figure at the bottom of the steps, I fell into a paroxysm of trembling which frightened poor Mr. Boyle.

Deane, on his side, was nearly as much agitated as I. He rushed up the steps to my side, and, drawing my hand tenderly through his arm, whispered,—

"Is it true—tell me only that—is it true that you are—my—mother?"

"Yes," I faltered, "it is true that you—are—my—son."

I received his passionate kiss on my forehead; I returned it.

But not all Deane's good qualities, not all Harry's bad ones, sufficed to prevent my feeling that this, my true son, my newly-found child, was a usurper, and that my heart belonged, for good and for ever, to the scapegrace for whom and by whom I had suffered so much.

CHAPTER XL.

BOTH Deane and I were rather silent as we drove along towards Kerr Street. At last I asked him what it was which had made him so suddenly suspect my relationship to him.

He said it was the behaviour of Nellie Styles when she found that Harry had given her the slip and gone away with me. She had, it seemed, found lying about the telegram which Sanders had sent, informing Harry that I was going to Paris, and had rightly concluded that he had followed me. She had then, in her anger, betrayed herself so far as to set Deane thinking that she must be Harry's mother, and not, as she and Harry had both assured him, his own. What could it be but maternal love and jealousy which induced Nellie to start for Paris in pursuit?

And if Harry were not my son, but hers, where was my son? At this point had come the inevitable suspicion that it must be himself; and Deane declared that the feeling he had always had for me since our first meeting in the grounds of The Limes had made it easy for him to believe in his relationship to me.

I asked him why Harry had declared his own mother to be Deane's, since Lady Stephana, on her return to England, would infallibly have enlightened him on this point. Deane thought that Harry knew he was playing a desperate game, which must come to an end with his protectress's return; and in the mean time Nellie, who was devoted to him, was a useful ally whom it was necessary to keep near. By declaring herself to be Deane's mother, she was able to serve her own son as well as if she had confessed to being his.

After another long pause, I said to him,—

“Do you know the difference this will make to your prospects, Deane?”

“Yes,” said he, quietly. “If it all turns out all right, I suppose it will.”

“And—and what about—Meg?”

“Don’t tell her anything,” said he, quickly.

By this time we had reached my house. Meg herself peeped out between the curtains of the dining-room window as the hansom stopped.

“Who was that with you, mamma?” she asked, curiously, when I had dismissed Deane and entered the house.

And then she suddenly perceived that I was much agitated, and refrained from teasing me with further questions.

I was very reticent that night, and retired to rest without having uttered a word concerning my momentous interview with Mr. Boyle either to Meg or to Burgess. Woman as I was, I could keep my secret better than my newly-found son himself could.

On the following morning Deane called. He was announced before I, resting after my fatigues, was ready to see him.

“You go, Meg,” said I to the girl, who had come up in the wake of the maid who had brought the message, “and I will be down in five minutes.”

Meg dutifully disappeared, but I did not hurry myself, having an idea that, even if I were five-and-twenty minutes instead of five in finishing my toilette, I should not be missed.

Meg, who left the room with leisurely feet and an air of unconcern, presented herself in the drawing-room wearing an appearance of coldness and dignity. On the last occasion of her meeting Deane, he had somewhat atoned for what she considered his scandalous frigidity on the omnibus; but still he could not be considered to have shown a very coming-on disposition, and Meg began to despair of making him confess the feelings which she was nevertheless sure that he entertained for her. She had half resolved upon what she could not help acknowledging was a very bold stroke, and this half resolution made her seem more constrained than usual.

Deane, on the other hand, as she noticed at once, came forward less slowly and less bashfully than was his wont. His first inquiries were for me, and, by the young girl’s manner in answering, he perceived that I had respected his wish, and told her nothing of the new development

of affairs. When Meg had assured him that I was well and that I should be down to see him myself in a few minutes, there was a pause.

"You are back again at Somerset House now?" said Meg, presently, for want of something to say.

"I ought to be, but I have got a day off, to come here."

"To see mamma?"

"Partly."

"And what is the other part?"

"To see some one else."

"Indeed!"

Another pause.

"I—I—I wanted to tell you, Miss Keen," stammered Deane, who began to grow very red and very unhappy-looking, "that I am going to leave Somerset House altogether."

"You are going abroad, as you thought of doing?"

"Perhaps."

"Only perhaps? What does it depend on? Or is that a secret?"

"It is no secret. It depends on—a flirt!"

"Mr. Carey!"

"Not 'Mr. Carey.' I have been masquerading under an assumed name. I have found out something about myself at last. I have discovered my mother."

"Yes, so I heard."

"You heard about her?"

"Yes. Mamma met her."

"And what did you think?"

"Well, I don't quite like to say."

"But I ask you to tell me frankly, quite frankly, just the thoughts that came into your mind."

"Well, I was surprised, I couldn't help it, to hear that—that she was that—that sort of person. I thought it was very hard upon you to find it out, and—and I thought you behaved beautifully in not seeming to mind."

"That she was not a lady? I did mind, though!"

A pause.

"If I were ever to want to marry, my wife would mind, wouldn't she?"

"But I thought you had made up your mind that a bachelor's was the life for you!"

“Still I should like you to answer my question.”

“Well, all those things depend upon the sort of woman you marry, don't they?”

“If I were to marry a flirt, for instance?”

Meg hesitated between half-hearted anger and whole-hearted pleasure at the turn the talk was taking. As she paused and considered her answer, she began to play with a book she had been carrying; and, as she turned over the leaves, a paper fell out on the floor. It fluttered to Deane's feet, and, perceiving this, Meg lost her presence of mind so much as to utter a cry of confusion and alarm as he stooped to pick it up.

For it was the wild letter written by Deane during his illness.

Seeing the confusion into which this trifling incident had thrown her, Deane involuntarily glanced at the document as he was handing it back to her; and he could not fail to be struck by the circumstance that the few hugely-scrawled, straggling words upon which his eyes fell were in his own handwriting.

“Why!” he exclaimed, and stopped.

Meg held out her hand for the paper, and then, without waiting to take it, turned away and walked to the fire. Presently Deane followed her.

“Miss Keen,” he said, in an agitated voice, “I could not help seeing as I picked up this paper that—that——”

Meg turned and snatched away the paper.

“I could not help seeing my own handwriting,” he went on, humbly but with evident anxiety. “Won't you please let me look at it?”

Meg hesitated; then, without looking at him, she quietly gave him the paper back again. He read it through, and then the girl listened, wondering what would happen next.

“Who gave you this, Meg?” (*Meg*, not Miss Keen) he asked.

“Your mother,” she answered, in a stifled voice.

“Oh! the woman who——”

He stopped. Meg went on:

“She wanted me to come and see you—when you were ill.”

“Wanted you to come and see *me*! Oh,” said Deane, decidedly, “that was some plot of Harry's.”

“So mamma thought, I believe, for she wouldn't let me go!”

“But—but you would have gone! You would, Meg?”

No answer, but an almost imperceptible shrug of the little shoulders. Then Meg heard a decided voice in her ear:

“Meg, I shall marry you!”

“Oh, oh! will you?”

“Yes. And, as for my mother, you must put up with her.”

By this time he had his arm round her waist; the next moment, without any warning of her somewhat abrupt change of front, Meg offered her face to be kissed.

Of course I could not tell the most convenient moment for my entrance; it happened to be this most interesting one. As he heard the door open, Deane cried,—

“Here comes my mother herself!”

Meg, surprised, started back. But, as I came in, she said,—

“Why, no, it's mamma.”

“That's what I said,” persisted Deane.

And, to Meg's astonishment, he came up to me, and kissed me on both cheeks. But the girl was too bright-witted to be puzzled long.

“I think I begin to understand,” said she, slowly. “But then,” and she turned to Deane rather shyly, “who are you?”

“Mr. Boyle, whom I have already seen this morning, says that I am Lord Wallinghurst!”

“Then I shall be——” began Meg, merrily, clasping her hands.

“Your ladyship,” said Deane, bowing. “But you ought not to think of such a trifle as that, in the first blush of your engagement.”

“What better can you expect from a flirt?” asked the girl, gaily.

She was, indeed, delighted at her prospective elevation, and she showed her pleasure ingenuously, like the honest little being she was.

The happiness of the lovers, although it was a pleasant sight to me, could not make me forget the danger which hung over Harry. I did not have any interview with him until after the inquiry before the magistrates was

over. At this inquiry I had to appear as a witness ; but the solicitor whom Mr. Boyle, not caring to undertake such business himself, had chosen for the conduct of Harry's defence, was a clever, experienced man, who filled me with hopes that he would be able to obtain a verdict of manslaughter only. This was, of course, as much as we could hope for. He founded these hopes chiefly on the fact that the revolver found in the room proved to be, not Harry's, but one which Mr. Keen had been known to keep in a drawer of his writing-table. Upon this fact the solicitor had founded the theory that Mr. Keen, exasperated with Harry's conduct in coming to him at all, had threatened the young man with the revolver ; that Harry had tried to snatch the weapon from him in self-defence, and that the discharge of it was accidental. I had myself neither seen nor heard anything inconsistent with this theory. Mr. Keen was known to be a man of violent temper, who entertained a strong aversion to Harry ; while the actual witness to the firing of the shot had not been near enough to swear that this was not what actually occurred.

The next day Harry was allowed to see me. To my amazement, he did not seem very crest-fallen, treated me in much the same manner as before, and expressed confident hopes of the result of the trial. I had hoped to find him in a repentant or at least a remorseful mood, but in this I was disappointed. I am afraid that Burgess's disgust at what he called Harry's brazen insolence was not unfounded. He confessed to me frankly that, as soon as I made the initial mistake of supposing him to be my son, he, knowing very well that I was Deane's mother and not his, and knowing also that he could only hope to keep up the deception during Lady Stephana's absence abroad, had conceived the idea of making hay while the sun shone, of fooling me to the top of my bent, satisfied that when the exposure came I should be too much ashamed of my mistake to make the facts generally known.

Harry, who was evidently proud of his successful plotting, went on to tell me what a piece of luck it had seemed to him when Lord Wallinghurst's death put another power into his ready hands. He told me that he had instantly conceived the idea of making a good

marriage on the strength of his supposed pretensions to the earldom, and then of beating a retreat to the Continent when, as he expressed it, "the game was up." He did not even try to disguise the fact that he would then have used his hold on his rich wife as a means of subsistence. Meg had been his first choice, and, failing her, he had fallen back on Ethel Everett, whose open preference made her an easy prey.

He did not deny, even now, that he had taken positive pleasure in these intrigues, and that the only thing that had marred his enjoyment of them had been the appearance of his own mother, whose jealousy of me had more than once threatened his plans with shipwreck, and was at last the actual means of bringing about his arrest. For the police had gone to his lodgings, on the evening when he went to Paris with me; they watched the house, and, on seeing her leave it, they followed her, went to Paris by the same trains and boat, and were thus enabled to lay their hands upon him just as he was starting with me for Havre.

Only one redeeming quality, or what seemed to me a redeeming quality, was shown by Harry at this interview: his affection for me, cruelly as he had deceived me, wickedly as he had taken advantage of his hold upon me, was real, undoubtedly real. He expressed again and again his wish that I had been really his mother, or even failing that, that I had gone on believing myself to be so. There was now absolutely nothing to gain by any pretence of affection, and not I alone, but the solicitor who conducted his case and the woman who was really his mother were struck by the reality of his feeling for me. It had not, indeed, been strong enough to exercise any beneficial effect on his morals; but, such as it was, it was genuine, and I, unable to lose my interest in him, was touched by it.

When the trial came off, I gave my evidence as if in a dream. His case was very ably conducted; the prosecution was not a malignant one. After a long deliberation, Harry was found guilty of manslaughter, and was condemned by the judge to penal servitude for ten years.

I fainted on hearing the sentence, notwithstanding the fact that it was, in the circumstances, a merciful one.

It is now five years since Harry was convicted, and

during those five years I have been happy in the society of my son Deane and of my daughter Meg, and of their two little children.

But, try as I may, I cannot lose the feeling that there is one child nearer to me than these, and that the scape-grace who will probably still have some exciting moments in store for me, when the term of his imprisonment is over, will fill my thoughts to the end, as he did on the first day when he thrilled my heart by calling me "Mother!"

THE END.



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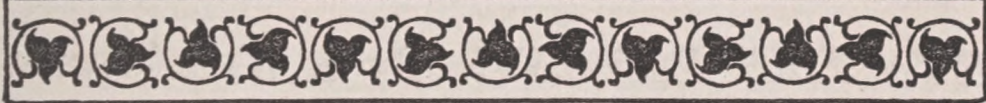
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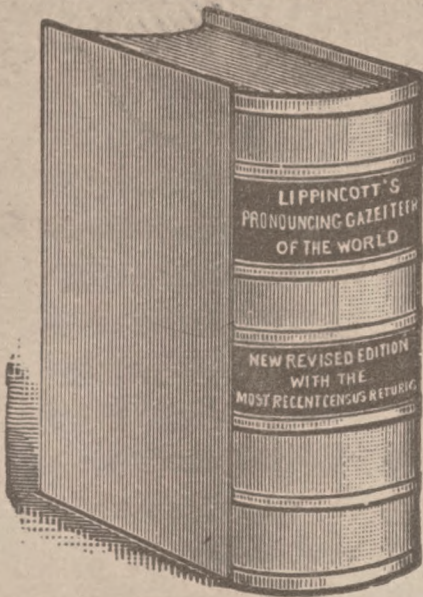
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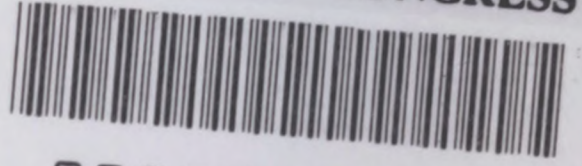
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